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Kosovar Center for Security Studies

Report inquiring into the causes and consequences of Kosovo citizens' involvement as foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq

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1. KEY FINDINGS

The context

- Among the 22 Western states which include those throughout Europe, the US, Russia, and Turkey, from which most of the foreign fighters are suspected to have joined militant organisations in Syria and Iraq, Kosovo is ranked eighth, with 232 confirmed cases (until mid-January). Currently, around 30 percent of the confirmed total cases of foreign fighters from Kosovo are considered to still be with rebel groups in Syria;

- Kosovo has 125 foreign fighters per capita for every 1 million citizens, making it the highest ranking country among the 22 listed countries, followed by Bosnia with 85, Belgium with 42, and Albania with 30 cases of foreign fighters per capita for every 1 million citizens;

- In terms of the number of foreign fighters per capita amongst their Muslim population, Kosovo is in the bottom half of the list of countries, ranked 14th among 22 countries with the highest number of foreign fighters per capita of their respective Muslim populations. Of the 22 countries listed, this report finds that it is the Muslim population of the non-Muslim majority countries that are mostly affected by the phenomenon of foreign fighters;

- The majority, or 54 percent of the foreign fighters from Kosovo, have joined the conflicts in Syria during 2013, a period when ISIS was consolidated and when its recruitment intensified;

- Until now, Kosovo institutions have taken a number of steps in their efforts to fight violent extremism. This includes, amongst others, the arrest of more than 80 individuals (January 2015) under suspicions of being involved in terrorist actions or organisations. Nonetheless, more than 60 percent were released; they are either under house arrest, being monitored, or completely unrestricted due to a lack of evidence for the charges brought against them;

- It is evident that policy- and decision- makers as well as the general public do not make clear distinctions between *religionization* efforts by religious authorities (i.e. imams) and *violent extremist* efforts (other imams and extremist activists), terms in which this report makes an ideological distinction, and what they stand for. More efforts are needed to make this distinction clearer in order to prevent counterproductive consequences when attempting to curtail and fight violent extremism.

- This report finds that violent extremist ideas in Kosovo are embraced by only a small group of people when compared to the overall population size; yet, given their ideological tenets, these groups still pose a threat to state institutions and citizens.

External conditions and influences

The roots and dissemination of conservative religious ideas

- This report recognizes the strong impact of Saudi Arabia in introducing more conservative religious ideas and practices and in widely spreading more conservative ideas and practices in and around Kosovo, but it does not find it to be the <u>core</u> or <u>direct</u> cause of pulling people towards violent extremism and violent extremist groups in Syria;

- Unlike many claims that have been put forth in regards to the influence of violent extremist ideas, this report finds that fundamental/conservative religious ideas should not be instantly confused with violent extremist ideas due to the differences between them, while this report also attempts to deconstruct the ways and cases in which they can indirectly interact;

- Unlike efforts made until now to identify the roots of violent extremist ideas across the different legal schools of the Sunni tradition in Islam, i.e. between the Hanafi legal school applied in Kosovo and the Hanbali legal school and later Wahhabi ideology applied in Saudi Arabia, this report does not locate violent extremist ideas in schisms between such legal schools. For instance, despite the fact that the Hanafi legal school is considered more liberal and most open to individual interpretation (*ijtihad*) in its teachings, the Deobandi sect and the Taliban (violent extremists) are strict followers of the Hanafi legal code;

- As such, this report finds that in looking for causes of violent extremism within the schisms or differences that exist between the Hanafi (Kosovo version) and Hanbali/Wahhabi (Saudi Arabian version) legal schools can result in making wrong and generalized conclusions when inquiring into the ideas, as the first major cause, that encourage people to go to Syria. Several contradictions within such debates are used to support this notion, and are explored by this report in great depth.

- This report does find, however, that such influences were an 'enabling factor' for schisms within and between Kosovo's Islamic community and practitioners on the one hand, and the secular part of the society and more liberal practitioners on the other hand - such schisms were also mostly instigated by a few imams who were not ethically responsible for the language used towards others of different ideas and values.

- This report, therefore finds the idea that suggests that violent extremist ideas are embraced by the overwhelming majority of those that end up as foreign fighters in Syria to be much more complex, and is explored at length. It deals with the challenge of distinguishing between the exports of ultraconservative theology on the one hand and militant extremism on the other.

The root and dissemination of violent extremist religious ideas

- The violent extremist ideas promoted by ISIS, recently embraced by groups of people in the Western hemisphere, including the Balkans and Kosovo in particular, can be traced back to modern Egypt and its prisons;

- Reinterpretations of various concepts in Islam by a number of radical thinkers in early 20th Century Egypt, and their consequent imprisonment by secular state authorities, have served as an enabling factor for the emergence of increasingly radical and violent interpretations of concepts in Islam;

- One of the most successful groups that emerged out of the same ideological thread was the Takfir wal Hijra (or the Takfirs), led by Mustafa Shukri, who was imprisoned during the 1960s due to his affiliation with the Muslim Brotherhood. Mustafa, with his new and more violent program, managed to successfully recruit from among his former associates who were tortured in prisons, as well as from among wider society;

- The basic tenets of the Takfir radical extremist ideology, which has its roots from the time of the Kharijites' (the earliest violent deviated group in Islam) ideology, which the Takfirs have adjusted for the modern period of the 20th and 21st century. This is the ideology em-

braced by ISIS and other previous violent extremist groups including Al Qaida and others. Those that embrace the Takfir ideology are part of a radical exclusivist group which misinterprets religious readings, and in many cases base their arguments in Quranic verses dealing with 'punishment' while ignoring references to 'mercy' and 'rewards'. They are hasty in their decision to tag and frame someone as an unbeliever or a hypocrite, as exemplified by the embrace of this ideology by ISIS. This report has deconstructed their ideological tenets, and discusses them in detail;

- The Takfirs should not be mixed with the non-violent practitioners in Kosovo, including those that practice Islam based on more conservative interpretations that go beyond the official Hanefi legal school. When looking for extremists, bearded man, more often than not, provide the wrong address in which to suspect a violent extremist. For instance, the Takfirs pose an alarming implication for police engaged in countering violent extremism, since their worshippers implement camouflage tactics in order to avoid detection when planning attacks. Unlike Muslim worshippers, the Takfir worshippers are allowed to deviate from strict Muslim practices; they allow themselves to shave their beards, drink alcohol, visit topless bars, and commit crimes against Westerners;

- This report finds that the radical, violent, and exclusive ideology of Takfirism is not a home-grown ideology. While religious influences and additional practices of a more conservative nature began to emerge at a greater scale in Kosovo during the second half of 1999, the Takfir ideology and its teachings entered Kosovo later on, but with more intensity from the beginning of 2005;

- This ideology has found its place in Kosovo through a number of Skopje based imams who have visited and studied in the Middle East, becoming prey to Takfir circles in its most prominent ideological base – Egypt. It was sometime in the beginning of 2000s when most of the Albanian imams from Albania, Macedonia, and Kosovo, who have studied together in the Middle East, began their ideological division. This division occured when these imams disagreed amongst themselves on fundamental issues.

- Unlike previous assumptions put forth in the public discourse in Kosovo which divides Islamic liberals on the one hand and Islamic extremists on the other hand, this report presents a pyramid which distinguishes between and puts the 'liberal practitioners' at the bottom layer of the pyramid; the 'non-violent conservatives' at the middle layer of the pyramid; and the 'violent rejectionists' / Takfirs at the top layer of the pyramid;

- This reports finds that one layer of the pyramid does not necessarily serve in every case as a 'conveyor belt' or an 'enabling factor' for the transition of Islamic practitioners between the layers of the pyramid; and it is certainly not one-directional. This means that the 'non-violent conservative' layer does not necessarily represent a door or an easy way for an Islamic practitioner to make its way to the 'violent rejectionist' / Takfir layer. In some cases it does and some cases it doesn't. The report, in fact, also finds that there are some cases when the 'non-violent conservative' layer has served to actually pull people out of the 'violent rejectionist' layer, and at the same time, it finds cases when Islamic practitioners at the 'liberal participationist' layer can move directly to the 'violent rejectionist' / Takfir layer. In order to analyze such cases, the report conducts an in-depth analysis of internal conditions at societal, family and individual levels.

Internal conditions and influences

Conditions facilitating religious (conservative) ideas

Multiple domestic interplaying factors can explain Kosovars' embrace for religion after 1999:

- First, the societal disorientation and weak economic and political conditions provided fruitful grounds for religionization immediately after the war. Secondly, the neglect towards Kosovo's rural communities after the war by international and local governing structures and other "secular aid agencies" created room for Middle Eastern charity organisations to massively penetrate these areas. Third is the neglect of international governing structures, mainly by UNMIK as the supreme governing authority at the time, towards PISG's requests to investigate "suspicious religious activities" in Kosovo.

- Poor economic conditions and the level of poverty have not changed much throughout the ensuing period. Several problems have prevailed, including corruption in every governing structure, high income inequality, especially the differences between the ruling classes and the majority rural part of society, as well as inadequate provision of public services.

- The unification and commitment of the Albanian citizens of Kosovo to a national cause faded after the liberation in 1999, and it was not as strong as before.

- As a result, various political Islamic groups became more credible than the official governing elites because they were more familiar with the concerns of the people and their needs. Imams in Kosovo engage much more directly with and remain much closer to citizens in comparison to policymakers and the political elite of secular institutions in Kosovo.

- This report also shows that Kosovo continues to be plagued by an education system that fails at all levels to address the pedagogic and skills training needs of its students and the economy. In general, the education institutions in Kosovo have failed to implement a system whereby both the teaching staff and the students embrace an approach that encourages critical thinking and debates on various issues. There is also a high drop-out rate between each level of education, whereby only a third of those who complete elementary education continue to secondary education, and only a third of those that complete secondary education progress in higher education. The per capita spending in education and science is many-fold lower than the other countries in the region.

- There is also little attention paid to cultural and extracurricular activities that the youth can engage in;

- Such a consistent lack of attention in youth by the governing institutions in Kosovo has apparently led the younger generation to be more committed to a religious cause and less to national or state cause when compared to the older generations. The latest 2014 KCSS survey also shows that younger generations have more trust in religious institutions in comparison with older generations. For instance, 42 percent of those belonging to the 18-24 age groups have *a lot of trust* in religious institutions, while less than 25 percent of those belonging to age groups older than 30 years of age have *a lot of trust* in religious institutions.

Conditions facilitating violent extremist ideas and groups

- Domestic conditions and factors that facilitate religionization are not only limited to religionization; these factors also create enough space that violent extremist groups can

capture. Such conditions also provide fertile grounds for a portion of society to embrace extremist violent ideas. Weak state structures (because of political instability, corruption, incompetency, and the overall destruction of the system of social values, ineffective public administration, weak economy, poverty, etc) creates enough room which radical violent groups can utilise;

- In the case of Kosovo, this report finds that a range of other issues enter the picture that facilitate radical violent extremism beyond religion, as well as the Kosovo citizens' embrace for jihadism in Syria, including the following:

  o **Personal characteristics:** the majority of those that embrace the Takfir ideology are (i) young; (ii) shallow- and light-minded; (iii) ignorant; (iv) without experience; and (v) since they do not draw religious references from credible religious scholars, they are usually attracted by a third group which follows distorted paths for rebellion that are drawn by hypocrisy; This includes a good number of Kosovo's citizens who have been involved in Syria, of which 46 percent are born between 1985-1999. This means that they have embraced the Takfir ideology even at a younger age;

  o **Education and attitudes towards it:** Contemporary jihadi movements do not seek to educate people or to encourage an in-depth study of the Quran. The majority of Kosovo citizens that have been involved in Syria have completed only secondary school. According to a former foreign fighter who spent around a month in Syria, where he had also met with Lavdrim Muhaxheri, told KCSS researchers that Lavdrim did not like recruiting educated citizens from Kosovo to join him in Syria. In fact, Muhaxheri had asked recruiters in Kosovo not to send bright and educated people, wanting only those that are obedient and are ready to follow orders without questioning. This report finds some exceptions in this regard and discusses them in length.

  o **Family and social conditions:** The overwhelming majority of those involved in Syria from Kosovo are those who have not had any form of part time or permanent employment before. They usually come from families who are not well off, and are located in more isolated areas in their towns and villages. This report also finds some exceptions in this regard, and discusses them in length.

  o **The concept of 'shahid' and personal characteristics:** Close to 40 percent of those that have already been to Syria hold a number of criminal records committed before they departed for Syria. Of those with previous criminal records, 47 percent had more than one criminal record. Takfir ideology attracts those with previous criminal records for several reasons. First, unlike in Islam, through a Takfir ideology one is allowed to attack, steal, lie, intimidate, engage in fraud, and in almost all other criminal records without discrimination. As a result, this provides a good avenue for those with such previous criminal records to embrace as a new "religious" ideology – the Takfir, believing it to be true Islam. Second, embracing the Takfir ideology does not require any effort, as much as it would when guided into Islam, as they (usually with previous criminal records) can continue with their previous habits and vices and do not need to make changes in their lifestyles. Third, it is the very 'simplicity' and effortlessness of becoming a Takfir (believing to be true Islam and its association with forgiveness and the potential way to heaven) that draws many with previous criminal records to it, including others as well.

○ **<u>Family and social isolation and alienation:</u>** This presents another aspect that encourages young people, including the educated and wealthy, to fall prey to the Takfir ideology after guidance into Islam. In many cases, such isolation usually begins when a young member of a secular family begins practicing Islam. When such young people start practicing Islam, secular families, usually parents, tend to convince them not to do so. A process of alienation starts between the young member of the family who follows Islam and the other members of the family who are in disagreement. In many cases this has drawn those young members of the family into isolation and alienation, eventually leading them to find comfort among the Takfir circles that readily wait and attempt to solve their problems.

Instruments facilitating violent extremism and recruitment
The issue with mosques and imams (Takfir vs. non-Takfir)

- One of the instruments used by the Takfirs is the mosques and imams themselves, including when these mosques are intentionally used by Takfir imams to spread their ideology. It should be noted that there are very few such imams and mosques in Kosovo and other places, which simultaneously hold a considerable ideological influence over their worshipers;

- Those who are new to practising Islam would usually attend the mosque closest to the place where they live. They by chance can be the mosques where Takfiri imams provide lectures, or which the Takfiri worshippers use even if imams are not Takfir. There can however, be other cases when young people new to Islam can fall under the influence of Takfirs, which this report discusses in length;

- The unintentional aspect of imams and mosques that can play a role in having young people and those new in Islam to fall prey to Takfir, on the other hand, is when a number of non-Takfir imams are ignorant towards their worshippers, and such ignorance contributes to some unintentional consequences. In addition, imams and mosques may unintentionally stimulate a worshipper's desire to join the fight in Syria when speaking ill of other religions, cultures, and traditions, especially when directed towards the Shi'ia sect. For example, they may contribute to a desire amongst their worshippers to join the fight against Assad, who belongs to a Shi'ia Alewi sect himself;

- However, one should not look at the mosques in general or the number of mosques that a country has as a primary cause for the radicalisation of society, nor as the primary motivation for people's involvement as foreign fighters in Syria. By using examples and some statistics, this report does not find in any way, the existence of a direct relationship between the number of mosques a country has and the number of foreign fighters in Syria. The report actually argues on the contrary;

Dormitories and other private spaces

- Calls to join ISIS and lectures based on Takfir ideological tenets are present in a few mosques based in Macedonia, Albania, and Kosovo; however, they may not be as intense as in the private spaces used by Takfir circles. Besides mosques, the Takfirs also use dormitories and private spaces, such as private apartments, rooms, and even shops to disseminate their ideology and recruit;

The internet

- Despite Kosovo's backward economic development, poverty, and rural underdevelopment, the internet penetration rate and the number of internet users are among the highest in the region, and are comparable to many EU member states. The internet however, is a double-edge sword in the world of radical violent extremism; while it is useful for state authorities to track violent extremist groups, such groups also use the internet to recruit fighters from around the world;

- ISIS propaganda videos have also penetrated Kosovo, and judging by the number of foreign fighters per capita that have joined ISIS and a few other rebel groups in Syria, it seems that such propaganda efforts have been successful.

- There are several aspects in the case of Kosovo that make its population, especially the younger generation, more susceptible to religionization and violent radicalisation:

  o Despite of extremely poor living conditions and infrastructure in rural areas, Kosovo has managed to extend its internet coverage to most remote areas in the countryside. For instance, internet penetration is high in Kosovo, with 76.62 percent claiming to use the internet;

  o The majority of internet users, or 53.66 percent, are young (below 30 years old), with the overwhelming majority of them, or 94.21 percent, using it from home;

  o In addition to the strong penetration rate in rural areas, the internet is quite affordable for households in rural areas, with 65 percent claiming to pay 15 Euros or less per month for their internet use;

  o Emotionally appealing videos posted online by ISIS propaganda tools have impacted a number of victims in Kosovo, resulting in many to leave their homes to join the conflicts in Syria, including those who previously practised a more liberal form of Islam.

The unintended consequences

Implications of dealing with the consequences

- Focusing the attention on the consequences (foreign fighters) ahead of the causes (range of issues mentioned above), involves the engagement of security institutions such as the police and the use of various magnitudes of force. Dealing only with the consequences (foreign fighters), instead of dealing with the root causes (conditions and factors), will ensure the reproduction of these consequences;

- Transposing this across similar cases at a global level, one can take the example of the killing of the most wanted and notorious violent extremist, Osama bin Laden. While the latter was killed, both his ideas and the conditions and factors that produce and sustain his ideas were certainly not defeated. As a result, the world is free of Osama bin Laden, but not of his ideas that produced an even more notorious organisation/entity – ISIS;

- Prisons have produced the most radical thinkers in Islam as well as violent extremists, and it is the very concept of martyrdom in Islam that the Takfir and other violent extremists and radicals utilize to legitimize their agenda, and thus gain support.

Implications of double standards

- Another aspect that could potentially legitimize violent extremists and their ideology is the very double standards that they sense a secular state, and in this case Kosovo, applies.

The application of, or the sense of the application of double standards produces an outcome very much desired by the Takfirs, since one of their main ideological tenets is that a state which is not an Islamic state, in this case a secular state, should be ignored and actually fought against;

- The Takfirs fill their worshippers' minds with various conspiracies against secular states and policies. Unmindful state security actions can only reinforce the conspiracies of brainwashed young Takfir worshippers who become increasingly ready to be called to action to "protect Islam";

- When religious figures breach the laws of the state, they should be dealt with equally just like any other citizen, including measures guaranteed by law including equality before the law.

Implications of the two extremes in (public discourse)

- This report also finds growing 'defensive modes', in which the liberal and more secular part of society on the one hand and the conservative and more religious part of the society on the other hand finds themselves in;

- Such opposing defensive modes have also contributed to the growing alienation between the two sides. This has, furthermore, resulted in the unintended consequence of having the two sides reacting antagonistically in the public discourse, suggesting that the "foreignness" of conservatism is pushing the liberal secular part of society towards more liberalism, and in antithesis, the "foreignness" of liberalism is pushing the conservative religious part of society towards more conservatism.

- Such an offensive stance is present on both sides, resulting in a polarisation towards the extremes. This dialectical social outcome, although surfacing unintentionally, enforces the two extremes – it is widening the gap between the liberal secular extreme on the one hand, and the religious conservative extreme on the other.

The BIK

- Besides claims from high ranking officials within the BIK of having control over religious affairs, manifestations through a number of instruments of religious deviations and propagation of the Takfir ideology in Kosovo do not speak for a rigorous control over religious affairs, which BIK should hold;

- A number of scandals and power politics within the institution have more often than not shifted BIK's attention away from religious affairs onto personal gains and positions of various individuals within the institution and the Muslim community;

- While the primary schisms appear to be control of the BIK through power-politics, the attention in public discourse has shifted and now appears to be as if the primary schisms in the BIK are between the Muslim liberals and extremists, trying to take hold of the BIK. This however, may not be entirely the case, as the extremists denounce the BIK, and consider it filled with a bunch of "hypocrites", and work more often in a mode of "excommunication and exodus" while attempting to control a few mosques where they can control their worshippers;

- Despite defining Hanafism as the legal school of the Islamic jurisprudence based on which the Islamic teachings should be delivered in its mosques and other structures, the BIK has failed to produce religious knowledge and scholarship, which could have helped in more easily absorbing and accommodating the teachings brought in by the newly educated imams across the Middle East.

Recommendations

This is the summary of a set of key recommendations proposed by the KCSS. For more detailed recommendations, the Chapter on recommendations should be consulted:

A comprehensive approach to rehabilitation and re-integration;
- o The following are the categories that would describe foreign fighters that either return or potentially would want to return to Kosovo:
    - **(a)** Those that regret joining the conflict in Syria, and want to give up their violent extremist acts and ideology;
    - **(b)** Those that regret joining the conflict in Syria, but want to keep their extremist ideology without resorting to violence;
    - **(c)** Those that do not regret joining the conflict in Syria, or the upholding of their violent extremist ideology, but want to return to Kosovo to facilitate further recruitment and dissemination of the Takfir ideology.

- o As such, a 'one size fits all' approach would not work, and a multi-faceted model approach should be undertaken;

- Arrests, imprisonment, or sending people to court should be avoided as much as possible;
    - o Those that return should go through a screening process, which would assess the purpose of their return and their fundamental motivation for returning – involving the identification of whether they belong to group of returnees **(a)**, **(b)**, or **(c)**, as described above.

- This means that overall, there needs to be a rehabilitation and reintegration programme that in its essence embodies the principle of "**help and watch**"

- The deradicalisation and rehabilitation programme would be more efficient if it was centralized, both in the ideas of how it should run, and in the process of implementation.

Donors
- Foreign donors should provide funding to the centralized de-radicalization and rehabilitation programme. Any independent attempt at implementation may occur in vain due to the nature and particularities of the issue and the state of radicalized individuals themselves;

- Foreign donors, when willing to provide funding for de-radicalization programmes or projects, should remain on the back seat. Taking the frontline as foreigners in such attempts, will more often than not result in the failure of the purpose of such projects.

The BIK
- It should as urgently as possible be registered as a legal entity;

- It should have centralised financing, which can be easily overseen and reported to relevant state authorities;

- It should not allow the building of mosques from funds that go through individual finances, not only from sources coming from the Gulf, but also from community financing;

- Liberal and conservative imams or those belonging to the two bottom domains of the three domain pyramid presented above, should find a common language, and unite in

fighting against extremism, despite their differences in (liberal/conservative) interpretations of and teachings in Islam. The BIK should be the hub for facilitating such rapprochement;

- Adopt a yearly curriculum of teachings in all mosques, which should be standardized as much as possible; changes to teaching curriculums in particular mosques should happen with the permission of relevant BIK structures for legitimate reasons;

- Increase and enforce more rigorous inspection inside mosques regarding teachings and other religious affairs;

- Work in preventing the creation of the celebrity status of imams who express a radical and extremist thinking, which can easily be identified – i.e. those belonging to the top layer of the pyramid "violent rejectionists" / Takfirs;

Imams

- Credible and legitimate imams, including those that are more liberal (bottom layer of the pyramid - "liberal participationists") as well as those that are more conservative (middle layer of the pyramid – "non-violent conservative") should stay close to their worshippers and not ignore them. Such imams should also be patient with potential worshippers and others who have already fallen under Takfir, who frame and publically lynch imams themselves;

- Imams that fall under the "liberal partipationists" layer and those that fall under the "non-violent conservative" layer of the pyramid, should engage in antagonisms as little as possible, and unite in efforts to deradicalize the young people who have fallen under Takfir ideology;

- If young people have committed a sin, based on religious interpretations, imams should not magnify those sins, because such young people may fall prey to Takfir for a quick route into Islam in order to find rapid forgiveness;

The state security structures:

- Should have a more targeted approach towards violent extremists, i.e. to work more specifically with intelligence based policing, and taking actions that would restrain security agencies as much as possible from using force (i.e. arrests, prosecutions, etc);

- When state security agencies assess that potential "non-violent conservative" imams – those on the second layer of the pyramid, serve unintentionally as an "enabling factor" for some of their worshippers embracing a "violent rejectionist" / Takfir ideology, they should again restrain themselves from arresting them. Such imams should be invited for a discussion, and they should be told by the state security agencies of the potential consequences of their particular teachings, where these teachings, in many cases by using unacceptable language towards others, unintentionally and indirectly invite people to join in with radical actions;

- Not discriminate against those with religious backgrounds who apply to work within state security structures.

There are also a number of other recommendations for (i) families and friends; (ii) charity organisations; (iii) conventional and social media presence; (iv) the EU; (v) other state institutions; as well as (vi) a number of other recommendations in general.

2. INTRODUCTION

The involvement of foreign fighters in conflicts in the Middle East is not a recent phenomenon and cannot be attributed in isolation to the recent conflicts in Syria and Iraq and the establishment of the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)[1]. The number of Western Europe's more than 16 million and America's more than 2 million Muslims felt the pull to engage in the Middle Easter conflicts during the United States' (US) Iraqi invasion in 2003, which raised some security concerns for both Europe and the US.[2] For Kosovo citizens, on the other hand, although the overwhelming majority are Muslim, conflicts in the Middle East were until recently considered as remote events, with no Kosovo citizen officially reported to have been engaged as a foreign fighter in any of these conflicts, at least not to the extent of the recent wave of foreign fighters involved in Syria and Iraq.[3] Similarly, for Kosovo citizens the rapid spread of the Arab Spring in many majority Muslim Middle Eastern and North African countries was equally as remote as previous events in the Middle East, including the recent unrest in Syria.

This changed when, by mid-May 2012, the governing institutions in Kosovo began to take a position on the civil strife in Syria. Kosovo joined other western governments and many NATO member states in condemning the regime of Bashar al-Assad. Kosovo's Foreign Minister (FM), Enver Hoxhaj, openly supported the opposition forces that created the Free Syrian Army (FSA) in fighting against Assad's regime at the beginning.[4] Kosovo's FM confirmed then that he had established some diplomatic contacts with the Syrian opposition.[5] Little did the governing structures in Kosovo know, however, that at the time that the opposition forces in Syria, including the FSA, was fragmented and that many violent extremist groups were joining forces to fight Assad's regime. Little, if not at all, was also known back then that a number of citizens from Kosovo had already joined some opposition forces, including the then unknown Al Qaida affiliated factions that emerged during 2012.[6]

The civil strife in Syria further grabbed the attention of the citizens and governing structures in Kosovo when in mid November 2012, a Kosovo citizen from Prishtina, Naman Demolli, who had joined the opposition forces in Syria against the regime of Bashar al-Assad, was reported

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1   Other denominations for ISIS include: the Islamic State (IS) and the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL). This report will be using "ISIS" as a term throughout the report.

2   Daniel Byman and Jeremy Shapiro (2014) "Be Afraid. Be Little Afraid: The Threat of Terrorism from Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq". Policy Paper. Nr. 34. November 2014. Foreign Policy at Brookings. Online available at: http://www.brookings.edu/~/media/research/files/papers/2014/11/western%20foreign%20fighters%20in%20syria%20and%20iraq%20byman%20shapiro/be%20afraid%20%20web.pdf

3   There are voices that mention a few cases of the involvement of Kosovo citizens in Afghanistan and Iraq

4   Louis Charbonneau (2012) "Kosovo voices strong support for Syria opposition" May 14, 2012. *Reuters*. Online available at: http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/05/14/us-syria-kosovo-idUSBRE84D1EI20120514

5   A number of high ranking Russian officials, including the UN Russian Ambassador, Vitaly Churkin, and some pro-Russian media reported that Kosovo was establishing a training camp for Syrian opposition. The author of this report was present at a meeting with the representatives of Syria's opposition in exile held in Kosovo, and can confirm that there was no discussion regarding any support for trainings in Kosovo. The meeting was open to media and the discussions were majorly focused on the lessons learned in Kosovo from political perspective.

6   According to 20 January 2014 data provided by the Anti-Terrorist Department within the Kosovo Police, 17 individuals from Kosovo had already joined the conflict between January and June 2012

to have been killed.[7] He is known as the first foreign fighter from Kosovo to be killed in recent conflicts in the Middle East. The news about the killing of Naman Demolli was brought to his family by his Kosovo peers who were with him in Syria, which raised some eyebrows in Kosovo as it became clear that he was not the only foreign fighter from Kosovo to have been drawn into Middle Eastern conflicts. As ISIS, and, to a certain extent other previously Al Qaida affiliated factions consolidated and strengthened over and during 2013, both in structure and in capabilities, their recruitment also intensified. Arab speaking fighters and recruiters from what appeared to be ISIS controlled zones were calling on all Muslims from around the world to join them in their "just cause". Given that Arabic is neither spoken nor understood by the citizens of Kosovo, except for a fraction of imams and a few others, these public calls were not very alarming to Kosovo's citizens and institutions in general.

The picture further changed, however, when in October 2013, videos appeared of two Albanian speaking individuals, one from Kosovo[8] (by the name Lavdrim Muhaxheri) and the other from Albania[9] (a man approximately in his 60s), calling on all Albanian Muslims to join the war against the regime of Bashar al-Assad and other "infidels". A few months later, in January 2014, Lavdrim Muhaxheri reappeared in another video calling on all Albanians to join him and the other "lions" – referring to the combatents fighting alongside him, in order to fight the *taghut*[10] and the *kuffar*[11]; he also used the opportunity to ask for the US General's head.[12] Again, two months later, in March 2014, another citizen from Kosovo, Rexhep Morina from Malisheva,[13] appeared on a video calling on others to join him in the "holy land" to fight a "holy war".[14] Public calls in Albanian language by individuals involved in various factions fighting in Syria presented a distressful signal for Kosovo as it brought the civil strife in Syria closer to home. It seemed, however, that even during 2013, the year when the majority of individuals from Kosovo left their homes to join the conflict in Syria, both the citizens and the relevant institutions in Kosovo did not have a clear picture on how the opposition against Assad was organized.[15]

It was only in November 2013 when the BIK, for the first time, issued an official declaration calling on all young people in Kosovo to not join the fighting in Syria.[16] It also appeared, during

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7   Studio Islame Prishtina (2012). "Kosovari Naman Demolli është vrarë në Siri [TV Klan Kosova] [5min]". *Youtube*. Online available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NaD-hopf1_s

8   Gazeta Shqip (2013). "Shqiptari bën thirrje për xhihad në Siri" October 13, 2013. *Gazeta* Shqip. Online available at: http://gazeta-shqip.com/lajme/2013/10/13/shqiptari-ben-thirrje-per-xhihad-ne-siri/

9   Ebu Ruvejda (2013). "Plaku nga Shqipëria-thirrje për Xhihad" *Youtube*. Online available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oYY0TQ3M5xY

10   In Islamic doctrine, *taghut* refers to the state or those who worship anything apart from Allah / those believing in other deities

11   In Islamic doctrine, *kuffar* means unbeliever

12   IndeksOnline.net (2014) "Lufta ne Siri – Indeksonline" *Youtube*. Online available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zhbWhgS6svc

13   Rexhep Morina was reported dead later in July 2014.

14   RTV Klan (2014) "Video ku bëhet thirrje për Siri" *Youtube*. Online available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2NGM8ds0Hj4

15   According to 20 January 2014 data provided by the Anti-Terrorist Department within the Kosovo Police, only during 2013, more than 120 individuals left Kosovo to join the fight in Syria.

16   BIK (2013). "Deklaratë për opinion" November 13, 2013. Online available at: http://bislame.net/lajme/476-dkl-siri

this period, that the Kosovo Police (KP) had the situation under control, and were monitoring individuals who might have potentially posed a threat to the state.[17] In April of the following year, the Mufti of the BIK, Naim Tërnava, personally condemned the ideas and ideologues in Kosovo who were calling on or recruiting the citizens of Kosovo to join the conflict in Syria, and stated that there is no holy war in Syria and that the people fighting there should return home.[18] Nonetheless, it appeared that these and other calls at the time addressed to the Kosovo citizens to not join the opposition forces in Syria and Iraq fell on deaf ears for a few citizens, both in Kosovo and in the Levant.[19]

While on the one hand the KP was conducting raids in Kosovo over the late summer of 2014 against the individuals suspected of being involved in conflicts in Syria (directly as foreign fighters, and indirectly as recruiters and propagators), ruthless acts were undertaken by a few Kosovo citizens in Syria during the same period. On 29 July 2014, a widely shared report in local and international media showed Lavdrim Muhaxheri beheading a 19-year old Iraqi citizen.[20] In an interview for an Albanian daily a few days later, Lavdrim Muhaxheri explained that the beheading of a 19-year-old came as a result of the latter suspected of being a spy.[21] A few weeks later, on 17 August 2013, another Kosovo citizen from Kaçanik (a town in Kosovo where Lavdrim Muhaxheri comes from) who goes by his code name Saleel Al Sawarim, beheaded another person.[22] The cruelty of such acts set off some alarm bells in Kosovo, especially considering the fact that such acts were committed by two Kosovo citizens within a short time period, and for a religious purpose – something that was not part of Kosovo citizens' tradition: neither religious nor national. By the time these crimes were committed and by the time the KP carried out raids against foreign fighters who came back to, and those promoting their ideas in Kosovo, more than 150 individuals from Kosovo were suspected of having been engaged in Syria and Iraq as foreign fighters, and many more continued to be enticed by various militant groups in Syria.

Many public debates took place in Kosovo and other Albanian speaking areas in the region which attempted to shed some light on a crucial question, that is, what is causing people to join the conflicts in the Middle East? Besides many attempts, very little informed arguments were provided by experts, policymakers, media, and even by religious figures and scholars. This is mostly due to the lack of information at the grassroots level which could have shed

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17   Selvije Bajrami (2013). "Terrorizmi, kërcënim për Kosovën" November 14, 2013. *Gazeta Zëri*. Online available at: http://old.zeri.info/artikulli/20527/terrorizmi-kercenim-per-kosoven

18   Koha.net (2014). "Tërnava fton të rinjtë shqiptarë në luftërat në Siri e Irak të kthehen në Kosovë" April 18, 2014. *Koha.net*. Online available at: http://koha.net/?id=27&l=6920

19   The Levant is a historical geographical term referring to an area east of the Mediterranan Sea, and it usually includes countries like: Syria, part of Iraq, Israel, Palestine, Lebannon, Jordan, and part of the Sinai.

20   Gaeta Tema (2014). "Foto Tronditëse / Lavdrim Muhaxheri pret koka njerëzish në Siri" July 29, 2014. *Gazeta Tema*. Online available at: http://www.gazetatema.net/web/2014/07/29/fotot-tronditese-lavdrim-muhaxheri-pret-koka-njerezish-ne-siri/

21   Fatos Mahmutaj (2014). "Intervista. Muhaxheri: Çdokujt që tradhton do t'ia prisja kokën" August 2, 2014. *Ora News*. Online available at: http://www.oranews.tv/rajoni/intervista-muhaxheri-cdokujt-qe-tradhton-do-tia-prisja-koken/

22   Zëri.info (2014). "Shqiptari tjetër i heq kokën me shpat një personi në sy të fëmijëve (Foto+18)" August 17, 2014. *Gazeta Zëri*. Online available at: http://old.zeri.info/artikulli/45850/shqiptari-tjeter-i-heq-koken-me-shpat-nje-personi-ne-sy-te-femijeve-foto18

some light in understanding the drivers behind people's involvement as foreign fighters in re-cent Middle Eastern conflicts. It is for this reason that the KCSS decided to conduct a 6-month long research project, with the core purpose to inquire into the causes and consequences of the Kosovo citizens' involvement as foreign fighters in the conflicts in the Middle East (more predominantly in Syria and Iraq). Considering that the issue of foreign fighters occupies a sig-nificant part of the security domain, and having the expertise and capacities to deal with such an issue, the KCSS took the responsibility to inquire into this sensitive issue in greater length and depth.

3. METHODOLOGY

In order to get an in-depth understanding of and give an answer to the question that this research project explores, a number of research methods were used. Firstly, the KCSS applied a distinct method to gather as much information as possible on individual foreign fighters who have returned home, those still fighting, and those who are deceased. The available open source information on Kosovo foreign fighters published through various media outlets were initially gathered and structured. In the meantime, data on foreign fighters was also gathered from available sources through the KP and other domestic security structures.

