



KCSS
Kosovar Centre for Security Studies

BEYOND THE TRIGGERS: NEW THREATS OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN KOSOVO



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Author: Skender Perteshi

Internal reviewer: Florian Qehaja

External reviewer: Garentina Kraja

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NOTE ON THE AUTHOR

KCSS researcher, Mr. Skender Perteshi, has graduated on International Relations and Diplomacy at University College "Universum". Currently he leads the KCSS program on countering and preventing violent extremism. Skender is the author of many research reports related to security ranging from integrity in Kosovo security sector, risks and threats assessments of national security, prevention and countering of violent extremism and terrorism, and the reform of the security sector. He has worked also as an associate and consultant for international and local organizations in security-related topics, most notably the Finn Church Aid Foundation-Helsinki, RUSI Institute, International Organization of Migration (IOM) and London-based MOONSHOT. His research interests include terrorism and countering violent extremism, on-line radicalization, counter-terrorism terrorism; causes and consequences of violent extremism; role of community in prevention of violent extremism; integrity in Kosovo's security sector; regional security cooperation; reform in defense sector.

ACRONYMS

FSA	Free Syrian Army
FTF	Foreign Terrorist Fighters
IAK	Islamic Association of Kosova
IS	Islamic State
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
KCSS	Kosovar Centre for Security Studies
KIA	Kosovo Intelligence Agency
KP	Kosovo Police
KSB	Kosovo Security Barometer
USA	United States of America

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The loss of IS-held territory and the changing tactics of the terrorist organization as it seeks to adjust to the post-intervention environment created new threats and challenges for the security in Europe, and in particular in the Western Balkans and Kosovo. The once externally driven threat of the recruitment of foreign fighters in Kosovo is now gradually morphing into homegrown terrorism and violent extremism. As the flow of the foreign fighters recruited in Kosovo and departing to fight in Syria and Iraq mostly ebbed since 2015, the threat of violent extremism has shifted to instances of domestic terrorism in Kosovo. In the last two years alone, the Kosovo Police and Kosovo Intelligence Agency have prevented around four terrorists' plots in Kosovo -- an unprecedented number of extremist ideological attacks ever planned in the country.

The threat of homegrown terrorism and continuous radicalization comes from several directions. Violent extremist ideologies are still very much prevalent in the families of foreign fighters from Kosovo, in particular in those that follow conservative teachings. These families hesitate to receive any kind of support from the state authorities and reject cooperation. Instead, they seek assistance from the non-formal religious radical groups that continue to operate in Kosovo. Another layer of the challenge is found in the Kosovo diaspora. About 20 per cent of the 403 foreign fighters from Kosovo are born or grew up as second or third-generation immigrants in the western European countries. During the establishment of the "Islamic State", these individuals were among the most extreme foreign fighters, with several engaged in international terrorist acts in Europe and Turkey and suicide attacks in Syria and Iraq. The majority of these foreign fighters of Kosovo origin had little or nothing to do with Kosovo until now. However, there is an indication that some of them are stepping up their presence in Kosovo and may further their familial ties in the region to grow their network of influence for ideological purposes. In addition, some 190 Kosovo citizens remain in Syria and Iraq as part of terrorist organizations or are under arrest there. The Kosovo Government has undertaken efforts to return them to Kosovo, including a high number of children born to at least one Kosovo parent during the conflict. Yet, despite Government's willingness to take ownership of the issue, with no reintegration program in place and a public largely unwilling to welcome the foreign fighters back, their return and the continued radicalization on the ground are poised to become Kosovo's greatest national security threat to date.

KEY FINDINGS

1. The number of Kosovo individuals who have traveled to Syria and Iraq has drastically dropped. Since 2016, no case of Kosovo citizens travelling to Syria and Iraq as part of any terrorist organization was reported;
2. The threat of violent extremism, once revealed through foreign fighter recruitment, has now gradually morphed into domestic terrorism in Kosovo;
3. Extremist trends in Kosovo mimic the trends elsewhere in Europe. Fresh terrorist sympathizers carry more potential and capabilities to undertake terrorist attacks compared to foreign fighters who returned from Syria and Iraq. In the last four years, the majority of the attacks in Europe were carried out by IS sympathizers or “lone wolves,” and less than one-fifth of the religiously motivated terrorist plots were the work of the attackers who previously fought in Syria and Iraq.
4. The Kosovo Police and Kosovo Intelligence Agency have prevented around four potential terrorist plots in Kosovo over the course of the last two years. The plots were masterminded by IS sympathizers and included men who have never participated in conflicts in Syria and Iraq. To date, no terrorist attack has taken place in Kosovo;
5. Out of 135 former foreign fighters from Kosovo, five have been directly or indirectly involved in any activities related to terrorism plots in Kosovo, including the attack foiled by Kosovo authorities in the 2018 World Cup qualifying match between Albania and Israel;
6. One in 360 returnees in Europe were involved or planned an attack upon their return from their fighting experience with IS. In Kosovo, one in 25 returnees was engaged in alleged terrorist plots that were foiled by the authorities;
7. An added complexity to Kosovo’s violent extremism problem is that a considerable number of Kosovo individuals who traveled to Syria and Iraq possess dual citizenship. Out of 255 Kosovo’s foreign fighters that traveled to Syria and Iraq 48 individuals, or 20 % of Kosovo’s total FTF, were born and raised in western European countries, mainly to immigrant parents who fled Kosovo in the 1990s. The majority, or 14 radicalized foreign fighters of Kosovo origin are from Germany, six from Switzerland

and four are Americans.¹ Some of these individuals returned to Kosovo or to the countries where they were born after joining the IS ranks. The rest of the foreign fighters from this pool are assumed killed in the battlefield.

8. Since 2012, an estimated 403 individuals travelled from Kosovo to the conflicts in Syria and Iraq as members of terrorist organizations. Out of this total, 255 are men, known as foreign fighters, and the rest are women and children. Based on data provided by authorities, some 40 children were born in Syria/Iraq to at least one parent of Kosovo origin. About 135 individuals returned to Kosovo and are going through the judicial process. Seventy-five Kosovo's FTFs are reported killed, while an estimated 190 remain in IS-held territory.
9. The highest number of Kosovo foreign fighters traveled to Syria and Iraq during 2013 and the first part of 2014 when IS was still being established. Some 294 Kosovo individuals from Kosovo have traveled to Syria and Iraq from 2012 until first part of 2014. The remainder, or around 82 foreign fighters from Kosovo, departed in late 2014 and 2015, a significant decrease.
10. Some 143 families from Kosovo have traveled to Syria and Iraq. In most cases their travel was initiated or imposed by a senior member of the family. Until the establishment of the so-called "Caliphate" in July 2014, fifteen (15) Kosovo's families traveled to conflict zones. After the declaration of the "Caliphate," the families of many Kosovo foreign fighters were pushed to move there. In the period between 2014 and 2015, an estimated 108 FTF families from Kosovo settled in the "Caliphate," a timeframe that overlaps with IS' economic, financial and military peak.
11. Gender power relations in Kosovo, a largely patriarchal society, were decisive in moving family members into IS war theater. In most cases, women and children were pressured by a senior member of the family - often husbands and fathers - to travel to IS-held territory. The women usually followed their husbands' orders to travel to Syria and Iraq.
12. The Kosovo foreign fighters who returned after their time abroad will continue to be a threat or to affect others in Kosovo, such as siblings and relatives through spreading of violent extremist ideologies, by sharing personal stories of the conflict in Syria and Iraq as well as in boasting about their participation in establishing the Islamic State.

