



INTERNATIONAL TERRORISM, A THREAT PRESENT IN KOSOVO

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Abstract:

This article deals with the threats posed by international terrorism to the security environment in Kosovo, with a particular focus on the period of the emergence of ISIS, when a large number of fighters from Kosovo joined terrorist organisations in the conflict zone of Syria and Iraq. This article attempts to explain the general factors leading to the rise of violent extremism and religious radicalism in Kosovo, as well as why Kosovar fighters joined ISIS. In particular, it examines the institutional responses to counter-terrorism in Kosovo, the elimination of conditions and factors conducive to extremism and radicalism, and the weaknesses of Kosovo institutions in countering terrorism.

Key Words: Security, Terrorism, Kosovo, Security Strategy.

Titulo en Castellano: El terrorismo internacional, una amenaza presente en Kosovo

Resumen:

Este artículo aborda las amenazas que plantea el terrorismo internacional en el entorno de seguridad en Kosovo, con especial atención al periodo de surgimiento del ISIS, cuando un gran número de combatientes de Kosovo se unieron a organizaciones terroristas en la zona de conflicto de Siria e Irak. El artículo trata de explicar los factores generales que condujeron al auge del extremismo violento y el radicalismo religioso en Kosovo, así como las razones por las que combatientes kosovares se unieron al ISIS. En particular, examina las respuestas institucionales a la lucha antiterrorista en Kosovo, la eliminación de las condiciones y los factores que propician el extremismo y el radicalismo y las deficiencias de las instituciones kosovares en la lucha contra el terrorismo.

Palabras Clave: Seguridad, Terrorismo, Kosovo, estrategia de seguridad.

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1. Introduction

In the fight against contemporary international terrorism, it has already been demonstrated that traditional approaches of state actors through repressive mechanisms alone are not sufficient. What is needed is a comprehensive approach that, besides the repressive aspect, also focuses on addressing socio-economic aspects and eliminating the conditions and circumstances that lead to violent extremism and terrorism. An efficient reaction against terrorism requires the involvement and cooperation of all public institutions, civil society, international organizations, and citizens. This approach has proven to be successful in Kosovo, even though steps in its direction were taken a bit late, only after the significant emergence of the phenomenon of citizens from Kosovo joining the ISIS group.

Kosovo, a country with a majority Muslim population, traditionally known for interreligious harmony, provided space, after the end of the conflict in 1999, for the operation of many religious organizations from Gulf countries. These organizations operated without proper institutional oversight. These organizations, operating under the guise of humanitarian work, engaged in activities that indoctrinated citizens into the streams of radical Islam, and their influence was later reflected in the adoption of ideas of political Islam and in the joining of many Kosovo citizens in the wars waged by ISIS.

In the case of Kosovo, it is argued that the theory of “structural models of Islamic terrorist groups, operating as a network organization” is applicable, extending their influence through different organizations or spreading extremism through different forms of messages, utilizing a global religious language to create an understanding of global politics that divides the world in two.² This promotion of the extremist approach to interpreting Islam religion in Kosovo has been carried out by organizations from Gulf countries, which have also invested in the education of local imams. These imams have, in turn, become active in spreading this extremist interpretation in the society.

Taking advantage of the circumstances of a war-torn society, with fragile institutions and a grave economic situation, the penetration of “humanitarian” organizations from Gulf countries found a completely open ground, without proper oversight.

This article contributes to the analysis of organizational and operational characteristics of transnational Islamic terrorism in Kosovo, where it is argued that the expansion of their influence in Kosovo was done through “humanitarian” organizations from Gulf countries, which led to the rise of religious extremism and, consequently, to the adoption of political Islamic ideas. The paper argues on the impact of threats from transnational terrorism on changing approaches to security in Kosovo, the conditions and circumstances that motivated fighters from Kosovo to join the ISIS organization, as well as institutional measures taken in Kosovo to fight extremism and terrorism.

In this context, this article develops the hypothesis that threats from transnational Islamic terrorism are evident in Kosovo and that institutional measures to fight these threats were a bit late. However, this paper argues that the undertaking of multiple measures with an interactive approach in Kosovo, by addressing socio-economic aspects, religious education, the treatment of motivating factors for extremism and terrorism, as well as the interstate cooperation, has proved to be successful in the case of Kosovo.