A crucial part of the methodology included KCSS researchers' visits to and meetings with former foreign fighters directly involved in conflict, recruitment, and with members of their families. In order to conduct this research, a considerable amount of time was spent in the field. Given that there was no available contact information for the majority of these subjects, KCSS researchers went directly to their hometowns or villages and investigated their addresses, an endeavour that turned out to be successful in most of the cases as exact addresses were found and direct contacts were made. As such, KCSS researchers, including the author of this report, have met directly with 6 former foreign fighters who came back to Kosovo, and members of the family (parent, sibling, or other close relatives) of another 12 foreign fighters, among which include those still directly involved in conflict, those that lost their lives, or those that are under arrest. Such field visits were conducted in the following municipalities: Gjilan, Hani i Elezit, Kaçanik, Klina, Prishtina, Vitia, while some meetings were also held in Prishtina with members of the families and relatives of foreign fighters from Peja and Gjakova. In addition, quantitative data was gathered for the purposes of this report, including sight visits which have helped extensively in observing foreign fighters' individual, family, social, and other general circumstantial conditions. The names of those who wanted to remain anonymous will appear with random initials, which do not necessarily reflect the true initials of their names, so as to protect their identity. This report will present the true and full names of those who have already appeared in the media and for which personal details already exist on open source media.

Direct contact with a few de-radicalized individuals who have formerly embraced radical violent ideologies and used to belong to circles that propagated and disseminated violent extremism and facilitated recruitment for foreign fighters in Kosovo were also made. Such individuals were supportive to this research as they provided, among other things, the basic ideological tenets of the violent extremist circles, those propagating such ideologies, their organisation, ideological roots, religious attitudes towards a number of subjects, tactics, instruments, etc. They agreed to support the research out of religious and personal principle, as well as out of (religious) regret of having been radical extremists in the first place, and with the will to contribute to fighting violent extremism in Kosovo and elsewhere. They also did so under the condition of anonymity (for personal security reasons), which this report respects based on strict research ethics. The interviews and meetings with former violent extremists as well as with those directly involved in conflict, were in combination extremely useful for the purposes of this research as it helped in understanding the root causes, both in terms of ideology and in

terms of identifying individuals/instruments facilitating violent extremism. They also helped in understanding the process of one's radicalisation, the process of joining and embracing violent extremist ideas, the process of actually being involved in the conflict as a foreign fighter, and more importantly the process of their de-radicalisation.

Secondly, and as a necessary part of the methodology, interviews were conducted with journalists who have either dealt with or reported more extensively on the issue at hand. A number of interviews were conducted with officials within state structures, which include: the anti-terrorist department within the KP, the Kosovo Intelligence Agency (KIA), and the Financial Intelligence Unit. Interviews were also conducted with former officials at the KP, former officials at the Parliamentary Committee on Internal Affairs, Security and Supervision of the Kosovo Security Force, and other former officials in relevant state security structures. Interviews were also conducted with a number of lawyers defending individuals suspected of being involved in conflicts in Syria and Iraq, or propagating, facilitating and supporting such radical groups. Additionally, formal and informal interviews were conducted with the BIK officials, imams in Kosovo, Albania, and Macedonia (including liberal and conservative), as well as practitioners of Islam.

Third, meetings with former radicals which led to a general understanding of their extremist ideology opened an avenue for further research that led into a more in-depth understanding of violent extremists groups and ideological divisions within and between them in Kosovo and the Albanian speaking areas in the region. As a result, a considerable number of books and reports from both, Western and Middle Eastern authors and experts were exhausted and a number of others consulted for the purposes of understanding such ideological tenets. They have significantly helped in understanding the issues related to religion, foreign fighters, the concept of jihad, and differences between them - strict in some cases and vague in others.

Forth, the KCSS has additionally employed quantitative research methods where specific statistical data is drawn from the Kosovo Security Barometer (KSB) conducted during October 2014, which included specific questions regarding the issue at hand. Data extracted from the KSB was helpful in supporting a number of arguments in this report, shedding some light into some aspects of the inquiry of this research project.

Finally, the KCSS initially began this research from a general security and human security perspective; however, while inquiring into the causes of Kosovo citizens' involvement as foreign fighters in the Middle Eastern conflicts, it became clear that more comprehensive research and analysis is needed. For instance, during research, it eventually became clear that an in-depth analysis of extremist ideologies and religious ideologies was necessary in order to produce a more complete understanding of the issue under investigation. This was necessary as ideological tenets provide the essence of people's radicalisation and eventual involvement with militant means, which interact with other factors and conditions on state, society, family and individual levels to "produce" a foreign fighter. Such a methodological approach has also led the author of this report to adopt a mix of policy, academic, and scientific (semi-policy/semi-academic/scientific) approaches, in order to discuss and tackle specific and sensitive issues under the investigation of this project.

After initially presenting the general context of the issue of foreign fighters, the report first discusses the *external conditions* and influences of religionization on the one hand and violent extremisation on the other hand. Secondly, it continues by looking at *internal conditions* and influences of religionization and of violent extremism. While it attempts to make a distinction between the religionization process and violent extremisation process on both external and internal domains, it also looks on how they interact with other conditions and factors especially on an individual level to facilitate violent extremism. While significant differences are noted between the impact of religionization violent extremism, there are a few conditions which this report discusses that unintentionally produce a link between the two, which in particular involved the ethical irresponsibility in religious teachings by a few religious authorities. The report continues by discussing the instruments used by violent extremist groups in the case of Kosovo to radicalise others, and it summarizes the general process of how individuals end up as foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq. The report also discusses the unintended consequences that in one way or another facilitate violent extremism, and concludes by providing a set of recommendations.

4. THE CONTEXT

It is estimated that the number of foreign fighters that have joined the various militant organisations fighting in Syria and Iraq is more than 20,000.[23] Around 4,000, or a fifth of these come from Western Europe.[24] These are data estimates from the second half of 2014, and the number continues to grow.[25] Among the 22 Western states which include those throughout Europe, the US, Russia, and Turkey, from which most of the foreign fighters are suspected to have joined militant organisations in Syria and Iraq, Kosovo is ranked eighth,[26] with 232 confirmed cases (see Table below). Russia is ranked first on the list with 1,500 confirmed cases, followed by France with 1,200 confirmed cases, and Germany, the United Kingdom (UK), and Turkey with 600 confirmed cases each. When looking at these figures on per capita basis, however, Kosovo has 125 foreign fighters per capita for every 1 million citizens, making it the highest ranking country among the 22 listed countries, followed by Bosnia with 85, Belgium with 42, and Albania with 30 cases of foreign fighters per capita for every 1 million citizens.

23   Peter R. Neumann (2014). "Foreign fighter total in Syria/Iraq now exceeds 20,000; surpasses Afghanistan conflict in the 1980s". *ICSR*. Online available at: http://icsr.info/2015/01/foreign-fighter-total-syriairaq-now-exceeds-20000-surpasses-afghanistan-conflict-1980s/

24   Ibid.

25   Evan Bartlett (2014). "Record number of foreign nationals fighting in Iraq and Syria". *The Independent*. Online available at: http://i100.independent.co.uk/article/record-number-of-foreign-nationals-fighting-in-iraq-and-syria--gk2635auox

26   Note needs to be taken on the numbers for Kosovo which are more recent than the other cases, since it includes confirmed cases until January 2015, while the other cases include confirmed numbers of the second half of 2014. This may slightly impact Kosovo's ranking on the table above. In addition, the numbers on the table above include all those that have gone to Syria and Iraq at some point in time; they do not represent the number of foreign fighters currently there.

27   These numbers are the highest estimates of second half of 2014 by The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR). http://icsr.info/2015/01/foreign-fighter-total-syriairaq-now-exceeds-20000-surpasses-afghanistan-conflict-1980s/

28   The number of population by country are estimates of July 2014 by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Online available at: https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/rankorder/2119rank.html

29   The number of Muslim population by country are estimates of 2010 by the Pew Research Center. Online available at: http://www.pewforum.org/2011/01/27/table-muslim-population-by-country/

30   According to 20 January 2014 data provided by the Anti-Terrorist Department within the Kosovo Police, the number of foreign fighters from Kosovo was 210. However and additional 22 foreign fighters have left Kosovo during January, which were not included in the official 20 January 2014 data. The information regarding 22 additional fighters have been gathered from direct communication with two police officials and media reports

Rank	Country	Nr. of foreign fighters[27]	Nr. of foreign fighters (per million)[28]	Nr. of foreign fighters per Muslim population (per million)[29]	Country	Rank
1	**Kosovo[30]**	**232**	**125**	1,667	Finland	1
2	Bosnia	330	85	698	Ireland	2
3	Belgium	440	42	690	Belgium	3
4	Albania	90	30	664	Denmark	4
5	Denmark	150	27	417	Norway	5
6	Sweden	180	19	399	Sweden	6
7	Austria	150	18	316	Austria	7
8	France	1,200	18	274	Netherlands	8
9	Netherlands	250	15	255	France	9
10	Finland	70	13	250	Serbia	10
11	Norway	60	12	211	Bosnia	11
12	Russia	1,500	11	209	United Kingdom	12
13	Serbia	70	10	146	Germany	13
14	United Kingdom	600	9	130	Kosovo[31]	14
15	Germany	600	7	98	Spain	15
16	Turkey	600	7	92	Switzerland	16
17	Ireland	30	6	92	Russia	17
18	Macedonia	12	6	51	Italy	18
19	Switzerland	40	5	39	USA	19
20	Spain	100	2	35	Albania	20
21	Italy	80	1	17	Macedonia	21
22	USA	100	0	8	Turkey	22

Table 1: Number of foreign fighters from Western Europe, Balkans, US, and Russia

Besides this, the per capita numbers of foreign fighters do not cover the entire picture, and certainly do not speak much about the states most affected by the phenomenon of foreign fighters on a per capita basis. The KCSS has looked beyond exploring per capita numbers. Given that it is mostly the Muslim population of each of the respective countries that holds the desire to join the Middle Eastern conflicts on religious grounds, compared to their respective non-Muslim populations, it is necessary to look at the number of foreign fighters per capita of their respective Muslim populations. It becomes clear that it is the Muslim population of the non-Muslim majority countries that are mostly affected by the phenomenon of foreign fighters. For instance, Finland is ranked by far the first on the list of Western countries with the highest number of foreign fighters per capita of its Muslim population, having 1,667 confirmed cases per capita per million of its Muslim population. Finland is followed by Ireland, which is second on the list; Belgium, which is third on the list, and other Nordic countries such as Denmark, Norway, and Sweden.

In this respect, Kosovo is in the bottom half of the list of countries (ranked 14th among 22 countries) with the highest number of foreign fighters per capita of their respective Muslim

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31   Gazeta Tema (2012). "Regjistrimi i popullësisë, 96% e kosovarëve myslimanë" February 9, 2012. *Gazeta Tema*. Online available at: http://www.gazetatema.net/web/2012/02/09/regjistrimi-i-popullsise-96-e-kosova-reve-jane-myslimane/

populations. Besides being a Muslim majority country, and besides bordering ISIS, Turkey, for instance, is ranked last on the list of countries with the highest number of foreign fighters per capita of their Muslim population. There are a few assumptions on why the Muslim populations of the non-Muslim majority countries are affected more by the phenomenon of foreign fighters compared to the Muslim populations of the Muslim majority countries. Such assumptions and analysis behind this are made in Chapter 7 of this report which deals with instruments facilitating violent extremism and recruitment.

The overwhelming majority of the fighters joined the conflict on religious grounds; however there are also a number of mercenaries that were reported to have joined the rebel groups for payment.[32,33] Most of the paid mercenaries are the former British Army soldiers who fight on the Kurdish side, and the former Russian Army soldiers who fight on the side of the Assad regime; there are also some private security companies involved as well.[34] It has also been reported that Dutch and German motorcycle gangs are joining the fights in Syria on the side of the Kurdish forces in order to fight ISIS.[35] It has even been reported that a Dutch prosecutor told such gang members that they will not be prosecuted for fighting abroad as long as they do not fight the Dutch troops.[36]

When it comes to the overall and more detailed statistics on the case of Kosovo, out of 226 foreign fighters for which the data is available on the period they are believed to have joined the conflict in Syria, the majority, or 54 percent, have joined during 2013, a period when ISIS was consolidated and when its recruitment intensified. Alternatively, 31 percent of them joined the conflict during 2012, a period when ISIS was not consolidated and when more 'sincere' efforts were being made to help the opposition forces against Assad's regime. It appears that no foreign fighter was reported to have joined the conflict in the immediate aftermath of the KP raids against the suspected former foreign fighters and a considerable number of imams. This however, proved to be short-lived, as a few months after, or more specifically in January 2015, an additional 16 foreign fighters, or 7 percent compared to the total, were found to have gone to Syria, and a number of others were caught by the authorities in their attempt to do so.

32   Al Arabiya News (2014). "More British 'mercenaries' join fight against ISIS" November 23, 2014. *Al Arabiya News*. Online available at: http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/world/2014/11/23/More-British-mercenaries-join-fight-against-ISIS-.html

33   Matthew Holehouse (2014). "British mercenaries fighting Isil 'open to murder charges'" November 24, 2014. *The Telegraph*. Online available at: http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/islamic-state/11249570/British-mercenaries-fighting-Isil-open-to-murder-charges.html

34   PravdaTV (2013). "Syria: Russian mercenaries fight" *Youtube*. Online available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uZ6NB6Yp6q4, https://medium.com/war-is-boring/there-are-russian-mercenaries-fighting-in-syria-18ae26e885f7

35   Anthony Faiola (2014). "German motorcycle gang follows Dutch bikers into fight against Islamic State". November 17, 2014, *The Washington Post*. Online available at: http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/world-views/wp/2014/11/17/german-motorcycle-gang-follows-dutch-bikers-into-fight-against-islamic-state/

36   John Hall and Chris Pleasance (2014). "Now German biker gangs join their Dutch counterparts in fighting against ISIS in Kobane". October 18, 2014. *MailOnline*. Online Available at: http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2798507/now-german-biker-gangs-join-dutch-counterparts-fighting-against-isis-kobane.html
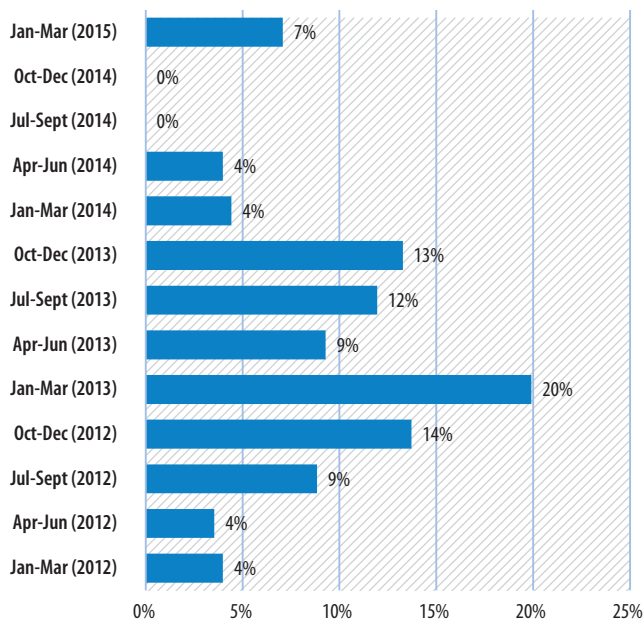
Figure 1: Period when foreign fighters from Kosovo joined the rebel groups in Syria (n=226)37

As for their current location, out of 210 foreign fighters for which such data is available, 58 of them or 28 percent are with the rebel groups in Syria and Iraq. Another 32 of them or 15 percent are under arrest, while 12 of them or 6 percent are under house arrest. Out of the available information, 34 of them or 16 percent were already killed, while there is no available information for the present location and state for 74 of them or 35 percent of the total. The numbers for Kosovo also include around 13-14 women, only a few of them involved as foreign fighters, while the majority were dragged into the conflict with their husbands.[38,39] There are also close to 20 children that were drawn into the conflict with their parents, who are not included in the number of foreign fighters for the case of Kosovo.[40]

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37   According to 20 January 2014 data provided by the Anti-Terrorist Department within the Kosovo Police

38   Ibid.

39   Besiana Xharra and Anita Kadriu (2014). "Gratë kosovare në ISIS (FOTO)" February 25, 2015. *Gazeta Zëri*. Online available at: http://www.zeri.info/aktuale/21333/grate-kosovare-ne-isis-foto/

40   According to 20 January 2014 data provided by the Anti-Terrorist Department within the Kosovo Police
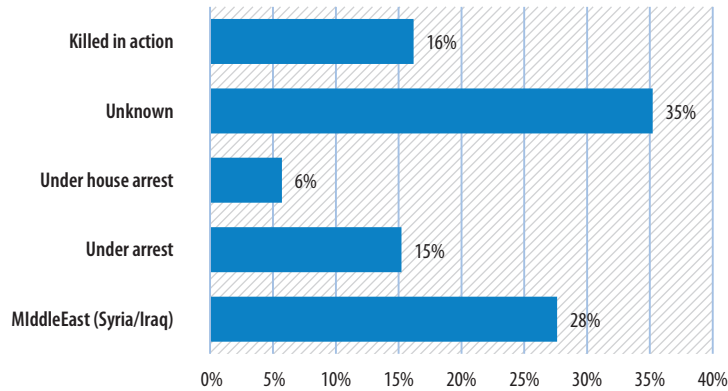
Figure 2: Currently known location of foreign fighters from Kosovo (n=210)[41]

Finally, calls on behalf of Islam by certain groups and individuals as a justification for joining the fights in Syria should be of an utmost concern for Kosovo, given that, among other things, around 96 percent of its population belong to the Islamic faith. Understandably, calls addressed to the citizens of Kosovo to join various extremist rebel groups in Syria have also instigated heated debates in Kosovo. However, besides producing two extreme positions – liberal secularists on the one side and religious conservatives on the other side, no proposals have been given on how to actually address the problem in Kosovo on a policy level. This is the case, plausibly, because little has been known so far about the genesis of the problem and the ideas behind the problem. As a result, a lot of prejudices and disparagements have been created and suggested from both sides in such debates.

It is of utmost importance therefore, to first understand the genesis of the problem and the ideas behind the problem, in order to tackle the root causes not only behind the calls to join various rebel groups in Syria, but also the causes behind the ideas of potential violent religious extremists in Kosovo. This is especially important for policy- and decision- makers within state security agencies and structures, because of the mistakes made by being unaware of the differences between fundamental ideas in religion and violent extremist ideas in religion that exist inside and outside of Islam. It is evident that policy- and decision- makers as well as the general public do not make clear distinctions between *religionization* efforts by religious authorities (i.e. imams) and *violent extremist* efforts (other imams and extremist activists), which this report finds to be distinct in terms of ideology, and what they stand for.

Such mistakes and unawareness could lead to counterproductive consequences; thus, there is a potential to backfire (in many, if not in most cases in the world it already has), when acting with ignorance on this issue. For instance Gilles Kepel, who has inquired into the origins of the global jihad movement back in the 1980s, says: "[w]hile European counterterrorism experts recognize that Salafist jihadism is an ideological movement with deep religious and historical roots, they feel that their counterparts at the FBI and American intelligence agencies don't share this understanding".[42] Also, Xavier Raufer, a Paris-based expert on terrorism who has

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41   According to 20 January 2014 data provided by the Anti-Terrorist Department within the Kosovo Police

42   Bruce Livesey (2005). "The Salafist Movement" *PBS: Frontline*. Online available at: http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/front/special/sala.html

close ties to France's intelligence community, said that when he "began using the word Salafi and Salafists in 1997 in meetings in Washington" nobody raised the word and asked what does it mean.[43] This however, is not the case with reference to such security agencies in 2015, they illustrate the importance of having an in-depth understanding of ideological divisions, especially between fundamental religious practices and beliefs and violent extremist practices and beliefs, when dealing with the problem of violent extremism, in order to prevent counterproductive consequences as this report discusses in its subsequent chapters.

Until now, Kosovo has taken a number of steps in its efforts to fight violent extremism as well as a number of actions against persons who are active in supporting violent extremist ideas under the veil of "holy war". According to one of the security institutions in Kosovo, the following measures have been taken:[44]

- Monitoring of activities of violent extremist suspects;
- Monitoring of activities of the returned foreign fighters;
- Banning the entry of foreign individuals who are suspected to have supported violent extremist ideas, in accordance with the – "Stop List";
- Application of a comprehensive approach against extremism in cooperation with relevant state institutions in accordance with the "Watch List";
- Cooperation with other partner foreign security and intelligence services;
- Education of and provision of information for Kosovo citizens regarding the conflicts in Syria; calls not to join the conflict (Government, BIK, media, etc.);
- Interviewing the returned foreign fighters by the Kosovo Police;
- Prevention of extreme actions or cooperation by groups supporting these actions within and outside the state;

Additionally, dozens of people were arrested under the suspicion of either being involved directly in Syria or supporting the extremist cause, including: suspected foreign fighters, recruiters, imams, and other extremist activists. The groups below were also arrested under suspicion of incitement through hate and racist speech in Kosovo:[45]

- On 5 November 2013 – there were 5 individuals arrested (1 on the run);
- On 26 June 2014 – there were 4 individuals arrested;
- On 11 August 2014 – there were 47 individuals arrested;
- On 17 September 2014 – there were 15 individuals arrested;
- While 13 others are on the run

The total number of individuals arrested, according to the latest (January) data include more than 80 individuals under similar suspicions, while more than 60 percent were released; they are either under house arrest, being monitored, or released completely, due to the lack of evidence for the charges brought against them.[46] Therefore, being unaware of or lacking understanding on specific ideas and ideologies, and especially drawing generalisations without making clear distinctions, could significantly jeopardise both the prevention and the fight against violent extremist ideas and acts, and more importantly, it could curtail potential de-radicalisation efforts.

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43   Ibid.

44   Interview with a high official of one of the security agencies in Kosovo, 27 October 2014. Prishtina, Kosovo.

45   Ibid.

46   According to 20 January 2014 data provided by the Anti-Terrorist Department within the Kosovo Police

5. EXTERNAL CONDITIONS AND INFLUENCES

A number of studies and research papers have dealt with the genesis of Islamic religious extremism or the use of violent means to reach particular goals. They mostly point at Saudi Arabia, not only as the root of modern religious extremism and violence, but also as the machine behind spreading such an ideology globally, including the Balkans and Kosovo in particular. When the citizens of Kosovo began joining the violent extremist rebel groups in Syria, in particular including ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra, policymakers, the media, and members of civil society have continued pointing at the Saudis and Saudi version of Islam as the main source for promoting such ideas in Kosovo, and pushing people towards such violent extremist groups in Syria. This report, however, finds that the root of violent extremist ideas elsewhere. It recognizes the strong impact of Saudi Arabia in introducing more conservative religious ideas and practices and in widely spreading more conservative ideas and practices in and around Kosovo, but it does not find it to be the <u>core</u> or <u>direct</u> cause of pulling people towards violent extremism and violent extremist groups in Syria. It finds such an issue to be much more complex, which this report deals with in length. Before moving on to identifying the <u>core</u> external causes and influences of violent extremist ideas, it is initially necessary to deal with global and local ideas and claims which indicate Saudi Arabia as the core cause.

5.1. The roots of conservative religious ideas

Saudi Arabia's identification with religious extremism dates back to the establishment of the first Saudi state in 1744 when al-Wahhab, an Islamic scholar, and Prince Muhammad bin Saud made an alliance to form the first Saudi state, then called the Emirate of Diriyah.[47] This was a power-sharing agreement where Prince Saud was to deal with political affairs and al-Wahhab was to deal with the religious affairs of the new state. This meant that Prince Saud was to endorse al-Wahhab's religious thoughts, while al-Wahhab was to give political legitimacy to Prince Saud through his followers.[48] Today's Saudi Arabia continues to inherit and function in accordance with this agreement. Al-Wahhab was an Islamic Salafi[49] scholar who belonged to the Hanbalite *madhhab* (legal school)[50] within *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) of the Sunni tradition in Islam.

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47   Sir James Norman Dalrymple Anderson (1983). " The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia" . *Stacey* International. p.77

48   PBS (2005). "A Chronology: The House of Saud" *PBS: Frontline*. Online available at: http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/saud/cron/

49   Salafism is an Islamic doctrine deriving from a *hadith* (Prophet Mohammad's sayings and deeds) which says: "the best people are those living in my generation, and then those who will follow them, and then those who will follow the latter". It is a call to Muslims to follow the example of those first three generations beginning with the Prophet, as the most credible references in Islamic interpretation.

50   Some refer to *madhhab* as "school of thought", but this report will be referring to it as "legal school" from Wael Hallaq (1997). "A History of Islamic Legal Theories" *Cambridge University Press*.

Hanbalism is generally recognized as the most conservative of the four major legal schools within the Sunni tradition.[51],[52] Hanbalism was the last of the four legal schools to be established, and it was found after Imam Ibn Hanbal (780–855), an Islamic scholar that lived and was more active around 200 years after the death of Prophet Muhammad.[53] Hanbalism challenged the other legal schools, especially Hanafism (institutionalized by the BIK in Kosovo) which uses analogical deduction (*qiyas*) to answer theological questions that could not be found in the Quran, the Sunnah, and the sayings of the Prophet's companions. By using analogical deduction, it allows people to decide on a certain interpretation of the Quran and the Hadith based on new circumstances that were not present or foreseen before. Imam Hanbal challenged this method believing that the use of analogical dedication was undermining the faith, eventually disregarding the principle of analogical deduction and calling for a return to the earlier traditions and interpretations – making him more fundamentalist[54] in religious interpretation and practice.[55] Hanbal also challenged other legal schools, believing them to be inadequate for the period he was living in.[56],[57]

Besides this, Hanbal had a major influence on other religious scholars in the following centuries, and eventually became popular with the religious teachings that they drew from Hanbal. For instance, a 13th century Islamic scholar and jurist, Ibn Taymiyyah (1263-1328), picked up where Hanbali had left and further promoted his conservative and traditional teachings and readings.[58] He was also of the belief that the Salafis (predecessors) had answers for all legal aspects and that the true Islam is to look back at its roots and not allow following scholars to establish circumstantial rules that deviated from true Islam.[59] Living under the Mongol occupation, and despite the latter's conversion into Islam, Ibn Taymiyyah was the first to have issued a fatwa *(religious opinion)* against the Mongols[60] (Muslim converts), and he personally joined the jihad against them.[61] He declared jihad against the Mongols to be compulsory not only

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51   Dimal Basha (2013). "Globalization and the Rise of Salafism in Kosovo. How Gulf Countries Spearheaded a Transitional Advocacy Network that is Challenging a New Democracy". *The New School Graduate Program in International Affairs*. Master of Ats thesis.

52   Message for Muslims (n.d.). "The Four Sunni Schools". Online available at: http://www.message4muslims.org.uk/islam/understanding-islamic-law/the-four-sunni-schools/

53   Ibid.

54   Fundamentalism in this report is understood as looking at the fundaments of religion, and it does not refer to extremism or violent extremism as it is usually employed in public

55   Message for Muslims (n.d.). "The Four Sunni Schools". Online available at: http://www.message4muslims.org.uk/islam/understanding-islamic-law/the-four-sunni-schools/

56   Dimal Basha (2013). "Globalization and the Rise of Salafism in Kosovo. How Gulf Countries Spearheaded a Transitional Advocacy Network that is Challenging a New Democracy". *The New School Graduate Program in International Affairs*. Master of Ats thesis.

57   Message for Muslims (n.d.). "The Four Sunni Schools". Online available at: http://www.message4muslims.org.uk/islam/understanding-islamic-law/the-four-sunni-schools/

58   Dimal Basha (2013). "Globalization and the Rise of Salafism in Kosovo. How Gulf Countries Spearheaded a Transitional Advocacy Network that is Challenging a New Democracy". *The New School Graduate Program in International Affairs*. Master of Ats thesis.

59   Ibid.

60   This was the period when the Mongol Empire occupied vast territories around Asia, including the Middle East, and parts of Europe

61   Denise Aigle (2007). "The Mongol Invasions of Bilād al-Shām by Ghāzān Khān and Ibn Taymīyah's Three "Anti-Mongol" Fatwas". *Mamluk Studies Review (The University of Chicago)*. p.105

because they did not follow the Sharia (they followed the Yasa code of laws of Genghis Khan at the time),[62],[63] but also because he considered them to be Kharijites - the first deviated group which this report discusses in the following chapters.[64] What was particular about his *fatwa* is that he set a precedent of turning jihad from a collective activity, as it was considered until then, to an individual endeavour, whereby every individual fighting infidels and bad Muslims would be received by God as martyrs.[65] During Ibn Taymiyyah's period jihad was still defensive, which means it was not to be issued for aggression outside of Muslim lands.

Ibn Taymiyyah is considered to be one of the most influential scholars, whose name and religious teachings have been widely quoted to have stimulated the likes of Al Qaida and the other violent extremist groups.[66],[67]. For example, more recently, when ISIS burned alive a Jordanian pilot, they quoted Ibn Taymiyyah as part of their justification to do so.[68] However, many of the extremist groups and individuals throughout history and in contemporary times use the primacy and the celebrity status of widely accepted religious scholars in Islam, like Ibn Taymiyyah, to justify their violent acts.[69] It is not that the extremist groups and individuals misquote such scholars, which does happen at times, but they do not use the entire body of teachings of such influential religious scholars (i.e. the numerous conditions they applied before issuing violent *fatwas*) to support their violent (usually defensive) acts. For instance, in one of his prison letters, Ibn Taymiyyah has taken a principled stance on the interpretation of Islam, saying: "Allah aids the just state even if it is non-Muslim, yet withholds His help from the oppressive state even if it is Muslim".[70] This is something that violent extremist groups and preachers tend to intentionally ignore (when manipulating others) and more unintentionally by followers (when manipulated by others). To demonstrate this in the case of the Albanian speaking areas in the region, Mustafa Tërniqi, an influential imam in one of the Mosques in Durrës, Albania,

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62   Hunt Janin and Andre Kahlmeyer (2007). "Islamic Law: The Sharia from Muhammad's Time to the Present". McFarland and Co. Publishers. P.79.

63   Camille Mulcaire (2013). "Assessing al-Qaeda from the Teachings of Ibn Taymiyya" *E-International Relations Students*. Online available at: http://www.e-ir.info/2013/10/15/assessing-al-qaeda-from-the-teachings-of-ibn-taymiyya/

64   Jon Hoover (n.d.). "Jihad and the Mongols". Taymiyyan Studies. Online available at: https://sites.google.com/site/jhoover363/taymiyyan-studies/jihad-against-the-mongols

65   Dimal Basha (2013). "Globalization and the Rise of Salafism in Kosovo. How Gulf Countries Spearheaded a Transitional Advocacy Network that is Challenging a New Democracy". *The New School Graduate Program in International Affairs*. Master of Ats thesis.

66   Shukur Khilkhal (2014). "IS emerges from radical Islamic jurisprudence" June 30, 2014. *Al Monitor*. Online available at: http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/08/religious-origins-of-islamic-extremism.html#

67   University of Nottingham (2011). "Why Study...Ibn Taymiyya, with Jon Hoover". *Youtube.* Online available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iRgm85xQhNI

68   Shoebat Foundation (2015). "Watch The Most Horrific Video By ISIS Burning POW Jordanian Pilot". February 3, 2015. *Shoebat.com*. Online available at: http://shoebat.com/2015/02/03/watch-horrific-video-isis-burning-pow-jordanian-pilot/

69   Camille Mulcaire (2013). "Assessing al-Qaeda from the Teachings of Ibn Taymiyya" *E-International Relations Students*. Online available at: http://www.e-ir.info/2013/10/15/assessing-al-qaeda-from-the-teachings-of-ibn-taymiyya/

70   Ibn Taymiyyah (n.d.) "Letters from Prison".

has quoted Ibn Taymiyyah when arguing before his congregation on why one should _not_ join the fighting in Syria, and why such an involvement does not fulfil the conditions for jihad.[71]

This is also the case with al-Wahhab (1703-1792), whose teachings lay the basis of Islamic faith in today's Saudi Arabia. Abd al-Wahhab was another Hanbalite who admired Ibn Taymiyyah and was consequently influenced by him. Although he lived around four centuries after Ibn Taymiyyah, the circumstances and conditions under which they lived were similar. Similar to Ibn Taymiyyah's case with the Mongols, al-Wahhab believed that the rulers of the Ottoman Empire at the time were corrupting Islam; which means, they were not practicing the true Islam through the rule of the Sharia.[72] Al-Wahhab despised "the decorous, arty, tobacco smoking, hashish imbibing, drum pounding Egyptian and Ottoman nobility who travelled across Arabia to pray at Mecca", says Alastair Crooke, a former official of one of British security agencies.[73] Al-Wahhab saw these as deviations from true Islam and the way the Salafis have practiced it. He was against the cultural influence that the Ottoman Empire (more liberal Hanafi) had brought to Saudi Arabia, although the Ottomans did not rule over the part of the Peninsula where al-Wahhab lived at the time.[74],[75]

Overwhelming western scholars and Islamic opponents of his ideas were of the belief that his readings and understanding of Ibn Taymiyyah, stimulated him to see it as necessary to kill others who he believed were practicing Islam in a form even remotely different from the way he thought it should be practiced. Today, some even go as far as linking al-Wahhab's ideas and actions with those of today's ISIS.[76] One of the influential descendants of al-Wahhab, Suleyman b. Abdallah b. Muhammad b. Ábd al Wahhab, wrote that "Wahhabism not only bans any alliance with the _kuffar_ (unbelievers), but also their employment, consultation, trust, visiting, advice, friendship emulation, cordiality and affability towards them.[77] However, al-Wahhab himself dedicated a lot of energy in "refuting the charges levied against him".[78]

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71   Lidhja e Hoxhallarëve (2014). "Hoxhe Mustafa Terniqi - Si ta kuptojme thirrjen per xhihad ne Siri?" _Youtube_. Online available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2-fjncv78JU

72   Dimal Basha (2013). "Globalization and the Rise of Salafism in Kosovo. How Gulf Countries Spearheaded a Transitional Advocacy Network that is Challenging a New Democracy". _The New School Graduate Program in International Affairs_. Master of Ats thesis.

73   Alastair Crooke (2014). "You Can't Understand ISIS If You Don't Know the History of Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia" August 27, 2014. _The Huffington Post_. Online available at: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/alastair-crooke/isis-wahhabism-saudi-arabia_b_5717157.html

74   Aal e Imran (2012). "Ibn Taymiyah, Ibn Abdul Wahab & Ibn Saud: The Partnership of Extremists". January 5, 2012. _Iqra Online_. Online available at: http://www.iqraonline.net/ibn-taymiyah-ibn-abdul-wahab-ibn-saud-the-partnership-of-extremists/

75   Mbruoja.net (n.d.). "A e konsideronte Muhamed ibn Abdulvehabi Perandorinë si shtet renegatësh dhe a ishte rebeluar kundër tyre?". _Mburoja.net_.

76   Alastair Crooke (2014). "You Can't Understand ISIS If You Don't Know the History of Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia" August 27, 2014. _The Huffington Post_. Online available at: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/alastair-crooke/isis-wahhabism-saudi-arabia_b_5717157.html

77   Isa Blumi (2005). "Political Islam Among the Albanians: Are the Taliban Coming to the Balkans". _KIPRED_. Online available at: http://www.kipred.org/advCms/documents/14714_Political_Islam_Among_the_Albanians_Are_the_Taliban_coming_to_the_Balkans.pdf, p.11

78   Ibid., p.10

There is a lot of confusion, in the west, and especially in Kosovo regarding al-Wahhab's works and consequently the so called Wahhabi Movement. It is such confusions that prompt a lot of polemics between the Salafi (more conservative) imams in Kosovo[79] on the one hand, and the more liberal imams and the secular part of society on the other hand. Salafi imams tend not to distance themselves from al-Wahhab as a scholar,[80],[81] and it is because of this that they usually get associated with Wahhabism as a term (later developed), which immediately and easily resonates with violent extremism. Such polemics derive from how al-Wahhab is described as a scholar, and how al-Wahhab and Wahhabism is currently associated with violent extremism. For instance, one of al-Wahhab's earlier biographers from Georgetown University in Washington D.C., Natana DeLong Bas, attempted to dispel the most important Western myths about Wahhabism. While confirming his calls to eradicate "erroneous" popular religious practices, like tomb and saint veneration, rejection of blind following in favour of independent reasoning, she moves on to call him the "Martin Luther of Islam", for the period during which he lived.[82] DeLong Bas, sees al-Wahhab as an Islamic reformist, and after hypothesising that she would find a lot of violence, calling for jihad, and labelling all non-Wahhabists as *kuffar*, she did not find anything like this in al-Wahhab's works/books[83] nor in Western travellers accounts of the time.[84]

Those who link Wahhabism to ruthless violent acts can be justified, albeit reservedly, on the grounds that many violent extremist groups and organisations have quoted al-Wahhab and the previous Islamic scholars who have influenced him, when calling for an offensive jihad[85] against those who they call unbelievers – that is non-Wahhabis. Also, much of the negative imagery of the Wahhabis comes from al-Wahhab's opponents and from the practice of tomb destruction that was carried out by [al-Wahhab] and his early followers".[86] There are those who write that even his former teachers did not support the doctrine he was soon to espouse, with many historians claiming that his teachers spoke of him with much negative critique."[87]

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79   It should be noted that the Salafi imams in Kosovo are not keen and do not seek to identify themselves with the term "Salafi" because of the usual link that made between Salafis and extremists, which does not hold ground in principle.