1 Ibid:

METHODOLOGY

In drafting this report, KCSS has applied a variety of qualitative data collection techniques. The author has predominantly relied on previously collected data over a period of six years, drawing on his personal experience and numerous research reports of the KCSS on violent extremism and terrorism, interviews with foreign fighters, visits to their community and discussions with their family members. All international and local reports related to violent extremism and terrorism in Kosovo have been reviewed for the purpose of this report. This study is based on 20 interviews with FTF and their family members from different municipalities and regions conducted in the course of the year by KCSS. KCSS has also relied on the official data and statistics provided by Kosovo law enforcement agencies. For the purpose of this research, KCSS has compiled a database of political and religious incidents or attacks conducted in Kosovo and beyond its borders by citizens of Kosovo origins. This database helped us note significant trends, contextualize and assess the risks and threats pertaining to terrorism and violent extremism in Kosovo.

Additionally, for this report KCSS draws from the findings yielded from 6 focus groups organized throughout Kosovo in 2017 and 2018. The focus groups were a sample of local communities, religious leaders and citizens who provided their perspectives on violent extremism and terrorism. The findings of the Kosovo Security Barometer (KSB), which measure public's trust toward security institutions and threats such as violent extremism, radicalization and terrorism, were also incorporated in the report, enabling the author to conduct a cross-sectional data analysis.

INTRODUCTION

Since early 2016 a series of coordinated countermeasures and targeted military operations against the Islamic State of Syria and Iraq (ISIS) succeeded in defeating this terrorist formation. Due to losses of territory and manpower, the flow of FTFs to the conflict theaters in Iraq and Syria decreased drastically up to the point of no mobility.² By early 2018, ISIS reportedly lost control of the previously held territory in those two countries.³ The IS rollback, however, caused panic in Europe and elsewhere in anticipation of the “flooding” of returnees to their places of origin. Yet, despite these concerns, many countries have instead witnessed a “steady trickle” or a low number of returnees to their original countries.⁴ The foreign fighters who remain in conflicts zones are likely to stay loyal to the IS ideology and will hesitate to return to their places of origin.⁵

In Kosovo’s case, there are two primary factors that account for the slow return of foreign fighters and their families: the loyalty of foreign fighters to IS and Turkey’s reluctance to allow IS members to enter through its territory. An estimated 190 foreign individuals remain in Syria and Iraq, or about half of those that joined IS and other terrorist organizations since 2012. The vast majority of those who travelled to IS-held territory from Kosovo departed through Turkey.

The physical defeat of the IS has resulted in a shift of its operational strategy forcing countries to continuously review and adjust their security policy and legal framework to respond to the ever-changing nature of the threat posed by the terrorist organization and its network of sympathizers.

Due to the global nature of IS threat, there are some emerging trends that were not common in previous experiences with terrorism. The increased number of suicide attacks and instanc-

2 Dempsey, M.P. (2017) “The Caliphate Is Destroyed, But the Islamic State Lives On” *Foreign Policy*, Available at <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/11/22/the-caliphate-is-destroyed-but-the-islamic-state-lives-on/> (Accessed 19 August 2018).

3 Byman, D.L. (2018) “What happens when ISIS goes underground?” *Brooking Institute*, Available at <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2018/01/18/what-happens-when-isis-goes-underground/> (Accessed 19 August 2018).

4 Ibid:

5 Interview with the Kosovo expert on terrorism. (May 2018) Prishtina

es of homegrown terrorism have become the most frequent hallmarks of the transformation of IS tactics.

These changes in the dynamics of international terrorism bear consequences for the whole of Europe, but they are bound to profoundly impact the Western Balkans and specifically Kosovo, a region that is still in the process of reforming its security sector.

Kosovo's policymakers have been grappling with the threat of violent extremism and the foreign terrorist fighter phenomenon for the sixth consecutive year. Recently their focus has shifted to the reintegration of the returned foreign fighters who, after spending years with terrorist organizations, have brought back to Kosovo an extreme ideological outlook, fighting experience and a Rolodex of foreign fighters from other parts of Europe.⁶

So far, according to data available which shows the engagement of returned FTF's in terrorist plots, the threat from returned foreign fighters, despite their high numbers, "remains very low"⁷ as assessed by their involvement and participation in attempted terrorist plots and incidents thwarted in Kosovo in the past two years.

Out of 135 returnees, five of them have been directly or indirectly involved in activities related to terrorism plots. The most prominent example is the foiled plot in November 2016 when Kosovo's law enforcement authorities arrested two-dozen individuals suspected of planning simultaneous terrorist attacks in Kosovo and in Albania during the 2018 World Cup qualifying match between Albania and Israel. Former Kosovo ISIS leaders Ridvan Haqifi and Lavdrim Muhaxheri, both since killed in US airstrikes in Syria, reportedly ordered the attack.⁸ In another IS-related incident, two Kosovo returned foreign fighters were arrested by one of the country's largest water reservoirs recording an IS propaganda video to lure Kosovo recruits to join the terrorist organization.⁹

As various studies, such as "Lone Wolf Terrorism: Understanding the Growing Threat Paperback" authored by [Jeffrey D. Simon](#) show, IS sympathizers, ideologues or 'lone wolf' attackers, which

6 "Ramush Haradinaj: Kosova e gatshme ti riatdhesoj te kthyerit nga Siria" (2017) Available at <https://telegrafi.com/ramush-haradinaj-kosova-e-gatshme-ti-riatdhesoje-luftetaret-e-sirise/> (Accessed 18 August 2018).

7 Stati

8 Kursani, Sh. (2017) "Kosovo Risk assessment report since independence - February 2008 - June 2017" KCSS Available at http://www.qkss.org/repository/docs/KS-RiskAssessment-eng_201377.pdf

9 Ibid:

have never physically joined IS, remain a higher threat than the formation's former foreign fighters.¹⁰ These findings correspond to the observations made in Kosovo for the purpose of this study. For instance, only two out of 22 individuals suspected of the attempted attack on the Israeli national team were members of IS, while the rest never traveled to Syria or Iraq as part of IS or any other terrorist organizations. Such finding will further complicate the efforts of Kosovo's security establishment. The issue is likely to shape up as the largest national security threat in the region after the fall of the IS in Syria with law enforcement agencies not only tasked to prevent and counter homegrown terrorism and monitor lone wolves and sympathizers in addition to keeping tabs on the returned fighters to their hometowns.

In this vein, the aim of this report is to identify the new trends and threats of terrorism and violent extremism in Kosovo in the aftermath of IS defeat. The challenges identified in the report are instances of domestic terrorism, lone wolf terrorists,¹¹ vulnerable communities, re-integration of the returned former fighters and their families.