² Brown Katherine: “Transnational Terrorism”, *E-International Relations*, (19 Jan. 2017), pp. 1-7, at <https://www.e-ir.info/pdf/67453>



2 International terrorism - Al Qaeda and ISIS

After the September 11 attack against the United States, Al-Qaeda transformed into a myth, as a successful organization in carrying out military attacks abroad. This organization claimed to be able to carry out attacks all over the world by financially, logistically and materially assisting smaller groups that joined the organization themselves. Such claims were realized in many cases, because Al-Qaeda promoted a global ideology that connected local causes together through an image of world politics, portraying Muslims worldwide as victims of Western oppression. This approach enabled them to function and replicate on a global scale.³

Al-Qaeda has drawn the attention of numerous scholars from various fields, as well as military strategists, who have focused on analyzing its organizational structure, ways of thinking and behavioral patterns. Attention was specially paid to its organizational strategy, propaganda, ideology, operational capability, leadership competence and its sustainability.

The case of Al-Qaeda, as a terrorist organization, reveals the global character of Islamic terrorism. This organization quickly transformed itself into an important actor in the international terrorist scene⁴. The seat of its leadership has moved several times to different countries such as Sudan, Afghanistan, Yemen, etc., while its operation is considered global. Al-Qaeda, as an organization, is considered unique, compared to previous groups, due to its organization, recruitment method, financing, and use of modern means of communication. Al-Qaeda is a dynamic organization, with continuous contacts with a wider group of Muslims from many countries of the world.⁵

The ability of terrorist groups, like Al-Qaeda, and ISIS as well, to operate on a large global scale is increased by relying on economic resources at their disposal. The Islamic State can serve as an example in this regard, which held control over oil resources, using them to finance its activities⁶. Such terrorist organizations with a global ideology also find it easy to transmit their messages in this period, using great technological developments. This transmission of ideas is facilitated by global media and the internet, and this makes many individuals from different countries of the world identify themselves with such causes and ideologies. In this situation, individuals who join and remain in such transnational organizations do not necessarily have the same motive as the group. The cases of female fighters from Kosovo who joined ISIS wars can be taken as examples in this regard. They do not have any direct connection to the motives of the leading terrorist group. However, they were influenced or indoctrinated through messages disseminated in global media and the internet. Additionally, the operations of organizations from Gulf countries in Kosovo, promoting a radical religious interpretation, succeeded in influencing many citizens to embrace the ideas of political Islam

Such terrorist groups, like Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, succeeded in exerting influence in many countries with Muslim populations, either directly or through networks of various organizations dressed in the guise of humanitarian organizations, utilizing a global religious language to create an understanding of global politics that divides the world in two.⁷ According to their interpretation, the world of Islam, described as a land of goodness, governed

³ Baylis, John; Wirtz, James J.; Cohen, Eliot and Gray, Colin S. (2013): *Strategjia në Botën Bashkëkohore - Hyrje në Sistemet e Strategjisë* (Strategy in the Contemporary World - An Introduction to Strategic Studies) / Tiranë, UET Press, pp. 232-240.

⁴ Ekaterina Stepanova: "Terrorism in Asymmetrical Conflict: Ideological and Structural Aspects", Stockholm International Peace Research Institute - SIPRI Research Report n° 23 (2008), pp. 1-178, pp. 74-85, at <https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/files/RR/SIPRIRR23.pdf>

⁵ Hoffman, Bruce (2006): *Inside Terrorism*, New York, Columbia University Press, pp. 36-38.

⁶ Brown Katherine: "Transnational Terrorism", E-International Relations, (19 Jan. 2017), pp. 1-7, at <https://www.e-ir.info/pdf/67453>

⁷ *Ibid.*



by religious laws, where Muslims are not oppressed, is on one side. Whereas the world of war, where Muslims are oppressed by unjust leaders and tyrants, is on the other side. They argue that because of the global connection that Muslims have with each other as a community of believers, they should join them in the fight against the oppressors. They consider Western countries as enemies, with special emphasis on the USA and all local governments in the Arab world that cooperate with the West. These organizations take advantage of local politics and grievances related to governance or social conditions, connecting them with religious ideologies and blaming the West and governments that do not lead based on religious principles for the difficult state of local communities. With this type of approach, they succeed in getting support and advocacy for their causes. In addition to this, Muslims that resist this jihadist violence and this interpretation are demonized as nonbelievers and, for this reason, they become 'enemies' that can be killed.⁸