80   Deniz Arnavut (2014). "Kundërpërgjigje Vehabistit Shefqet Krasniqit dhe armiqëve të tjerë të medhhebit Hanafi tradicional". *Youtube*. Online available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x7whtd-l_Vs

81   Telegrafi.com (2014). "Enes Goga: Hoxhallarët, çdo herë kanë qenë në shërbim të atdheut". August 25, 2014. *Telegrafi.com*. Online available at: http://www.telegrafi.com/lajme/enes-goga-hoxhallaret-cdo-here-kane-qene-ne-sherbim-te-atdheut-2-49774.html

82   Musaid Al-Tayyar (2014). "Muhammad Ibn Abdul Wahhab: an Intellectual Biography. Interview with Dr. Mrs Natana DeLong Bas: By Musaid Al-Tayyar". *The Simple Truth*. pp.54-60

83   For instance, she looked at the infamous book of al-Wahhab "Kitab al-Tawhid", which is quoted by many to have violent language towards the non-Wahhabists

84   Musaid Al-Tayyar (2014). "Muhammad Ibn Abdul Wahhab: an Intellectual Biography. Interview with Dr. Mrs Natana DeLong Bas: By Musaid Al-Tayyar". *The Simple Truth*. pp.54-60

85   Note that 'offensive jihad' came to be used around 150 years after al-Wahhab's death, by more radical interpreters who acted based on external and internal conditions (more modern ones) in the Middle East in the beginning of the 20th century.

86   Musaid Al-Tayyar (2014). "Muhammad Ibn Abdul Wahhab: an Intellectual Biography. Interview with Dr. Mrs Natana DeLong Bas: By Musaid Al-Tayyar". *The Simple Truth*. pp.54-60

87   http://thewahhabithreat.com/wahhabism/history-of-wahhabi-ism/the-factual-bioagraphy-of-the-wahhabi-founder/

However, there are voices who say that such a link is made mostly out of ignorance to perpetu-ate anti-Wahhabi polemic, "blindly denouncing the Wahhabi movement".[88] For instance, when talking about al-Wahhab's treatise on jihad, The Georgetown University Professor, DeLong Bas asserts that al-Wahhab even placed "limitations on violence and destruction on the few oc-casions when jihad was called for", and that he called for jihad only for defensive purposes.[89] Accordingly, al-Wahhab "believed in the sanctity of human life and taught that the preserva-tion of human life is the most important obligation of the Muslim."[90] For instance, "[H]e did not allow for children to be separated from their parents and he even required that families taken prisoner be allowed to practice their own religion and provide their children with appropri-ate religious instruction, provided that they were not atheists."[91] Overall, al-Wahhab's calls to return to the fundamental practices of Islam came out of his concern regarding the indiffer-ence at the time to the plight of widows, lack of attention to obligatory prayers, and failure to allocate shares of inheritance fairly to women that he found in Najd during his time.[92] Overall, al-Wahhab's conservative "back to the roots" religious teachings and thoughts combined with his personality and celebrity status as an Islamic scholar, have stimulated violent extremist groups to quote and (mis)use his religious authority to justify their violent acts.

It is the link between Hanbal – Ibn Taymiyyah – al-Wahhab, the first being the supreme ideo-logue of the purification of Islam and "back to the roots" reference propagated by the follow-ing two ideologues, which in the modern world makes al-Wahhab and its official practice in Saudi Arabia look ultra-conservative, especially for a 21st century secular state. The institu-tionalization of al-Wahhab's doctrine as a religious practice in Saudi Arabia and the dissemi-nation of its doctrine throughout the world, since the 1970s when oil prices boomed, raised a lot of concerns among secular states.[93] The dissemination of Saudi Arabia's Hanbali doctrine in Kosovo began during the mid 1990s but more intensively from the second half of 1999, immediately after NATO ceased its operation against Serbian targets.[94] According to Dimal Basha, who has written on the dissemination of Salafism globally and in Kosovo, Saudi Arabia

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88   M.R. Rida, Al-Wahhabiyya wa 'l-Hijaz. In Isa Blumi (2005). "Political Islam Among the Albanians: Are the Taliban Coming to the Balkans". *KIPRED*. p.10

89   Musaid Al-Tayyar (2014). "Muhammad Ibn Abdul Wahhab: an Intellectual Biography. Interview with Dr. Mrs Natana DeLong Bas: By Musaid Al-Tayyar". *The Simple Truth*. pp.54-60

90   Ibid.

91   Ibid.

92   The Air University (1992). "Saudi Arabia: Wahhabi Theology". *Library of Congress Country Study on Saudi Arabia*. Online available at: http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/loc/sa/wahhabi.htm

93   Dimal Basha (2013). "Globalization and the Rise of Salafism in Kosovo. How Gulf Countries Spearheaded a Transitional Advocacy Network that is Challenging a New Democracy". *The New School Graduate Program in International Affairs*. Master of Ats thesis. p.24

94   Interview with H.H. a former long time employee in various Arab sponsored charity organisations in Kosovo, 18 October 2014. Prishtina, Kosovo.

has built international advocacy networks that have propagated their "Islamic fundamentalist ideology" as a tool to increase their influence worldwide, and it has done so in Kosovo.[95,96]

5.2.   Dissemination of conservative religious ideas in Kosovo

According to a number of reports, Saudi Arabia has employed various instruments to facilitate the dissemination of its conservative religious practices.[97,98] In the case of Kosovo, a number of charity organisations and foundations provided financial aid to re-build houses that were destroyed during the war, to build new schools, mosques, print religious books, etc.[99,100,101,102] They have also provided financial aid to clinical centres, universities, as well as to the local governing institutions that were established after 1999 under UNMIK.[103] Saudi based and financed organisations have also supported more than 30 specialized Koranic schools in Kosovo's rural areas, all built after 1999.[104] Another instrument that was used was the provision of scholarships and financial aid to study in Saudi Arabia, and this was not only limited to imams or religious practitioners, but it included medical staff as well.[105106]

95   Dimal Basha (2013). "Globalization and the Rise of Salafism in Kosovo. How Gulf Countries Spearheaded a Transitional Advocacy Network that is Challenging a New Democracy". *The New School Graduate Program in International Affairs*. Master of Ats thesis. p.23

96   Roy Oliver (2006). "Globalized Islam: the Search for a new Ummah". In Dimal Basha (2013). "Globalization and the Rise of Salafism in Kosovo. How Gulf Countries Spearheaded a Transitional Advocacy Network that is Challenging a New Democracy". *The New School Graduate Program in International Affairs*. Master of Ats thesis.

97   Aal e Imran (2012). "Ibn Taymiyah, Ibn Abdul Wahab & Ibn Saud: The Partnership of Extremists". January 5, 2012. *Iqra Online*. Online available at: http://www.iqraonline.net/ibn-taymiyah-ibn-abdul-wahab-ibn-saud-the-partnership-of-extremists/

98   Ioannis Michaletos (2014). "Balkan and Syria nexus". May 18, 2014. *Phantis*. Online available at: http://www.phantis.com/blogs/ioannis-michaletos/balkan-and-syria-nexus

99   Liridon Llapashtica (2014). "Milionat e "Al Haramain" në Kosovë (Foto)" October 2, 2014. *Gazeta Zëri*. Online available at: https://zeri.info/ekonomia/489/milionat-e-al-haramain-ne-kosove-foto/

100   Isa Blumi (2005). "Political Islam Among the Albanians: Are the Taliban Coming to the Balkans". *KIPRED*. Online available at: http://www.kipred.org/advCms/documents/14714_Political_Islam_Among_the_Albanians_Are_the_Taliban_coming_to_the_Balkans.pdf

101   Dimal Basha (2013). "Globalization and the Rise of Salafism in Kosovo. How Gulf Countries Spearheaded a Transitional Advocacy Network that is Challenging a New Democracy". *The New School Graduate Program in International Affairs*. Master of Ats thesis.

102   Interview with H.H. a former long time employee in various Arab sponsored charity organisations in Kosovo, 18 October 2014. Prishtina, Kosovo.

103   Liridon Llapashtica (2014). "Milionat e "Al Haramain" në Kosovë (Foto)" October 2, 2014. *Gazeta Zëri*. Online available at: https://zeri.info/ekonomia/489/milionat-e-al-haramain-ne-kosove-foto/

104   Isa Blumi (2005). "Political Islam Among the Albanians: Are the Taliban Coming to the Balkans". *KIPRED*. Online available at: http://www.kipred.org/advCms/documents/14714_Political_Islam_Among_the_Albanians_Are_the_Taliban_coming_to_the_Balkans.pdf, p.15

105   Liridon Llapashtica (2014). "Milionat e "Al Haramain" në Kosovë (Foto)" October 2, 2014. *Gazeta Zëri*. Online available at: https://zeri.info/ekonomia/489/milionat-e-al-haramain-ne-kosove-foto/

106   Dimal Basha (2013). "Globalization and the Rise of Salafism in Kosovo. How Gulf Countries Spearheaded a Transitional Advocacy Network that is Challenging a New Democracy". *The New School Graduate Program in International Affairs*. Master of Ats thesis.

Just like the case with the other countries[107], it is believed that many religious practitioners in Kosovo who have visited and studied in Saudi Arabia were influenced by religious practices in Saudi Arabia. Through this, they associate more with Islam via a "back to the roots" and more conservative teaching than what was previously understood of Islam in Kosovo. They took such teachings and more conservative religious practices back home where they continued to practice and promote them. Saudi based charity organisations in Kosovo have also brought religious scholars as missionaries to lecture in Kosovo. A former employee of one of the Saudi based charity organisations has confirmed that they did condition the charity and benefits they were providing with the attendance of their lectures.[108] In the meantime, the advancement of technology has also made it possible for Saudi Arabia's advocacy networks to disseminate their religious doctrine more easily and efficiently. [109,110]

Saudi Arabia's dissemination efforts of its fundamental/conservative interpretation of Islam based on the Hanbali legal school did have an influence in challenging Kosovo's institutionalized liberal interpretation of Islam based on the Hanafi legal school. However, as this report will continue to note, fundamental/conservative religious ideas should not be instantly mixed with violent extremist ideas – since there are differences between them, while this report also attempts to deconstruct the ways in which they interact. The introduction of more conservative religious ideas in Kosovo is believed to have had several implications for Kosovo and its Islamic community. Isa Blumi claimed that the introduction of the Saudi interpretation of Islam in Kosovo has caused splits in Kosovo's religious community.[111] Similarly, Xhabir Hamiti, former chairperson of the BIK Assembly, noted that the Saudi based charity organisations in Kosovo have "carried out religious activities in forms and manners that often contradicted local Islamic tradition and religious culture as well as management and organisation structure of the BIK".[112]

Negative attitudes towards others who embrace values that are different to that of conservative practitioners of Islam have been evident in the post-war Kosovo. Some of them go as far as challenging Albanian national and historic symbols, which has not so openly been the case before as it is today. For instance, two young men from Kaçanik have posted a video that shows them mocking Scanderbeg (Albanian national hero) statue and calling him *kafir* (unbeliever), just because he was considered an Albanian Christian who fought against Muslim Ottomans

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107   Aal e Imran (2012). "Ibn Taymiyah, Ibn Abdul Wahab & Ibn Saud: The Partnership of Extremists". January 5, 2012. *Iqra Online*. Online available at: http://www.iqraonline.net/ibn-taymiyah-ibn-abdul-wahab-ibn-saud-the-partnership-of-extremists/

108   Interview with H.H. a former long time employee in various Arab sponsored charity organisations in Kosovo, 18 October 2014. Prishtina, Kosovo.

109   Ibid.

110   Dimal Basha (2013). "Globalization and the Rise of Salafism in Kosovo. How Gulf Countries Spearheaded a Transitional Advocacy Network that is Challenging a New Democracy". *The New School Graduate Program in International Affairs*. Master of Ats thesis.

111   Isa Blumi (2005). "Political Islam Among the Albanians: Are the Taliban Coming to the Balkans". *KIPRED.* Online available at: http://www.kipred.org/advCms/documents/14714_Political_Islam_Among_the_Albanians_Are_the_Taliban_coming_to_the_Balkans.pdf, p.12

112   Dimal Basha (2013). "Globalization and the Rise of Salafism in Kosovo. How Gulf Countries Spearheaded a Transitional Advocacy Network that is Challenging a New Democracy". *The New School Graduate Program in International Affairs*. Master of Ats thesis. p.29

back in the 15th century.[113] Shefqet Krasniqi, an imam in Prishtina[114] has also spoken about Mother Theresa's secure place "in the middle of hell", just because she has embraced Christianity and not Islam.[115] Many non-practicing Albanian Muslims (which comprise the majority of the population) and Albanian Christians take this as an offence, because it touches upon the national and secular element of the majority of the society. On the other hand, a number of practicing Muslims take this as normal and correct interpretation because of the belief that one cannot go to heaven without first being a Muslim. Others like Mazllam Mazllami and Irfan Salihu have also spoken negatively against some values that the secular population embrace, especially the issue of women, holidays of other faiths, etc.[116.] This has been a challenging task to deal with as some argue that this should be considered as hate speech, while others, especially some of those practicing Islam consider this to be both the issue of the freedom of speech, and a correct religious stance based on Islam.

As a result, much of the published reports and debate in Kosovo regarding the sources of extremism has tended to focus on the challenges that the introduction of Hanbali and Wahhabi practices of Saudi Arabia's institutionalized version of Islam pose to Hanafi practices in Kosovo. For instance, Idriz Bilalli, the head of the Worker's Union of the Islamic Community (WUIC), talked of Fadil Sogojeva, another imam, as practicing Islam differently in ways which do not commensurate with the institutionalized practices in Kosovo of the Hanafi legal school.[117] According to Bilalli, this is creating confusions and schisms within the Islamic community, and at times people like Sogojeva and some of his followers hold destructive attitudes.[118] On the other hand, Sogojeva indicated that this has nothing to do with the legal school he follows. During his studies in Riyadh, Sogojeva says, the Arabs were saying "look at him - the Hanafi", and in Kosovo they say "beware of him - the Salafi", and acknowledges that he is neither a radical nor a moderate, but a scholar who has studied the Sharia and Islamic jurisprudence.[119]

However, this report finds that looking for causes of violent extremism within the schisms or differences that exist between Hanafi (Kosovo version) and Hanbali/Wahhabi (Saudi Arabia version) legal schools could result in giving incorrect and generalized conclusions, when inquiring into the ideas, as the first major cause, that take people to Syria. This is so because of several contradictions existing within such debates.

For instance, the Taliban (a violent and ultra-conservative group) in Afghanistan belong to a Deobandi movement, which was created in response to the crisis in the Islamic community

113   Gazeta Express (2014). "Xhihadistët shajnë dhe godasin bustin e Skënderbeut në Kaçanik (Video)" June 30, 2014. *Gazeta Express.* Online available at: http://lajmifundit.al/2014/06/xhihadistet-sulmojne-bustin-e-skenderbeut-ne-kacanik/

114   Anon. (2009). "Dr.Shefqet Krasniqi per Terrzezën". *Youtube.* Online available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IML-QbHOmVs

115   Ibid.

116   Islami feja e Vërtetë (2011). "Shën Valentini - Mazllam Mazllami". *Youtube*. Online available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YS-NnughspE

117   Telegrafi.com (2012). "Radikalizimi i islamit: Rrezik apo fobi?" August 17, 2012. *Telegrafi.com.* Online available at: http://www.telegrafi.com/lajme/radikalizimi-i-islamit-rrezik-apo-fobi-2-24418.html

118   Ibid.

119   Ibid.

in the 19th century, and chose to "emphasise classical Islamic education and promote religious schools as a means of reforming society".[120] Despite the fact that the Hanafi legal school is considered more liberal and most open to individual interpretation (*ijtihad*) in its teachings, the Deobandi sect and the Taliban are strict followers of the Hanafi legal code.[121] Hanafi legal school is also followed in Pakistan, a place which is known for much violent religious extremist acts.[122],[123] Finding sources of violent extremist acts within a particular Islamic legal school, and ruling them out in others would not, therefore, be a credible avenue to find the ideas behind people's involvement in Syria or various violent extremist groups.

In another example, the liberal female political activist Sherry Rehman (appointed Pakistan's ambassador to the United States since 2011) is a Hanafi, and so is Mullah Muhammad Omar, the founder and leader of the Afghan Taliban.[124] Some imams in Kosovo do not see it fit to limit themselves within one legal school, as only one of these schools does not constitute the entirety of Islam.[125] Joshua T. White, a Senior Associate and Co-Director of the South Asia program at the Stimson Centre, asserted that there are only subtle differences for the most part between Hanafi interpretations and the other three major legal schools (Shafi, Maliki and Hanbali).[126] Alternatively, others claim that there is no rigidity about following one of the schools in all questions and in all matters.[127]

The main difference between the legal schools remains with the methods they apply, and the sources each of the four founders of the Islamic legal schools within the Sunni tradition used in reaching an opinion or answering specific theological and practical questions.[128] Given that the Hanbali legal school effectively rules out analogical reasoning to reach conclusions, as shown in table below, when compared to the Hanafi legal school for instance, makes it more fundamentalist/conservative and rigid when interpreting various theological and practical questions.

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120   Joshua White (2012). "Understanding the Taliban: Assessing Religious Categories of Analysis". *Danish Institute for Internatioanl Studies*. Online available at: http://subweb.diis.dk/graphics/Publications/ReligionViolencePapers/Understanding%20the%20Taliban.pdf

121   Aneela Sultana (n.d.) "Taliuban or Terrorist? Some Reflections on Taliban's Ideology". *Politics and Religion Journal*. Online available at: http://www.politicsandreligionjournal.com/images/pdf_files/srpski/godina3_broj1/aneela%20sultana.pdf

122   ReOrienting the Veil (n.d.). "Islamic Jurisprudence & Law" ReOrienting the Veil. Online available at: http://veil.unc.edu/religions/islam/law/

123   Siegbert Uhlig (2005). "Hanafism". *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica: D-Ha, Vol 2*.

124   Joshua White (2012). "Understanding the Taliban: Assessing Religious Categories of Analysis". *Danish Institute for Internatioanl Studies*. Online available at: http://subweb.diis.dk/graphics/Publications/ReligionViolencePapers/Understanding%20the%20Taliban.pdf

125   Interview with A.E, a Kosovo based imam who does not limit himself only to a Hanafi legal school, 22 November 2014. Mitrovica, Kosovo.

126   Joshua White (2012). "Understanding the Taliban: Assessing Religious Categories of Analysis". *Danish Institute for Internatioanl Studies*. Online available at: http://subweb.diis.dk/graphics/Publications/ReligionViolencePapers/Understanding%20the%20Taliban.pdf

127   IslamicIslamic (n.d.). "Madhab & Legal school" *IslamicIslamic*. Online available at: http://www.islamicislamic.com/school_of_thought.htm#1._Schools_of_thought_

128   The four major legal schoolss in the Sunni tradition were founded and named after great Islamic scholars at the time, and theyinclude Imam Abu Hanifa (699 – 767), Imam Malik bin Anas (711–795), Imam Ash-Shafi'i (767-820), and Imam Ibn Hanbal (780–855).

Method applied by Hanafi legal school	Method applied by Maliki legal school	Method applied by Shafi legal schools	Method applied by Hanbali legal schools
The Quran	The Quran	The Quran	The Quran
The Sunnah	The Sunnah	The Sunnah	The Sunnah
The sayings of the Prophet's Companions	The sayings of the Prophet's Companions	Ijma` (scholarly consensus)	Non-controversial fatwa given by Prophet's Companions
Qiyas (analogical deduction)	The custom followed by people of Medina	The sayings of the Prophet's Companions	Use of inauthentic and weak hadiths (if there is no other evidence).
Istihsan (Juristic preference)	Fatwa given by a Companion	The controversial views of the Companions	Qiyas (analogical deduction). This is the least preferable.
Ijma` (scholarly consensus)	Al-Masalih Al-Mursalah (public Interest)	Qiyas (analogical deduction) applied in a stricter way	
`Urf (Custom)	Istihsan (juristic preference)		
	Sadd Adh-Dhara'i` (blocking the means to evil)		

Table 2: Differences between the Islamic legal schools[129],[130]

Another case which shows that the introduction of additional ideas and practices from Saudi Arabia do not extend beyond introducing more conservative ideas and creating some schisms within the Islamic community in Kosovo, is the attacks and threats towards some imams. In 2008, Xhabir Hamiti, an outspoken critic of "Salafi in Kosovo", was reported to have been attacked by four masked men.[131],[132],[133] Hamiti suspects that the attacks came from people who do not like the fact that he has been outspoken against the introduction of different practices of Islam in Kosovo.[134] In 2009, Osman Musliu, an Imam in Drenas, also claimed to have been attacked by "islamic extremists" *[sic.]*.[135],[136.] There are also a few other cases of attacks and threats against imams, who appear to be blaming the executive structures within the BIK for allowing

129 IslamicIslamic (n.d.). "Madhab & Legal school" *IslamicIslamic*. Online available at: http://www.islamicislamic. com/school_of_thought.htm#1._Schools_of_thought_

130 Message for Muslims (n.d.). "The Four Sunni Schools". Online available at: http://www.message4muslims.org. uk/islam/understanding-islamic-law/the-four-sunni-schools/

131 Dimal Basha (2013). "Globalization and the Rise of Salafism in Kosovo. How Gulf Countries Spearheaded a Transitional Advocacy Network that is Challenging a New Democracy". *The New School Graduate Program in International Affairs*. Master of Ats thesis. p.51

132 Almakos (2012). "Hoxhallarët në Kosovë të pambrojtur nga sulmet". March 12, 2012. *Almakos.com*. Online available at: http://almakos.com/lajme/kosove/4722-hoxhallaret-ne-kosove-te-pambrojtur-nga-sulmet.html

133 Jeton Musliu (2008). "Intervistë me Xhabir Hamitin". December 1, 2008. *Gazeta Express*.

134 Ibid.

135 Dimal Basha (2013). "Globalization and the Rise of Salafism in Kosovo. How Gulf Countries Spearheaded a Transitional Advocacy Network that is Challenging a New Democracy". *The New School Graduate Program in International Affairs*. Master of Ats thesis. p.51

136 Almakos (2012). "Hoxhallarët në Kosovë të pambrojtur nga sulmet". March 12, 2012. *Almakos.com*. Online available at: http://almakos.com/lajme/kosove/4722-hoxhallaret-ne-kosove-te-pambrojtur-nga-sulmet.html

"Islamic extremists" and additional Islamic practices that go beyond the traditional Hanafi line in Kosovo.

On the other hand, Sabri Bajgora, the Head Imam of the BIK also claimed to have been attacked by Musli Verbani, a mainstream/liberal imam in Kaçanik, and a critic of the BIK structures and Wahhabi voices in Kosovo.[137],[138]. Similarly, Enis Rama, an imam in one of the mosques in Mitrovica was among the recently arrested imams for charges brought against him and suspicions for his alleged involvement in terrorist groups, terrorist recruitment, etc.[139]. Given that he spent some time studying in Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt,[140] he is also considered one of those imams that go beyond, not limiting himself only to the institutionalized Hanafi line in Kosovo. However, Enis Rama, months before he was arrested also spoke against violent extremists groups in claiming that Islamic extremism is when someone "escapes from the middle".[141] This, according to him, means that the further away you move from the middle, one should be considered an extremist; whether one moves further away from the middle in the direction of the religion, or in the opposite direction; both are to be considered extremists.[142]

However, similar to other more liberal (Hanafi) voices in Kosovo among other Islamic practitioners, and besides being considered by many as a Salafi (more conservative), Enis Rama was found on the list of the notorious Lavdrim Muhaxheri of those who need to be beheaded.[143] In an interview for an Albanian daily, Lavdrim Muhaxheri said that these and other imams (including the conservative ones) who are speaking negatively about the "caliphate" need to be beheaded, and their beheading is foreseen in the Quran.[144] In personal contact with a former violent extremist in Kosovo who was ready to go to Syria and belonged to a violent extremist group in Kosovo and in Macedonia, something which this report will soon turn to, also told the author of this report that Enis Rama and Ekrem Avdiu (who also does not limit himself to more liberal interpretation based on Hanafi legal school – thus more conservative), were two of his most hated imams, and was ready to assault them – at least.[145] Additionally, in response

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137   Telegrafi.com (2012). "Kryeimami Bajgora sulmohet nga Imami i Kaçanikut". March 3, 2012. *Telegrafi.com*. Online available at: http://www.telegrafi.com/lajme/kryeimami-bajgora-sulmohet-nga-imami-i-kacanikut-2-20805.html

138   Kohavision (2013). "PULS - Bashkësia Islame e Kosovës". November 25, 2013. *Kohavision*. Online available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IANICbwuDJc

139   Labinot Leposhtica (2014). "Lirohen Dy nga Imamët e Dyshuar për Terrorizëm" September 24, 2014. *Kallxo. com*. Online available at: http://live.kallxo.com/sq/MTL/Lirohen-Dy-nga-Imamet-e-Dyshuar-per-Terrorizem-2339

140   Qendra për Studime Islame (n.d.). "Njihu me ligjëruesit". *QSI*. Online available at: http://www.qsi-ks.com/webi/bio.php

141   Tuba Islame (2014). "Enis Rama – Ekstremizmi". May 8, 2014. *Youtube*. Online available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OdcKJvYUx58

142   Ibid.

143   FaktiNews (n.d.). "Armiqtë e Lavdrim Muhaxherit në Kosovë janë Shefqet Krasniqi, Enis Rama, gazeta Expres, BBC, CNN etj.". Faktinews.com. Online available at: http://www.faktinews.com/aktualitet-2/tema/armiqte-e-lavdrim-muhaxherit-ne-kosove-jane-shefqet-krasniqi-enis-rama-gazeta-expres-bbc-cnn-etj/

144   Ibid.

145   Interview with C.D. a former extremist belonging to Takfir circles in Kosovo, 18 October 2014. Prishtina, Kosovo.

to Enis Rama's interview for KTV back in July 2014[146] where he stated that no one should support ISIS, a person who goes by the name Haj-ja Alel Xhiad shared Enis Rama's stance on ISIS on his Facebook account saying "may Allah give me the opportunity to capture him".[147] KCSS researchers learned that Haj-ja Alel Xhiad was from Gjilan, and was later killed in Syria.[148] There are also other cases of non-Hanafi and more conservative imams that preach and practice in accordance with a "back to the roots" and more conservative teachings who were found on Lavdrim Muhaxheri's list of "idiots to be captured", and were also threatened alongside more liberal imams.[149,150]

In its inquiry, therefore, this report firstly finds religious influences from Saudi Arabia to have had an impact on the introduction and dissemination of more fundamental/conservative ideas and practices of Islam in Kosovo. Second, and as a former employee of one of the Saudi based charity organisations in Kosovo has confirmed, it finds that the Saudi Arabia's efforts in Kosovo and the region has had an influence in the religionization of society.[151] Third, it finds that such influences were an 'enabling factor' for schisms within and between Kosovo's Islamic community and practitioners on the one hand, and the secular part of the society and more liberal practitioners on the other hand - such schisms were also mostly instigated by a few imams being ethically irresponsible for the language they used towards others that are different from them and the ideas they stand for.

According to the evidence and interpretations outlined above, however, the report does not find such influences to have had a direct impact either as a cause, an idea, or a promoter behind calls for people to join the violent rebel groups in Syria. As John Esposito concluded when speaking about the "ultra-conservative" views of Wahhabism[152], "the challenge is to distinguish between the export of ultraconservative theology on the one hand and militant extremism on the other."[153] This, report, therefore, finds that it is necessary to make a clear distinction between religionization efforts and the introduction of more conservative religious ideas and religious based ideologies in Islam on the one hand, and violent extremist ideas on the other. Where do the violent extremist ideas and voices that transform Kosovo's citizens into violent extremist fighters in Syria come from then?

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146   Mesazhi (2014). "Hoxhe Enis Rama: Askush nuk e perkrah ISIS-in" Juky 29, 2014. *Mesazhi*. Online available at: http://www.mesazhi.com/artikuj/hoxhe-enis-rama-askush-nuk-e-perkrah-isisin

147   The author of this report has a screen shot of Haj-ja Alel Xhiad posting.

148   Interview with R.H. a young Islam practitioner in Kosovo, 12 February 2015. Prishtina, Kosovo.

149   FaktiNews (n.d.). "Armiqtë e Lavdrim Muhaxherit në Kosovë janë Shefqet Krasniqi, Enis Rama, gazeta Expres, BBC, CNN etj.". Faktinews.com. Online available at: http://www.faktinews.com/aktualitet-2/tema/armiqte-e-lavdrim-muhaxherit-ne-kosove-jane-shefqet-krasniqi-enis-rama-gazeta-expres-bbc-cnn-etj/

150   Visar Duriqi (2014). "Lavdrim Muhaxheri thotë se ka gisht në përzgjedhjen e imamit të Kaçanikut dhe e kërcënon atë me jetë" May 12, 2014. *Gazeta Express.* Online available at: http://www.gazetaexpress.com/lajme/lavdrim-muhaxheri-thote-se-ka-gisht-ne-perzgjedhjen-e-imamit-te-kacanikut-dhe-e-kercenon-ate-me-jete-13206/

151   Interview with H.H. a former long time employee in various Arab sponsored charity organisations in Kosovo, 18 October 2014. Prishtina, Kosovo.

152   Esposito's stance is that "[i]n itself, a religiously exclusivist theology is not necessarily violent. An exclusivist theology merely entails a division between those who will, and those who will not, go to paradise after the Day of Judgement.

153   John Esposito (2011). "What Everyone Needs to Know about Islam". *Oxford University Press.* p.55

5.3.   The roots of violent extremist ideas

The violent extremist ideas promoted by ISIS, which a group of people in the Western hemisphere, including the Balkans, and Kosovo in particular have more recently embraced can be traced back to modern Egypt and to its prisons. It begins within organized Islamic politics in Egypt with the foundation of the Muslim Brotherhood in 1928 under the leadership of Hassan al Banna.[154] It should be understood that this was the period immediately after the Ottoman Empire, considered as the Islamic Caliphate for the Sunni Muslims, had ceased to exist. This was also a decade after the British and French began carving up borders as colonial rulers in the Arab lands. Feeling the tremendous retreat of Islamic values in the Arab lands the founders and ideologues of the Muslim Brotherhood reacted with an "explosive formula" by combining their political agenda with a more rigid version of Islam.[155]

As a result, and following two decades since its establishment, the Muslim Brotherhood's history was associated with political violence to a limited extent, though, as Katerina Dalacoura asserts that political violence "was not unique to the Islamist trend but part of a wider phenomenon in Egyptian politics".[156] This was the period when the Muslim Brotherhood's key political ideologue, Sayyid Qutb, was finishing his education in socialism and literature in a secular system during the 1920's and 1930's.[157] Qutb was a *hafiz* (committing the Quran to memory) by the age of ten.[158] He later spent some time for his studies in the United States during the 1940s where he earned a masters degree.[159] Upon his return to Egypt, he came back with more radical ideas, wanting to establish a new way of life based on the Quran and Islamic teachings, which was the initial concept of the Muslim Brotherhood since its establishment.[160,161]

During the 1940s, the Muslim Brotherhood had significantly grown in membership and had established offices in a number of Arab countries. It was also during this period that it was blamed for plotting a number of attacks in Egypt, including the assassination of the Egyptian Prime Minister in 1948.[162] In 1949, government agents killed its founder al-Banna, and Sayyid Qutb became one of the influential members of the Muslim Brotherhood, calling call for the restoration of Sharia law in Egypt. Qutb condemned the Egyptian state to the Islamic category of *jahiliyya* (pre-Islamic barbarism) and argued that the restoration of Islam requires a revolution led by a vanguard of the *ummah* (Islamic Community), and that Islamic society in general

154   Katerina Dalacoura (2011). "Islamist Terrorism and Democracy in the Middle East". Cambridge University Press.

155   Bruce Livesey (2005). "The Salafist Movement" *PBS: Frontline*. Online available at: http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/front/special/sala.html

156   Katerina Dalacoura (2011). "Islamist Terrorism and Democracy in the Middle East". Cambridge University Press. p. 11

157   Bruce Livesey (2005). "The Salafist Movement" *PBS: Frontline*. Online available at: http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/front/special/sala.html

158   Ibid.

159   Ibid.

160   Ibid.

161   Aljazeera (2011). " Profile: Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood". February 6, 2011. *Aljazeera.com*. Online available at: http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/2011/02/201126101349142168.html

162   Ibid.

needed a revival.[163] Qutb became the editor of Muslim Brotherhood's journal and established himself as an Islamic political reference and theoretician for most of the Arab world at the time.[164]

The following are the series of events that preceded the surfacing of radical extremist ideas:

- The Muslim Brotherhood was keen to overthrow King Farouk of Egypt, who was believed to have established a corrupt government and a weak economy.[165,166] In order to do so they cooperated with Gamal Abdel Nasser;

- After the successful overthrow of King Farouk of Egypt, disagreements between Muslim Brotherhood and Nasser grew, because the later was determined to establish a secular rule in Egypt, and not the Sharia as Qutb propagated and intended;[167,168,169]

- In the meantime, Qutb was becoming politically more active and was gaining support;

- During the first half of the 1950s, Nasser outlawed the Muslim Brotherhood; however, the former continued to operate and pursue its political agenda clandestinely and more vehemently;[170]

- Thousands of Muslim Brotherhood members were arrested, dozens faced life imprisonment sentences, many of whom spent long months in military prisons and the famous "fortress prison", known for its severe torture tactics.[171,172,173]. Among those arrested was Qutb, who was sentenced to 15 years imprisonment.[174]

- Mass prosecutions led the bulk of the Muslim Brotherhood's members to become more moderate, but a minority diverged towards more radical thoughts and actions.

163   Katerina Dalacoura (2011). "Islamist Terrorism and Democracy in the Middle East". Cambridge University Press.

164   Bruce Livesey (2005). "The Salafist Movement" *PBS: Frontline*. Online available at: http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/front/special/sala.html

165   Hoda Gamal Abdel-Nasser (n.d.). " Biography: A historical sketch of President Gamal Abdel-Nasser". *Bibliotheca Alexandrina and the Nasser Foundation*. Online available at: http://nasser.bibalex.org/common/pictures01-%20sira_en.htm

166   King Farouk had also lost the war with Israel, in latter's war for independence in 1948, which was a blow to Egyptian and wider Muslim world's morale.

167   Middle East Monitor (2013). " The Muslim Brotherhood: a history of arrests from 1948 to 2013". Agusut 22, 2013. *MEMO.* Online available at: https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/articles/africa/7039-the-muslim-brotherhood-a-history-of-arrests-from-1948-to-2013

168   Nancy Elshami (2013). " The Ghost of Revolutions Past: Nasser, Sissi, & the Muslim Brotherhood". July 26, 2013. *Muftah*. Online available at: http://muftah.org/the-ghost-of-revolutions-past-nasser-sissi-the-muslim-brotherhood/#.VNsrL2h4pcQ

169   Anon. (2012). " Gamal Abdel Nasser on the Muslim Brotherhood (subtitled)". *Youtube.* Online available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TX4RK8bj2W0

170   Middle East Monitor (2013). " The Muslim Brotherhood: a history of arrests from 1948 to 2013". Agusut 22, 2013. *MEMO.* Online available at: https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/articles/africa/7039-the-muslim-brotherhood-a-history-of-arrests-from-1948-to-2013

171   Ibid.

172   Encyclopedia of World Biography (n.d.). " Sayyid Qutb Facts". *Encyclopedia of World Biography*. Online Available at: http://biography.yourdictionary.com/sayyid-qutb

173   Aljazeera (2011). " Profile: Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood". February 6, 2011. *Aljazeera.com.* Online available at: http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/2011/02/201126101349142168.html

174   Encyclopedia of World Biography (n.d.). " Sayyid Qutb Facts". *Encyclopedia of World Biography*. Online Available at: http://biography.yourdictionary.com/sayyid-qutb

- Most of Qutb's written works were produced while he spent time in prison, where he laid out the ideological foundation for the Salafi jihadist movement, and advanced Ibn Taymiyyah's concept of "defensive jihad" to his new thesis of "offensive jihad".[175],[176]

- After having been released briefly from prison through the President of Iraq's pleading to Nasser,[177] Qutb was again, in 1966, imprisoned and sentenced to death on charges that indicated through his writings and ideas he wanted to overthrow the government and establish an Islamic State and transform the society.[178],[179].