The first part of the report consists of an analysis of the international context of violent extremism and terrorism, including the defeat of IS and the changing IS strategy. This part of the report will contextualize the danger posed by the returned foreign fighters, lone wolf attackers and international networks of terrorism. The second part of the report focuses on violent extremism in the Western Balkans and Kosovo and the efforts of local authorities in tackling this threat. The third part of the report identifies the new threats of violent extremism and terrorism in Kosovo in a bid to encourage authorities and the public at large to discuss the evolving nature of the violent extremist threat.

10 "Lone Wolf Terrorism: Understanding the Growing Threat Paperback' authored by [Jeffrey D. Simon](#). September 27, 2016

11 Bennett, B.B. (2007) "Understanding, Assessing, and Responding to Terrorism: Protecting Critical Infrastructure and Personnel". According to him "**Lone wolf terrorism** involves individual extremists who usually operate alone, and are not part of any terrorist organization or formation or on the fringes of established extremist groups, inflicting serious harm or causing significant damage."

INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT AFTER ISIS DEFEATED

The evolution of IS from a branch of al-Qaeda into one of the world's most powerful terrorist organization has turned the formation into the brand terrorist organization worldwide.¹² Yet, the physical defeat after nearly half a decade of its existence has created a new security environment and new terrorist threats.¹³ The lack of IS control over territory has led to an increase of its presence in the virtual sphere that continues to ideologically influence and move individuals who did not have an opportunity to join the "Caliphate" to further IS' goals by different means. This type of strategy has won over many "lone wolf" attackers and sympathizers of the IS worldwide, who may undertake attacks based on IS goals and in line with its ideology.¹⁴

The ability for IS to inspire attacks makes it difficult to combat and render it fully incapable of carrying out terrorism acts. The formation's loose network allows any individual of any background to aspire recognition as a member of IS without any physical contact with the organization. The shift of the IS strategy has made it increasingly challenging for state authorities to cope with it.¹⁵ As Marc Sageman argues in his report "Understanding terror network," "terrorism now is mostly self-generated from the bottom-up, self-organizing, and a local initiative that has considerable flexibility." The decentralization tactic, previously used by al-Qaeda p, which is now anchoring IS activities¹⁶ provides its members and its sympathizers a level of secrecy in conducting terrorist activities and flexibility to undertake them.¹⁷

12 "ISIS's New Frontier: Combating Decentralization, Defeat and Despair" (2017) Available at <https://www.adl.org/blog/isis-new-frontier-combating-decentralization-defeat-and-despair> (Accessed 19 August 2018).

13 *ibid*:

14 McCants, W. (2017) "After the fall of ISIS, what's next for counterterrorism? Experts discuss" *Brooking.edu* Available at <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2017/10/03/after-the-fall-of-isis-whats-next-for-counterterrorism-experts-discuss/>

15 Sageman, M. "Understanding terror network" <https://www.aclu.org/files/fbimappingfoia/20111110/ACLURM002083.pdf>

16 "ISIS's New Frontier: Combating Decentralization, Defeat and Despair" (2017) Available at <https://www.adl.org/blog/isis-new-frontier-combating-decentralization-defeat-and-despair>

17 *Ibid*:

In its early days, the “Caliphate” attracted many foreign fighters to travel to Syria and Iraq to join its efforts to create the so-called “Islamic State.” Since 2012 until now over 20,000 (twenty thousands) individuals from around the globe have joined the IS. The utopic image of a life in the “Caliphate” has been one of the main pull factors.¹⁸ According to the families of the foreign fighters who followed them in Syria, in the beginning life in the “Caliphate” was good and individuals who lived there felt that they achieved the dream to live in a country where they could freely practice their religion and raise their families in the making of the perfect society.¹⁹

During this period, due to the control of oil wells and illicit trade, the IS had financial power, food and weapons and was superior to other armed groups active at the time, including Free Syrian Army (FSA), Al Fateh al Sham (former Jabhat al Nusra) Ahrar al Sham and others.²⁰ Because of its initial control and power, the IS managed to attract the support of manpower to conduct the fighting on its behalf and later to project credibility by establishing a place to live.²¹ The IS’ goal to emerge as the leading organization in establishing the “Caliphate” and protecting Islam resulted with the clashes between IS and other rebel organizations in Syria and later in Iraq. In order to dominate the “Holy War” and to appropriate “Jihad”²² the IS turned to the elimination of its rivals by initially attacking the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and then other religious terrorist organizations such as Jabha Al Nusra, a Sunni-dominated militant group. The clashes between ISIS and other opposition forces disenchanting a portion of foreign fighters from IS, but did not move them to abandon the ideology or their decision to participate in the conflict.²³

Following the US-led airstrikes against IS, the organization suffered major losses, including its control over large swaths of territory and financial resources. IS’ military defeat left many foreign fighters regretful of their decision to join the terrorist organization as did its treatment

18 The Soufran Group (2015) FOREIGN FIGHTERS THE SOUFAN GROUP DECEMBER 2015 JUNE 2014 An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq (2015) *The Soufran Group* http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TSG_ForeignFightersUpdate3.pdf

19 Interview with the returnee from Syria conflict. September 2017

20 Ibid;

21 Interview with the returnee from Syria conflict. September 2017

22 Jones, S.G., Dobbins, J., Byman, D., Chivvis, C.S., Connable, B., Martini, J., Robinson, E., Chandler, N. (2017) Rolling Back the Islamic State https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR1900/RR1912/RAND_RR1912.pdf

23 Data provided to the media in Kosovo, Albania, Macedonia, and BeH by law enforcement agencies.

of civilians under its control. According to the Iraqi IS fighters “our aim was that being true believers, honesty and loyalty to Allah were some of the values which the Caliphate and the organization should proclaim. However, we found something different.”²⁴ According to him the mass killing of civilians, raping of Shias, Christian and Jazidi women were an initiation rite and proof of the commitment and the loyalty of the fighters towards the “Caliphate.”²⁵

The changing the dynamics of violent extremism and terrorism in the international level have resulted also with the changing of IS overall strategy. Long gone are the days when the self-declared Caliph, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, called on Muslims across the world to abandon their “decadent homelands” and migrate to the Islamic State.²⁶ In the last three years, the group’s leaders have been telling their followers to stay where they are and fight “the infidels” “where it hurt them most.”²⁷ Conducting terrorist attacks for IS members and sympathizers is now more of a duty than an idea.²⁸

This shift has increased the threats and probability of plots and attacks in Europe, where most of the foreign fighters that joined IS came from. In line with the new strategy, the IS cast its net wider, proclaiming that anyone can be a soldier of the “Caliphate,” without the need to travel to Syria or Iraq or to have any formal relationship with the organization. According to the new IS approach, the IS sympathizers could conduct “jihad” through attacks against their home countries to kill civilians, state authorities and others who stand against the IS ideology.²⁹ This approach has resulted in a spike of terrorist attacks and terrorist plots in Europe in the last three years.