As the Muslim Brotherhood continued to live on, Answar Sadat, who succeeded Nasser in 1970 as President of Egypt, introduced new policies, which among others, included those giving more freedom to Islamic groups.[180],[181]. Although it had not gained a legal status at the time, Sadat's new policy enabled the Muslim Brotherhood to re-emerge.[182] The re-emerging Muslim Brotherhood during Sadat's era, however, was a movement committed to non-violent participation in political processes.[183] Still, there were groups that did not agree with the Muslim Brotherhood's re-emergence as a non-violent political movement, and as a result began creating their own political groups that appeared to be even more radical than the initial position of the Muslim Brotherhood. During Sadat's rule, Egypt also witnessed the emergence of many "vibrant and energetic" student associations and groups; many of which dealt with non-violent political and cultural activities, while others resorted to use of violent means.[184] Qutb's ideas had an immense impact on, and provided the intellectual thread for the "ideological evolution of Islamist [more radical and violent] movements [in Egypt and] throughout the Middle East, and indeed globally [...]."[185] This period also saw a huge rise in the number of independent *ahli* (private) mosques that were not controlled by the government, and they provided a safe meeting point for militants and recruits".[186]

175   Ibid

176   Dimal Basha (2013). "Globalization and the Rise of Salafism in Kosovo. How Gulf Countries Spearheaded a Transitional Advocacy Network that is Challenging a New Democracy". *The New School Graduate Program in International Affairs*. Master of Ats thesis. p.13

177   Encyclopedia of World Biography (n.d.). " Sayyid Qutb Facts". *Encyclopedia of World Biography*. Online Available at: http://biography.yourdictionary.com/sayyid-qutb

178   Ibid.

179   Katerina Dalacoura (2011). "Islamist Terrorism and Democracy in the Middle East". Cambridge University Press.

180   Bruce Livesey (2005). "The Salafist Movement" *PBS: Frontline*. Online available at: http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/front/special/sala.html

181   Aljazeera (2011). " Profile: Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood". February 6, 2011. *Aljazeera.com*. Online available at: http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/2011/02/201126101349142168.html

182   Ibid.

183   A collection of dozens of sources regarding the Takfir and similar ideologies found here: http://www.angelfire.com/az/rescon/2rdmv.html

184   Katerina Dalacoura (2011). "Islamist Terrorism and Democracy in the Middle East". Cambridge University Press. p. 113

185   Ibid.

186   A collection of dozens of sources regarding the Takfir and similar ideologies found here: http://www.angelfire.com/az/rescon/2rdmv.html

Qutb's radical reinterpretation of several key concepts such as Jahiliyya and Jihad,[187] among others, "inspired those radicalised through imprisonment and torture to split off from the Brotherhood, using his writings to legitimise violence against the regime".[188] Some of the violent groups that spawned during this period were influenced by Qutb's initial ideology, and advocated an extreme interpretation of Qutb's writings, included the Egyptian Islamic Jihad, led by Ayman al-Zawahiri, who later on merged his organisation with Osama bin Laden's Al-Qaida.[189] Another organisation that emerged out of the same ideological thread, which appeared to be the most successful one, was the Takfir wal Hijra (henceforth referred to as Takfir), led by Mustafa Shukri, who was imprisoned during the 1960s because of his affiliation with the Muslim Brotherhood at the time. Mustafa, with his new and more violent program, managed to successfully recruit from among his former associates who were tortured in prisons, but he also managed to recruit from among the contemporary society as well.[190] Mustafa Shukri, who spent time in prison with Qutb and was influenced by him, had become one of his more radical disciples.[191]

The Muslim Brotherhood's much more radical ideological offspring, the Takfir, became the new 'radical ideological bin' from which many other extremists groups appeared afterwards, including Al Qaida and other violent radical groups.[192] Takfir wal Hijra in English means 'excommunication and exodus', and the name itself tells a lot about their fundamental beliefs, one of which is withdrawal into isolation from, what they believed to be, Jahiliyya society. Their aim is to rigidly implement the more modern Islamic concepts of the *Dar al-Islam* (House of Islam) and the *Dar al-harb* (House of War). The former refers to all the lands in which an Islamic government rules and in which Islamic law prevails, with the latter referring to lands in which Muslims don't rule and, in their interpretation, it means that it should be taken by means of a perpetual state of jihad.[193]

Before outlining the central ideological tenets of the Takfir, it is important to outline the central ideological ancient tenets from which they draw their contemporary ideas. The Takfir derive their ideological basis from the Kharijites,[194] which was a group that deviated in the early period of Islamic history when the first schisms in Islam occurred after Uthman (the third

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187   The Georgetown University Professor, DeLong Bas, notes that tying Qutb's work with the ideology of jihad, which the West often ties, is not right. She asserts that through his work/books, Qutb attempted to go beyond what was in previous interpretions in the Quran, and attempted to interpret "in a way that is understood and relevant to our times". However, just like other previous Islamic scholars with celebrity status among Islam practitioners, Qutb became a popular figure which was used as an intellectual drive by a number of radical activists in political scene

188   A collection of dozens of sources regarding the Takfir and similar ideologies found here: http://www.angelfire.com/az/rescon/2rdmv.html

189   Bruce Livesey (2005). "The Salafist Movement" *PBS: Frontline*. Online available at: http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/front/special/sala.html

190   Katerina Dalacoura (2011). "Islamist Terrorism and Democracy in the Middle East". Cambridge University Press. p. 113.

191   Bruce Livesey (2005). "The Salafist Movement" *PBS: Frontline*. Online available at: http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/front/special/sala.html

192   Ibid.

193   Bernard Lewis (2004). "The Crisis of Islam: Holy War and Unholy Terror" *Random House Publishing Group*.

194   Other terms one may find in English or Arabic for "Kharijites" include: Khawarij, al-Khārijiyyah, Khāriji, etc.

Caliph) was killed in the 7th century.[195] The Kharijites in English means "the exitors"[196] or "the separatists".[197] They separated from the then Islamic mainstream after having openly resisted against Ali (the forth Caliph) for not taking an armed vengeance against Muawiyah, who did not want to obey Ali as a Caliph; the latter instead negotiated with them (Muawiyah).[198],[199]. Therefore, it should be noted that the first major deviation from Islam occurred a long time before any of the legal schools in the Sunni tradition were created. Even though the Kharijites did not grow in number, their theological and ideological deviations from Islam (especially the violent interpretations and treatment of others who are not like them) have lived on during present times.[200]

According to a Qassim University Professor in Saudi Arabia, Naser Bin Abdul Kerim El-Akli, who has written on the Kharijites and their progression to the present day, and is considered one of the most referenced figures on the Kharijites, outlines some of their features that have separated them from the Islamic tradition. According to him, they: (i) rebel against the Salafi (the predecessors) and their worshipers; (ii) are fanatically committed to their beliefs; (ii) have a wrong reading of the Quran; (iv) oppose the *ulema* (top Islamic religious scholars); and alike. They have appeared to disbelieve even Prophet Muhammad in certain instances, which makes them very unlike other Muslim believers, including the Salafis – even those of the present day.[201]

Pillars based on which the Kharijites rose:[202,203]

- Considering all Muslims who make a mistake, be that a single one, as kuffar, and their treatment within the rules of treating kuffars;

- Disobedience towards and rebellion against the existing leaderships;

- Going back to the early texts that have to do with warrants for 'good' and prevention from 'bad', as a tool to oppose the Salafis and to fight them and others who do not think like them;

- Emerging as good and sincere people with fanatic commitment to prayers, fasting, which makes them highly committed to religion, but without understanding it;

- Weakness in understanding the religion; they have very little religious knowledge.

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195   Javeed Akhter (n.d.). "Schisms and Heterodoxy Among Muslims". *International Strategy and Policy Institute.* Chicago, Illinois, USA. Online available at: http://www.irfi.org/articles/articles_201_250/schisms_and_heterodoxy_among_mus.htm

196   Ibid.

197   Karen Armstrong (2011). "Islami: një histori e shkurtër". *Logos-A.* Skopje, Macedonia.

198   Ibid.

199   Javeed Akhter (n.d.). "Schisms and Heterodoxy Among Muslims". *International Strategy and Policy Institute.* Chicago, Illinois, USA. Online available at: http://www.irfi.org/articles/articles_201_250/schisms_and_heterodoxy_among_mus.htm

200   Naser bin Abdul Kerim El-Akli (2003). "Hauarixhët, grupi i parë i devijuar në historinë e Islamit". *Jehona.*

201   Omar Abdullah Kamel (n.d.). "Kharijites of the Age". *The World Association for al-Azhar Graduates* . Online available at: http://waag-azhar.org/en/makalat1.aspx?id=303

202   Naser bin Abdul Kerim El-Akli (2003). "Hauarixhët, grupi i parë i devijuar në historinë e Islamit". *Jehona.* p.31-31

203   Omar Abdullah Kamel (n.d.). "Kharijites of the Age". *The World Association for al-Azhar Graduates* . Online available at: http://waag-azhar.org/en/makalat1.aspx?id=303

- One does not find religious scholars that they follow;
- Conceited and arrogant in relation to religious scholars, making them believe that they know more than the religious scholars;
- Defective in their method of argumentation, basing their arguments in Quranic verses dealing with 'punishment' and ignoring Quranic verses dealing with 'mercy' and 'rewards'.
- Ignorance to the Sunnah (Islamic tradition); restricting the majority of their arguments only based on the Quran.
- Hastiness in establishing an Islamic rule and creating a position towards any opponent without prior and strict assurance;
- Lack of vision and patience, and quick to draw conclusions

Muslim believers and practitioners have used the following Hadith to point at the Khrijites, since it seemed to many of them that they share most of the characteristics professed by Muhammad:

> "[...] there will be a Group of people who will recite the Holy Quran but it will not go below their throats. They will leave the true Religion of Islam as fast as an arrow leaves the bow. They will be recognized by the shavings of their entire head and they will move in Groups and their last Group will emerge with Dajjal, when you meet them you will discover their nature and character, the worst of its kind."[204]

The Kharijites were committed to murdering every Muslim that did not agree with them, and every child, as well as taking women hostage as a trophy.[205] The Kharijites have declared war on Islamic Ummah, more than anyone else has.[206] The Kharijites are also known for their "harshness, cruelty and violence against Muslims".[207] Wrong understanding of the Quran led people to embrace the Kharijites' ideology, and in modern times it led to the creation of groups such as the Takfir that have their ideological basis from the Kharijites. They never had the intention to refute the Quran, asserts El-Akli, but they understood from it that which it does not advocate in reality.[208]

Finally, they have distanced themselves from anyone who has not agreed with them, and they do not discriminate between Muslims and non-Muslims in their thinking and treatment even today.[209] Similar to the early Kharijites, the Takfir ideology usually spreads among a group of young people with little knowledge and experience, and among some religious scholars with various scientific and literary specialities, which are committed to Islam, but understand very

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204   There are several explanations of this hadith by Islamic scholars. One of them is Shareekh Ibn Shihab. Online available at: http://www.islamicacademy.org/html/Articles/English/Tableeghee%20Jma'at-Ahadis.htm

205   Naser bin Abdul Kerim El-Akli (2003). "Hauarixhët, grupi i parë i devijuar në historinë e Islamit". *Jehona.*

206   Ibid.

207   Omar Abdullah Kamel (n.d.). "Kharijites of the Age". *The World Association for al-Azhar Graduates .* Online available at: http://waag-azhar.org/en/makalat1.aspx?id=303

208   Naser bin Abdul Kerim El-Akli (2003). "Hauarixhët, grupi i parë i devijuar në historinë e Islamit". *Jehona.*

209   Ibid.

little of it.[210,211.] El-Akli notes that the founder of Takfir wal Hijra, Mustafa Shukri, began embracing the Kharijites' ideology after he was arrested in 1964, and such an ideology was more rigidly reinforced during his time in prison in Egypt.[212] The ideology and ideas of the Takfir worshippers began to massively spread after some of their leaders were persecuted.[213]

Below is the outline of the basic tenets of the Takfir radical ideology, which has its roots in the Kharijites' ideology and was adjusted for the modern period of the 20th and 21st century. They believe the following:[214]

- The Prophet's mandate was to fight all people (al-nas) until they convert, pray and pay zakat;
- After establishing its rule over one state, the Takfir will issue a call to all humanity to join Islam and submit to the Sharia;
- Those who reject the call must be fought against to end all dissension;
- The Islamic state will be the third superpower and extend its dominion over the whole world;
- That both the regime and all of society were Jahiliyya and true Muslims must separate from them and join the Takfir, the only true Muslim worshippers;
- They are extreme in repudiating all Muslim communities after the Rashidun, including the four legal schools and all traditional commentators. Their founding Imams were puppets of rulers who used them to monopolise Quranic interpretation to their own advantage;
- Declare both regime and society under Takfir. They are the near enemy to be dealt with first by jihad - Israel and other external enemies would come later;
- Denounce all symbols of the regime's legitimacy: the official religious establishment in a particular state, the army, and all government services. Members feel no allegiance to the state and refuse conscription. They do not recognise state education, uniforms, marriage or the legal system, as they are Jahiliyya and serve the state. They are not allowed to be state employees, and those who are, change jobs on joining the society;
- They are exclusive, seeing itself as the only true Muslim community and all others as infidels or apostates;
- Stress an international Jewish conspiracy and the need to fight it;
- Whilst traditional Ulema and the Muslim Brotherhood would not denounce a Muslim as an infidel, accepting his claim to be Muslim at face value and leaving the judgement of his intention to God, the Takifr are ready to denounce Muslims as kuffar;
- Another innovation was that whole societies and regimes were excommunicated rather than individuals only;

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210   Ibid.

211   Interview with B.I. a Albania based imam who does not limit himself only to a Hanafi legal school, 24 January 2015. Tirana, Albania.

212   Naser bin Abdul Kerim El-Akli (2003). "Hauarixhët, grupi i parë i devijuar në historinë e Islamit". *Jehona*.

213   Ibid.

214   A collection of dozens of sources regarding the Takfir and similar ideologies found here: http://www.angelfire.com/az/rescon/2rdmv.html

- Agree on the overall goals of Jihad: to overthrow infidel rulers, unite the Ummah (Islamic Community), restore the Caliphate, guarantee the freedom of da'wa (Islamic State), liberate occupied Muslim territories and establish Sharia rule in the world;

- Contrary to the traditionalist view of Jews and Christians as protected "People of the Book", the Takfir viewed them as kuffar because they had deliberately rejected the truth and because of their connections to colonialism and Zionism.

- They see the Christian West, Jewish Zionism and atheist Communism as planning to corrupt, divide and destroy Islam[215]

Additional features of the Takfir that eventually developed, which, as Bruce Livesly believes, have "alarming implications for police engaged in counterterrorism work", include that fact that the Takfir worshippers implement camouflage tactics in order to avoid detection when planning to plot attacks.[216] For instance, unlike Muslim worshippers, the Takfir worshippers are allowed to deviate from strict Muslim practices; they are allowed to shave their beards, drink alcohol, visit topless bars, and commit crimes against Westerns.[217] Groups like the Takfir and others that embrace the same ideological thread will be difficult to "nullify".[218] Gilles Kepel rightly notes that the Takfir groups "would rather build citadels of jihad within Europe out of which to reach out not only to the young, deprived people of Muslim descent who live in European suburbs, but also to reach out to what is happening in the Middle East.[219] Mamoun Fandy, an Egyptian-born professor of politics, also asserted that this kind of ideology is spreading like an "amazing virus" throughout Muslim communities, and that it is flourishing more amongst the Muslim communities outside the Arab world, than within it.[220]

It is, therefore, this ideology that most of the Kosovo foreign fighters in Syria embrace, including their followers in Kosovo, propagators, and recruiters. This has also been confirmed by a former Takfir member in Kosovo, who in close personal contact with the author of this report outlined such an ideology even before the author conducted further research on the issue. This former Takfir member in Kosovo outlined additional radical features in their thinking, which were communicated to him by Takfir imams which this report soon turns to, and others embracing such an ideology, which include:[221]

- If one's father does not pray, and is not convinced to pray, he is considered a kafir, and it is allowed to do whatever it takes to take "kuffar" parents' wealth under Takfir possession;

- One is allowed to rape a woman who is uncovered (wears a miniskirt);

- One should hate and block the imams that are part of BIK – they should be considered imams of *taghut* (imams of the state) which, according to them are kuffar (unbelievers), and should be ignored;

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215   Ibid.

216   Bruce Livesey (2005). "The Salafist Movement" *PBS: Frontline*. Online available at: http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/front/special/sala.html

217   Ibid.

218   Ibid.

219   Ibid.

220   Ibid.

221   Interview with C.D. a former extremist belonging to Takfir circles in Kosovo, 30 October 2014. Prishtina, Kosovo.

- One should not interact at all with the *taghut* (state) institutions, i.e.:
  - Should not vote;
  - Should not interact with the police or other state security institutions;
  - Should not sit in the parliament
  - etc.

In summary, these extreme ideological tenets are found out of Islamic tradition, and any Islamic legal school, including the Salafis, which are considered more conservative practitioners who do not limit themselves to only one of the Islamic legal schools, but teach and interpret all of them.

5.4.   Dissemination of violent extremism in Kosovo

This report finds that the radical, violent, and exclusive ideology of Takfir is not a home-grown ideology. While religious influences and additional practices that are more conservative were increasingly introduced in Kosovo during the second half of 1999, the Takfir ideology and its teachings entered Kosovo later on, but more intensively from the beginning of 2005. This ideology has found its place in Kosovo through a number of Skopje based imams who have visited and studied in the Middle East where they have succumbed to the Takfir circles mostly and predominantly in its ideological base – Egypt.[222] It was sometime in the beginning of the 2000s when most of the Albanian imams from Albania, Macedonia, and Kosovo, who have together studied in the Middle East, began their ideological splits. This means, when these imams disagreed amongst themselves on fundamental issues.

The ideological splits began gradually; however, they became more definitive in 2003 when theological debates took place between imams in Macedonia regarding whether or not Islam allows you to vote in official state organized elections.[223] There was a group led by Shukri Aliu, a Skopje based imam that openly came out and argued against participation in elections, and dubbed those who vote as *kuffar* (unbelievers) – a clear Takfiri trait, as outlined above. There was another group in Skopje led by Bekir Halimi, another Skopje based imam known also to not limit his teachings only to the Hanefi School,[224] and a few others, who argued that participation in elections is allowed and should be encouraged especially now that there are political options after the 2001 Ohrid Agreement.[225] The two camps continued the debate on other issues as well, and ever since it became clearer that the Takfir group had actually already adopted the key Takfiri traits, the camps continued to separate to the extent that the Takfirs consider the non-Takfiris, including the conservative imams (so called Salafis), as an enemy and imams of *taghut* – another clear Takfiri trait as outlined above. The Takfirs in Skopje even went against Muhammad Nasiruddin al-Albani, an Albanian from Shkodra, who spent the rest

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222   Interview with H.B. a Macedonia based imam who does not limit himself only to a Hanafi legal school, 23 January 2015. Skopje, Macedonia

223   Ibid.

224   The author of this report understands that Bekir Halimi is considered a Salafi by many, which according to its theological definition he is, but he does not like to be linked with Salafism, like many other Salafi imams, because of the misuse of such a term.

225   Interview with Bekir Halimi. a Macedonia based imam who does not limit himself only to a Hanafi legal school, 23 January 2015. Skopje, Macedonia

of his life in Syria, and is considered one of the most influential Islamic scholars of the 20th century.[226] Muhammad Nasiruddin al-Albani held many current and young non-Takfiri imams close to him with his teachings - including those who are today considered as Salafis.

Looking at the context and the dissemination of the Takfir ideology in Skopje is as of much relevance for understanding the dissemination of such an extremist ideology in Kosovo. This is because of the links and dissemination channels that have facilitated the opening for such an ideological base in Kosovo. For instance, among a number of Albanian speaking imams who have embraced Takfir ideology is Shukri Aliu, a Kosovo born imam, who has spent most of his life in Macedonia.[227] During the 1990s, he first went to Syria to pursue his studies, and then continued in Medina, Saudi Arabia, from where he is believed to have been thrown out of school and eventually from Saudi Arabia because of his radical Takfir thoughts, which were academically and nationally unacceptable.[228] He eventually went to Egypt and spent some time with Takfir circles, where he strengthened the radical Takfir ideology. He first propagated his ideology as an imam in Skopje in the beginning of 2000s, during which period he did not spare himself to push for ideological changes in the Macedonian Islamic Community (MIC) by using force. He was even reported to have used weapons, including Kalashnikovs, when he entered the offices of the MIC's leadership during 2004.[229] This and the charges brought against him for such an attack made him flee to Kosovo. This was already the period when ideological splits between imams where clear and the Takfir imams and worshippers avoided contact with the other imams who they consider to be imams of *taghut* (state).

By the time he fled to Kosovo, Shukri Aliu had already built a support base and a number of disciples in Macedonia that he left behind. For instance one of his disciples and close confidents, Rexhep Memishi, even as this report is being written continues to preach the Takfir ideology uninterrupted in the Jahja Pasha mosque in Skopje, and at the same time recruits and directly supports ISIS before his congregation.[230] Even back in 2011, on 23 February, Rexhep Memishi posted a quote about jihad by Abu Muqhammad al-Maqdisi, a spiritual mentor and a reference scholar for the likes of ISIS, Al-Qaida, and all the Albanian speaking Takfir imams.[231],[232]. One of Memishi's close relatives was killed while fighting for ISIS, and his other close relatives that keep changing their names on Facebook continue to directly and openly support ISIS.[233],[234]

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226   King Faisal International Prize (n.d.). "Sheikh Mohammad Nasir Ad-Din Al-Albani". *KFIP.* Online available at: http://kfip.org/sheikh-mohammad-nasir-ad-din-al-albani/

227   Levizja Islame Bashkohu (2012). "Arrestohet dhe ekstradohet Hoxhë: Shukri Aliu / reagon lëvizja "Bashkohu" - [KlanKosova]" LISBA. *Youtube.* Online available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NxZ1zZu54ls

228   Interview with D.T. a former extremist belonging to Takfir circles in Kosovo, 16 December 2014. Prishtina, Kosovo.

229   ICG (2006). "Maqedonia: me hapa të pasigurtë drejtë Evropës". *Brifing për Evropë*, Numër 41. Online available at: http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/europe/b041_macedonia_wobbling_toward_europe_albanian.pdf

230   Visits to Skopje and numerous videos.

231   Rexhep Memishi (2011). Facebook posting. February 23, 2011. Online available at. https://www.facebook.com/RexhepMemishi/posts/128500657222529

232   Interview with R.H. a young Islam practitioner in Kosovo, 12 February 2015. Prishtina, Kosovo.

233   Interview with C.D. a former extremist belonging to Takfir circles in Kosovo, 7 January 2015. Prishtina, Kosovo.

234   Author's observations on Facebook.

Rexhep Memishi attended his religious studies in Medina during the early 2000s, but just like Shukri Aliu, he was thrown out of the university and as a result left Saudi Arabia because of his radical Takfir ideology.[235] One of those that gave the order to expel Memishi from the University was an Albanian imam from Kumanovo, Macedonia who both works for the Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia and enjoys high respect as a religious scholar.[236],[237] Rexhep Memishi also went to Egypt where he stayed with Takfir circles between 2004 and 2006, a period where he had major disagreements with other imams from Kosovo and Albanian speaking areas (including those referred to as Salafis), and questioned their "Islamic knowledge", because they would not embrace the Takfir tenets.[238] Both Shukri Aliu's[239] and Rexhep Memishi's video lectures are posted on YouTube through the "Udhëzimi Islam" account which holds the picture of Osama bin Laden.[240] Besides Rexhep Memishi, Shukri Aliu has left a number of other disciples, predominantly in Skopje, but include other places in Macedonia as well, who continued to preach in support of ISIS and violent jihadi movements uninterrupted by any state authority in Macedonia.

When charges were brought against Shukri Aliu for committing a criminal offense of "violence", in accordance with the Macedonian Criminal Code, he fled to Kosovo, where he stayed for around 7 years uninterrupted by any state authority in Kosovo.[241] He was arrested in Kosovo and later extradited to Macedonia on 5 December 2012 upon the request of Macedonian authorities.[242] He was extradited by Kosovo's Ministry of Interior (MoI) because he was sued in Macedonia, back in 2005, under the charges that together with some of his followers, he tried to intimidate the head of the MIC through the use of violence and maltreatment.[243] In the press statement given by the Macedonian MoI, it was stated that there are indications that Shukri Aliu, as a close friend of Ramadan Shiti (who was killed during the operation "Storm" in Brodec in 2005) is involved in many criminal offenses which he committed in the territory of Macedonia.[244],[245],[246]

235   Interview with C.D. a former extremist belonging to Takfir circles in Kosovo, 7 January 2015. Prishtina, Kosovo.

236   Interview with H.H. a former long time employee in various Arab sponsored charity organisations in Kosovo, 18 October 2014. Prishtina, Kosovo.

237   Interview with H.B. a Macedonia based imam who does not limit himself only to a Hanafi legal school, 23 January 2015. Skopje, Macedonia

238   Interview with R.E. a Kosovo based imam who does not limit himself only to a Hanafi legal school, 22 November 2014. Mitrovica, Kosovo.

239   Udhezimi Islam (2012). "Fjalë tronditëse! Immeti sot! Shukri Aliu". *Youtube*. Online available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IxQ9zlXahaE

240   Udhezimi Islam (n.d.). *Youtube*. Online available at: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCvgme8jWR_Cdi-s6cZadhaQ

241   Koha, 6 December 2012, Nr. 1780, fq. 4. Macedonia.

242   Levizja Islame Bashkohu (2012). "Arrestohet dhe ekstradohet Hoxhë: Shukri Aliu / reagon lëvizja "Bashkohu" - [KlanKosova]" LISBA. *Youtube*. Online available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NxZ1zZu54ls

243   Koha, 6 December 2012, Nr. 1780, fq. 4. Macedonia.

244   Koha, 6 December 2012, Nr. 1780, fq. 4. Macedonia.

245   Besimtari (2012). "Arrestohet në Kosovë Hoxhë Shukri Aliu dhe ju Dorëzohet Maqedonasve". December 5, 2012. Besimtari. Online available at: http://besimtari.com/site/2012/12/05/arrestohet-ne-kosove-hoxhe-shukri-aliu-dhe-ju-dorzohet-maqedonasve-video/

246   Levizja Islame Bashkohu (2012). "Arrestohet dhe ekstradohet Hoxhë: Shukri Aliu / reagon lëvizja "Bashkohu" - [KlanKosova]" LISBA. *Youtube.* Online available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NxZ1zZu54ls

His seven uninterrupted years in Kosovo provided enough time for Shukri Aliu to create an ideological support base, disciples, and many other followers in and around a number of mosques in Kosovo. He influenced Zekirija Qazimi from Gjilan, among the arrested imams by the Kosovo Police later believed to have become an ISIS propagandist, recruiter, and a reference for the Kosovo citizens fighting for ISIS.[247],[248]. Another imam in Gjilan who was influenced by Shukri Aliu is Ridvan Haqifi, a close student of Zekirija Qazimi, who is in Syria and believed to be on the same ranks with Lavdrim Muhaxheri.[249],[250]. He has also asked for the "head" of anyone who helped in returning Erion Zenaj from Syria, alluding to a former ISIS fighter returned to Kosovo, Fitim Lladrovci.[251] Bedri Robaj, among those arrested by the Kosovo police, is another imam in Kosovo influenced by the Takfiri imams mentioned above as well as during his studies in Egypt, and it is believed that later he became a propagator, recruiter, and a reference for and a preacher supporting the Al Qaida affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra group.[252],[253] Ridvan Memishi and a few other of Shukri Aliu's disciples from Macedonia have been freely and frequently visiting Kosovo, something that was mostly facilitated during Shukri Aliu's period in Kosovo as a fugitive until 2012.[254] Shukri Aliu and his disciples in Macedonia and Kosovo appeared later to have also influenced Lavdrim Muhaxheri, one of Kosovo's more ruthless foreign fighters in Syria. This is symptomatic of how security institutions in Kosovo (both national and international ones) have missed the opportunity to capture such blatant dissemination of an extremist at its outset. This is also symptomatic of the lack of a more institutionalised cooperation mechanism between the security and religious institutions (the BIK and imams).

A direct ideological influence from Shukri Aliu to Lavdrim Muhaxheri can be observed if one carefully listens to one of Lavdrim Muhaxheri's approximately 10 minute long recruitment videos from Syria.[255] Starting from the minute 5:05 to minute 5:25 he says "*Muslims cannot achieve the implementation of the Sharia without spilling their blood, and that the ship of a Muslim does not sail on water; it sails on sea, on a bloody sea, and by spilling our Muslim blood the victory can be close*".[256] With this, he was paraphrasing a quote from Shukri Aliu which was previously published by the Cultural Association "Rinia Islame (Islamic Youth)" in Kaçanik, which goes as follows: "*An example of our ummah is the ship, but this ship does not sail on sea. This ship lives in the blood of its sons. When the blood lessens, the ship shivers. When the blood drains out, the*

247   Interview with C.D. a former extremist belonging to Takfir circles in Kosovo, 7 January 2015. Prishtina, Kosovo.

248   Interview with A.A. a former foreign fighter from Kosovo, 17 November 2014. Prishtina, Kosovo.

249   Ibid.

250   Visar Duriqi (2014). "Ekskluzive: BIK'u, rruga drejt terrorizmit" Juky 31, 2014. *Gazeta Express*. Online available at: http://www.gazetaexpress.com/lajme/ekskluzive-biku-rruga-drejt-terrorizmit-33221/

251   Televizioni Koha (2014). "Komandanti i shqiptarëve në ISIS kërkon kokën e atyre që ndihmuan kthimin e Erion Zenës". November 3, 2014. *Televizioni Koha*. Online available at: http://www.tvkoha.tv/19094/komandanti-i-shqiptareve-ne-isis-kerkon-koken-e-atyre-qe-ndihmuan-kthimin-e-erion-zenes.html

252   Interview with D.T. a former extremist belonging to Takfir circles in Kosovo, 16 December 2014. Prishtina, Kosovo.

253   Interview with A.A. a former foreign fighter from Kosovo, 17 November 2014. Prishtina, Kosovo.

254   Interview with D.T. a former extremist belonging to Takfir circles in Kosovo, 16 December 2014. Prishtina, Kosovo.

255   IndeksOnline.net (2014) "Lufta ne Siri – Indeksonline" *Youtube*. Online available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zhbWhgS6svc

256   Ibid.

ship overturns. This is why our ship has overturned, because the blood of those shahids who have spilled their blood, has been drained".[257] "Rinia Islame" has posted this to remember the detention of Shukri Aliu which they associated with a will "may Allah release him from prison".[258] This quote issued by Shukri Aliu, and later used by Lavdrim Muhaxheri speaks clearly of the Takfir ideology they embraced and especially of the omnipresence and the necessity of permanent violence in reaching their goal – their version of an Islamic State.

The above list of Shukri Aliu's disciples in Kosovo is not exhaustive, but it is certain that even after his extradition from Kosovo, his ideological base continues to prevail and spread through his disciples.[259] Shukri Aliu's Takfir ideology in Kosovo began to be spread initially in the wider region of Gjilan, which borders Macedonia, and more predominantly in the municipalities of Kaçanik, Hani i Elezit, Vitia (part of the wider region of Gjilan), which are all close to Skopje. Some of the practitioners of Islam in Skopje, which is also the case with those within the Takfir circles, consider Hani i Elezit and Kaçanik as their own region, not only because of close proximity, but also because of their influence.[260] It should be noted that ever since Shukri Aliu was extradited from Kosovo, his entry into the country was banned. In addition to Shukri Aliu, entry into Kosvo was also banned for Rexhep Memishi and a few other imams from Skopje, although it is difficult to tell at this point whether they all belong to the Takfir ideology.[261] According to the former Takfir member, Rexhep Memishi has continued his contacts with Takfir disciples in Kosovo through Skype and other social media.[262]

While the Egypt-Macedonia link is the major source through which the Takfiri ideology has found its place in Kosovo, there are also other minor sources through which the Takfir ideology has transmitted into Kosovo. According to the former Takfir member, who the author of this report has been in contact with, Idriz Bilibani, an imam in Kosovo with strong religious links to Bosnia and Sandzak has used the Takfir tenets in his sermons and other places in Kosovo. In the case of Albania, the Takfiri ideology has found its place in the country through Saudi Arabia's Takfiri circles, which largely remain secret due to Saudi Arabia's harsh treatment of such major deviations.[263] There is no direct link between Albania and Kosovo when discussing the influence of Takfir ideology; however, Albania based imams, such as Abdurrahman (Genci) Balla, who was a school mate in the Saudi with Rexhep Memishi, and has been arrested, may have had an influence through his online presence.

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257   Cultural Association "Rinia Islame" (Islamic Youth) in Kaçanik

258   Ibid.

259   Interview with C.D. a former extremist belonging to Takfir circles in Kosovo, 7 January 2015. Prishtina, Kosovo.

260   Discourse used while in visit in Skopje
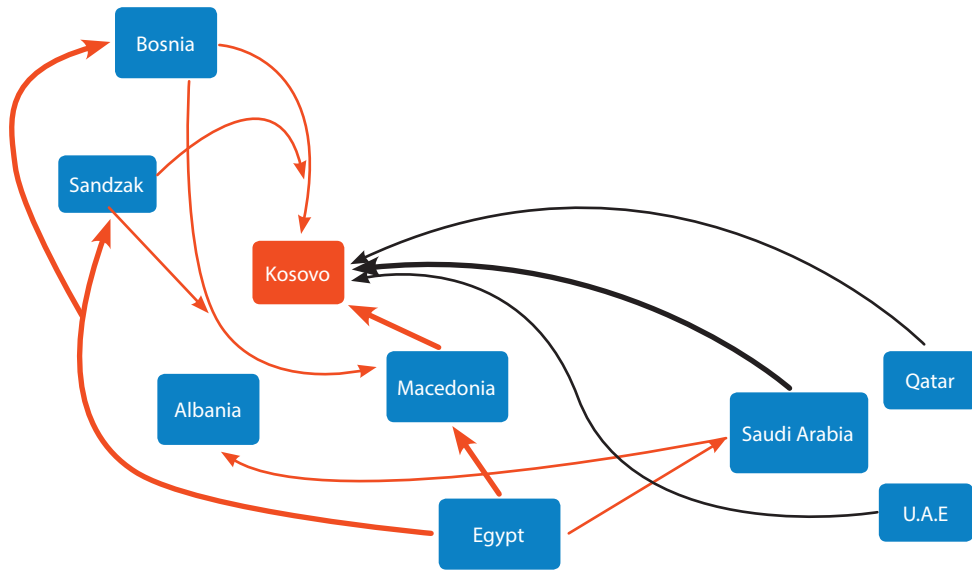
261   Interview with a high official of one of the security agencies in Kosovo, 27 October 2014. Prishtina, Kosovo.

262   Interview with C.D. a former extremist belonging to Takfir circles in Kosovo, 7 January 2015. Prishtina, Kosovo.

263   Interview with H.B. a Macedonia based imam who does not limit himself only to a Hanafi legal school, 23 January 2015. Skopje, Macedonia

Direct Takfiri ideas through human interlocutors
Direct funding for both charity and religionaisation effort

Line thickness shows the intensity of the link for each of the two categories

Diagram 1: Sources of dissemination of extremist Takfiri ideas into Kosovo and the region

At a "Political Islam and Radicalisation" conference held in Prishtina in November 2014, Lorenzo Vidino, an academic and security expert specializing in Islamism and political violence in Europe and North America[264], presented his divisions of views on Islamism as well as violent extremism.[265] He divides the views on Islamism on three levels or macro groups based on a pyramid, whereby at the very top of the pyramid we have "violent rejectionists", who reject any order that does not obey the strict Islamic law. The second layer of the pyramid includes the "non-violent rejectionists", who also support the strict interpretation of the Islamic law, but do not openly advocate the use of violence to overthrow the system. The third layer of the pyramid includes the "participationists", who have similar views to the previous two groups on how the society and religion should look, but they do participate in the political system, even if and when it is a democratic one (see pyramid below on the left).

If Vidino's pyramid is used in Kosovo's case, according to the entire methodology of research used for this report, just like the case at a global level, at the very top we would have "violent rejectionists" or the Takfirs as used in this report. The next level of the pyramid, instead of "non-violent rejectionists" which is found at global level, in the case of Kosovo we would have "non-violent conservatives" – those usually referred to as Salafis, because in the case of Kosovo, the conservative Islamists do participate in political processes, and partially in secular social life, but are characterised with a more strict interpretation of the Islamic law in private and partly in public life. For example, they pay taxes, bills, etc. to the state (unlike the Takfirs),

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264   Lorenzo Vidino (n.d.). "Bio". Online available at: http://lorenzovidino.com/
265   Lorenzo Vidino (2014). "Political Islam and Radicalisation". FES Conference. November 12-21, 2014.

while still maintaining a conservative religious lifestyle compared to the secular part of the society and more liberal practitioners of Islam in Kosovo. Lastly, in the Kosovo case, the bottom level of the pyramid represents "liberal participationists", who unlike Vidino's bottom level of the pyramid, in the case of Kosovo they are even more liberal, and certainly do not necessarily embrace Islamic law in its entirety.
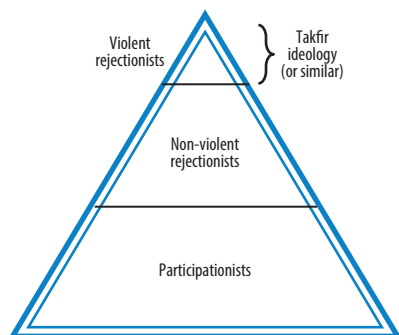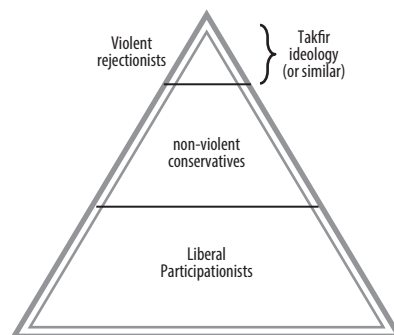
Figure 3: Views on Islam (global)

Figure 4: Views on Islam (Kosovo)

An important question regarding the pyramids presented above, is whether or not there is a direct relationship between one level of pyramid with the other level next to it? In other words, do these levels of pyramid serve as a "conveyor belt" or are they an "enabling factor" for people to move up or down the levels of the pyramid? As Vidino asserted, in some cases they do, in some cases they don't.[266] So seems to be the case in Kosovo; belonging to "liberal participationist" does not necessarily mean that one can go to "non-violent conservative" or vice versa. Similarly, belonging to "non-violent conservative" layer, does not necessarily mean that one would move to "violent rejectionist" level, as Vidino asserted, in some cases one may, and in other cases one may not. As a result, there may be cases where one moves from "non-violent conservative" to a "violent rejectionists"; however, this should not be taken as a rule. This is because, in the case of Kosovo, there are cases where the "non-violent conservatives" have helped in de-radicalising the young Takfiris, as a former extremist has told the author of this report.[267]

Additionally, an Albania based imam, who does not limit himself only to the more liberal Hanafi interpretation of Islam, having close relations and links to more conservative imams in Kosovo (those considered Salafi), has de-radicalized a Prishtina based Madrassa student who was about to leave for Syria.[268] So, while in some cases the "non-violent conservative" level serves as a an "enabling factor" for people to move to "violent rejectionists", there are also cases where the "non-violent conservative" served as an "enabling factor" for people to move from "violent rejectionists" to "non-violent conservative". The "non-violent conservative" level is

266   Ibid.

267   Interview with D.T. a former extremist belonging to Takfir circles in Kosovo, 16 December 2014. Prishtina, Kosovo.

268   Interview with T.M. a Albania based imam who does not limit himself only to a Hanafi legal school, 24 January 2015. Durrës, Albania.

not the only gateway to "violent rejectionists", because there are two cases of foreign fighters, which the author of this report has encountered, one from Kaçanik and the other from Prishtina, who were at the "liberal participationst" layer when they decided to go to Syria.

After having discussed in detail the external conditions and influences of both religionization and extremism, and after having attempted to draw some lines between conservative religious practices and violent extremist practices, this report now turns to internal conditions and influences for embracing both religious (conservative) ideas and the extremist ideology. The internal conditions and influences of extremism, may also shed some light on the cases when someone may jump from "non-violent conservative" ideas as well as from "liberal participationist" ideas to "violent rejectionist" ideas – which has to do, more often than not, with some individual characteristics of victims that fall prey to such ideology.

6. INTERNAL CONDITIONS AND INFLUENCES

It is evident in Kosovo that the external conditions and influences of religionization efforts have found fruitful grounds in Kosovo, especially after 1999. Nowadays more people practice religion; as can be generally observed, the number of those who claim to be practicing Islam is much higher nowadays than before 1999 when the predominant majority claimed to just belong to a Muslim faith, without practicing it (secular). This can also be observed from the number of those that attended sermons in mosques before, particularly during the communist Yugoslavia and the 1990s when the majority was focused on the national cause, and those that attend nowadays. Out of this observation, many of those who belonged to the non-practicing ones (secular) began practicing Islam after 1999, and especially in more recent years; there are certainly many[269] of those who after 1999 began practicing Islam outright at their younger age. However, one cannot explain religionization in Kosovo without looking into the internal conditions in conjunction with the external conditions discussed above.

6.1. Conditions facilitating religious ideas

Multiple domestic interplaying factors can explain Kosovars' embrace for religion after 1999. Multiple conditions existed and were at play during the first years after the war, and during the ensuing period, which provided fruitful grounds for the religionization of the society. First, the societal disorientation and weak economic and political conditions provided fruitful grounds for religionization right after the war. Isa Blumi claimed that "the post conflict period in Kosovo was manifested with a disoriented society, high poverty, and weak economic and political institutions.[270] The entire society has been rapidly exposed to a variety of ideas and mindsets, including those more liberal on the one hand, and more conservative on the other hand. Secondly, the neglect of Kosovo's rural communities after the war by international and local governing structures, together with other "secular aid agencies" created room for Middle Eastern charity organisations to massively penetrate those areas.[271] Poorly educated men and women in rural communities, consequently, accepted some of the conditions of Saudi charity organisations to attend their lectures that introduced them to more conservative and rigid thoughts in Islam.[272]

Third is the neglect of international governing structures, mainly by UNMIK as the supreme governing authority at the time, towards PISG's requests to investigate "suspicious religious

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269   It is out of general observation, as the exact number is difficult to tell.

270   Dimal Basha (2013). "Globalization and the Rise of Salafism in Kosovo. How Gulf Countries Spearheaded a Transitional Advocacy Network that is Challenging a New Democracy". *The New School Graduate Program in International Affairs*. Master of Ats thesis.

271   Isa Blumi (2005). "Political Islam Among the Albanians: Are the Taliban Coming to the Balkans". *KIPRED*. Online available at: http://www.kipred.org/advCms/documents/14714_Political_Islam_Among_the_Albanians_Are_the_Taliban_coming_to_the_Balkans.pdf, p.v

272   Dimal Basha (2013). "Globalization and the Rise of Salafism in Kosovo. How Gulf Countries Spearheaded a Transitional Advocacy Network that is Challenging a New Democracy". *The New School Graduate Program in International Affairs*. Master of Ats thesis.

activities" in Kosovo.[273,274.] A former high-ranking officer at the then Kosovo Police Service (KPS) claimed that they were aware of religionization efforts by charity organisations, but UNMIK did not allow them to carry out investigations on the grounds of human rights and freedom of religion.[275] This ignorance, according to Isa Blumi, left little room for poor rural communities to resist aid provided by Middle Eastern charity organisations, which almost certainly monopolized the assistance in these areas.[276]

According to the October 2014 KCSS Kosovo Security Barometer (KSB)[277] survey, people living in rural areas have more trust in religious institutions compared to those living in urban areas. For instance, 79 percent of people in rural areas claimed to have trust (trust a lot, trust and trust to a certain extent) in the religious institutions compared to 71 percent of those living in urban areas. In addition, those that would commit themselves more to a religious cause rather than to a national or state cause are slightly higher in rural areas. For instance, 13 percent of those that would commit themselves to a religious cause rather than to a national or state case are those from rural areas, compared to 10 percent of those coming from urban areas who said the same thing. Similarly, of those who would commit themselves more to a national or state cause before a religious cause, 44 percent are form rural areas while 49 percent are from urban areas. In general, however, the overwhelming majority would commit themselves to a national cause or to both national and religious cause. See figures below.
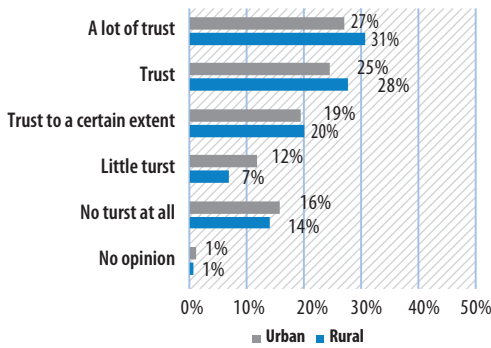
Figure 5: Trust in religious institutions (urban/rural)[278]
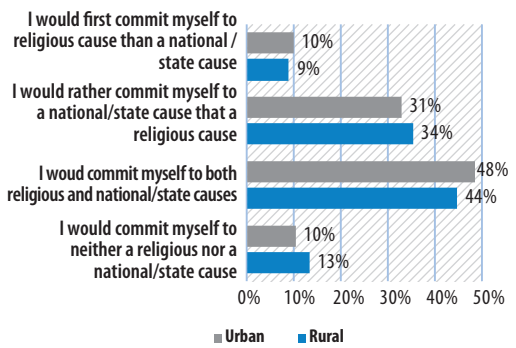
Figure 6: Commitment to a cause (urban/rural)[279]

Poor economic conditions and the level of poverty have not changed much during the ensuing period. Corruption in every governing structure, high income inequality, especially the

273   Dimal Basha (2013). "Globalization and the Rise of Salafism in Kosovo. How Gulf Countries Spearheaded a Transitional Advocacy Network that is Challenging a New Democracy". *The New School Graduate Program in International Affairs*. Master of Ats thesis.

274   Interview with N.I., a former Kosovo Police official and security expert, 28 October 2014. Prishtina, Kosovo.

275   Interview with N.I., a former Kosovo Police official and security expert, 28 October 2014. Prishtina, Kosovo.

276   Isa Blumi (2005). "Political Islam Among the Albanians: Are the Taliban Coming to the Balkans". *KIPRED*. Online available at: http://www.kipred.org/advCms/documents/14714_Political_Islam_Among_the_Albanians_Are_the_Taliban_coming_to_the_Balkans.pdf, p.12

277   Additional and detailed information on the KSB (sampling, methodology, etc) refer to KSB publications which are regularly published on KCSS's website, www.qkss.org

278   KCSS (2014). *Kosovo Security Barometer*. October 2014

279   Ibid.

differences between the ruling classes and the majority rural part of the society, as well as inadequate provision of public services have prevailed.[280] The 2014 Corruption Perceptions Index of "Transparency International", which ranks countries/territories based on how corrupt a country's public sector is perceived to be, gave Kosovo a score of 33/100 in a range where a score of (0) means "highly corrupt" and a score of (100) means "very clean".[281] With this score, Kosovo is ranked 110th out of 175 countries/territories observed by "Transparency International" listing Kosovo below 33 percent of all the countries/territories where the perception about the level of corruption has been measured.[282] In regards to religionization, it is also important to note the trust on and engagement in corruptive activities in educational institutions. According to the 2014 UNDP report, 44 percent of those interviewed, which include teachers, parents, and students, believe that they engage in corruption because "there is no other way to get things done".[283] According to the same report, 41 percent of those interviewed, which include teachers, parents, and students, believe that they are "fairly certain" that they will obtain the service or get the problem solved through corruption.[284] These factors have provided enough space for various missionaries from the Middle East and the local imams to present religion, as Dimal Basha also noted, as "the next best solution to achieve prosperity".[285]

In addition, the West's meddling and micromanagement in Kosovo, and their open support for the national elite that misrules, has created an identity crisis and a search for authenticity which people can find in religion.[286] In addition, the unification and commitment of the Albanian citizens of Kosovo to a national cause, faded after the liberation in 1999, and it was not as strong as before. As a result, various political Islamic groups become more credible than the official governing elites because, as DeLong-Bas asserts, they are more familiar with the concerns of the people and their needs.[287] Imams in Kosovo engage much more directly with and remain much closer to the citizens, compared to policymakers and the political elite of secular institutions in Kosovo. Ever since the war ended in Kosovo (in the past 15 years) a good number of policymakers and governing elites were in almost daily contact with a number of foreign embassies in order to gain legitimacy, and have mostly dealt with their own and their close friends private concerns. They have not sufficiently dealt with the concerns of citizens

280   James Korovilas (2013). "Kosovo's Economy: How to analyse the present situation of Kosovo's economy?". *Academic Foresights*. Online available at: http://www.academic-foresights.com/Kosovo.pdf

281   Transparency International (2014). "Corruption by country/territory". *Transparency International*. Online available at: http://www.transparency.org/country#KOS

282   Ibid.

283   UNDP (2014). "Survey on Public Perception of Corruption in the Education Sector". *UNDP*. Online available at: http://www.ks.undp.org/content/dam/kosovo/docs/SAEK/2014%20Report_UNDP_Opinion%20Poll_Corruption%20in%20Education%20ENG_1.pdf. p.28

284   Ibid., p.30

285   Dimal Basha (2013). "Globalization and the Rise of Salafism in Kosovo. How Gulf Countries Spearheaded a Transitional Advocacy Network that is Challenging a New Democracy". *The New School Graduate Program in International Affairs*. Master of Ats thesis. p.42

286   A collection of dozens of sources regarding the Takfir and similar ideologies found here: http://www.angelfire.com/az/rescon/2rdmv.html

287   Memri (2007). " American Professor Natana DeLong-Bas: 'I Do Not Find Any Evidence...'". January 3, 2007. Islam Daily. Online available at: http://www.islamdaily.org/en/wahabism/5201.american-professor-natana-delong-bas-%E2%80%98i-do-not-fin.htm

through secular institutions, and have not remained close to them compared to imams and religious figures.

As a result, imams in Kosovo have become the reference point and a sort of life advisor and problem solver for citizens. Imams, through religion, partly answer and partly respond to some of the most simple as well as most intricate and intimate questions held by a good number of citizens, which include: issues regarding marriage, life on the internet, relationships through the internet, death, food, heritage, the way one has to deal with parents, children, husbands and wives, heaven and hell, and many other concerns.[288] This is provided through the internet, direct interaction, phone calls, TV, and other communication channels. For instance, a Muslim worshipper who missed a flight called one of his preferred imams to ask what should he do and how should he behave in that particular occasion.[289] It is clear that people have gradually begun to distrust education institutions and the secular governing elite, because of their failure to respond to peoples' immediate needs, and as a result have turned to religious institutions and imams for guidance.

Sfera Training Centre has produced a public video where a group of mostly educated young people in Kosovo indicate their reasons for turning to Islam. Reasons among them vary, from not finding pleasure in temporary things, a sense of relief after religious sermons, to wanting to change the lifestyle from trouble makers to good citizens and generally feeling much better and happier.[290] Most of the protagonists in the video seem to have one thing in common; they all seem to have embraced religion at a young age – either during their elementary school years, or during early high-school years.

The education system implemented in Kosovo after 1999 did not provide a credible avenue for answers to important questions that people of a younger age usually have. A recent report, "Kosovo: 2014-2018 Country Development Cooperation Strategy", published by the UNDP shows that Kosovo continues to be "plagued by an education system that at all levels fails to address the pedagogic and skills training needs of its students and the economy".[291] It also asserts that there is an inequitable access to educational institutions and that a vast disparity exists from school-to-school in terms of quality.[292] It is important to note that the pre-university education, the most fragile period when the youth form their characters and have important questions in life answered, is still characterized by fragility.[293] The same UNDP report shows that management systems of pre-university education, professionalism, pedagogy and implementation of reforms are still weak.[294] Additionally, the higher education in Kosovo "fails to impart practical knowledge and skills and produce qualified graduates trained for employ-

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288   Radio Islame (n.d.). "Pyetje Përgjigje". Online available at: http://www.radioislame.com/new/category.php?-cat_id=pyetje-pergjigje

289   Interview with R.H. a young Islam practitioner in Kosovo, 12 February 2015. Prishtina, Kosovo.

290   Sfera Training Center (2014). " Udhëzimi në Islam, si dhe pse?". *Youtube*. Online available at: https://www.you-tube.com/watch?v=KDCFLjcqI5M

291   USAID (n.d.). "Kosovo: 2014-2018 Country Development Cooperation Strategy". *USAID*. Online available at: https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1863/CDCS_Kosovo.pdf. p.7

292   Ibid

293   Ibid., p.11

294   Ibid., p.11

ment".[295] In general, the educational institutions in Kosovo have failed to implement a system whereby both the teaching staff and the students embrace an approach that encourages critical thinking and debates on various issues.

Similarly, the 2014 the EU Commission Progress Report had negative remarks for the education system in Kosovo. It noted that the system of education in all levels (primary, secondary, and tertiary) are politicized, which means the political elite in Kosovo uses the education system for power based domestic politics.[296] The curriculum is also inadequate, and the professional capacity of the teaching staff in all levels is weak.[297] The education system in Kosovo has shown to be inadequate to respond to the needs of the state and other sectors; for instance, the Judicial Council has been unable to hire for 50 vacancies it has published because of the low number of applications for such positions, despite the fact that thousands graduate from the Law Faculty of the UP.[298]

In terms of expenditures and investments in the education sector, Kosovo spends the least per capita in education and science. Kosovo's expenditures in education and science in 2013 stood at around 130 Euros per capita;[299] while in 2012 Albania spent around 143 Euros per capita (9 percent higher than Kosovo); Serbia spent around 185 Euros per capita (43 percent higher than Kosovo); and Croatia spent around 422 Euros per capita (225 percent higher than Kosovo) in the education sector in 2012.[300]

Other important data on education in Kosovo indicate that of those who finish primary education, an extremely low number continue into other levels of education. For instance in the academic year 2008/2009 only 98,890 or 27 percent of the 365,473 enrolled in primary education continued into secondary education.[301] The same is the case for those continuing into higher education. Only 33,834 or 9 percent of the 365,473 enrolled in primary education continue into higher education, which also means that only 34 percent of those enrolled in secondary education continue into higher education.[302] Therefore, there is a very high dropout rate in between levels of education, especially for those that quit after finishing elementary school, which do not get the chance neither to socialize in an educational institution nor to gain the basic knowledge on important questions that are usually answered during secondary education. There is also an alarmingly high rate of dropouts while attending the same year/level of

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295   Ibid., p.11

296   European Comission (2014). "Kosovo* Progress Report". *European Comission.* Online available at: http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/pdf/key_documents/2014/20141008-kosovo-progress-report_en.pdf. p. 37

297   Ibid., p. 37

298   Koha.net (2014). "Kosova prodhon juristë shumë por kualitet pak". December 7, 2014. *Koha.net.* Online available at: http://koha.net/?id=27&l=36131

299   GAP (n.d.). "Si i shpenzon shteti paret tona? Raportet mbi Ndarjet dhe Shpenzimin e Parasë Publike". GAP Institute. Online available at: http://www.institutigap.org/spendings/?buxheti-i-kosoves----planifikimet/2013#/~/buxheti-i-kosoves----planifikimet, in combination with World Bank Data

300   Author's own calculations for data from World Bank: http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/expenditure-education-public-gdp#footnote

301   World Bank (2010). "Kosova: Rishikimi i Shpenzimeve publike". June 3, 2010. *Raport Nr. 53709.-XK.* Online available at: http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTKOSOVO/Resources/Kosovo_PER_June_3_2010_Alb.pdf

302   Ibid.,

education, and it is estimated that within two years around 30,000 students have dropped out of their pre-tertiary education level.[303]

Additionally, there was a lack of a range of cultural and other activities where youth could have been engaged. For instance, besides having inherited above 30 cultural facilities (cinemas, theatres, youth centres) from the Socialist Yugoslavian regime in almost every municipality, Kosovo had only 1 functional and 1 semi-functional cinema in 2009, or 1.1 cinemas per million of the population.[304] This number is multiple times smaller than what other countries in the region provide in terms of cultural activities to their citizens. For instance, in 2009 Serbia had 83 cinemas, or 11 cinemas per million of the population (10 times more than Kosovo).[305] Montenegro had 24 cinemas, or 38 cinemas per million of the population (34 times more than Kosovo);[306] Macedonia had 18 cinemas, or 8.5 cinemas per million of the population (8 times more than Kosovo).[307] Although the physical facilities exist, it is difficult to find a functional cultural centre that has a wide range of options for cultural activities including theatre, cinema, youth clubs etc.

Such a consistent lack of attention in youth by the governing institutions in Kosovo has apparently led younger generations to be committed more to a religious cause and less to national or state cause, compared to the older generations. According to late 2014 KCSS's Kosovo Security Barometer (KSB)[308] survey, only 33 percent of those belonging to 18-24 age group said they would rather commit themselves to a national or state cause than to a religious cause. On the other hand, while 60 percent and 50 percent of those belonging to 50-59 and 60-69 age groups respectively (twice as much as the younger age group) would rather commit themselves to a national or state cause than a religious cause. Younger generations also appear to be more committed to both national/state and religious cause together. For instance, 47 percent of those belonging to 18-25 age group would commit themselves to both national/state and religious causes, while only 29 percent, 22 percent, and 20 percent of those belonging to 40-40, 50-59, and 60-69 age groups respectively would commit themselves to both causes. See figure below.

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303   Koha.net (2015). " Për dy vjet shkollimin në Kosovë e braktisën 30 mijë nxënës". January 28, 2015. *Koha.net*. Online available at: http://koha.net/?id=27&l=42611

304   OSCE (2014). "OSCE Municipal Profiles March 2014". OSCE. Online available at: http://www.osce.org/kosovo/66047 q

305   UNESCO (n.d.). *UNESCO Institute for Statistics*. Online available at: http://data.uis.unesco.org/#

306   Ibid.

307   Compendium (n.d.). "Country chart: Number of screens, cinema admission and cinema admissions per capita (2001-2009)". *Compendium Cultural Policies and Trends in Europe*. Online available at: http://www.culturalpolicies.net/web/statistics-participation.php?aid=110&cid=74&lid=en

308   Additional and detailed information on the KSB (sampling, methodology, etc) refer to KSB publications which are regularly published on KCSS's website, www.qkss.org

18-24	7%	13%	47%	33%
25-29	11%	18%	31%	39%
30-39	10%	11%	39%	39%
40-49	10%	12%	29%	48%
50-59	9%	9%	22%	60%
60-69	7%	14%	20%	59%
70+	14%	3%	34%	49%

- I would rather commit myself to a national/state cause that a religious cause
- I woud commit myself to both religious and national/state causes
- I would rather commit myself to a religious cause than a national/state cause.
- I would commit myself to neither a religious nor a national/state cause
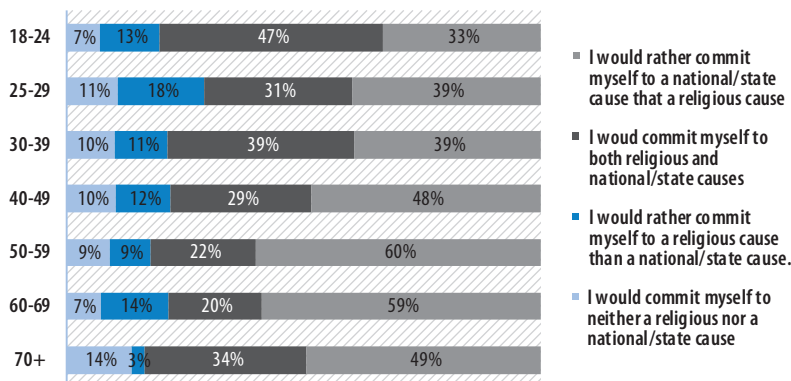
Figure 7: Commitment to a cause (age groups)[309]

Lastly, it should be noted that the combination of the factors mentioned above and domestic conditions, whereby people embrace religion and rely on religious authorities on the one hand, and do not get meaningful services from secular state institutions is also reflected in the level of trust such institutions enjoy among the wider public in Kosovo. A number of surveys show similar results, where the people in Kosovo have far more trust in religious institutions compared to governmental and state sector institutions. Riinvest Institute 2014 survey shows that close to 60 percent of citizens trusted religious institutions while only a little more than 20 percent trusted political parties, the President, and the Government respectively.[310] Kosovo, however, is not an exception as this is the trend in the region as well, especially in Serbia. The same survey results also show that trust in religious institutions among the citizens of Kosovo is also much higher than their trust in the Kosovo Police, EULEX, the Parliament, and public utility companies. Survey results of another report produced by "Forum 2015" show similar results; however it places the religious institutions as the second most trusted institutions among sixteen other institutions. It shows that close to 62 percent of citizens place trust in religious institutions.[311] Similar to the Riinvest Institute data, it shows that government and state related institutions like political parties, the President, and the Government are the least trusted institutions in Kosovo.[312] This means that people's trust in religious institutions in Kosovo is three times higher compared to their trust in the governing and other state institutions.

KCSS's December 2013 survey also shows similar results. For instance, it shows that 61.40 percent of people trust religious institutions, compared to NGOs (46.00 percent), Kosovo Assem-

309   KCSS (2014). *Kosovo Security Barometer*. October 2014

310   Riinvest (2014). "Public Opinion Poll". *Riinvest Institute.* Online available at: http://riinvestinstitute.org/publikimet/pdf/POLL_ENG1418830333.pdf

311   KFOS (n.d.). "Mapping of Open Government Policies in South East Europe". *Forum 2015*. Online available at: http://kfos.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/Mapping-of-Open-Government-Policies-in-South-East-Europe-ENG.pdf

312   Ibid.

bly (14.70 percent), or the media (38.10 percent).[313] While the latest 2014 KCSS's KSB survey shows that younger generations have more trust in religious institutions compared to older generations. For instance, 42 percent of those belonging to 18-24 age groups have *a lot of trust* in religious institutions, while less than 25 percent of those belonging to age groups older than 30 years of age have *a lot of trust* in religious institutions. Only 9 percent of those belonging to the 18-24 age groups have *no trust at all* in religious institutions, while above 20 percent of those belonging to generations older than 50 years of age have *no trust at all* in religious institutions. See figure below.
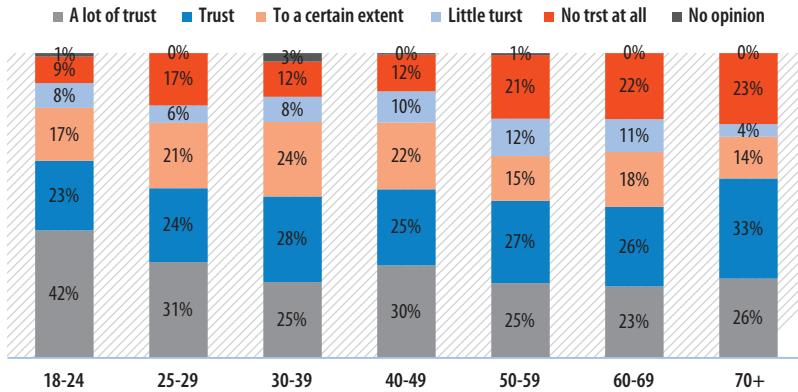

Figure 8: Trust in religious institutions (age groups)[314]

6.2.   Conditions facilitating violent extremist ideas and groups

Domestic conditions and factors that facilitate religionization are not limited to religionization only; these factors also create enough space that violent extremist groups capture. Such conditions also provide fertile grounds for extremist violent ideas to be embraced by a portion of the society. Data on people's trust in institutions presented above regarding Kosovo provide enough evidence for what Vlado Azinovic, who has written and commented a great deal on religious extremist violence in Bosnia and the Balkans, finds. He considers that rampant discrimination, the government's questionable legitimacy and the influence of violent extremist groups 'align' to create an environment that is ideal for nurturing potential violent radicals.[315] Azinovic also asserts that there is a link between the socio-political context and security. In his analysis about radical violent groups in the Balkans, he finds how the weak state structures (because of political un-sustainability, corruption, their inability, and the overall destruction of the system of social values, ineffective public administration, weak economy, poverty, etc) creates enough room which radical violent groups capture.[316]

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313   KCSS (2013). *Kosovo Secuerity Barometer*. December 2013. Online available at: http://www.qkss.org/repository/docs/Kosovo_Security_Barometer_Third_Edition_20786.pdf

314   KCSS (2014). *Kosovo Security Barometer*. October 2014

315   Radio Free Europe (2012). "Islamic Terror in Bosnia? New Book Offers Insights from Former RFE/RL Editor". *RFE Radio Liberty*. Online available at: http://www.rferl.org/content/off-mic-azinovic-terrorism-book-bosnia/24659069.html

316   Vlado Azinovic (2012). "Uvod u studije terorizma". Fakultet politickih nauka Universitet u Sarajevu, Sarajevo.

DeLong Bas furthermore asserts that the violent extremist groups are created by people who are "frustrated and disgruntled" with their governments and have turned to Islam to legitimise their violent actions, but at the same time such movements "have offered no vision for society once they have come to power".[317] According to Husna Haq from Christian Science Monitoring, citing some news and FBI reports, says that "ISIS typically preys on Western youth who are disillusioned and have no sense of purpose or belonging."[318] In an interview with Mustafa Tërniqi, an imam in Durrës who has been outspoken in arguing through Islamic references on why no one should join conflicts in Syria and Iraq, has said that confusion within society is usually created when there are socio-political transitions; there are new thoughts, opinions, and circumstances. Such confusion presents a fruitful ground that the Takfir usually capture.[319]

In the case of Kosovo, this report finds that there is a range of other issues that come into the picture that facilitate radical violent extremism beyond religion, including the following:

6.2.1.   Particular personal characteristics

El-Akli drew some of the personal features of those that are usually drawn into the Kharijites' ideology. According to him, the majority are (i) young; (ii) shallow- and light-minded; (iii) ignorant; (iv) without experience; and (v) since they do not draw religious references from credible religious scholars, they usually get attracted by a third group which follows distorted paths for rebellion and are drawn by hypocrisy.[320] In addition, a number of other imams in Kosovo, Albania, and Macedonia (including Salafis by its religious definition) who are aware and well informed about the Takfir ideology, interviewed for the purpose of this research, have similar claims to El-Akli's. Ismajl Bardhoshi, an influential imam and a scholar from Tirana, Albania, also believes that those who are more susceptible to being attracted to the Takfir ideological circles are young; however, he adds that they are also naive as most of the time they have a good purpose, but very little knowledge on religion.[321] That they have little knowledge about religion itself was also mentioned by a number of other imams that were interviewed when asked about the personal traits of those embracing the Takfir ideology.[322]

The graph below shows the year of birth of 199 Kosovo foreign fighters, for which such data exists, according to which, 46 percent of those who fought or are still fighting in Syria are born between 1985-1999. Considering that Kosovo foreign fighters began to be involved in the Syrian conflict since 2012, we could conclude that 46 percent of those that were or are still involved in Syria were between 23-28 years of age when they decided to depart to Syria.

317   Musaid Al-Tayyar (2014). "Muhammad Ibn Abdul Wahhab: an Intellectual Biography. Interview with Dr. Mrs Natana DeLong Bas: By Musaid Al-Tayyar". *The Simple Truth*. pp.54-60

318   Husna Haq (2014). "ISIS excels at recruiting American teens: Here are four reasons why (+video)". October 22, 2014. *The Christian Science Monitor*. Online available at: http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/USA-Update/2014/1022/ISIS-excels-at-recruiting-American-teens-Here-are-four-reasons-why-video

319   Interview with T.M. a Albania based imam who does not limit himself only to a Hanafi legal school, 24 January 2015. Durrës, Albania.

320   Naser bin Abdul Kerim El-Akli (2003). "Hauarixhët, grupi i parë i devijuar në historinë e Islamit". *Jehona*. p.11

321   Interview with B.I. a Albania based imam who does not limit himself only to a Hanafi legal school, 24 January 2015. Tirana, Albania.

322   Interviews with imams B.I., T.M., H.B., R.E., A.E., who do not limit themselves only to the Hanafi legal school. Prishtina, Skopje, Tirana, Durrës.

Another 20 percent of them were even younger at the time they decided to join the rebel groups in Syria; 20 percent of them were below 23 years of age. One of them for whom such information exists was even younger than 16 or 17 years of age when he decided to fight in Syria, while 8 percent, or 15 of them, belong to those born between 1994 and 1997, which means they were between 17 and 20 years of age when they decided to leave. More than a third of the Kosovo foreign fighters, or 36 percent were older than 28 years of age at the time they decided to leave. On the other hand, 6 percent, or 11 of them who went to Syria as foreign fighters were born after 1975, which means that 11 individuals were older than 38 at the time they decided to leave.
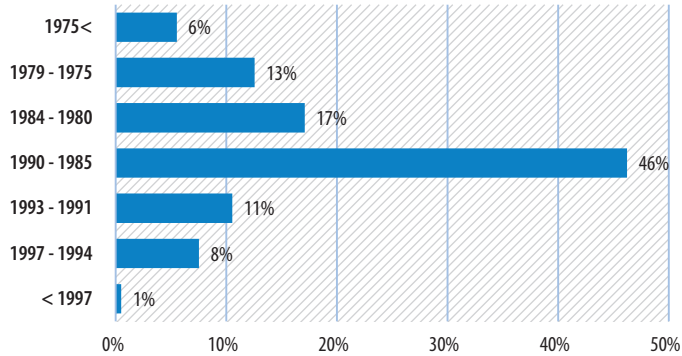
Figure 9: Kosovo foreign fighters in Syria according to year of birth (n=199)[323]

An important note needs to be made regarding age groups and people's involvement in Syria, however. Although it looks like the majority of those that went to Syria are young, but not as young as one would initially assume, one needs to understand the difference between the age an individual decided to fight in Syria and the age when they decided to embrace the Takfir ideology. Given that 46 percent of those who joined the fights in Syria were between 23-28 years of age, they certainly became part of Takfir ideology when they were much younger. For instance, Shukri Aliu, the ideological generator of Takfir ideology in the Albanian speaking areas in the region, joined the fights in Syria very early in the conflict, when he was around 37-38 years of age. Although he belonged to an older age group among fighters, he began adopting his Takfir ideas in the late 90s, when he was around 21-23 years of age, or perhaps younger. So, Shukri Aliu embraced the Takfirs around 15 years before he joined the fight in Syria.[324] One cannot say, for instance, that Shkri Aliu is light-minded or was very young when he adopted his Takfir ideas; however, a number of influential imams in Kosovo, Albania, and Macedonia, share the same belief that those who want to get to the leading position among the Takfirs have some other traits. For instance, these particular individuals have a higher tendency to be attention-seeking, desire salience, and want to be represented and be displayed as early as

323   Author's own calculations from data provided by the Anti-Terrorist Department within the Kosovo Police
324   Interview with C.D. a former extremist belonging to Takfir circles in Kosovo, 18 October 2014. Prishtina, Kosovo.

possible during their leadership endeavour which is, perhaps, difficult to notice in the begin-
ning when such desires appear.[325],[326]

6.2.2.   Education and attitude towards it

The Georgetown University professor, Natana DeLong Bas, points out that "contemporary ji-
hadi movements do not seek to educate people" or to encourage an in-depth study of the
Quran.[327] This is a particular trait of the Takfir ideology, which we have outlined in detail in
previous sections. Ahmet Kalaja, an imam in Tirana, also asserts that usually those who lack
education, implying not only the level but also the lack of substance that one gets in educa-
tion institutions, get attracted to Takfir ideology.[328] For instance, in the case of Kosovo, out of
57 of those who went to Syria, for which such data is available, 75 percent have completed
only their secondary education, while 20 percent of the 57 of them have completed higher
University education. Given that 57 Kosovo foreign fighters, for which such data is available,
represent only a quarter of all foreign fighters that went to Syria, data on their education pre-
sented in the graph below does not tell the entire story behind everyone's education level, but
should be observed as an indication.
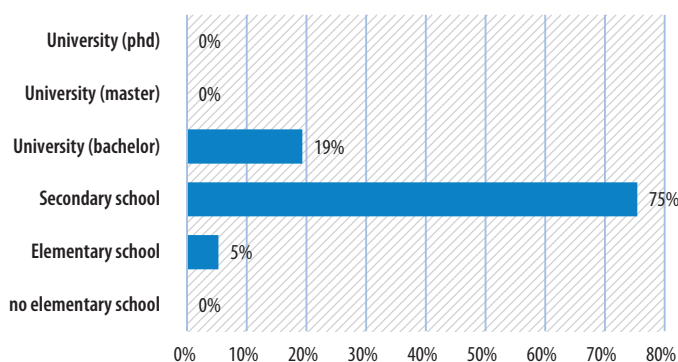
Figure 10: Level of education of Kosovo foreign fighters (n=57)[329]

There are also exceptions when it comes to the level of education. For instance, A.A., who
joined the fights in Syria and stayed for around a month at the end of 2013, has a bachelor's
degree in International Relations with high grades and a master's degree with high grades as
well.[330] Similarly, A.B. from Lubishtë village in Vitia, who was charged of organising and partici-
pation in terrorist organisations, among other things, is also a student at the Technical Faculty

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325   Interview with B.I. a Albania based imam who does not limit himself only to a Hanafi legal school, 24 January
        2015. Tirana, Albania.