For instance, in the United Kingdom 22 people were killed and 118 were injured in a suicide bombing attack in Manchester Arena on June 2017.³⁰ The attacker was a lone wolf, who had never a member been of IS, but was very much inspired by the group’s ideology. Other ter-

24 Cockburn, P. (2015) “Life under Isis: Why I deserted the ‘Islamic State’ rather than take part in executions, beheadings and rape - the story of a former jihadi” Available at <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/life-under-isis-why-i-deserted-the-islamic-state-rather-than-take-part-in-executions-beheadings-and-10111877.html>

25 *ibid*:

26 “Isis leader calls on Muslims to ‘build Islamic state” (2014) Available at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-28116846>

27 *ibid*;

28 *ibid*;

29 For more please see the article:

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/dec/31/isis-dreams-of-caliphate-gone-now-deadly-new-strategy>

30 “Manchester Attack- What we know so far” (2017) <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-manchester-40008389>

rorist attacks conducted by “lone wolves” during this period were carried out in Belgium, Germany, Turkey, France and elsewhere.

In addition, new sympathizers have more potential and capabilities to undertake terrorist attacks compared to returned foreign fighters. In the last 4 years less than 1/5 of the religiously motivated attacks in Europe were the work of former foreign fighters, while the rest were sympathizers or “lone wolf” attackers.³¹ Only a small portion of returned foreign fighters has the potential to engage in the terrorism activities in the future in Europe and elsewhere.³² One of the main factors, which may prevent their direct involvement in terrorist plots is the close surveillance placed on them by state authorities. The returnees, however, may use their experience, credibility of the battlefield, and their skills to produce new generations of “jihadists” by training them, spreading the ideology and increasing their skills in planning attacks as well as building explosives to conduct terrorist acts.³³

Generally, the returnees appear to be more easily monitored by the state authorities than the ISIS sympathizers who are difficult to be identified before they move into action. This assessment was recently shared by French authorities who claim that whether or not encouraged or directed by returnees, the domestic terrorist threat from IS supporters who did not go to Syria, Iraq or another IS front, will remain a potent threat for many years.

That said, there is mounting evidence that returnees will play a crucial role in stepping up terrorist attacks in Europe’s soil as directed by the IS strategy. Their role appears to be central in planning and preparing of any high scale terrorist attacks. It may be no accident that Islamic State’s most devastating operation in Europe - the November 2015 attacks in Paris that killed 137 people – were planned and executed by a team of returnees who were trained to undertake this type of attacks that IS hopes to become a hallmark of its new strategy of instilling fear and terror while securing the organization’s monopoly in terrorism. As the superficial appeal of the Islamic State “brand” continues to fade, it is likely that more experienced and ideologically committed members of the terrorist organization will play a bigger role.³⁴

31 *ibid*:

32 *Ibid*:

33 *Ibid*:

34 *Ibid*:

CONTEXT OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN KOSOVO

The prolonged conflicts in Syria and Iraq and the rapid proliferation of terrorist organizations such as the Islamic State of Syria and Iraq and Al Fateh al Sham (former al Nusra Front) attracted many individuals from Western Balkans region to join these militant groups. Since 2012, 850 to 1,000 individuals from Bosnia, Kosovo, Serbia, Macedonia and Albania have traveled to Syria/Iraq as foreign fighters. This total number includes women and children who are generally not considered combatants, but figure in the official tally as participants in the conflict.³⁵

The foreign fighter phenomenon is an evolving threat that poses a long-term challenge to national and international security. Since 2012, an estimated 403³⁶ individuals travelled from Kosovo to join terrorist organizations in Syria and Iraq. Out of this total, 255 are foreign fighters, while the rest are women and children.³⁷ Based on data provided by authorities, around 40 children were born in the war theater to at least one parent of Kosovo origin. Some 135 individuals have returned to Kosovo and are being tried in local courts. An estimated 75 Kosovo foreign fighters are reported killed, while around 190 individuals are estimated to have remained in conflict zones.³⁸

35 The Soufran Group (2015) FOREIGN FIGHTERS THE SOUFAN GROUP DECEMBER 2015 JUNE 2014 An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq (2015) *The Soufran Group* http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TSG_ForeignFightersUpdate3.pdf

36 Official data provided to the author, January 2018

37 Ibid;

38 Ibid:

During 2013 and the first part of 2014



294 individuals from Kosovo
went to Syria and Iraq

From 2015 until now



82 individuals from Kosovo
went to Syria and Iraq



**Number of Kosovo's individuals which have traveled in Syria and Iraq
based on municipalities**

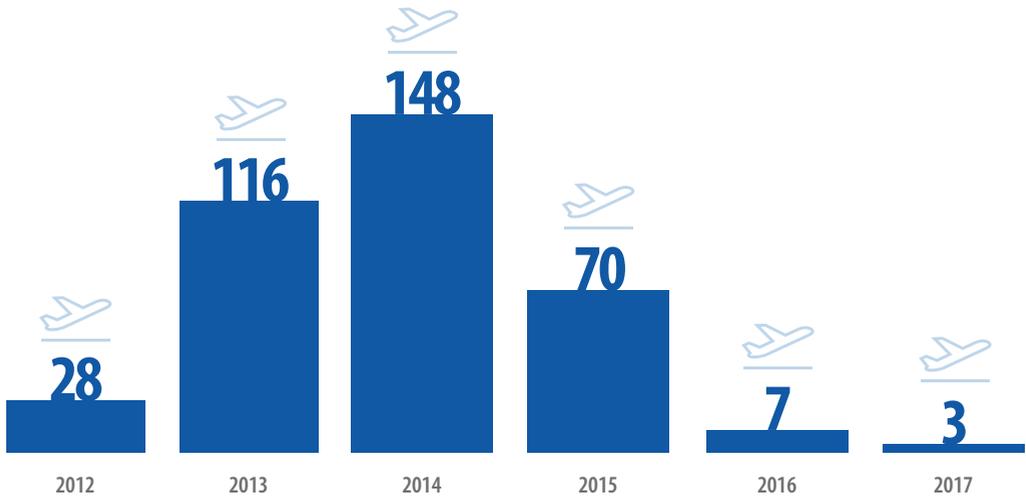
KOSOVO'S FOREIGN FIGHTER PHENOMENON

The departure of foreign fighters from Kosovo reached its highest peak during 2013 and the first part of 2014, a time period during which IS was only beginning to consolidate itself as a terrorist organization. According to official data, a total of 294 individuals from Kosovo went to Syria and Iraq during this period.³⁹ The rest, 82 individuals from Kosovo, went to Syria and Iraq from 2015 until now, marking a large drop of the number of Kosovo's individuals who traveled to these war zones.⁴⁰

While there may be various factors that account for the significant decrease in the flow of foreign fighters, this report identified five primary reasons that led to this change in landscape: disenchantment with IS as it battled its rivals in Syria, the repeated appeals by the families of foreign fighters in Kosovo for their return, the rollback of IS territorial gains due to military defeats and the efforts of Kosovo law enforcement in countering violent extremism on the ground and preventing the departure of its citizens to Syria.