326   Interview with H.B. a Macedonia based imam who does not limit himself only to a Hanafi legal school, 23 Jan-
        uary 2015. Skopje, Macedonia

327   Musaid Al-Tayyar (2014). "Muhammad Ibn Abdul Wahhab: an Intellectual Biography. Interview with Dr. Mrs
        Natana DeLong Bas: By Musaid Al-Tayyar". *The Simple Truth*. pp.54-60

328   Interview with K.A. a Albania based imam who does not limit himself only to a Hanafi legal school, 24 January
        2015. Tirana, Albania.

329   Author's own calculations from data provided by the Anti-Terrorist Department within the Kosovo Police

330   Interview with A.A. a former foreign fighter from Kosovo, 13 December 2014. Prishtina, Kosovo.

at the University of Prishtina.[331] When KCSS researchers met him unannounced at one of his relative's stores on the way to Lubishtë, he was found studying for his exams at the faculty.[332] He did appear to be religious and embracing religion; however, at the time the KCSS researches met him, he looked determined and committed to his studies with a pile of books and paper work which were clearly not religious.

A.A, who spent around a month in Syria, where he had also met with Lavdrim Muhaxheri, told the KCSS researchers, that Lavdrim did not like the presence of educated recruits from Kosovo in Syria. According to him, Lavdrim Muhaxheri was asking Zekirija Qazimi (imam and recruiter in Kosovo from Gjilan) to not send bright and educated people; he wanted only those that obey and can readily follow orders without questioning.[333] Also, in one of the ISIS recruitment videos, where Lavdrim Muhaxheri invites the Albanian speaking population to join ISIS, said that they are not bothered by anything; the only thing that bothers them are the *munafiq* (hypocrite) imams who are going against ISIS and who call them uneducated and ignorant.[334] He then continues by saying "yes, that is true, we are uneducated, but with that little education we have" we are trying to fight for the word of God, and moves on to mock the educated ones, by saying that "they are cowards and are not willing to fight for Allah."[335]

6.2.3. Family and social conditions

Mentor Zejnullahu, born in 1990, from Tërpeza village of Vitia, was caught at the Airport of Tirana by state authorities while he was attempting to fly to Istanbul in order to continue his trip to Syria. Mentor is a student of economics at the public University of Gjilan and did not have any permanent employment; was employed only as a seasonal worker together with his four other brothers in the construction sector.[336] Mentor's family have poor living conditions. The only member of the family that works is his father, Bafti Zejnullahu, who works as a forester in his village. They live in a rundown house, which is located in a remote part of their village, and if one wants to get to their house, they have to travel on foot on a narrow muddy and gravel road which makes it impossible to be accessed by car or any other vehicle.[337] Mentor is one of the people arrested during the August police raid, and says that he regrets his attempt to join ISIS.[338]

Kjani Mjaku, born in 1979, from Kaçanik, was reported to have been killed in Syria in January 2014, three months after having joined the conflict.[339] Kjani was the eldest son in the family

331   Interview with A.B. an extremist suspect arrested by the Kosovo Police, 26 November 2014. Prishtina, Kosovo.

332   Ibid.

333   Interview with A.A. a former foreign fighter from Kosovo, 13 December 2014. Prishtina, Kosovo.

334   IndeksOnline.net (2014) "Lufta ne Siri – Indeksonline" *Youtube*. Online available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zhbWhgS6svc

335   Ibid.

336   Visit to Mentor Zejnullahu's family, 3 December 2014. Viti, Kosovo

337   Ibid.

338   Koha.net (2014). "Pendohet xhihadisti Mentor Zejnullahu [video]". August 31, 2014. *Koha.net*. Online available at: http://koha.net/?id=27&l=23733

339   IndeksOnline.net (2014). "Rrëfimi special për shqiptarët e vrarë në Siri". January 9, 2014. *Indeksonline.net*. Online available at: http://www.indeksonline.net/?FaqeID=2&LajmID=81270

who was married and had three kids.[340] Before leaving for Syria, Kjani did not have a permanent job; and whenever he could, he was cutting trees close to his rundown house located in a very remote and, what seemed to be, an abandoned area uphill of Kaçanik. KCSS researchers met his brother coming out of the garden of his house with a wearisome horse, which appeared to not have been fed well. Although Kjani's brother was met unannounced by KCSS researchers, he was very welcoming.[341] However, he did not have time to talk since he was in rush to go and cut some trees and sell them in "wood market" down in Kaçanik as early as possible – he did not want to miss the opportunity to sell whatever he could cut during that day.[342] His economic conditions seemed to be dire.

Hetem Dema, a former KLA soldier born in 1974, from Bob village of Kaçanik, was reported to have been killed in Syria in January 2014 together with Kjani Mjaku, three months after they have together joined the conflict.[343] Hetem was married, had three kids, and he was a soccer player for F.C. "Lepenci" in Kaçanik. He went to Syria with the permission of his family who are proud of his son for falling as a *shahid* (martyr).[344] One of his relatives, who KCSS researchers met, said that his financial conditions were below average but not very bad, because of one of his brothers is working abroad.[345]

T.U, born in 1987, from Kaçanik, who was among those arrested, spent three months in Syria. T.U, just like the above-mentioned individuals, never had a permanent job. He used to work as a waiter, and when he returned after having been arrested was unable to find a job. When KCSS researchers met T.U, he said that he has nothing to do in Kaçanik, he has no job, and, according to him, it is the fault of the state that is leaving people jobless.[346] A.G., born in 1988, from Hani i Elezit, who was among those arrested, went to Syria in the beginning of 2014. He has never worked before in his life, and his family was being held by a pension that his father gets from Germany for which he was entitled to after having worked there in previous decades.[347] A.G. began practicing religion in the past three years and eventually, according to his family, became very strict in religion.[348]

A.C. born in 1983, from Hani i Elezit, who was among those arrested also fought in Syria. A.C. appeared to be living in very poor economic and financial conditions.[349] He lives with his wife, parents, and four kids and the only income he has is from social welfare that he gets from the state.[350] He was offered a job in his town just before he was arrested; however, he lost the op-

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340   Ibid.

341   Visit to Kjani Mjaku's family, 6 December 2014. Kaçanik, Kosovo

342   Ibid.

343   IndeksOnline.net (2014). "Rrëfimi special për shqiptarët e vrarë në Siri". January 9, 2014. *Indeksonline.net*. Online available at: http://www.indeksonline.net/?FaqeID=2&LajmID=81270

344   Ibid.

345   Interview with Hetem Dema's relative, 8 December 2014. Kaçanik, Kosovo

346   Interview with T.U., a former foriegn fighter from Kosovo, 15 December 2014. Kaçanik, Kosovo.

347   Interview with A.C., a former foriegn fighter from Kosovo, 15 December 2014. Hani i Elezit, Kosovo.

348   Visit to A.G.'s family, 15 December 2014. Hani i Elezit, Kosovo.

349   Interview with A.C., a former foriegn fighter from Kosovo, 15 December 2014. Hani i Elezit, Kosovo.

350   Ibid.

portunity because, after being arrested, his potential employer believed he was a terrorist.[351] He said that the state has also cut his social welfare, because he was not present to take it while he was under arrest, and he needs now to go and fix it himself, but cannot do that at the moment since he is under house arrest.[352] A.C. seemed to be a well-informed individual, and was irritated by the recent police raid, describing it as a raid "against Muslims".[353] While he did not want to talk a lot, he put forth some rhetorical questions such as: "why aren't the killers of Selver Haradinaj and Enver Zymberi considered terrorists, on the one hand, and why am I considered a terrorist for fighting in Syria on the other?"[354] In addition, he said that when he was arrested he had asked the police officers another rhetorical questions saying that "I am not responsible for the theft of 40 kg drugs in the safest room in the police facilities; why wasn't anyone kept responsible for it, but they find Muslims to be the problems of this society".[355] It is difficult to confirm whether he said this to state authorities, but it is important to note his way of thinking and generally his mental cognition.

While the majority of those researched by the KCSS belong to families with such social conditions, there are exceptions as well. For instance, A.A, born in 1987, who was among those arrested, went to Syria and came back after a month. He had some on and off jobs, but did not have permanent employment. All of his brothers work in the private sector and his financial conditions can be described as above average.[356] C.D, who was a former Takfir and was about to go to Syria, but did not because some Salafi-considered (non-violent conservative) imams managed to de-radicalize him.[357] He embraced the Takfir ideology although he claims that he has perfect financial conditions in the family because of his father's business.[358] Both, A.A. and C.D. are also well educated and live in urban areas; nonetheless, there are some other aspects and conditions, which in combination with their personal characteristics could explain, to a certain extent, why such individuals (outliers) could also fall prey to Takfir calls, which we discuss next.

6.2.4.   The concept of 'shahid' and personal characteristics

Interplay of a number of other traits within a considerable number of these foreign fighters' characters makes them embrace the Takfir ideology and eventually join the fights in Syria. One of these traits within the interplay of their other traits is their desire for a "quick way into Islam" and the moral and spiritual benefits it offers to them. For instance, close to 40 percent of those that have already been to Syria have had a number of criminal records before they departed for Syria. Of those with previous criminal records, 47 percent had more than one criminal record before departing to Syria.[359] Additionally, almost 9 percent of them had three

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351   Ibid.

352   Ibid.

353   Ibid.

354   Ibid.

355   Visit to A.C.'s family, 15 December 2014. Hani i Elezit, Kosovo.

356   Interview with A.A. a former foreign fighter from Kosovo, 20 December 2014. Prishtina, Kosovo.

357   Interview with C.D. a former extremist belonging to Takfir circles in Kosovo, 18 October 2014. Prishtina, Kosovo.

358   Ibid.

359   Author's own calculations from data provided by the Anti-Terrorist Department within the Kosovo Police

previous criminal records, while 5 percent had more than six previous criminal records.[360] For instance, Lavdrim Muhaxheri, from Kaçanik, who was believed to have been a reference point and a commander of the Albanian-speaking fighters within the ranks of ISIS, had 7 criminal records before leaving for Syria.[361] As for the nature of their (Kosovo foreign fighters') previous criminal records, they include: violent attacks (39 cases among them); thefts (30 cases among them); carriage of firearms without permit (27 cases among them); intimidation and fraud (11 cases among them); possession of narcotics (6 cases among them); murder and attempted murder (5 cases among them).[362]
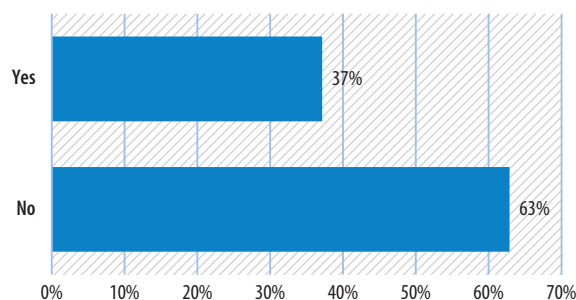
Figure 11: Previous criminal records of Kosovo foreign fighters (n=210)[363]

There is a logical association that can be made between having previous criminal records among a good number of those that embrace the Takfir ideology, and their desire for a "quick way into Islam". Takfir ideology attracts those with previous criminal records for several reasons. First, unlike in Islam, one with the Takfir ideology is allowed to attack, steal, lie, intimidate, engage in fraud, and in almost all other criminal records without discrimination, and with no condition.[364] This, as a result, provides a good avenue for those with such previous criminal records to embrace as a new "religious" ideology – the Takfir, believing it to represent true Islam. By being convinced by others, or making themselves believe that Takfir is the true Islam, they believe that God will forgive their previous criminal records and deeds, while they can still continue with their former criminal lifestyles, but now on behalf of religion, which they believe gives them the right to do so.

Secondly, according to a number of Imams (included the Salafi considered ones) and ordinary practitioners of Islam that were interviewed for the purposes of this research, becoming an Islamic practitioner takes a lot of time and effort, in a sense that a person who is guided into Islam or wants to embrace and practice Islam needs to make significant changes on a personal level. Such major changes include lifestyle changes such as not drinking alcohol, commitment to *namaz* (5 times daily prayers), not clubbing, and other significant required social changes, as well as changes on how one deals and interacts with their family members, friends and

360   Ibid.

361   Ibid.

362   Ibid.

363   Ibid.

364   Interview with H.B. a Macedonia based imam who does not limit himself only to a Hanafi legal school, 23 January 2015. Skopje, Macedonia

others, which are considered to be major changes in one's life. According to these Imams and ordinary Islamic practitioners, one needs to be very committed and dedicated to go through such changes in their lives. However, when embracing the Takfir ideology, one does not have to go through these changes; they can still continue with their previous criminal records, so no changes are needed, and they can continue with the same lifestyle but under the veil of what they believe to be Islam and the forgiveness that comes with it. Therefore, Takfirism provides them with the comfort of what they believe to be a "quick way into Islam", and thus, a quick way to forgiveness, without having to progress slowly through the real changes needed when one is guided into Islam.[365],[366]

In another example, according to R.H., who is in his early 30s and has diligently practised Islam for around 20 years now and appreciates Salafism (by its core definition, not by the way Salafism is understood by the international media/reports), says that when guided into Islam, one has to make significant changes.[367] For instance, one has to begin to entirely respect their parents and give them some sort of authority; furthermore, one needs to respect friends, and others. This means that when one agrees to be guided into Islam, they need to make significant changes on how one interacts with others who are close to them, and even ask for forgiveness, in case one has intentionally or unintentionally caused any harm or showed disrespect to parents, friends, and others.[368] This is something difficult to do at the beginning; however, when joining the Takfir ideology, one does not have to go through these steps. They can even refer to their parents, friends and others as kuffar if they don't pray, and even take violent measures against them, which is unlike the Islamic tradition, including Salafism, as C.D., a former radical Takfir member told the author of this report.[369] The Takfir, unlike those who begin practicing Islam, do not even have to respect the secular state in a sense of paying duties (taxes and other obligations) towards it.[370]

Third, there is much 'simplicity' and effortlessness in becoming a Takfir (believing to be true Islam and its association with forgiveness and the potential way to heaven) that draws many with previous criminal records towards it, but others as well. Those in leadership positions (Takfir scholars and spiritual motivators) in propagating Takfir ideology, use a simple language, always based on its fundamental tenets, to draw usually young individuals into Takfir, by offering them a quick way to forgiveness and heaven. The concept of *shahid* (martyr) in Islam is a strong and attractive concept.[371] However, the Takfir misuse the concept of *shahid* with their simple language when attracting the 'newcomers' who seek forgiveness and are drawn by the 'next life in heaven'. When already drawing them into Takfir, and when wanting to convince them to go to fight in Syria, or elsewhere, the recruiters and Takfir leaders ask them simple questions that resonate with such individuals: Do you love Allah? Yes. Do you love Moham-

365   Interview with H.B. a Macedonia based imam who does not limit himself only to a Hanafi legal school, 23 January 2015. Skopje, Macedonia

366   Interview with A.E, a Kosovo based imam who does not limit himself only to a Hanafi legal school, 22 November 2014. Mitrovica, Kosovo.

367   Interview with R.H. a young Islam practitioner in Kosovo, 12 February 2015. Prishtina, Kosovo.

368   Ibid.

369   Interview with C.D. a former extremist belonging to Takfir circles in Kosovo, 11 February 2015. Prishtina, Kosovo.

370   Interview with R.H. a young Islam practitioner in Kosovo, 12 February 2015. Prishtina, Kosovo.

371   Interview with K.M., one of the Kosovo based journalists dealing with and reporting on extremism in Kosovo, 28 October 2014. Prishtina, Kosovo.

med? Yes. Would you die for them? Yes.[372] They answer such questions by previously being disillusioned that this is the way they will be forgiven by Allah, and *shahid*, i.e. being a martyr fighting for the Islamic State and the Sharia, is the quickest way to get forgiveness and potentially go to heaven.[373]

According to Mustafa Tërniqi, people who are drawn into such logic are usually sincere, and they truly believe they will be forgiven, but they have little understanding of Islam, and their initial desire to gain a "quick way into Islam" and the benefits they believe they will receive by engaging themselves in Syria by falling *shaihd*, betrays them and quickly draws them in.[374.] By falling as *shahid*, those embracing Takfir ideology believe that they will be forgiven of their previous criminal records (committed outside 'religious' guidance as secular/atheist), and their little lifestyle changes, by continuing with criminal records (now committed by a 'religious' guidance), believe they will find Allah's forgiveness in the Day of Judgement.[375] There is a case of a foreign fighter from Gjakova, A.D who returned home badly wounded, having his eyes completely lost including parts of his arms during a battle in Syria. The level of his brainwash with the concept of *shahid* and the heavenly benefits that he believes he would have gained if he has been killed went as far as him believing that his lost eyes now rest in heaven.[376]

6.2.5.   Family and social isolation and alienation

Another aspect that makes, especially young people, including the educated and well of ones fall prey to Takfir ideology, is family and social isolation after having been guided into Islam. Such isolation usually, and in many cases, begins when a young member of a secular family is guided towards and begins practicing Islam. When such young people begin practicing Islam, secular families, usually parents, tend to convince them not to do so. This is more predominant within urban secular families because of their fear of being associated by neighbours, colleagues, and others with Islam as an entire family – which they consider parochial. They do not like to have such an association, in many cases, because of 'pride' and other aspects that an urban secular family embodies in Kosovo. They consider their secular stance to be associated with modernism, while they consider religionization as parochial.

When a young member of a family begins to practice Islam, it creates schisms between the young members of the family on the one hand and the parents on the other. Parents attempt to encourage their child to not practice Islam (many times they do this aggressively), while the child, already strongly convinced about his/her guidance rejects such attempts. This signals when the process of parent-child alienation begins. Parents express, and openly state the child's beliefs to be alien to them, and the child begins feeling as an alienated member of the family. Having such schisms and fundamental disagreements within a family, the child begins to spend more time around those that s/he believes to have more similarities to their

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372   Interview with T.M. a Albanian based imam who does not limit himself only to a Hanafi legal school, 24 January 2015. Durrës, Albania.

373   Ibid.

374   Ibid.

375   Interview with K.M., one of the Kosovo based journalists dealing with and reporting on extremism in Kosovo, 28 October 2014. Prishtina, Kosovo.

376   Interview with close relatives of A.D. a former foreign fighter, 15 January 2015. Prishtina, Kosovo.

new ideological stance than they do with the family who has alienated them. This is the point when a number of these young people fall prey to Takfir circles, who, according to C.D., a former member of Takfiri circles, says they are very nice to those who are alienated and in need of friendship and care, something they have lost from their families.[377]

For instance, A.E. around 23 years old from Peja, before falling prey to Takfir circles, was a victim of his family's stance towards his decision to start practicing Islam. When he began practicing Islam, his father conditioned him in a way that if he wanted to continue living with his family and get family's support, he was to stop practicing Islam.[378] A.E. was a student of electronics at the University of Prishtina and was living in a rented apartment in Prishtina. He eventually got together with a girlfriend who wore a headscarf. Unable to face the antagonisms at home with his family, he found support within Takfir circles who, at worst, had been helping him more than his family was, and guided him towards their ideology. A.E. eventually was convinced and decided to go to Syria to fight.[379],[380] In an interview with A.E.'s father, it was clear that his father had applied immense pressure on him to give up Islam, which consequently alienated him from his family, and ended up in the defeat of communication – someone else began taking care of A.E., who was eventually led to believe that he could fall as *shahid* while fighting in Syria.

Other examples include also those of Ilir Berisha and Shefki Koraqi from Kaçanik, who are believed to have been Takfir recruiters for ISIS in Kosovo, and who did not have good relations with their families. For instance, Ilir Berisha's father is believed to have abandoned him and did not allow him to live with the family.[381] Ilir then began living with Shefki Koraqi, both related and close friends of Lavdrim Muhaxheri.[382] Besides family isolation, those who eventually begin their lives as Takfirs and end up in Syria are also socially isolated. For instance, when KCSS researchers visited the house of Kjani Mjaku in Kaçaninik, who was killed in Syria in January 2014, his brother, Kenan Mjaku, indicated that their neighbours are completely ignoring them; they do not talk to them anymore because of superstition considering the entire Mjaku family as "terrorists".[383] Those who begin practicing Islam function very well as brothers and sisters, and solidarity amongst them is very much present. The Takfir reinforce this, especially for people who are alienated from their families, friends, and the society in general, and this is one of their strong tools to attract the 'abandoned' ones.[384],[385] Husna Haq of the Christian Science Monitor also asserts that much like "criminal gangs that offer a sense of family and belonging, ISIS offers disaffected teens a chance to join a group that gives them purpose and meaning – however misguided."[386]

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377   Interview with C.D. a former extremist belonging to Takfir circles in Kosovo, 28 October 2014. Prishtina, Kosovo.

378   Interview with father of A.E. a former foreign fighter from Kosovo, 21 January 2015. Peja, Kosovo.

379   Ibid.

380   Interview with C.D. a former extremist belonging to Takfir circles in Kosovo, 18 October 2014. Prishtina, Kosovo.

381   Interview with K.M., one of the Kosovo based journalists dealing with and reporting on extremism in Kosovo, 28 October 2014. Prishtina, Kosovo.

382   Ibid.

383   Visit to Kjani Mjaku's family, 6 December 2014. Kaçanik, Kosovo

384   Interview with K.M., one of the Kosovo based journalists dealing with and reporting on extremism in Kosovo, 28 October 2014. Prishtina, Kosovo.

385   Interview with D.T. a former extremist belonging to Takfir circles in Kosovo, 16 December 2014. Prishtina, Kosovo.

386   Husna Haq (2014). "ISIS excels at recruiting American teens: Here are four reasons why (+video)". October 22, 2014. *The Christian Science Monitor.* Online available at: http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/USA-Update/2014/1022/ISIS-excels-at-recruiting-American-teens-Here-are-four-reasons-why-video

7. INSTRUMENTS FACILITATING VIOLENT EXTREMISM AND RECRUITMENT

7.1. The issue with mosques and imams (Takfir vs. non-Takfir)

Takfirs use a number of instruments and tools to radicalize and recruit people into their ideology, which is one of the first necessary steps to be taken before convincing them to go to Syria. One of the instruments or tools they use is mosques and imams themselves; however, there is an intentional and unintentional aspect of these instruments or tools that contribute to Takfirization. The intentional aspect of these instruments includes the fact that some mosques are intentionally used by Takfir imams to spread the ideology. It should be noted that there are very few such imams and mosques in Kosovo and other places, which at the same time, however, have a considerable ideological influence over their worshipers. Besides the lectures based on the Takfir tenets, these mosques also provide a socialisation atmosphere and a community feeling between the worshippers, which more often than not embrace the Takfir ideology as victims of such imams and mosques. For instance, with the practice of Islam growing continuously in Kosovo, as it has been argued earlier, these few imams and mosques provide risks for people who are new to Islam. For many people that are new to Islam it is very difficult to differentiate between a credible and legitimate imam and a Takfir imam.

Those who newly begin to practice Islam would usually go to the closest mosque from the place they live. These by chance can be the mosques where Takfiri imams provide lectures, or which the Takfiri worshippers use even if and when imams are not Takfir. For instance, in an interview with a former Takfir member, he explains how he had fallen prey to the Takfir ideology solely through his decision to go to the mosque closest to home. When he decided to practice Islam, which happened before his 20s, he decided to go to the "Dardania" mosque in Prishtina where at the time there was no Takfir imam holding sermons, but the majority of the worshippers were Takfir and close to Shukri Aliu and Rexhep Memishi, who also had an organisation and an office close by.

After the sermons, this former Takfiri member would usually go to play video-games in a nearby location with other worshippers of the mosque, who were Takfir, a socialisation which usually happens between such worshippers. Eventually he would talk about what he was doing outside the sermons in his daily life; i.e. that he was planning to go and vote; that he was doing one thing or another. The other worshippers (Takfiri) would immediately jump and tell him that those things are "forbidden" in Islam, which in reality they are only forbidden based on Takfir tenets, not necessarily throughout Islam. However, he was very new to Islam and believed the other worshippers, and eventually became ideologically aligned with them, and a very close to the other Takfir visitors from Skopje, including Shukri Aliu and Rexhep Memishi. Therefore, it is the confusion at the very beginning within those that are new to Islam that encourages a number of them to fall prey to Takfirs, in most cases by chance; thus, escaping

from true and credible references to Islam right from the beginning of their lives as practicing Islamists.[387]

The unintentional aspect of imams and mosques that can play a role in having young people and those new in Islam fall prey to Takfir, on the other hand, is when a number of non-Takfir imams are ignorant towards their worshippers, with such ignorance ensuring some unintentional consequences. For instance, Ahmed Kalaja, an imam in Tirana, says that some imams (non-Takfir) must also hold responsibility, because they go and deal with "vain words" and *jenaze* (funerals) ceremonies instead of focusing on proper and fundamental Islamic teachings, which provide answers to practical and theological questions that worshippers usually have.[388] Some other imams (non-Takfir) also do not stay close to their worshippers, when they are in need of answers, or simply want to hang around. Mustafa Tërniqi, an Imam in Durres, Albania, who has argued in length why one should not join the fights in Syria, asserts that a number of Imams make a mistake when they don't stay close to their worshippers.[389] If Imams don't stay close to their worshippers, they might easily escape and be attracted to Takfir Imams who provide simple answers to complicated questions, and behave extremely well towards potential prey.[390],[391] Takfirs usually distribute books and literature even in the mosques where non-Takfir imams hold their sermons, and if imams are not attentive to what their worshippers have been given by others, then one could lose worshippers to Takfir imams.[392]

Another unintentional aspect of imams and mosques that can play a role or that can indirectly facilitate and unintentionally stimulate some of their worshippers' desire to join the fights in Syria is when in some cases they speak ill of other religions, cultures, and traditions, but especially the Shi'ias. A number of imams in Kosovo (very few compared in proportion to the total number of imams) that belong to and teach the non-violent conservative Islam, yet at times speak ill of the Shi'ias, can unintentionally contribute to a few of their worshippers' desire to join the fights against Assad, who belongs to a Shi'ia Alewi sect himself. These types of worshippers can be young but very energetic, expressive, and ready to take action, and besides not wanting to embrace radical ideologies, teachings against Shi'ias can especially motivate them to go to Syria and fight the "Shi'ia regime" of Bashar al Assad, and thus fall under Takfiri circles that facilitate their way to Syria. Thus, there are some imams who have directly spoken against joining the fights in Syria, yet they may have unintentionally facilitated the desire to fight Assad's regime in practice.

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387   Interview with K.A. a Albania based imam who does not limit himself only to a Hanafi legal school, 24 January 2015. Tirana, Albania.

388   Ibid.

389   Interview with T.M. a Albanian based imam who does not limit himself only to a Hanafi legal school, 24 January 2015. Durrës, Albania.

390   Interview with T.M. a Albanian based imam who does not limit himself only to a Hanafi legal school, 24 January 2015. Durrës, Albania.

391   Interview with D.T. a former extremist belonging to Takfir circles in Kosovo, 16 December 2014. Prishtina, Kosovo.

392   Interview with K.A. a Albania based imam who does not limit himself only to a Hanafi legal school, 24 January 2015. Tirana, Albania.

However, one should not look at the mosques or the number of mosques that a country or society has as an a priori cause for a society's radicalisation or as an a priori cause for people's involvement as foreign fighters in Syria. For instance, the ratio between the number of primary and secondary school facilities and the number of mosques is much higher in Kosovo compared to Turkey. The ratio between the number of primary and secondary school facilities and mosques in Kosovo is 1,125 to 660, or almost 1.7 schools to 1 mosque.[393,394] This ratio in Turkey, on the other hand, is 42,442 to 82,693, or 0.5 schools to 1 mosque.[395,396] There are many more schools in Kosovo than mosques, while there are many more mosques than schools in Turkey. Examining the number of mosques per population, there is 1 mosque in Kosovo per 2,730 people, while in Turkey there is 1 mosque per 907 people. Therefore, despite that:

- the ratio between the number of schools and mosques in Turkey is three times lower than in Kosovo;
- the number of mosques per capita is three times higher in Turkey than Kosovo; and that
- Turkey borders the ISIS controlled areas of Syria

...Turkey is still at the bottom of the list of the number of foreign fighters per capita per Muslim population compared to Kosovo, or compared to any other Western non-Muslim majority country, including Russia (see Table 1 "*Number of foreign fighters from Western Europe, Balkans, US, and Russia*" in Chapter 4 above).

There are two assumptions that could be made to explain and understand why the Muslim population of Western European and other non-Muslim majority countries are attracted more to the Takfir ideology, resulting in a higher number per capita of their respective Muslim populations that end up as foreign fighters in Syria. The first assumption is that the Muslim population in these non-Muslim countries is alienated by the 'foreign' cultures they live in, especially in terms of their tradition, which is different to the western Christian traditions. John Esposito asserts that more radical Islam is followed and practiced by Muslim communities in America and Europe because they find it as an alternative way of practicing Islam in response to rejecting foreign cultural practices which they see as very foreign in these countries.[397] Gilles Kepel similarly asserts that "[w]hen you're in the state of such alienation you become easy prey to the jihadi guys who will feed you more savoury propaganda than the old propaganda of the Salafists who tell you to pray, fast and who are not taking action".[398]

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393   Besiana Xharra (2012). "Kosova Mbyll Sytë Para Xhamive Ilegale" January 12, 2012. *Balkan Insight.* Online available at: http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/kosova-mbyll-syte-para-xhamive-ilegale

394   Besiana Xharra (2012). "Kosovo Turns Blind Eye to Illegal Mosques". January 12, 2012. *Balkan Insight.* Online available at: http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/kosovo-turns-blind-eye-to-illegal-mosques

395   OECD (2005). "Basic Education in Turkey: Background Report". OECD Reviews of National Policies for Education. Online available at: http://www.oecd.org/edu/school/39642601.pdf. p.9

396   Haber Turk (2013). "Türkí e'de kaç cami var?". March 6, 2013. *Haber Turk.* Online available at: http://www.haberturk.com/yasam/haber/825261-turkiyede-kac-cami-var

397   John Esposito (2011). "What Everyone Needs to Know about Islam". *Oxford University Press.* p.55

398   Bruce Livesey (2005). "The Salafist Movement" *PBS: Frontline.* Online available at: http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/front/special/sala.html

The second assumption, which relates to the first one in many ways, is the very confusion amongst the Muslim population in these countries in regards to the imams and scholars they need to follow as a reference to Islamic teachings. Given that mosques and credible imams are not as close to and in direct contact in Western non-Muslim countries as mosques and credible imams are in Muslim majority countries like Kosovo and Turkey, they can much more easily fall prey to Takfir references in electronic media (YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, etc.) which speak in more simple terms to their alienated state in non-Muslim countries. In other words, they use "YouTube imams" as a reference to Islam.

7.2.   Dormitories and other private spaces

Calls to join ISIS and lectures based on Takfir ideological tenets are present in a few mosques based in Macedonia, Albania, and Kosovo; however, they may not be as intense as in private spaces that the Takfir circles use. Sabri Bajgora, the head of imams in the BIK also confirmed that while they are trying to increase their inspections in mosques, they cannot do so in private spaces where the BIK is aware of a number of imams that organize gatherings with their worshippers and others, and speak differently (more radically) than they speak in their respective mosques.[399] For instance, a group of individuals who were arrested during the August of 2014 police raids were frequently gathered in A.F.'s (another person that was in Syria and was arrested) apartment. The father of A.G. (another person who was in Syria and was arrested), has noticed that his son was frequently attending some lectures and meetings, the details of which he was not aware of, in one of A.F.'s apartments in Hani i Elezit.[400]

During the interviews with an imam in the municipality of Vitia[401], and a parent of one of those involved in Syria[402], it was confirmed that they have seen a few shop keepers and worshippers in these towns' respective mosques, who pretend to lecture to much younger generations. They have confirmed that they invite a number of young people from their neighbourhoods, who belong to an age group between 9-13 years of age, and listen to what these shop keepers have to say about Islam. One of the interviewees, the father of A.G., was sure that one of these shop keepers belong to what they described as 'radical Islam', which we suspect is one of the Takfirs in town or Takfiri influenced citizens.

Lastly, there were also a few dormitories that the Takfiri circles have established, including in the centre of Prishtina, where they hosted a number of young Islamic practitioners. D.T., a former Takfiri member who has been in close contact with the author of this report, confirmed the existence of such dormitories in "Lagja e Muhaxherëve"[403] ("Muhaxheris' Quarter) in the centre of Prishtina. These dormitories were hosting students and other young people in need of a place to stay. Such dormitories represented a room where urban youngsters, who were alienated from their families because of the former's conditions and negative attitudes to the

399   Interview with B.S., a high official in BIK. 25 November 2014. Prishtina, Kosovo.

400   Visit to A.G.'s family, 15 December 2014. Hani i Elezit, Kosovo.

401   Interview with B.B., a Kosovo based imam. Vitia. Kosovo

402   Visit to A.G.'s family, 15 December 2014. Hani i Elezit, Kosovo.

403   This does not have to do anything with Lavdrim Muhaxheri. It is an old Prishtina quarter.

decisions of the latter to practice Islam, found a place. Takfiri based lectures were continuously held in such dormitories, and they were frequently visited by Takfiri imams from Macedonia.[404]

7.3.   The internet

Despite Kosovo's backward economic development, poverty, and rural underdevelopment, the internet penetration rate and the number of internet users are among the highest in the region, and can be comparable to many EU member states.[405] However, as Husna Haq reports, the internet is a double-edge sword in the world of terrorism; while it is useful for state authorities to track violent extremist groups on the one hand, these groups use the internet to recruit fighters from around the world.[406] When it comes to ISIS's internet and online propaganda activities, Erin Marie Saltman & Charlie Winter from Quilliam Foundation, claim that "the efficiency with which IS[IS] is currently using the Internet is something unprecedented and, in many ways, a sign of the times".[407] This is all part of a high-tech propaganda machine that ISIS uses to reach out to potential fighters in Europe and elsewhere in the world.[408]

ISIS propaganda videos have also penetrated Kosovo, and judging by the number of foreign fighters per capita that have joined ISIS and a few other rebel groups in Syria, it seems that such propaganda efforts have been successful. While the internet propaganda tools certainly do facilitate the recruitment efforts and other instruments used by ISIS recruiters in Kosovo, one cannot rule out that in many cases it could be a much more effective recruitment tool than the physical contact such as mosques, imams, and private spaces. There are two aspects in the case of Kosovo that make its population, especially the younger generations, more susceptible to both religionization and potential violent radicalisation.

First, despite of extremely poor living conditions and infrastructure in rural areas, Kosovo managed to extend its internet coverage in most remote areas of the countryside. For instance, the internet penetration rate in Kosovo is 76.62 percent in terms of the number of users claiming to use internet.[409] The internet penetration rate in terms of the number of users in rural areas is 77.7 percent, higher than the Kosovo average.[410] The majority of internet users, or 53.66 percent, are young (below 30 years old), and the overwhelming majority of them, or 94.21

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404   Interview with D.T. a former extremist belonging to Takfir circles in Kosovo, 16 December 2014. Prishtina, Kosovo.

405   Internet World Stats (2014). "Internet Users in Europe". June 30, 2014. *Internet World Stats Usage and Population Statistics*. Online available at: http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats4.htm

406   Husna Haq (2014). "ISIS excels at recruiting American teens: Here are four reasons why (+video)". October 22, 2014. *The Christian Science Monitor*. Online available at: http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/USA-Update/2014/1022/ISIS-excels-at-recruiting-American-teens-Here-are-four-reasons-why-video

407   Erin Marie Saltman and Charlie Winter (2014). "Islamic State: The Changing Face of Modern Jihadism". Quillam Foundation. Online available at: http://www.quilliamfoundation.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/publications/free/islamic-state-the-changing-face-of-modern-jihadism.pdf. p.37

408   CBS News (2014). "ISIS recruits fighters through powerful online campaign". August 29, 2014. *CBS News*. Online available at: http://www.cbsnews.com/news/isis-uses-social-media-to-recruit-western-allies/

409   Agron Fazliu (2013). "Internet Penetration and Usage in Kosovo". *Kosovo Association of Information and Communication Technology*. Online available at: http://www.stikk-ks.org/uploads/downloads/Internet_penetration_and_usage_in_Kosovo.pdf. p.18

410   Ibid., p.19

percent, use it from home.[411] In addition to the very strong penetration rate in rural areas, the internet is quite affordable for households in rural areas, 65 percent of which claim to pay only 15 Euros or less per month for their internet use.[412] Moreover, 86.76 percent of internet users claim to use internet every day,[413] and 83.29 percent claim to be using it for a long time during the day – around 3 hours a day.[414] Therefore, individuals from both urban and rural areas have extremely high exposure to online content.