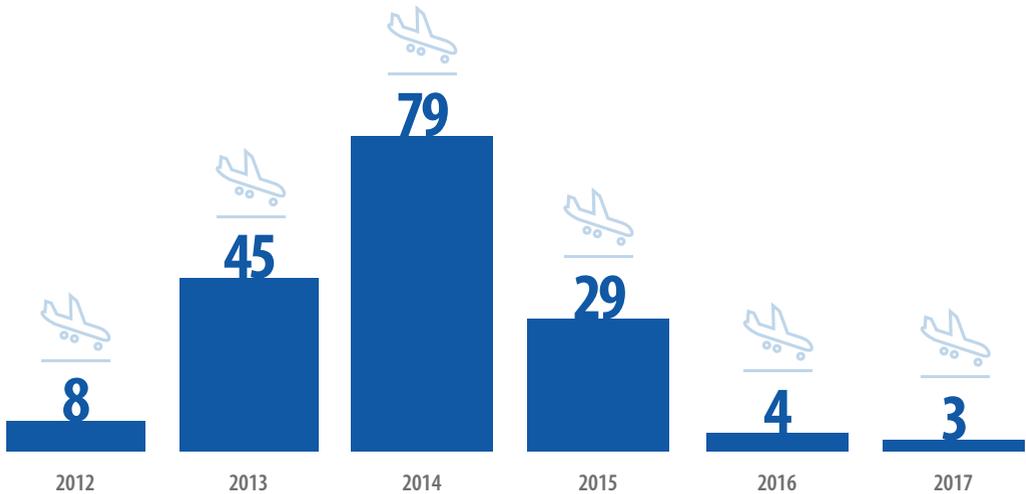
³⁹ Kosovo Police Data provided to the author January 2018.

⁴⁰ Ibid:



FF's fighters traveling in Syria and Iraq by years⁴¹

In the period between 2012 and 2013 around 135 Kosovo citizens returned to the country from the conflict in Syria. This period coincides with the rise of the “Caliphate” and the ensuing clashes between IS and other Islamic rival groups that were then active in Syria and Iraq.



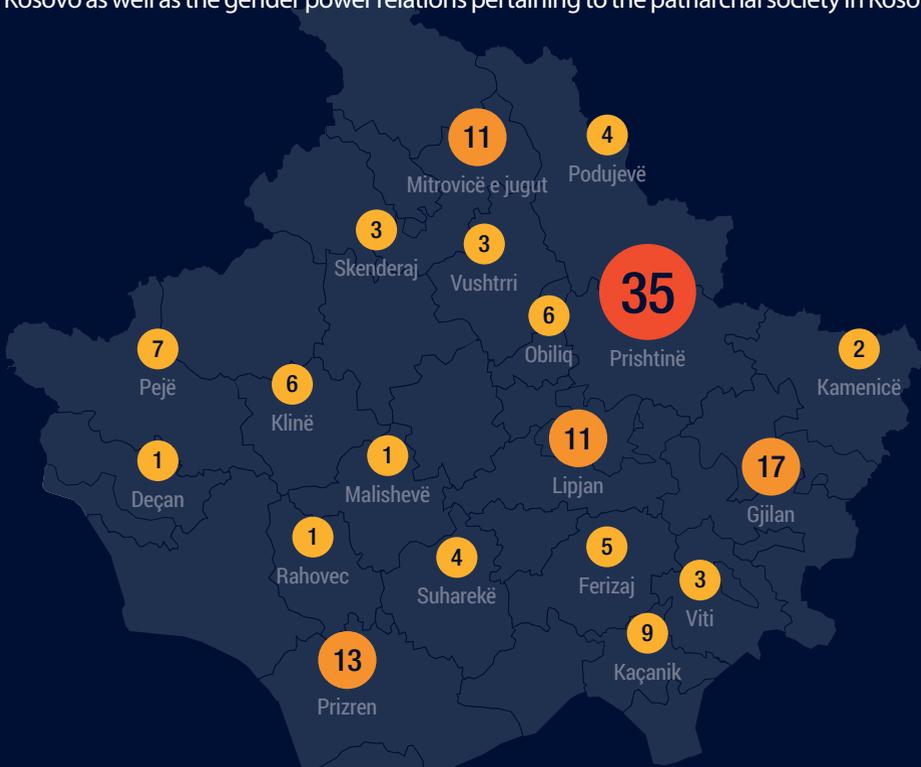
Return of Kosovo foreign fighters through years⁴²

41 Ibid:

42 Kosovo Police Data provided to the author, January 2018.

KOSOVO FAMILIES TRAVELING TO SYRIA AND IRAQ

In addition to foreign fighters, a large number of families have followed their fathers and husbands to the IS-controlled territory. Around 143⁴³ families from Kosovo have traveled to Syria and Iraq. In most cases their travel was initiated or imposed by a senior family member. There are different reasons cited by the families of foreign fighters from Kosovo on their decision to travel to the war zones, ranging from their willingness to live under the rules of the “Islamic State” to lack of alternatives in Kosovo as well as the gender power relations pertaining to the patriarchal society in Kosovo.



Number of Kosovo’s families that traveled to IS-controlled territory by municipality⁴⁴

⁴³ Ibid:

⁴⁴ Kosovo Police data provided to the author

The appeal of the utopia promised to the audience in Kosovo by the Islamic State representatives was one of the key pull factors that moved these individuals to seek a life in the “Caliphate,” led by the belief that they would contribute to the creation of the “perfect society.” As the mother of a Kosovo foreign fighter from the region of Gjilan⁴⁵ recently said, “my son was a very good student in Prishtina, and he never encountered any kind of violence here in the region of Gjilan or in Prishtina. Once the Caliphate was established, he decided to go to practice and live the religion freely, free from the judgment of others.”

Another factor was the gender power relations in the family. The patriarchy, which is still highly prevalent as a system of hierarchy in Kosovo, was decisive in moving family members to IS-controlled territory.⁴⁶ In most cases, women and children were pressured by the senior man in the family to travel with them to join IS and other terrorist organizations. The women have found themselves without the alternative but to follow their husbands.⁴⁷ Confronted with such power relations in the society, women could not count on the support of their community or extended families to resist the orders of their husbands or fathers.⁴⁸ An additional factor was the lack of support from state mechanism to prevent women from travelling to war zones in the Middle East. Further, some of the women involved are often unaware of the instruments at disposal for their protection and generally lack courage to report the pressure exerted on them by their husbands.⁴⁹ There are two main reasons that explain this behavior: firstly, the lack of trust in state institutions to address such issues and secondly, they are reluctant to report these cases to the authorities due to concerns about their personal safety.⁵⁰

The self-isolation of the families of foreign fighter from the rest of the community is one of the factors that made these families more vulnerable to radicalization and violent extremism.⁵¹ Some of the families that traveled to the Middle East harbored radical religious views and considered those that did not share the same values as non-believers. These families said they

45 Interview with the family of the FF from Vitia, November 2017

46 Interview with the sociologist from Kosovo, December 2017

47 Interview with the FTF parent from Prishtina. March 2018

48 Ibid:

49 Interview with the mother of women from Podujeva which is present in Syria and Iraq. February 2018

50 Ibid;

51 Interview with the FF family from Mitrovica, December 2017, and Interview with the FF from Prizren, January 2018

felt that they could not practice their religion freely in a secular Kosovo society and they saw the “Caliphate” as a viable alternative.⁵²

The communities in Kosovo were also reserved and shied away from interaction with the conservative families of foreign fighters due to their practice of the religion. However, this report found that in many instances the isolation of the radical families of foreign fighters was self-inflicted and less due to the stigmatization by the community in which they reside. A family from Mitrovica, for example, confessed that they do not have any relationship with the community where they live, and that it does not seek out “any communication with neighbors and community because of the religion.”⁵³ The families’ perception was that the authorities and the community are prejudiced against them due to their religious orientation, making them feel alienated by the community and the authorities.⁵⁴ These views and perceptions of isolation whether self-inflicted, imagined or real appear to make religious families in Kosovo more vulnerable to radicalization and violent extremism.