Second, what could facilitate religionization and potentially radicalisation through such high internet penetration and exposure is the fact that, besides general belief, the young people in Kosovo do not speak foreign languages, or more precisely English, especially those in rural areas. There is no data regarding the level of English or other foreign languages that people in Kosovo speak. However, out of an overall observation from the author's encounter with more than 1,000 of his students with whom he has dealt with for years as a university lecturer, not more than 10-15 percent could be said to know English above an average level.[415] This was also confirmed in conversations regarding the issue of students' language with other university lecturers and professors. The inability to speak or understand English or other foreign languages, limits the majority of youth to Albanian language only online content. This is also shown and illustrated in Kosovo's ICT Association report, which confirms that 76.60 percent of internet users in Kosovo use the internet in the Albanian language.[416]

The internet content in Albanian language is not very rich, and is nothing compared to what there is in English and other major foreign languages online also used for education, culture, sports, and other activities. What one can encounter mostly in the Albanian language is the pop culture content (not very meaningful to one's life, pop songs, comedies, and other content that one gets bored with quickly). The other content which is predominant in Albanian speaking language include the hundreds of lecture of imams which talk about the intricate issues of one's life, as well as answer some very basic questions on existential issues. These are some of the things that one should, but does not often get through the education system installed and implemented in Kosovo in the past 15 years. For instance, 73.29 percent of internet users in Kosovo use the internet for Facebook, 65.37 percent of them use it for Skype, and 43.62 percent use it for YouTube.[417] On the other hand only 11.94 percent of internet users in Kosovo use the internet for reading out of curiosity (ex. Wikipedia, Google search, etc.), only 16.78 percent use it to read the news, and only 10.76 percent use it for research and studying.[418]

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411   Ibid., p.22

412   Ibid., p.23

413   Ibid., p.38

414   Ibid., p.24

415   This is due to the fact that the author of this report could not provide students with English literature because the overwhelming majority could not understand it

416   Agron Fazliu (2013). "Internet Penetration and Usage in Kosovo". *Kosovo Association of Information and Communication Technology*. Online available at: http://www.stikk-ks.org/uploads/downloads/Internet_penetration_and_usage_in_Kosovo.pdf. p.43

417   Ibid., p.46

418   Ibid., p.46

The three social media communication channels most utilized by imams and radical networks appear to be the ones mostly used by the internet users in Kosovo, such as Facebook, Skype, and YouTube. It is evident by now that ISIS was successful in using the internet with content that would make an emotional appeal to those already radicalized or those that are in the process of radicalisation by showing what they usually claim to be Assad's crimes against children and their "Muslim sisters". For instance, in one of the widely circulated recruitment videos in the Albanian language, Lavdrim Muhaxheri called on all Albanian speaking Muslims to join ISIS on the grounds that "they [Assad army and ISIS enemies] are raping our Muslim sisters, they are beheading our children in their cradles, they are burning our houses, and you are sleeping and listening to imams who are saying that we need only financial aid. No we don't need financial aid, we need man to fight".[419] There are many other videos where Albanian speaking individuals, especially those that are already radicalized or in the process of radicalisation, fall prey to such emotional appeals.

For instance, A.A. from Prishtina, who also fought for a month in Syria, and who does not appear to be very religious, said that what he was seeing on the internet about Assad's crimes against others was unjust.[420] A.A. felt like he had to go and protect Muslims, but acted more out of his internationalist stance as a human being helping other human beings.[421] Another former foreign fighter in Syria who is from Kaçanik says that he had a lot of free time and often used the internet, where he saw Assad's crimes against children in Syria, which was frightening to him, and he felt like he needed to act.[422] Additionally, the father of A.H. (A.H. attempted to go to Syria), claimed that he saw nothing wrong with the fact that his son was praying, but he also said that A.H locked himself in the room a lot when using the internet.[423] The father of one of the foreign fighters from Albania who lost his life fighting in Syria, besides saying that his son died for Allah, said that his son was also attracted to fighting in Syria because of the crimes and the killings of innocent people, including children, that he observed on the internet[424]

There are also emotionally appealing songs in Albanian language, which make calls to join the fighting in Syria. For instance, Nusret Kurtishi's song called "Lufta për Allah" ("The war for Allah"), was published on YouTube on 19 October 2014, and by mid-February 2015 it has been clicked more than 51,000 times[425], which means it was listened to around 12,000 times

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419   IndeksOnline.net (2014) "Lufta ne Siri – Indeksonline" *Youtube*. Online available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zhbWhgS6svc

420   Interview with A.A. a former foreign fighter from Kosovo, 18 January 2015. Prishtina, Kosovo.

421   Ibid.

422   Visar Duriqi (2014). " Rrëfen muxhahedini kosovar i kthyer nga Siria: Jam penduar që shkova atje, ajo luftë nuk na përket neve". May 1, 2014. *Gazeta Express.* Online available at: http://www.gazetaexpress.com/lajme/rrefen-muxhahedini-kosovar-i-kthyer-nga-siria-jam-penduar-qe-shkova-atje-ajo-lufte-nuk-na-perket-neve-11338/

423   Visit to Mentor Zejnullahu's family, 3 December 2014. Viti, Kosovo

424   A1 (2014). "A1 Report - Shqiptari vritet në Siri, Prindërit në A1 Report: Djali bëri detyren". *Youtube*. Online available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lZr3GwxiGa4

425   Note that the numnber of clicks does not mean that it has been viwed by that many people, since a single person can click such videos many times, but it does indicate that a considerable number of individuals have clicked, watched or listen to such videos.

a month.[426] The song talks about how one should join and help the "brothers" in Syria where one can find the cure for their sins. There is also another song which is about an Albanian from Skopje, Sami Abdullahu, who was killed in Syria in August 2013.[427] The song was published on YouTube on 15 September 2013, and by mid-February 2015 it had been clicked more than 128,000 times, therefore listened to close to 6,000 times a month, perhaps even more often at the beginning. The song talks about how his prayers to fall *shahid* (martyr) were listened to, and now "not one, but 72 brides are waiting for him".[428] Such propaganda videos are very effective in brainwashing young people and calling them to action.[429]

Besides emotionally appealing videos and other calls, the Albanian speaking foreign fighters in Syria and their recruiters have also used the 'soft' or the 'good' part of being involved in jihad. They not only show how an ISIS fighter pompously beheads and burns who they call *kuffars* on behalf of religion, but they also show how they engage in more pleasant activities. For instance, a YouTube video was posted in 11 July 2014 with Albanian speaking jihadists who appear to be having fun in the swimming pool in what appeared to be a captured villa in Syria by Albanian speaking ISIS fighters.[430] Since it was published, and until mid-February 2015, the video was clicked close to 100,000 times, which means close to 15,000 times a month.[431] Another video appears to show Lavdrim Muhxheri's friends relaxing and having a good time singing after beheading the 19 year old Iraqi who they suspected to have been a *kafir* (unbeliever).[432] Ever since it was published on 30 July 2014, it was clicked roughly 75,000 times, which means approximately 13,000 times a month.[433]

There is another aspect of the use of social media by the Takfiri individuals fighting in Syria themselves, which could also be the case for recruiters and propagators at home in Kosovo. It appears that social media has a significant impact in stimulating their radical actions. For instance, A.A., one of the former foreign fighters in Syria who has met Lavdrim Muhaxheri there describes how Lavdrim was very anxious to see the attention he was getting in social media, which means the number of YouTube views, Facebook 'likes' and 'shares' and other social media activities that would boost his ego.[434] According to A.A., Lavdrim Muhaxheri had posted something online and went off either to fight in battle or elsewhere, and when he came back to his base where A.A. was present, he was rubbing his palms excitedly and anxiously to see whether his post had been watched, liked, shared or followed in general. When they take a

426   Ibrahim Terzijaj (2014). "Nusret Kurtishi ''Lufta për All-llah" 2014 (Sami Abdullahu shehid insha Allah)". *Youtube*. Online available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e6M-sl27m9A

427   Ebu Ruvejda (2013). "Hafiz Sami Abdullahu (shehid inshaAllah)". *Youtube*. Online available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7DCjCnFG2oM

428   Ibid.

429   Interview with K.M., one of the Kosovo based journalists dealing with and reporting on extremism in Kosovo, 28 October 2014. Prishtina, Kosovo.

430   Anon. (2014). "Xhihadistët Shqiptarë në Siri lahen në pishinë". *Youtube*. Online available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ewu4bbLlajI

431   Ibid.

432   Ilir Musliu (2014). "Pas masakrës, 'kasapi i ISIS' organizon festë me shokët e Lavdrim Muhaxherit". *Youtube*. Online available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yXpRF-5T7CY

433   Ibid.

434   Interview with A.A. a former foreign fighter from Kosovo, 18 January 2015. Prishtina, Kosovo.

radical action and such actions are widely followed and watched in social media, and especially reported in the conventional media in Kosovo and worldwide, it gives them a sense of purpose for repeating their actions, or radicalizing their actions even more. Therefore, such attention boosts their ego and it gives them a sense of purpose, especially in repeating such actions, in order to get a reaffirmation and a sense of worthiness.

The Takfirs use mosques through imams, private spaces, and the internet, as instruments to brainwash and mentally 'lock' the newcomers, especially young people, into their ideology. They do this by first, using simple language to give simple answers to complex questions in Islam, which usually involves manipulation of religion by responding to the newcomers' instability and their disoriented condition. Second, they block the newcomers from legitimate and credible references in Islam, which is the credible Imams, among which are many so-called Salafis (non-violent conservatives) in Kosovo and other Albanian speaking areas who they perceive as their fiercest competitors. They do this by badmouthing them as "imams of *taghut*", which means "imams of the state", "corrupt imams", "imams who have abandoned true Islam" and other tagging and framing techniques which than successfully creates antagonisms between the new Takfirs and credible imams; this lessens the chances of the young Takfirs to get de-radicalized. For instance, a former Takfiri in Kosovo, felt that Enis Rama and Ekrem Avdiu were the worst imams, "imams of *taghut*", "corrupt imams", etc., which are preaching the "wrong" Islam, until he was de-radicalised by listening to the very lectures of Enis Rama and Ekrem Avdiu, by being convinced to do so by other practicing Islamists who were his friends.[435] They tag and frame credible and legitimate imams by using all these instruments, including mosques, private spaces and the internet (social media, etc).

7.4.   Finances

The financing of radicalisation and violent extremism in Kosovo is difficult to trace. Although this report does not find financing to be the core motive or cause of one's radicalisation or a cause for joining violent extremist groups in Kosovo or in Syria, this research could, however, make a number of conclusions in this regard. We first need to deal in some detail with religious charity organisations, mostly funded from the Gulf, in order to deconstruct the purpose of their funding, as well as potential leakages of such funds into radicalisation and violent extremism. Just like the division between external influences and efforts for religionization of the society on the one hand and external influences and ideas of violent extremisms on the other hand, the issue of financing should be observed and analysed in the same fashion.

A number of religious charity organisations have been established in Kosovo in the immediate aftermath of the war in 1999. Among the most active were those working under the umbrella of the Saudi Joint Committee for the Relief of Kosovo (SJCRK), which was a Saudi Government based relief organisation, and at the time chaired by the Saudi Minister of Interior, Prince Naif bin Abdul Aziz.[436] A few days following the deployment of NATO troops in Kosovo, on 13 June 1999, the SJCRK reported that the number of aid shipments sent by Saudi Arabia totalled 41

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435   Interview with D.T. a former extremist belonging to Takfir circles in Kosovo, 16 December 2014. Prishtina, Kosovo.

436   King Fahd bin Abdul Aziz (1999). "A report on Saudi relief for Kosovo". June 13, 1999. *Saudi Press Agency*. Online available at: http://www.kingfahdbinabdulaziz.com/main/y0370.htm

cargo planes, carrying 40 million Saudi Riyal (SR) of shipments, or close to 20 million Deutsche Marks (DM), which in Euro terms would be around 10 million Euros.[437] This included, among other items, relief materials, dates, milk, 42,000 blankets for refugees, 110,000 booklets on Islam in the Albanian language, and cash donations worth 35 million SR, or around 16 million DM, totalling around 8 million Euros.[438] By then, it was already reported that 14,000 individuals were sponsored by the JCRK, and assistance was provided to 17,880 refugees in a number of sites.[439]

In the meantime, the SJCRK built 38 mosques and 12 schools, and even financed the Provisional Institutions of Self Government (PISG) during UNMIK's period.[440] The SJCRK appeared to have monopolized assistance especially in rural areas after the war, due to the lack of presence of state institutions but other aid organisations as well.[441] As a result, bad conditions in rural areas in Kosovo in the immediate aftermath of the war depended on Saudi aid.[442] The Islamic Endowment Foundation (IEF), an NGO which operated under the umbrella of the SJCRK, openly admits, according to Isa Blumi, to have supported "more than 30 specialized Koranic schools in Kosovo's rural areas, all built after 1999".[443] The JCRK has also financed the renovation of 10 health houses only in 1999. It has also been reported that the University of Prishtina has asked the SJCRK to finance the specialization of 20 Kosovo doctors, who stayed in Saudi Arabia for between 3 to 6 months.[444] The PISG has also received around 360 tons of medicine for three years immediately after the war.[445] The JCRK has also spent around 6 million Euros on the renovation and building of schools in various cities in Kosovo, the renovation of the madrasa in Prishtina, and it has completed the laboratory of the technical faculty of the UP.[446] It has built 200 new homes and has renovated more than 260 homes destroyed during the war throughout Kosovo.[447]

Al Haramein Islamic Foundation (henceforth: Al Haramein) was another charity based organisation which was active in Kosovo. It is a branch of the Muslim World League charity, which is closely linked to the Saudi government.[448] It was established in 1988 and it functioned until

437   Ibid.

438   Ibid.

439   Ibid.

440   Dimal Basha (2013). "Globalization and the Rise of Salafism in Kosovo. How Gulf Countries Spearheaded a Transitional Advocacy Network that is Challenging a New Democracy". *The New School Graduate Program in International Affairs*. Master of Ats thesis.

441   Isa Blumi (2005). "Political Islam Among the Albanians: Are the Taliban Coming to the Balkans". *KIPRED.* Online available at: http://www.kipred.org/advCms/documents/14714_Political_Islam_Among_the_Albanians_Are_the_Taliban_coming_to_the_Balkans.pdf, p.14

442   Ibid., p.14

443   Ibid., p.15

444   Liridon Llapashtica (2014). "Milionat e "Al Haramain" në Kosovë (Foto)". October 2, 2014. Zeri.info. Online available at: https://zeri.info/ekonomia/489/milionat-e-al-haramain-ne-kosove-foto/

445   Ibid.

446   Ibid.

447   Ibid.

448   History Commons (n.d.). "Profile: Saudi National Commission for Relief and Charity Work Abroad". *History Commons.* Online available at: http://www.historycommons.org/entity.jsp?entity=saudi_national_commission_for_relief_and_charity_work_abroad_1

2004. It was a well financed organisation and it is estimated that it has financed 25 million meals for the holy month of Ramadan worldwide between 1996-2001,[449] and it has built 1,200 mosques worldwide between 1992-2001.[450] According to first hand documents that were in possession of this organisation, it has recently been reported that it has also financed the PISG in Kosovo under UNMIK from 1999 to 2005.[451] The PISG has received a total of 18 million Euros from Al Haramein, and some money has also been distributed to a number of media corporations.[452] In 1999, the University Clinical Centre in Kosovo has received 2 million DM from the organisation.[453]

Another active organisation in Kosovo was Al Waqf Al Islam (henceforth: Al Waqf), which according to media reports in Kosovo and journalists that reported on its activities, was an organisation closely related to the BIK's Mufti Naim Tërnava.[454] Al Waqf has its headquarters in Eindhoven, the Netherlands.[455] Al Waqf's branch in Kosovo receives regular requests from the BIK to build new mosques and to refurbish the damaged ones.[456] It is not registered as an organisation in Kosovo, but operates as a "physical person" of a polyclinic centre "Mekka" in Kosovo.[457]

Besides their immense charity work in Kosovo, Al-Haramain and Al Waqf in some cases were accused of being linked to and financed organisations like Al Qaida and other violent extremist groups' actions. For instance, the founder of Al Haramain, Aqeel Abdulaziz Aqeel al-Aqeel, was listed on Security Council Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee as being associated with Al-Qaida, Osama bin Laden, or the Taliban.[458] As a result, Al-Aqeel and three other senior officials were fired from the charity by the Saudi minister of religious affairs in January 2004. Al Haramain branches in Albania, Bosnia, the Netherlands, and other places are listed on Security Council Al Qaida Sanctions Committee since 2004.[459] The Al Haramein branch in Albania was listed as a suspicious organisation since after its financial official went to trial in Egypt; he voiced his support for Osama bin Laden.[460] It is interesting that, besides being based in Saudi Arabia and

449   M.A. Salloomi (2011). "Viktimat e Pafajshme në Luftën Globale Kundër Terrorit". *AuthorHouse TM UK Ltd*. p.85

450   Ibid., p.86

451   Liridon Llapashtica (2014). "Milionat e "Al Haramain" në Kosovë (Foto)". October 2, 2014. Zeri.info. Online available at: https://zeri.info/ekonomia/489/milionat-e-al-haramain-ne-kosove-foto/

452   Ibid.

453   Ibid.

454   Interview with K.M., one of the Kosovo based journalists dealing with and reporting on extremism in Kosovo, 28 October 2014. Prishtina, Kosovo.

455   Free Republic (2003). "Al Qaeda 'financed from Eindhoven'". Free Republic. Online available at: http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/898567/posts

456   Radical Islam Monitor in Southeast Europe (2014). "Al Waqf-Al Islami in the Balkans". January 24, 2014. *Rimse*. Online available at: http://www.rimse.gr/2014/01/al-waqf-al-islami-in-balkans.html

457   Visar Duriqi (2014). "Irakiani që e drejton OJQ'në financuese të Al-Kaida'së jeton në Kosovë me leje të refugjatit". July 5, 2014. *Gazeta Express*. Online available at: http://www.gazetaexpress.com/lajme/irakiani-qe-e-drejton-ojqne-financuese-te-al-kaidase-jeton-ne-kosove-mqe-leje-te-refugjatit-26738/

458   United Nations (2015). "The List established and maintained by the Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee with respect to individuals, groups, undertakings and other entities associated with Al-Qaida". Online available at: http://www.un.org/sc/committees/1267/AQList.htm

459   Ibid.

460   Ibid.

in many cases suspected of being guided by a Saudi state policy, both Saudi Arabia and the US have jointly listed Al Haramein on their list for "blocking property and prohibiting transactions with persons who commit, threaten to commit, or support terrorism" on 2 June 2004.[461]

It is as if by tradition that whatever organisation or person the US places on its "black list", Saudi Arabia has immediately followed suit. According to R.H., a former worker at a number of Saudi based charity organisations in Kosovo, Saudi Arabia follows the US, as it is itself threatened by the Takfir and violent extremists that follow such an ideology.[462] Such is the case with a number of individuals as shown by the document of sanctions list of the US Treasury Department,[463] as well as with a number of charity organisations and branches, where they acted jointly to block the suspected finances of terrorism.[464]

Similarly, Al Waqf's director at an international level, Ahmad Al Hussaini (a member of board of directors since 1991), is included in a list of 20 Saudi Arabian business leaders alleged to have provided financial support to the Al Qaida terror network.[465] Al Hussaini's name was drawn as being linked to Al Qaida by an Al Qaida member himself.[466] However, it is difficult to verify as to how this member of Al Qaida drew or provided this list to authorities, because the same report says that Al Hussaini's name was found on a list, which the Bosnian police found during a raid on the offices of one Saudi based charity organisation in Bosnia.[467] A report issued by the Netherlands' intelligence service also identified Al Waqf as one of several extremist groups and furthermore was described as a radical Islamic group.[468] According to a WikiLeaks document, the Netherlands' intelligence service has also discovered the Al Waqf mosques to have become a recruiting ground for a "holy war".[469] However, the same Wikileaks document also adds that "it is important to note there is no proof the Foundation [Al Waqf] was actively involved in terrorist activities, as only the Dutch branch has been investigated."[470]

Just like Al Waqf's close link to and cooperation with the BIK in Kosovo, the same organisation's branch in Bulgaria had close links to the Mufti in Bulgaria.[471] According to a WikiLeaks document, just like in Kosovo, Al Waqf has built several mosques and unregistered madrassas in

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461   U.S. Department of Treasury (n.d.). Online available at: http://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/terrorist-illic-it-finance/Documents/designationsum-.pdf

462   Interview with R.H. a young Islam practitioner in Kosovo, 12 February 2015. Prishtina, Kosovo.

463   U.S. Department of Treasury (n.d.). Online available at: http://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/terrorist-illic-it-finance/Documents/designationsum-.pdf

464   Treasury News (2002). "Fact Sheet Designations of Somalia and Bosnia-Herzegovina Branches of Al-Haramain Islamic Foundation". From the Office of Public Affairs. Online available at: http://fas.org/irp/news/2002/03/dot-031102fact.html

465   Free Republic (2003). "Al Qaeda 'financed from Eindhoven'". Free Republic. Online available at: http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/898567/posts

466   Ibid.

467   Ibid.

468   Ibid.

469   Bryan Gold (2008). "The culmination of my internship- Radical Islam in Bulgaria". July 26, 2008. Wikileaks. Online available at: http://wikileaks.org/gifiles/docs/10/1049887_-eurasia-radical-islam-in-bulgaria-an-investiga-tion-.html

470   Ibid.

471   Ibid.

Bulgaria.[472] The same WikiLeaks report, however, notes that besides suspicions that this is the only organisation in Bulgaria to be considered a radical Muslim group in Bulgaria, there is "no real evidence besides whispers and rumours that any other movement, namely al Qaeda and Hezbollah, are involved in any serious way in Bulgaria".[473] It also notes that nothing has been reported besides the off-hand reference or the possibility of Islamic influence.[474] Similarly, Al Waqf in Kosovo is led by an Iraqi citizen, Abdur Rezaq, who is reported to have been active in Kosovo since 2002.[475] It has also been reported that despite that Abdur Rezaq's resident permit in Kosovo has expired, he continues to live in Kosovo and continues his work with Al Waqf. There has been no evidence (at least not in public) of Al Waqf's support for any violent extremist groups in Kosovo; however the organisation is on the KIA's list of suspected organisations financing terrorism.[476] Al Haramein and Al Waqf have been identified as an organisation that supports individuals who are sympathetic to violent extremist groups, and also in Macedonia.[477]

It is clear that certain individuals affiliated to and working in such charity organisations are sympathetic to violent and radical extremist groups; however, it is difficult to say that these charity organisations have been established with the purpose of financing and supporting radical extremist groups. For instance, despite that the US, followed by Saudi Arabia, and immediately after the Security Council, have listed Al Haramain under the organisations supporting terrorism, the Security Council Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee has removed the Al Haramein Foundation branch in the USA from its sanctions list as of 28 October 2014,[478] in which the EU followed suit.[479] This occurred "after concluding its consideration of the de-listing requests for this name submitted through the Office of the Ombudsperson established pursuant to Security Council resolution 1904 (2009), and after considering the Comprehensive Report of the Ombudsperson on this de-listing request".[480]

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472   Ibid.

473   Ibid.

474   Ibid.

475   Visar Duriqi (2014). "Irakiani që e drejton OJQ'në financuese të Al-Kaida'së jeton në Kosovë me leje të refugjatit". July 5, 2014. *Gazeta Express.* Online available at: http://www.gazetaexpress.com/lajme/irakiani-qe-e-drejton-ojqne-financuese-te-al-kaidase-jeton-ne-kosove-mqe-leje-te-refugjatit-26738/

476   Visar Duriqi (2014). "Organizata që financoi "Al-Kaida'në" vazhdon ndërtimin e xhamive në Kosovë". June 17, 2014. *Gazeta Express.* Online available at: http://www.gazetaexpress.com/lajme/organizata-qe-financoi-al-kaidane-vazhdon-ndertimin-e-xhamive-ne-kosove-22390/

477   US Embassy Skopje (2007). "Macedonia: A/S O'brien Visit Highlights Terrorism Financing Issues". August 22, 2008. Wikileaks. Online available at: http://cables.mrkva.eu/cable.php?id=119557

478   United Nations (2014). "Security Council Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee Deletes Al-Haramain Foundation (United States of America) from Its Sanctions List". October 28, 2014. *United Nations.* Online available at: http://www.un.org/press/en/2014/sc11618.doc.htm

479   Debevoise&Plimpton (n.d.). "Sanctions Alert: A bi-monthly summary of sanctions news and events". *Debevoise&Plimpton.* Online available at: http://www.debevoise.com/~/media/files/insights/publications/2014/11/sanctions_alert_issue_30.pdf

480   United Nations (2014). "Security Council Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee Deletes Al-Haramain Foundation (United States of America) from Its Sanctions List". October 28, 2014. *United Nations.* Online available at: http://www.un.org/press/en/2014/sc11618.doc.htm

Bootie Cosgrove-Mather has also argued how Al Haramain "provides the clearest example of a charity that has stayed open despite repeated attempts to shut it down overseas".[481] According to him, even the US officials have privately admitted that "only a small percentage of the total was diverted and that few of those who worked for Al-Haramain knew money was being funnelled to Osama bin Laden's terrorist organization". [482] Juan Zarate, a former deputy assistant secretary for terrorist financing and financial crimes at the U.S Treasury Department has also stated that such religious organisations are being (mis)used by certain individuals to support violent extremist groups from a "logistical and philosophical" standpoint.[483]

Such appears to be the case with Al Waqf in Kosovo. A former employee of Al Waqf who has worked for this organisation for several years has told the author of this report that while Al Waqf's mission and activities were exclusively concerned with charity works, he would not rule out the fact that there may have been employees in the organisation who embrace Takfiri ideology.[484] According to him, the then director of the organisation in Kosovo, who was an Iraqi citizen, would even hire such individuals on purpose in order to de-radicalize them.[485] He furthermore confirmed that the former director of Al Waqf in Kosovo has managed to de-radicalize a few graduates that came back from Egypt, who today serve as imams in Kosovo and at the same time fight the Takfiri ideology themselves.[486] One of the employees of Al Waqf who was a Takfir was fired in 2007 because it was clear that he would not give up his Takfir ideology and was continuously propagating an anti-state rhetoric based on clear Takfiri tenets of calling *taghut* and *kafir* against anything related to state institutions. [487] The employee that was fired is one of the Takfir imams and is among those arrested during the recent raids by the Kosovo police.

These major worldwide charity organisations therefore, cannot be accused of supporting Takfiri groups in Kosovo outright; however, this report finds, just like Bootie Cosgrove-Matther has, that there are certain individuals with a Takfir ideology that 'infiltrate' themselves as employees or contractors and support in one way or another the Takfir activities. Juan Zarate was right when he claimed that it makes it difficult to dig out the bad from the good in such organisations; however, one should be careful to not accuse entire organisations of being involved in financing violent radical groups. The strongest evidence for this is the fact that, despite being accused by the US and others of being linked to Al Qaida and other violent extremist groups, the very US branch of Al Haramain was recently delisted from the Security Council list of organisations suspected to have links with Al Qaida, and in addition, the UN recently

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481   Bootie Cosgrove-Mathers (2004). "Al Qaeda Skimming Charity Money". June 7, 2004. *CBSNews*. Online available at: http://www.cbsnews.com/news/al-qaeda-skimming-charity-money/

482   Ibid.

483   Ibid.

484   Interview with D.T. a former extremist belonging to Takfir circles in Kosovo, 16 December 2014. Prishtina, Kosovo.

485   Ibid.

486   Ibid.

487   Interview with D.T. a former extremist belonging to Takfir circles in Kosovo, 16 December 2014. Prishtina, Kosovo.

removed one of the founders of Al Haramain, Soliman Al-Buthe, off the Al Qaida suspect list, despite being listed for a long period.[488]

On the other hand, it is important to consider a few local charity organisations such as the Cultural Association "Rinia Islame" ("Islamic Youth") and Shoqata "Parimi" ("Principle" Association) based in Kaçanik. Both of these organisations are reported to have been linked with Takfirs in Kosovo and their attempts to take young people to Syria. "Rinia Islame" was an organisation with close ties to Lavdrim Muhaxheri, who is reported to have established the organisation himself; this organisation was never registered with the relevant state institutions.[489] It is difficult to know where these organisations get the funds from, but when it comes to financing people's transfer to Syria, a number of sources, including one state security institution, indicate that the financing is supported by petty cash provided by a number of Takfiri individuals who together collect the money and give them to potential victim foreign fighters. T.U., a former foreign fighter from Kaçanik, said that he had better conditions in ISIS than in Kaçanik, never having to think of food, shelter, and clothes.[490]

488   Jeff Barnard (2013). "UN takes charity founder off Al-Qaeda list". February 12, 2013. Arqab News. Online available at: http://www.arabnews.com/saudi-arabia/un-takes-charity-founder-al-qaeda-list.

489   Ekuiliber (2014). "Lavdrim Muhaxheri thotë se ka gisht në përzgjedhjen e imamit të Kaçanikut dhe e kërcënon atë me jetë". May 12, 2014. *Ekuiliber*. Online available at: http://ekuiliber.com/lavdrim-muhaxheri-thote-se-ka-gisht-ne-perzgjedhjen-e-imamit-te-kacanikut-dhe-e-kercenon-ate-me-jete/

490   Interview with T.U., a former foriegn fighter from Kosovo, 15 December 2014. Kaçanik, Kosovo.

8. THE PROCESS

1) Societal disorientation after the 1999 systemic transformation; 2) Weak economic and political conditions; 3) Rural underdeveloped and devastated communities mostly ignored; 4) High level of poverty; 5) High level of social inequality and discrimination; 6) High corruption in state institutions; 7) Loss of interest for citizens' concerns by domestic political elite; 8) More space for imams and religious authorities to deal with citizens' concerns; 9) Loss of trust in state institutions 10) Growing trust in religious institutions; 11) Secular state institutions' de-legitimization; 12) Poor investments in education sector; 13) Quality of education highly questioned and considered not serious; `14) or other things having to do with one's personal decision

Decision to practice Islam

1) Young, shallow, light-minded, no experience; 2) Negative attitude towards education; 3) Previous criminal records; 4) Need for forgiveness; 5) Desire for a quick way into Islam 6) Family and social isolation

Prey to Takfir

Continuation in Islam

Process

Brainwash a Muslim worshipper (usually new to Islam)

"Lock" the Takfir worshippers mentally

Worshipper becomes part of Takfir community

Community of Takfir in Kosovo
(potential foreign fighters)
Imams
Propagators
Recruiters
Worshippers

Instruments

Mosque – Takfir Imam

Private spaces
 - Apartments
 - Dorms/Rooms
 - Shops

De-legitimization
 - of society
 - of credible imams
 - state structures

Internet
 - Facebook/Twitter
 - Youtube
 - Skype

Finances
 - Takfir worshippers cash
 - Takfir employed in charity organisations
 - Private businesses

Community of foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq
Receiving guarantor (i.e. commander)
Foreign fighter

1. Decision to fight
2. Commander needs a reference to prevent suspicion
3. Takfir imam in Kosovo refers and gives the guarantee
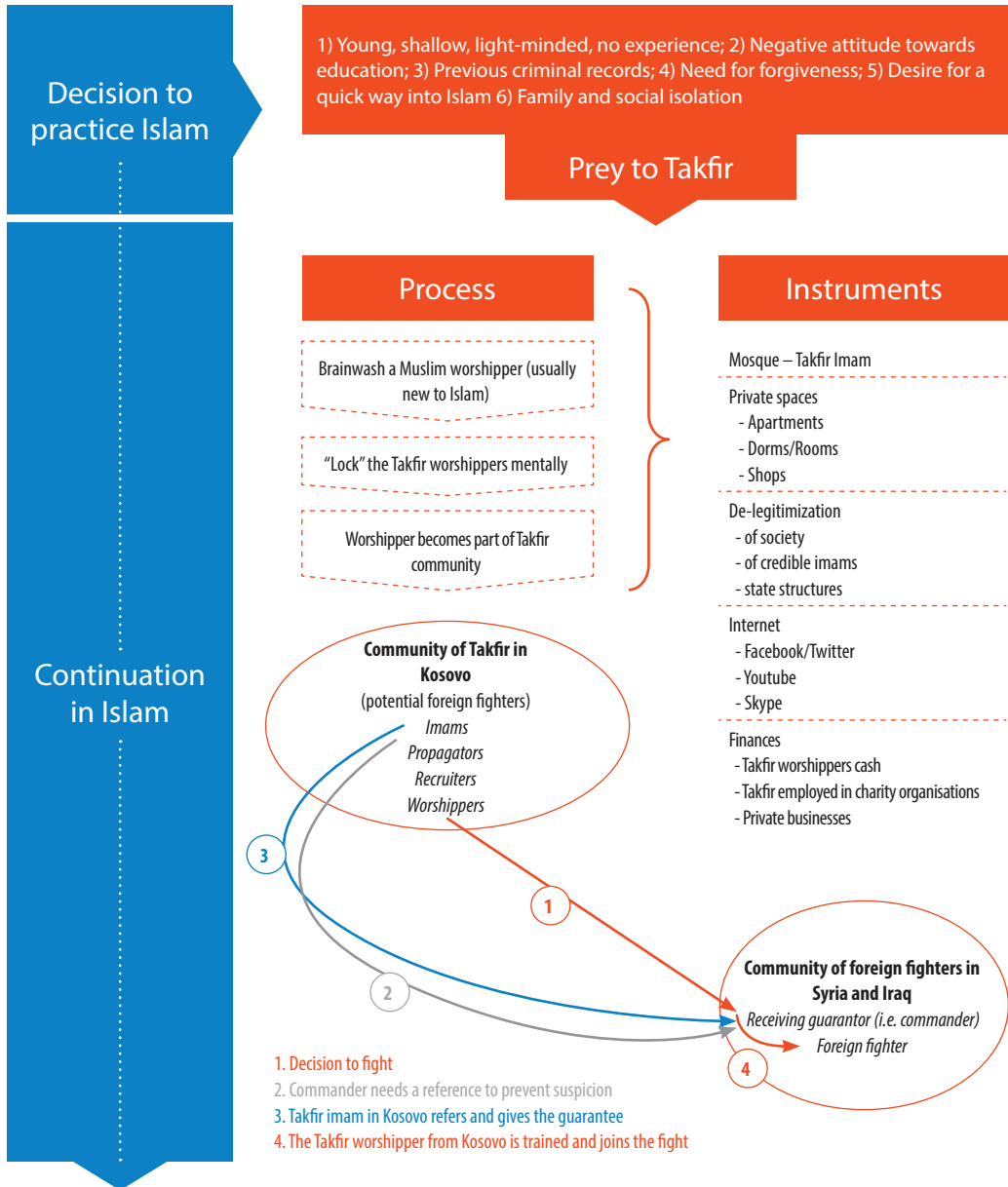4. The Takfir worshipper from Kosovo is trained and joins the fight

Diagram 2: Conditions and process facilitating the phenomenon of foreign fighters

9. THE UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

9.1. Implications of dealing with the consequences

When dealing with the issue of foreign fighters in Kosovo, be it the state – usually through its intelligence and other security structures, or the society – usually through conventional and social media, most of the attention tends to focus on foreign fighters themselves. However, as the diagram in the previous Chapter shows, foreign fighters are the consequence of a range of conditions, factors, and issues in various sectors, including state (secular) institutions through policymaking on the one hand and religious institutions, in most cases, through inaction towards deviations that happen within and through religion on the other hand. This means that focusing the attention on the consequences ahead of the causes (range of issues), will necessitate the engagement of security institutions such as the police, which by nature involves the use of force of various magnitudes. Dealing with the consequences (foreign fighters), by not alleviating the causes (conditions and factors), will by logic reproduce the consequences.