Prior to the establishment of the “Caliphate” on July 2014, only 15 Kosovo’s families traveled to Syria and Iraq. After the declaration of the “Caliphate,” between 2014 and 2015, around 108 families of foreign fighters moved to IS-controlled territory in hopes of settling down in the “Caliphate” as it was thriving economically, financially and militarily.⁵⁵

In 2016 and 2017 only four families of foreign fighters from Kosovo traveled to Syria and Iraq. Among the factors that contributed to the decreasing number of families traveling to IS territory⁵⁶ were the defeat of ISIS, the stepped up control of Kosovo’s borders and the disillusionment of foreign fighters with IS.⁵⁷

52 Ibid:

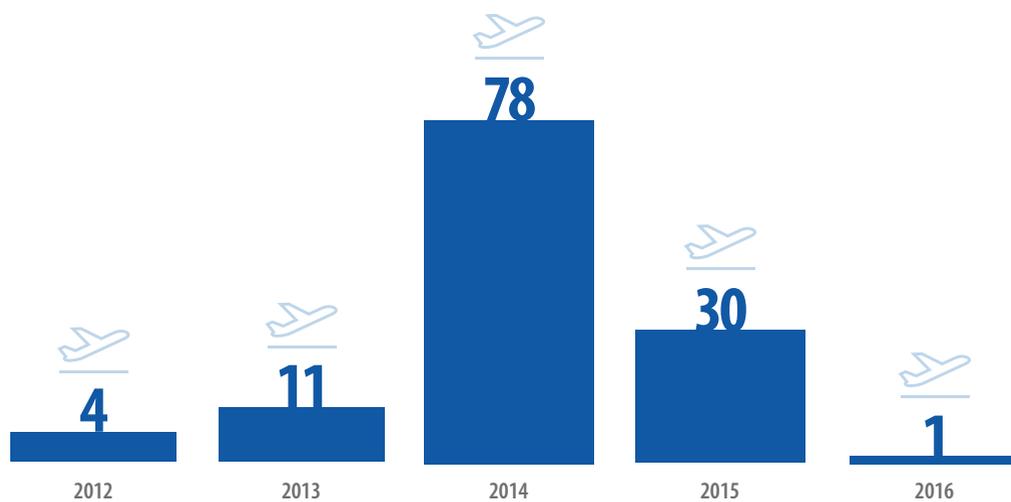
53 Interview with the parent of FF from Mitrovica, November 20, 2017

54 Ibid:

55 Kosovo Police data provided for the author, January 2018.

56 Ibid:

57 Kosovo Police data provided for the author, January 2018.



FFs families that traveled to Syria/Iraq through the years⁵⁸

58 Kosovo Police data provided for the author, January 2018. Interview with the returned FF from Ferizaj, October 2018.

A TICKING BOMB: THE RETURNED FOREIGN FIGHTERS AND IS SYMPATHIZERS IN KOSOVO?

In Europe, around 1 in 360 returnees were involved or planned an attack upon their return from fighting alongside IS and other terrorist organizations.⁵⁹ The majority of terrorist attacks internationally were carried out by sympathizers or ideologically connected to IS without being physically part of it.

IS sympathizers were involved in some of the most prominent attacks in Europe: the Nice attack in July 2016, attacks in the German cities of Ansbach and Würzburg in the same month (July 2016) the attack on a Berlin Christmas market in December 2016, and the London Parliament attack in March 2017. These attacks are examples that best illustrate the potent threat posed by sympathizers in Europe who did not foster a relationship with the terrorist organization.⁶⁰

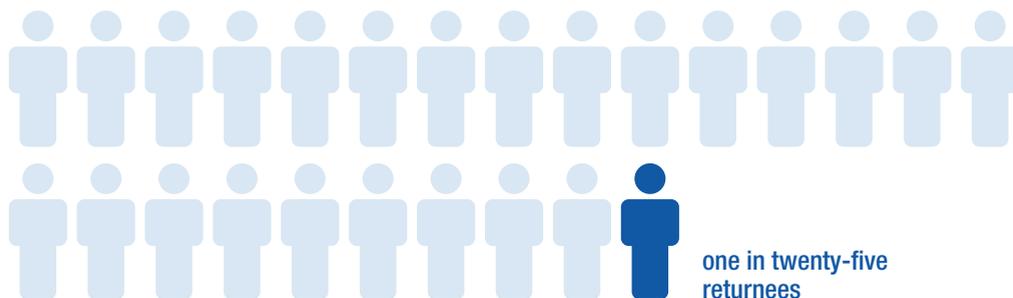
To date there have been no terrorist attacks in Kosovo. Returned foreign fighters have been involved in planning terrorist plots, but Kosovo authorities foiled their execution.⁶¹ According to our database, of the 135 returned foreign fighters, 5 were involved in terrorist plots, or one in twenty-five returnees, a much higher prevalence than the European average.⁶² However, this ratio suggests that IS sympathizers or home-grown terrorists are going to pose more of an imminent threat to national security than the returned foreign fighters, who are already identified by the authorities and whose activities are frequently monitored.

59 [ibid](#):

60 Reed, A., Pohl, J., Jegering, M. (2017) "The Four Dimensions of the Foreign Fighter Threat: Making Sense of an Evolving Phenomenon" <https://icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/ICCT-Reed-Pohl-The-Four-Dimensions-of-the-Foreign-Fighters-Threat-June-2017.pdf>

61 KCSS database on terrorist threats in Kosovo since independence. January 2018

62 Kursani, Sh. (2017) "KOSOVO RISK ASSESSMENT REPORT SINCE INDEPENDENCE FEBRUARY 2008 – JUNE 2017" QKSS, http://www.qkss.org/repository/docs/KS-RiskAssessment-eng_201377.pdf

135 returned foreign fighters, **5** were involved in terrorist plots

One of the key factors that accounts for the relatively low participation of former foreign fighters in terrorist plots at home appears to be their repentance for joining IS and subscribing to its ideology. However, their low participation could also be a function of the efforts of Kosovo security authorities in mid-2014 who acted swiftly to detain the overwhelming majority of those that returned from the Islamic State and placed them under close surveillance ever since.⁶³ That said, returned foreign fighters and their reintegration challenge provide a cautionary tale for all European countries that have been touched by this phenomenon. As the Kosovo case study implies, in some instances returned foreign fighters become involved, adding their know-how and utilizing their network to further IS goals albeit through different tactics. There are two terrorist cases where the returned foreign fighters were involved. In one such case, known as “Israel case” Kosovo Police arrested 22 individuals suspected of planning to attack the Israeli national football team during a World Cup qualifying match, which took place in neighboring Albania. Of the 22 suspects, one was a returned IS foreign fighter. The rest were sympathizers.

In the second case, known as “Badovc case,” police arrested 5 individuals as they were filming an IS propaganda video targeting Kosovo’s audience. Two of the suspects were returned foreign fighters. Similarly, in the third terrorist plot thwarted by Kosovo Police in 2013 in Prishtina and southeastern town of Gjilan, out of seven suspects arrested by the police, two were returned foreign fighters.⁶⁴

63 Ibid:

64 Ibid:

The majority of the Kosovo's returned foreign fighters who participated in fighting in Syria and Iraq underwent trial in Kosovo courts. They refused to plea guilty and have instead criticized state authorities and their work against violent extremism and radicalization in Kosovo as bias against pious Muslims.⁶⁵ The lack of repentance and remorse for their participation in a terrorist organization is perhaps the most obvious indicator that those individuals are still adherents of violent extremism ideology, deepening concerns that they could further radicalization efforts in Kosovo.

The returned foreign fighters will continue to pose a threat or to affect the others in Kosovo such as siblings and other relatives as they will often disseminate violent extremist ideologies as bearers of personal accounts of conflicts in Syria and Iraq and their particular sense of pride in participating in the establishment of the "Islamic State." In addition, those that were killed in conflicts in Syria/Iraq will affect their community in Kosovo by providing a story of martyrdom that those loyal to them may follow in Kosovo or in the Middle East.

There are already indications that point to the validity of this argument. For instance, in July 2018 Kosovo Police in Skenderaj arrested a relative of two former part of six individuals which were arrested, foreign fighters killed in Syria. The arrest took place after police intercepted his plans to conduct a terrorist attack in Kosovo.⁶⁶ The case is evidence to the subtle influence that former foreign fighters will play in their communities. For one, the siblings of the foreign fighters and their family members stay connected and following the arrests of their relatives those ties were further strengthened.⁶⁷ Another case that provides further proof of the huge impact of foreign fighters on their siblings and relatives is the thwarted plot of June 2018 of two individuals, a man and a woman, who planned to attack NATO's peacekeeping force in Kosovo and the country's police. A 26 year-old Kosovar with Belgian citizenship planned to carry out the terrorist attacks in Kosovo and Belgium. The main suspect's plan was for his girlfriend to carry out a suicide bombing against KFOR and in popular places for crowds in Kosovo.⁶⁸ The suspect's girlfriend is the sister of G.H arrested by Kosovo Police for tentative producing an IS propaganda video. These two cases illustrate the closely-knit network of for-

65 Declaration of one individual which were planned to attack the Israeli national soccer team. For more please see: <https://www.evropaelire.org/a/izraeli-ndeshja-sulmi-shqiperia/29235667.html>

66 Ibid:

67 Observations from the interview with the FF's family from Gjilan. September June 2018. Interview with FF's family from Prizren February 2018.

68 "New details related to tentative terrorist plot against KFOR" Prishtina, June 2018. For more please see: <https://kallxo.com/detaje-te-reja-nga-tentim-sulmi-kunder-kfor-it/>

eign fighters and their families and their level of coordination in spreading violent extremist ideologies.

Currently, there is a high number of Kosovo foreign fighters who are still present in IS-held territory. The Kosovo Government has expressed its willingness to facilitate their return to Kosovo, in particular of women and children, who are considered as non-combatants. While Kosovo's government has claimed that through this decision they are taking up their share of responsibility, the decision to bring back Kosovo's foreign fighters will represent one of the main security threats to country's national security due to their potential to further radicalization in Kosovo. The majority of those that remain in conflict areas are currently residing in Kurdish camps in Syria close to the border with Turkey and in international camps in Turkey.

Without prior planning and programs to facilitate their return, the reintegration of former foreign fighters will be one of the toughest challenges yet to the Kosovo government and its law enforcement agencies due to the resistance of the society to welcome these individuals back in their fold.

The most challenging part of this process will be the integration of over 40 children who remain in former IS-held territory. Some of these children were born in a different environment, were raised in a different culture to parents who adhered to an extremist ideology making it extremely difficult for stakeholders in Kosovo to work on their deradicalization. The rest are children who were 10 or 12 when they have traveled to Syria and Iraq and are now 16 and hence already exposed to IS ideology,⁶⁹ which has already impacted their personality and behavior.⁷⁰ In the long-term, these individuals will become the ultimate threat to Kosovo's national security.

69 KCSS database 2018.

70 Interview with the Kosovo expert on VE. July 2018

KOSOVO FIGHTERS FROM DIASPORA

A considerable number of Kosovo's individuals who joined the IS and other terrorist organizations in Syria and Iraq are from diaspora but have Kosovo origin. Out of the 255 foreign fighters from Kosovo who have traveled to Syria and Iraq, 48 individuals or 20 % of Kosovo's total FTF⁷¹ are young individuals who have no relations to Kosovo or are born in another country. These individuals migrated to western European countries during the 1990s or were born to immigrant parents who moved there after they settled in these countries thirty years ago.

The graph below shows that the highest number of Kosovo's individuals who joined IS are from Germany, a total of 14, followed by 6 individuals from Switzerland and four from the United States of America.⁷² Some of these individuals returned to Kosovo or in their home countries after their stint with IS, while the rest were killed in combat.



Kosovo foreign fighters from Kosovo and Diaspora

71 Kosovo Police Data provided to the author, January 2018.

72 Ibid:

Over the years, the participation of some members of the Kosovo's diaspora in international terrorist attacks has become a major point of concern. Most of those involved were individuals that do not have strong ties to Kosovo, but who represent the younger generation of migrants who have left Kosovo with their families at an early age during the 1990s conflicts in the Balkans. One such example is the one involving two brothers, Hysen Sherifi (29 years old at the time of detention) and Shkumbin Sherifi (23 at the time of detention), who have been convicted by the federal court of the Eastern District of North Carolina in the US for plotting to behead federal agents.⁷³ The elder Sherifi issued such threats from his prison cell, while he enlisted his younger brother in the planning of the attack together with other individuals. Both brothers and their family members immigrated to the US during the 1990s at a very young age.⁷⁴ Another similar example includes the case of Arid Uka, who shot two American soldiers at the Frankfurt Airport in 2011 following 9/11 attacks in the US. Uka was born in 1990s in Germany, where his family migrated from Kosovo some forty years ago.⁷⁵

Other incidents involving members of Kosovo's diaspora took place in Turkey and Iraq. In Turkey, a man of Kosovo origin was involved in a shoot-out in the province of Nigde in March 2012, leaving three people dead and many injured Turkish soldiers and police officers. In Iraq, Blerim Heta, a man of Kosovo origin who joined IS from UK where he resided, in March 2014 killed around 50 people in a suicide bombing attack in Baghdad.⁷⁶ Most recently, in June 2018 Kosovo Police arrested a man of Kosovo origin who grew up in Belgium and possessed Belgian citizenship in the midst of plotting a terrorist attack on NATO-led peacekeepers in Kosovo. His intention was to carry out terrorist attacks in Kosovo and Belgium in close collaboration with his girlfriend, who is the sister of another Kosovo individual arrested for terrorist activities.⁷⁷

73 US Department of Justice, "Convicted Terrorist Sentenced to Life in Prison for Plotting to Kill Witnesses in His Terrorism Trial," (2013) <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/convicted-terrorist-sentenced-life-prison-plotting-kill-witnesses-his-terrorism-trial>.