Transposing this into similar cases at global level, one can take the example of the killing of the most wanted and notorious violent extremist, Osama bin Laden. While the latter was killed, both his ideas and the conditions and factors that produce and sustain his ideas were certainly not defeated. As a result, the world is free of Osama bin Laden, but not of his ideas that produced an even a more notorious organisation/entity – ISIS. State security structures can do little to deal with the causes, as causes lay within the policymaking structures of other sectors, such as those dealing with the quality of education, economic development and prosperity, fight against corruption, establishment of a more just system and a just state, something the security structures can do very little to improve. Certainly, dealing with the consequences, i.e. putting state security structures at the forefront of dealing with the consequences, can have counterproductive consequences.

State security structures can do their job, and by nature it involves using force, at best arresting violent extremists who pose a threat to the constitutional order and the state itself. However, as this report has shown by going through a short history of the development of violent extremist ideas, it is clear that the most radical ideas came out of prisons. Starting from more ancient radical thinkers like Ibn Teymiyyah, to more modern ones, like Sayyid Qutb in Egypt, Mustafa Shukri in Egypt (the founder of Takfir wal Hijra), and onto the more recent ones such as Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, the self declared Caliph of the so called Islamic State (ISIS).[491] It is the very concept of martyrdom in Islam that the Takfir and other violent extremists and radicals utilize to legitimize their agenda, and thus gain support. Locking up religious figures including violent extremists, or even killing them, will only reinforce and legitimize their radical ideas among the radical and violent extremist worshippers, but also those that are more fundamental and radical in only their thinking rather than in action, who may more readily engage in

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491   This report does not claim that they share the same ideas, but they certainly are considered some of the more radical thinkers in Islam, and one should judge them based on the circumstances and conditions under which they lived during their respective periods.

violent actions as a result. When the state deals with 'respected' religious extremists or other religious figures by using force, it will more often than not encourage their ideas.

9.2. Implications of double standards

Another aspect that could potentially legitimize violent extremists and their ideology is the very double standards that they believe a secular state, and in this case Kosovo, applies. Application or the sense of application of double standards produces an outcome desirable for the Takfirs, since one of their main ideological tenets is that a state, which is not an Islamic state, in this case a secular state, should be fought against. Similar were the claims of Udo Steinbach, a former director of the German Institute for Middle East Studies, who talked on political Islam and radicalisation at a conference, held in Prishtina in November 2014. He claimed that the extremists' actions and endeavours come as a result of their sense of inferiority that exists within the Islamic community worldwide.[492] Also, according to him, the extremists pick up and quote the application of double standards all over again, as a tool used to gain legitimacy.[493] In Kosovo there are many cases of this utilised by extremists; one of them, for instance, being the capture of a Serbian citizen carrying explosives, whereby he is blamed as an individual, while they believe that if such an explosive was caught being carried by a Muslim believer, an entire community would be blamed. They base this on what they claim to be an unjust system applied by a secular state, especially towards Muslims – a conspiracy that suddenly becomes a fact, in light of the arguments they use with their worshippers and potential ideological recruits.

These issues are exacerbated when state structures deal with the consequences unmindfully. In a several months long interaction with liberal, non-violent Muslim worshippers (which constitutes the overwhelming majority), as well as with the former radicals and current radical thinkers, and foreign fighters themselves, the author of this report can pull out one particularly common trend. They all share the idea that "Islam is under global attack" and it "should be protected". This siege mentality very much presents a vulnerable state of mind, making the believers ready, especially the younger ones, for (whatever) a "call to action". For instance, arresting around 50 people on bulk on charges of terrorism, with only 29 days of official investigations by the prosecution preceding such a raid,[494] boosted by overwhelming media coverage, only reinforces the idea that "Islam is under attack" and reinforces the "siege mentality" Muslim worshippers and practitioners in Kosovo have come to develop. State security agencies can legally and legitimately deal with specific individuals who may pose a threat to law and order; however, using a poor strategy in such cases can result in unintended consequences and the reinforcement of a Takfirs' utility of the arguments of an "unjust state" to recruit the vulnerable energetic young people that are new to Islam.

The conspiracy that the Takfirs usually use against the secular state becomes almost a fact in the eyes of their worshippers and others when the overwhelming majority of the arrested

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492   Udo Steinbach (2014). "Political Islam and Radicalisation". FES Conference. November 12-21, 2014.

493   Ibid.

494   Interview with K.M., one of the Kosovo based journalists dealing with and reporting on extremism in Kosovo, 28 October 2014. Prishtina, Kosovo.

people, including some of the Takfirs, get released because there is no evidence to press further with the charges against them. There is another side of the coin when dealing unmindfully with violent extremism through security institutions. For instance, in an interview with D.D., one of the arrested imams, also considered a Salafi, has told the author of this report that he has been mocked by some of his worshippers after being arrested. The reason being that when the same worshippers had previously asked him whether or not should they work and join the Kosovo Police when an opportunity to do so came, D.D., had encouraged them to do so, arguing that this does not breach any Islamic principles or rules, and is certainly not against Islam, unlike as the Takfir would argue. After being arrested by the Kosovo Police, the same worshippers came to D.D. telling him that he has dug his own grave and actually sought to be arrested, because he had encouraged them that they should work for the same Kosovo Police that arrested him. D.D. felt that he was put in a bad position, and although they were not, his worshippers sounded very much like the Takfirs by finding some reason in such thinking after their Imam's arrest.

The Takfirs fill their worshippers' minds with various conspiracies against secular state policies. For instance, when the author of this report visited one of the suspected ISIS recruiters, M.K., where he was found watching Turkish channels, and news appeared of the bomb plot in Ankara. When asked what is the news about, M.K. replied that the "Masons are conspiring against Islam".[495] Unmindful state security actions can only reinforce such conspiracies of already brainwashed young Takfir worshippers who become more ready to be called into action to "protect Islam". When religious figures breach the laws of the state, they should be dealt with equally just like any other citizen, including in measures guaranteed by law, such as equality before the law. However, more often than not, when a religious figure uses hate speech and poses offence towards a non-Muslim figure or another community, they are either legally charged with, or socially judged for using "hate speech". On the other hand, when a state official or other secular members of society use hate speech or offend religious figures, they are not legally charged of using "hate speech", but are praised for using "freedom of speech". In other words, they sense with particular evidence that "imam hate speech" and "secular hate speech" are not weighed the same before the justice system. This is not to say that "hate speech" should be allowed by religious figures; to the contrary, they should be legally charged of using "hate speech", but so should the other members of society (including secular or those of other confessions who use hate speech). Unless equality before law is respected, the Takfir conspiracy will prevail and more young people could potentially fall prey to such conspiracies and other 'convincing' language, as argued above, to recruit vulnerable members of society.

9.3.   Implications of the two extremes in (public) discourse

It is evident from a number of reports and general observations that the growing religionization of society, which means the embrace for more conservative ideas and values as opposed to more liberal secular ideas and values, has also put, by reaction, part of the non-religious part of society in a defensive mode. This means that both the non-religious and the religious part of society are acting in a defensive mode in their mutual direct relationship in public discourse. Such opposing defensive modes have also resulted in the growing alienation between

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495   Visit to Kaçanik, Kosovo. 8 December 2014.

the two sides. This has, furthermore, resulted in unintended consequences of having the two sides reacting, at least in a public discourse, with antagonism, whereby the "foreignness" of conservatism is pushing the liberal secular part of the society towards more liberalism, and similarly, the "foreignness" of liberalism is pushing the conservative religious part of the society towards more conservatism. Such a push is unfolding offensively by both sides, which is resulting in both sides pushing towards their own extremes. This dialectical social outcome, although surfacing unintentionally, produces two extremes – it is widening the gap between the liberal secular extreme on the one hand, and the religious conservative extreme on the other (see the diagram below on the left). As it has been argued in the previous Subchapter (9.2), when state laws are biased towards the liberal secular part in the application of hate speech for one side v.s. freedom of expression for the other on similar, if not the same issues, it pushes religious conservatism onto a stronger defensive and more antagonistic position. Consequently, it heightens the religious extreme. In other words, it is the very values of a liberal secular state values that should treat all the citizens equally, regardless of their confessions.

This dialectical outcome is more dangerous in producing violent radical extremism when it occurs within the Muslim religious community in Kosovo, and perhaps elsewhere. The Takfir, which according to their ideological tenets denounce and consider as *munafiq* (hypocrites) all religious figures, imams, and scholars that belong to a state recognized religious community, in the case of Kosovo the BIK almost "joyfully" wait for more liberalism within such religious authority. This is because it reinforces their arguments in front of their already brainwashed worshippers, and those in the process of being brainwashed are convinced that they are right to denounce official religious communities that work with the state, on the grounds that they are corrupting Islam. As such it materializes their efforts do delegitimize credible and legitimate religious figures (including the more conservative ones), and legitimize their arguments, based on violent extremist ideas and deeds.

The conservative voices within the religious community are those that consider the move towards any extremism as a deviation from religion, be that towards more liberal (what they call "liberal deviations") and more conservative (what they call "extremist deviation"). Further conservatism in religion will, as if by automation, antagonize the liberal voices of the religious community towards further liberalism, which again and furthermore, as if by automation, pushes the conservative voices further towards conservatism, potentially leading to extremism. This is the logic when one extreme produces another extreme in religion, in this case Islam. Overall, this is not to say that the secular liberal society should become more conservative in order to curtail religious conservatism; however, an understanding of conservative religious ideas in public discourse, renouncing double standards in public discourse, and respecting one's religious orientation and the way one wants to practice it will certainly curtail further conservatism and extremism. The same goes for religious conservatives who should be careful in public discourse, that is to respect one's liberal values and other beliefs that a particular secular liberal individual might have. This certainly could help in curtailing the use of antagonistic public discourse against one's conservative values and practices.
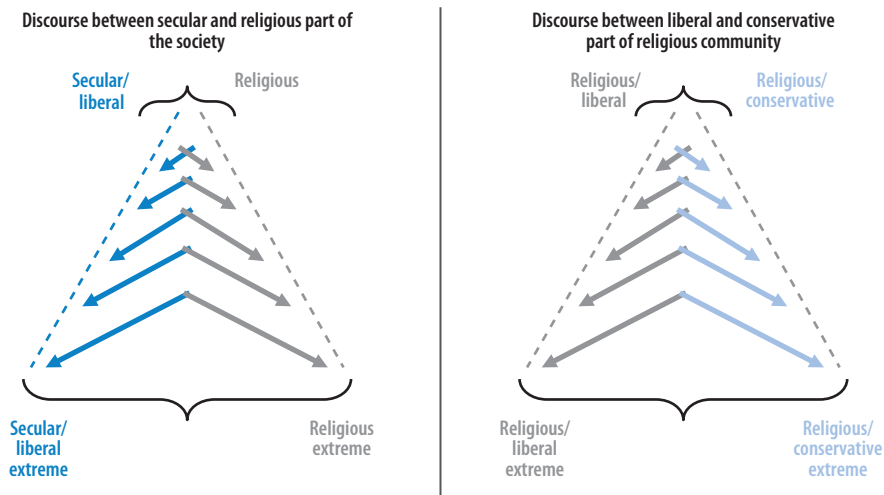
Figure 12: The dialectics of extremisms

According to A.A., a former foreign fighter in Syria, who appears to know the logic and mentality behind Takfirs, the legitimization of Takfirs in front of their, and potential Takfir worshippers happens when political parties with religious agendas, such as the Justice Party (PD) in Kosovo, cannot reach any results in the interest of Muslims. Just like with the BIK, which they consider a *munafiq* (hypocrite) religious authority because of perceptions of their cooperation with a secular state, they consider as *munafiq* and *kuffar* (unbelievers) the political parties that are integrated into secular state institutions to run political and religious agenda. First, they consider them as *munafiq* and *kuffar*, because of Takfir's predominant belief that one should not cooperate with any state other than an Islamic State. Second, when such political parties end up doing nothing or very little for the Muslim community's interests, such as the issue with the headscarf, this almost immediately legitimizes their argument for denouncing anything to do with such political parties that attempt to work within a secular state.[496]

9.4.   The BIK

Control over religious affairs by the largest Muslim religious authority in Kosovo – the BIK, is important in preventing potential violent deviations and extremisms. However, besides claims from the high ranking officials within the BIK of having religious affairs under control, manifestations of religious deviations and propagation of the Takfir ideology in Kosovo through a number of instruments, do not speak for a rigorous control over religious affairs, which the BIK should in fact have. A number of scandals and power politics within the institution have more often than not shifted BIK's attention away from religious affairs onto personal gains and positions of various individuals within the institution and the Muslim community itself. Individuals and groups within BIK and the Muslim community in general have not spared themselves from tagging, framing, and publicly lynching each other with the purpose of shifting the attention away from internal organisational problems within the institution as well as individ-

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496   Interview with A.A. a former foreign fighter from Kosovo, 17 November 2014. Prishtina, Kosovo.

ual intentions for power gain within the institution.[497] A number of reports have shown that there was an abuse of power and other scandals. For instance, Gazmend Haxhiu, an imam in the Shtimje municipality, said that there were physical fights, threats, and intimidation, which have damaged the image of the BIK.[498] Imam Haxhiu also claimed that there were fraudulent elections held in some municipal councils of the BIK whereby a number of poorly educated people were nominated for posts, while those with master's degrees were ignored, i.e. in Kaçanik, Ferizaj, and Suhareka.[499] According to him, this all happened because the educated personnel would not submit themselves to Mufti Naim Tërnava's orders.[500]

Similarly, Idriz Bilalli, the Chair of the Workers Union of the Islamic Community, asserted that the Mufti has been involved in a number of violations, irregularities, nepotisms, and has shown a lack of transparency with finances.[501] The Mufti has also been accused of blackmailing a number of members of the BIK in order to press them to support his decisions.[502] Also, before the elections for the Mufti which were held in the end of 2013, the Mufti, together with the members of the BIK Assembly close to him, attempted on 20 August 2013, and later on, managed to change the Constitution of the BIK, which previously foresaw a limit of two mandates of 5 years for the position of Mufti.[503],[504] The opponent of such changes to the Constitution, Xhabir Hamiti, was dismissed from his position as the Chair of the BIK Assembly by the close confidents to Mufti Tërnava.[505] Nonetheless, Xhabir Hamiti refused to recognize this decision and continued to remain in his office.[506] Such events have also led to divisions within the BIK and the Islamic community.

There are many reasons behind power-politics played between various divided groups and individuals and their desire for power positions within the BIK structures. It is estimated that the BIK's annual budget ranges between 5.5 to more than 6 million Euros.[507] Sources of these funds include those coming from (1) worshippers from each regional council; (2) fundraising and charity for the holy month of Ramadan; (3) funds taken from leasing of religious property; (4) funds and luxury goods (i.e. gold) collected during Hajj; and (5) donations that go to the

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497   Telegrafi.com (2013). "SPBIK: Lëvizja ultra vehabite dhe selefite në BIK". August 26, 2013. *Telegrafi.com*. Online available at: http://www.telegrafi.com/lajme/spbik-levizja-ultra-vehabite-dhe-selefite-ne-bik-2-35451.html

498   Anita Kadriu (2013). ""Xhihadi" për BIK". August 16, 2013. Zeri.info. Online available at: http://old.zeri.info/artikulli/12275/xhihadi-per-bik

499   Ibid.

500   Ibid.

501   Ibid.

502   Anita Kadriu (2013). "Rikthehet drama në BIK: sot kuvendi!". August 29, 2013. Zeri.info. Online available at: http://old.zeri.info/artikulli/13488/rikthehet-drama-ne-bik-sot-kuvendi

503   Telegrafi.com (2013). "SPBIK: Lëvizja ultra vehabite dhe selefite në BIK". August 26, 2013. *Telegrafi.com*. Online available at: http://www.telegrafi.com/lajme/spbik-levizja-ultra-vehabite-dhe-selefite-ne-bik-2-35451.html

504   Visar Duriqi (2013). "Hesht për Zgjedhjet që Përmbyllin Dekadën e Tij". August 5, 2013. *Gazeta JNK*. Online available at: http://gazetajnk.com/?cid=1%2C979%2C6162

505   Telegrafi.com (2013). "SPBIK: Lëvizja ultra vehabite dhe selefite në BIK". August 26, 2013. *Telegrafi.com*. Online available at: http://www.telegrafi.com/lajme/spbik-levizja-ultra-vehabite-dhe-selefite-ne-bik-2-35451.html

506   Anita Kadriu (2013). "Rikthehet drama në BIK: sot kuvendi!". August 29, 2013. Zeri.info. Online available at: http://old.zeri.info/artikulli/13488/rikthehet-drama-ne-bik-sot-kuvendi

507   Edona Musa (2012). "BIK Shpenzon 2.5 Milionë për Haxh në Vit". April 16, 2012. *Gazeta JNK*. Online available at: http://gazetajnk.com/?cid=1,979,1900

official charity organisation of the BIK called "Bereqeti".[508],[509],[510]. In addition, BIK's activities and operations have until recently, and even more so before, have been in the dark. Having no legal status, until recently the BIK did not and could not own a bank account, so all of the post-war funding and incomes have gone through personal pockets and personal bank accounts of only a few people in the BIK.[511] Therefore, there was a lot of room to manoeuvre with its budget without being exposed to more transparency, not only with its funding but also with its activities.

Such decentralised funding and a lack of accountability or a lack of a sense of financial transparency, has also led to some imams receiving funds from the Gulf on personal accounts and pockets to build mosques. This is problematic because of the very risk that such funds, although initially intended for charity, may fall to Takfir hands, as it has been indicated in Subchapter 7.4, which discusses finances of violent extremism. Such was the case with Zekirija Qazimi, the notorious Takfir from Gjilan, who has apparently received funds from the Gulf to build his "own" mosque.[512] As indicated in previous sections, Zekirija Qazimi had an immense influence on Lavdrim Muhaxheri from Kaçanik, and Ridvan Haqifi from Gjilan, both of whom have held and continue to hold higher ranks among the Albanian fighters in ISIS. Zekirija Qazimi has served also as one of the referees and guarantors supporting many foreign fighters from Kosovo.[513],[514] The problem with the BIK in this case is that the lack of more centralized financing and flow of funds, and the unwillingness to press for more control over financial income of its own Imams for charity, has unintentionally led to funds falling into Takfir hands who then built their "own" mosques.[515] Although Zekirija Qazimi built the mosque in Gjilan he later controlled, it was the BIK structures, or more specifically an Imam with liberal views in the BIK structures in Gjilan, M.B,. who authorised Zekija Qazimi to serve as an imam in the mosque he built with the funds he raised on his own.[516]

Therefore, while the primary schisms appear to be control of the BIK through power-politics, the attention in public discourse has shifted, with the primary schisms in the BIK appearing to be between the Muslim liberals and extremists, trying to take hold of the BIK. However, this may not be entirely the case, as the extremists denounce the BIK, and consider it full of "hypocrites", while working more in an "excommunication and exodus" mode while attempting to control a few mosques where they can control their worshippers. It appears that the liber-

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508   Interview with B.S., a high official in BIK. 25 November 2014. Prishtina, Kosovo, and Interview with K.M., one of the Kosovo based journalists dealing with and reporting on extremism in Kosovo, 28 October 2014. Prishtina, Kosovo.

509   Edona Musa (2012). "BIK Shpenzon 2.5 Milionë për Haxh në Vit". April 16, 2012. *Gazeta JNK*. Online available at: http://gazetajnk.com/?cid=1,979,1900

510   Interview with K.M., one of the Kosovo based journalists dealing with and reporting on extremism in Kosovo, 28 October 2014. Prishtina, Kosovo.

511   Interview with B.S., a high official in BIK. 25 November 2014. Prishtina, Kosovo.

512   Ibid.

513   Interview with C.D. a former extremist belonging to Takfir circles in Kosovo, 18 October 2014. Prishtina, Kosovo.

514   Interview with A.A. a former foreign fighter from Kosovo, 17 November 2014. Prishtina, Kosovo.

515   Another case is the infamous Takfiri "Termokos" mosque in Prishtina

516   Interview with B.S., a high official in BIK. 25 November 2014. Prishtina, Kosovo.

al-extremist discourse as the primary cause of schisms within the BIK is a pretence for other issues within the BIK, including the political capture and control of its activities and finances. As a result, this has worsened the image of the BIK and the unity of the Islamic community in Kosovo in the eyes of the secular part of the society, which has led the latter to grow more alienated towards the Muslim community.

Lastly, despite defining Hanafism as the legal school of the Islamic jurisprudence based on which the Islamic teachings should be delivered in its mosques and other structures, the BIK has failed to produce religious knowledge and scholarship, which could have helped in better absorbing and accommodating the teachings brought in by the newly educated imams in the Middle Eastern countries. The BIK, therefore, did not succeed in accommodating religion based on the new socio-political circumstances that rapidly appeared after the liberation, together with more conservative Islamic teachings that were brought in more intensively since then.

10. RECOMMENDATIONS

This report has attempted to shed some light on the issue of Kosovo's foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq, and at the same time, it has attempted to deconstruct the usual myths in regards to radicalisation and violent extremism. One, therefore, needs to go beyond a simple 'black and white' perspective, which means that the issue of radicalisation and violent extremism goes beyond a simple 'liberal / extremist' divide as the debates, especially in Kosovo, have usually been led. Given the Kosovo context, the KCSS recommends the following:

A comprehensive approach to rehabilitation and reintegration

- The following are the categories that would describe foreign fighters that either return or potentially would want to return back to Kosovo:
    a) Those that regret joining the conflict in Syria, and want to give up their violent extremist acts and ideology;
    b) Those that regret joining the conflict in Syria, but want to keep their extremist ideology without resorting to violence;
    c) Those that do not regret joining the conflict in Syria, or the upholding of their violent extremist ideology, but want to return to Kosovo to facilitate further re-cruitment and dissemination of the Takfir ideology.

- As such, a 'one size fits all' approach would not work, and a multi-faceted model approach should be undertaken;

- Arrests, prisons, or sending people to court should be avoided as much as one possibly can. As Gilles Kerchove, the European Union Counterterrorism Coordinator asserted at the recent White House Summit on Countering Violent Extremism (CVE), that the EU "should do as much as possible to avoid sending returnees to criminal court".[517] Kerchove also noted that "[p]risons are major incubators of radicalization, and it is more difficult to convince fighters to return home when they fear being sent to jail".[518] Such is the approach that Denmark has taken, and Jorgen Ilum, the Police Commissioner in Aarhus, said that the state should take the approach whereby potential returnees would want to become part of the society.[519] He further asserts that, 10 out of 16 returnees by now have returned to school, have a job, and their attention has shifted away from Syria onto something else.[520]

- Those that return should go through a screening process, which would assess the purpose of their return and their fundamental beliefs for returning - meaning identifying whether they belong to group of returnees **(a)**, **(b)**, or **(c)**, as described above.
    o This is impossible to be done by any state official in Kosovo alone, who lack fundamental knowledge on ideological religious divisions, i.e. unable to understand

517   Kelsey Segawa (2015). "Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Returning Foreign Terrorist Fighters". February 23, 2015. *The Washington Institute*. Online available at: http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/rehabilitation-and-reintegration-of-returning-foreign-terrorist-fighters

518   Ibid.

519   CNN (2014). "Denmark's de-radicalization for Jihadis". October 24, 2014. *CNN*. Online available at: http://edition.cnn.com/videos/world/2014/10/24/shubert-denmark-jihadi-rehab.cnn

520   Ibid.

whether someone belongs to a violent extremist ideology or to a conservative religious ideology, which have fundamental differences;

o   Such an assessment should be carried out by legitimate and credible imams and/or religious authorities who have deep and fundamental knowledge in religion and extremist ideologies. These imams would also help state authorities in assessing more approximately the group to which potential returnees belong;

o   When encountering those belonging to group **(b)** and **(c)**, it is the imams that belong to the middle level of pyramid, i.e. "non-violent conservatives", who would be more credible and legitimate for these returnees to interact with. Returnees in these two groups would not take seriously any state authority or liberal imam, as they would outright frame them as *taghut*, *munafiq*, and *kuffar* and would reject any interaction, which would make it impossible to carry out the assessment, or even run them through the deradicalisation process;

o   Imams would also help, especially initially, in engaging them with the society and potentially de-radicalize or soften the returnees' 'rejectionist' stance. According to the research carried out for the purposes of this report, most of those that have gone to fight in Syria and Iraq have done so because they have been brainwashed by Takfir circles and as such have 'sincerely' joined jihad based on their disillusionment on how the Quran and other Islamic teachings were read to them by the Takfir. As such, it is only through the Quran and credible Islamic teachings that they can be convinced to change their stance, and this can be done only through credible and legitimate imams according to each group of returned fighters;

• Depending on the results of such an assessment, those identified as belonging to group **(a)** should go through re-socialisation and re-integration process (jobs, education, cultural activities, etc), and should not be framed by the other part of the society with denominations such as "terrorist" or "extremist", since they would be isolated and return to their former radical friends again. Those identified as belonging to group **(b)** should be dealt with separately and mostly by credible and legitimate imams, as one of the most important agents who can facilitate de-radicalisation through religious teachings. Those identified as belonging to group **(c)** should be dealt with by both, imams and rule of law institutions accordingly;

• This means that overall, there needs to be a rehabilitation and reintegration programme that in its essence embodies the principle of "**help and watch**";[521]

• The deradicalisation and rehabilitation programme would be more efficient if it was centralized, both in the idea on how it should run, and in the process of implementation. Such a centralised programme and process should include stakeholders such as: representatives from relevant state institutions; civil society; BIK through imams; donors; and most importantly the de-radicalized and re-integrated returnees;

• Just like the Danish deradicalization programme, the work of the rehabilitation programme should be separated from the work of the security services and police investigators, which according to the officials at the Danish rehabilitation programme, is critical to

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521   Steffen Neilsen, a crime prevention advisor and part of a multi-agency task force tackling radicalisation and discrimination, when commenting on how Denmark deals with these cases he claims that "[w]e are actually embracing them when they come home. Unlike in England, where maybe you're interned for a week while they figure out who you are, we say 'Do you need any help?'"

its credibility and ability to build relationships with the returnees and the Muslim com-
munity;[522]

- According to KSB October 2014 survey results, the majority of the population or above 50
percent believe that the returnees should undergo a rehabilitation process in order for
them to be able to be integrated in the society, and there are those that believe that they
should be treated just like any other citizen because they don't pose a threat. Close to 30
percent believe they need to be arrested immediately, while less than 20 percent believe
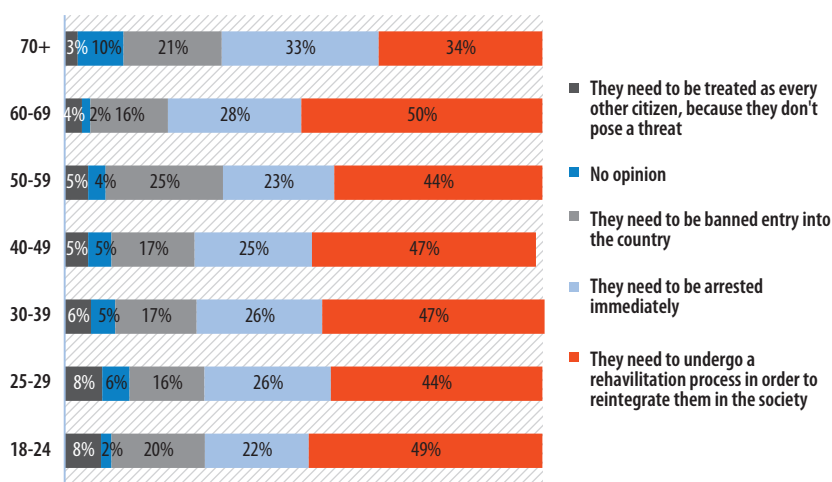they should be banned entry into the country.

Figure 13: Treatment of Kosovo foreign fighters upon return (age groups)[523]

Donors:
- The foreign donors should provide funding to the centralized de-radicalization and re-
habilitation programme. Any independent attempt has more chances than not to go in
vain, because of the nature and particularities of the issue and the state of radicalized
individuals themselves;

- Foreign donors, when willing to provide funding for the de-radicalization programme
or projects should remain on the back seat. Taking the frontline as foreigners in such at-
tempts, will more often than not result in failure of the purpose of such projects. The visi-
bility of foreign funding, foreign representatives, foreign logos, foreign messages, should
be avoided as much as possible, if not entirely, and the projects should run and should
have the local faces and local efforts on the frontline, especially at the community level
and in direct contact with the radicalized and those that may be prey to radicalisation;

522   Simon Hooper (2014). "Denmark introduces rehab for Syrian fighters". September 7, 2014. *Aljazeera*. Online
available at: http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2014/09/denmark-introduces-rehab-syrian-fight-
ers-201496125229948625.html

523   KCSS (2014). *Kosovo Security Barometer*. October 2014

The BIK:

- It should as urgently as possible be registered as a legal entity;

- It should have centralised financing, which can be easily overseen and reported to relevant state authorities. When overseas or domestic donors offer finances to a particular religious activity (such as building a mosque), such an activity should be reported to the BIK, which upon its own assessment should issue or deny permission;

- It should not allow the building of mosques from funds that go through individual finances, not only from sources coming from the Gulf, but also the building of mosques coming from community financing;

- It should inspect unauthorised building of mosques, and it should report such endeavours to the relevant state authorities immediately;

- Liberal and conservative imams or those belonging to the two bottom domains of the three domain pyramid presented previously should find a common language, and unite in the fight against extremism, despite their differences in (liberal/conservative) interpretation of and teachings in Islam. The BIK should be the hub for facilitating such rapprochement;

- Adopt a yearly curriculum of teachings in all Mosques, which should be standardized as much as possible; changes to curriculum of teachings in particular mosques, for legitimate reasons should happen with the permission of relevant BIK structures. The religious curricula should more often include religious interpretations in Islam that embrace one's national and cultural identity and one which blends in with the intention of the state, particularly the community, and traditions themselves.

- Increase and enforce more rigorous inspection in the mosques regarding the teachings and other religious affairs. The BIK after all should be kept responsible for identifying potential extremist deviations as early as they happen;

- These will make the BIK more responsible, and as a result should be kept responsible for any radicalization that is bread in its own mosques in Kosovo together with other state institutions;

- Work in preventing the creation of the celebrity status of imams that have radical and extremist thinking, which can easily be identified – i.e. those belonging to the top layer of the pyramid as "violent rejectionists" / Takfirs;

- More videos should be posted and promoted from credible and legitimate imams who have spoken against radicalism, extremism, and against joining the rebel groups in Syria. One madrassa student who has watched Mustafa Terniqi's lecture on the war in Syria has thanked him for his lecture, because he was thinking to leave to Syria, and that video lecture prevented him from going;

Imams

- Credible and legitimate imams, including those that are more liberal (bottom layer of the pyramid - "liberal participationists") as well as those that are more conservative (middle layer of the pyramid – "non-violent conservative") should stay close to their worshippers and not ignore them. They should protect their worshippers from falling under Takfir circles who may easily provide simple but illegitimate theological answers to young people's questions;

- Such imams should also be patient with worshippers that are new in Islam;

- Such imams should also be patient with potential worshippers and others who have already fallen under Takfir, who frame and publically lynch imams themselves. They should engage in open debate with them, which might lead, and in many cases has led to their deradicalisation with religious and theological arguments. This may take time, hence patience by imams is key – they should not easily give up or isolate them;

- Imams that fall under the "liberal participationists" layer and those that fall under the "non-violent conservative" layer of the pyramid, should engage in antagonisms as little as possible, and unite in efforts to deradicalize the already radicalized young people who have fallen prey under Takfir. They should tune down their framing, tagging, and public lynching based on "extremists" denominations, for their power gains and power politics within the Islamic community, and not forget that the extremists ideologically lay elsewhere;

- If young people have committed a sin, based on religious interpretations, imams should not magnify those sins, because such young people may fall prey to Takfir in order to find forgiveness quickly;

- Imams should be more careful and be accountable of the words and phrases they express publically, either during their sermons or in their online interaction with worshippers and others. Speaking ill of others' cultures, traditions, religious backgrounds, or ways of interpretation of Islam should be stopped. If for instance, a certain Imam wants to argue that Shi'ias are not Muslim, they should do this strictly under theological interpretations, and under no circumstances speak ill of them. Tagging and framing of others with negative language should be avoided at any cost.

The state security structures:

- Should have a more targeted approach towards violent extremists, i.e. to work more through intelligence based policing, and take action that would as much as possible restrain security agencies from using force (i.e. arrests, prosecutions, etc). This would also contribute to preventing the creation of any religious 'martyrs' that would later serve as a radical spiritual model to be followed by more Takfir worshippers;

- When state security agencies assess that potential "non-violent conservative" imams – those on the second layer of the pyramid, serve unintentionally as an "enabling factor" for having some of their worshippers embrace a "violent rejectionist" / Takfir ideology, they should again restrain themselves from arresting them. Such imams should be invited for a discussion, and they should be told by the state security agencies of the potential consequences of their particular teachings, meaning when their teachings, in many cases by using unacceptable language towards others, unintentionally and indirectly invite people to join in with radical actions. In many cases, those belonging to the "non-violent conservative" layer of the pyramid can also identify potential "violent rejectionists"/ Takfirs, and work with them in deradicalizing them;

- Not discriminate against those with religious background who apply to work within the state security structures. A young imam in Vushtria who has earned a bachelor's degree from the Faculty of Islamic Studies (FIS), a master's degree in Political Science from the UP, and now is pursuing his PhD studies in Political Science, was rejected when he applied to work for the Ministry of Interior. There may have been, of course, grounded reasons

for his rejection, but state security structures should jump at the opportunity to employ those that embrace the constitutional order of Kosovo, but at the same time have more understanding in religion and religious affairs than the secular employees of such state security structures.

Families and friends

- Families should not isolate their (young) members of the family who have decided to practice Islam, and certainly should not create an alienated atmosphere at home;
- Families and friends should not make a big deal out of it, otherwise, they will find peace in religious and extremists circles;

Conventional media and social media presence

- Create a platform where answers to key existential and philosophical questions that young people of late elementary school and early secondary school may have on major life issues. Such a platform, whereby http://www.zgjoi.com/ can be an example, should primarily be in Albanian language;
- The content should be created by producing short videos of a few minutes duration with answers to key existential and philosophical questions about life and existence;
- University professors, high school and elementary school teachers, members of civil society, including credible and legitimate imams, and other non-state actors should be involved in producing such short videos;
- Such content should be posted and promoted online in order to present an alternative or additional view on various existential and theological questions;
- National TV stations should be enriched with educational, cultural, and other content;
- Conventional media, including TV, newspapers, and online portals and magazines, should as much as possible refrain from indirectly "promoting" violent extremists fighting in Syria. Their public appearance and attention encourages them to take radical actions and to recruit others. Less attention by the media on extremists fighting in Syria would help in their deligitimization;
- Secular figures of society should get more space in religious media, and legitimate and credible religious figures should get more space on non-religious media. This helps in removing prejudices and stimulates and inclusive and cooperative approach.

Religious charity organisations and work

- They should be more open and transparent upon request;
- State structures should not abruptly close charity organisations, but should cooperate with them in order to identify potential extremists working and infiltrated in such organisations. Closing them down completely will not work, as they will operate under different names, as is the case with AKEA, which has been recently closed, but is still operating under a different name;
- Religious charity organisations should be directed into serving also for the deradicalization processes through lectures, as well as through funding.

Other recommendations

- Organise workshops where religious, state, and civil society members sit together and debate on issues that have to do with religion and violent extremism. This helps in breaking psychological borders and prejudices that exist between all parties;

- Organize roundtables with liberal and conservative imams where unintended consequences of extremist ideas may leak as a result of their conservative teachings and preaching;

- Include mosques in urban planning in order to prevent the creation of illegal mosques; as such one can control extremism more efficiently – this goes hand in hand with our findings regarding the number of mosques regarding the case of Turkey.

- There should be state mechanisms that can identify and verify those that are killed in Syria, because families know of their deceased member of the family in Syria usually through the media and through close friends. It is not always clear whether those suspected as killed are really dead.

EU:

- Have a proactive approach to liberalizing the free movement of the Kosovo citizens, as this may expose the young people to new and progressive ideas of the West.

MEST:

- Heavily invest in the education sector, with a primary focus on elementary and secondary education, especially by incorporating critical thinking methodologies in curricula and the methods of teachings. This will enable the young people, even those who decide to practice a particular religion, to think more critically, and have a more investigative approach when facing violent extremist groups who, until now have easily manipulated the young people who take the religion as a dogma;

- Learning of foreign languages, especially English, should not be present in curricula only nominally as has been the case, but the MEST and the Departments of Education in the municipalities should take the responsibility for exponentially increasing the number of young people who can speak English and other languages at least at above an average level. This will help young people in diving into alternative and other online contents during their online and virtual presence.

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