74 "Convicted US Terrorist Plotter Commissioned 'Murder-for-Hire Hit Men to Behead Witnesses for \$5,000 a Head' While in Prison," DailyMail Online (2012) Available at <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2092141/Hysen-Sherifi-US-terrorist-plotter-commissioned-hit-men-beheadwitnesses-prison.html>;

75 The Guardian, "Kosovan Albanian Admits Killing Two US Airmen in Frankfurt Terror Attack," The Guardian, August 31, 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/aug/31/kosovan-albanian-admits-killing-airmen>

76 Likmeta, B. (2014) "Turkey Arrests Albanians After 'Terror' Attack" Balkan Insight, Available at <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/three-albanians-arrested-in-turkey-terror-attack>.

77 "Detaje të reja nga tentim sulmi ndaj Kforit" June 2018, Prishtina. For more see: <https://kallxo.com/detaje-te-reja-nga-tentim-sulmi-kunder-kforit/>

The cases mentioned above are a testament to the radicalization risks of Kosovo's diaspora and the risk of their engagement in terrorist plots. While this risk does not pertain solely to Kosovo's diaspora as the violent extremism phenomenon has touched upon various layers of Western societies, this report argues that it carries a great threat for this particular community due to the cultural marginalization, challenges of assimilation and confusion over identity.

Hence, given Kosovo's large diaspora and its political and economic influence in Kosovo there is an urgent need to increase Kosovo's outreach to counter violent extremism in the ranks of its diaspora. This is especially relevant among the diaspora youth who at times sit in the margins of the Western societies, unable to fully integrate and hence an easy prey to groups advocating radicalization and violent extremism. In this vein, Kosovo's government and Kosovo's Islamic Association should increase their cooperation to monitor the religious education provided to Kosovo's diaspora.

CONTINUOUS RADICALIZATION OF FTF FAMILIES

The foreign fighter and violent extremism phenomenon affected a great number of families in Kosovo. There are two categories of families that were affected. The first category consists of families whose relatives joined the IS, but the family was not radicalized as a whole. These families made great efforts to prevent their relatives from traveling to Syria and Iraq.⁷⁸ This category maintains cooperation with state authorities in trying to address the radicalization and violent extremism in Kosovo and in trying to bring back their relatives who remain in Syria. The families are not ideologically affected by violent extremism and radicalization. In these instances the radicalized family members usually experience a falling out with the other part of the family as they try to sway each other in their system of values. These families have a strong relationship with the community, relatives and state authorities.⁷⁹ The majority of the families of foreign fighters fall in this category.

The second category consists of families of foreign fighters who are ideologically affected by violent extremism and radicalization. The report found that they are very conservative families, stigmatized and isolated from the community and relatives, and have limited or no interaction with state authorities.⁸⁰ These families maintain that the decision of their relatives to join the IS and participate in the conflicts in Syria and Iraq was justified. They perceive the activities of the police and other institutions as biased and consider de-radicalization efforts as an anti-Muslim agenda.⁸¹ They continue to rely for help and support on religious-based organizations or likeminded individuals who are still active in Kosovo. This assistance is received in the form of rent, food and coverage of other daily expenses. They remain skeptical of any kind of support from the state authorities.⁸²

78 Interview with brother of FTF from Gjilan region, December 2017

79 Interview with the FTF family members from Mitrovica, November 2017

80 Interview with the father of FTF family member from Prizren December 2017

81 Interview with the FTF family members from region of Gjilan, December 2017

82 Ibid;

The radicalization and ideology of violent extremism are still prevalent in the conservative and radicalized families of foreign fighters. According to a parent from Prizren, “the jail is a privilege which Allah gave to my son for his efforts to protect Muslims and Allah. With the support of Allah, my son will past this challenge.”⁸³ This is evidence of the extent to which some families of foreign fighters have radicalized.

These are families of foreign fighters who reject any interaction with the community and the state authorities and maintain their ties with religious organizations and religious informal groups who fill the vacuum left by the state authorities. In most cases, the individuals who support the radicalized families of foreign fighters are close friends of the foreign fighters. Often these individuals and the religious formal and non-formal groups prevent the radicalized families to establish contact with the community or the state authorities, hindering any future efforts for their participation in reintegration activities.

In the meantime, the state authorities at the local and central level are failing to come to the assistance of the families of foreign fighters and to understand their basic needs and concerns. By letting them deal with various challenges on their own they are indirectly contributing to their further isolation and allowing informal groups to fill the gap quickly. In most cases, the radical families of foreign fighters are the poorest families in their community, often condemned to various health problems that they cannot address due to their financial situation. For example, the family of a foreign fighter from Prizren and Hani i Elezit is the town’s poorest family. The only person capable of working is in prison and the family has no means and no income. They do not own a home and for shelter and food they depend on a network of foreign fighter friends and religious organizations. This family never requested support from the local authorities, allowing religious informal groups to control the relationship and the interactions⁸⁴ A similar example was encountered during the course of the research for this report in the region of Mitrovica.⁸⁵

Despite the refusal of the radical families of foreign fighters to communicate and establish a relationship with state authorities, the government should do its best and intervene in these cases to prevent further radicalization.

83 Interview with the father of FTF family member from Prizren December 2017

84 Interview with the father of FTF family member from Prizren December 2017

85 Interview with the FTF family members from Mitrovica, November 2017

CONCLUSIONS

Following the defeat of IS, terrorist organizations around the globe have changed their strategy of action. As a result, the threat from violent extremism and terrorism has shifted its dynamics in globally and locally. With IS no longer in search for foreign fighters to participate in the battlefield, a new threat of home-based attacks according to IS ideology emerged. The shift in strategy has led to an increase of terrorist attacks in Europe, the majority of which were conducted by “lone wolf” attackers.

Similar trends were witnessed in the past two years in Kosovo, where authorities have successfully prevented several terrorist plots in Kosovo by identifying the individuals involved in the planned attacks that led to their arrest.

To date, most of Kosovo’s foreign fighters that returned after fighting with IS are standing trial or have been convicted for their engagement with terrorist activities. Despite the high number of the returned foreign fighters to Kosovo, their engagement in terrorist activity is relatively low. Out of 135 foreign fighters who returned to Kosovo after a stint with IS in Syria and Iraq, 5 were involved in planning terrorist attacks or other incidents in Kosovo.

Despite the drastically reduced flow of foreign fighters from Kosovo to Syria and Iraq, the level of threat and the dissemination of extremist ideology have not changed. There is an increasing number of sympathizers who never managed to join IS in the conflict zones but remain ideologically loyal to the IS.

These sympathizers are often found in the networks of IS foreign fighters, such as families or distant friends and relatives. Contributing to their radicalization is the lack of the relationship between the state mechanisms and the ideologically radical families who find support in informal groups and reject any cooperation with the state.

A similar challenge is posed by Kosovo’s large diaspora. As official data reveals, a high number of FTF’s of Kosovo are from diaspora and there is a growing concern that upon their radicalization in Western European countries they will increasingly look to Kosovo as a place where they could stage attacks or expand their ideological network of IS sympathizers.

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