In their action strategy, Islamic terrorist groups, like Al-Qaeda and ISIS, focus on selecting targets of attack in order to generate a wide message. The attack in Paris in 2015 by the Islamic State group serves as an illustration in this regard.⁹ The attack in Paris belongs precisely to this strategy of giving a global message, because this city is one of the most visited places in the world. The terrorist group targeted the most frequented spaces in the city, such as: bars, a football stadium, and a place where a rock concert was being held. This type of attack generated the idea that anyone and anywhere is a target of attack, using this strategy to instill widespread fear in many countries and gain significant publicity for the actions of the group.

Another feature of terrorist organizations, like Al-Qaeda and ISIS, is that their activities are designed to provoke states into action, as well as generate widespread fear among citizens. The attacks of these groups are often carried out in symbolic places and premises, as well as in locations where high casualties can be caused, in order to make the given state react severely. The September 11, 2011 attacks are included precisely in this strategy.¹⁰ After this attack, it would be inconceivable, for example, that the United States would not respond with great severity, or after the attack in Paris, that France would not react strongly. These types of attacks by such terrorist groups are designed to provoke states to take radical actions to protect civilians, especially actions that can undermine the democratic values of western societies, with the aim of inciting internal dissatisfaction for coercive and restrictive measures undertaken by governments, in the name of protection, regarding human rights. As far as this approach is concerned, some scholars have argued that European counter-terrorism policies are more reactionary than effective because they follow a pattern of reaction against terrorism, restricting human rights in the name of security.¹¹

Such terrorist organizations require considerable logistical and organizational capabilities to manage their resources, due to the spreading of their network in many countries. One of the main claims about terrorist groups, like Al-Qaeda, is that they are not hierarchical in structure but rather like scattered cells, even anarchical, that are not controlled only by a single official leader. Such terrorist groups are becoming increasingly decentralized, benefiting from new technologies, forms of communication and other aspects of globalization.

One of the very worrying processes in terms of security in relation to Islamic terrorist organizations is their collaboration with organized crime in various criminal processes such as money laundering, purchase and sale of weapons and various equipment. The interaction between them is certainly of mutual interest, since criminals can provide terrorist groups

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Brown Katherine: "Transnational Terrorism", *E-International Relations*, (19 Jan. 2017), pp. 1-7, at <https://www.e-ir.info/pdf/67453>

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*



everything they demand, whereas terrorists provide security for their illegal trade in areas where they can control them, as well as in states with failed regimes. In the U.S. Government National Strategy for Combating Terrorism (2006), it is emphasized: “Terrorists exploit failed states, using them to plan, organize and prepare for operations.”¹² In this regard, we have the state of Pakistan as an example, which turned into a place where terrorists were sheltered, and it was even used as a shelter by the Al-Qaeda leader, Osama bin Laden.¹³

The fight against transnational Islamic terrorism is a global challenge and no country, regardless of its military and economic power, can provide a proper response to this phenomenon with an individual approach. Terrorism requires a globally coordinated response from the international community. In this war, all states must be coordinated in the development of effective operational measures to combat terrorism at the international level. Combating terrorism and violent extremism successfully and in the long term requires a comprehensive approach that focuses on addressing political, social, and economic causes. A further goal is to strengthen the structures of the rule of law and train them to cope with this asymmetrical conflict. No doubt, respect for human rights is a key issue in this direction and this imposes a balanced approach while undertaking measures against terrorism, because, in the end, one of the goals of such terrorist organizations is to touch upon this foundation of democratic societies and encourage them to undertake severe restrictions in order to violate human rights and thus incite internal resentment against governments.¹⁴ In the case of Kosovo, it is clearly proven that this type of terrorism cannot be fought only with a traditional security approach. It requires a multifaceted approach and a coordinated interinstitutional and inter-state action. The approach of the Republic of Kosovo against terrorism focused on strengthening cooperation between law enforcement and security agencies; receiving, evaluating and quickly exchanging information; training specialized cyber structures; making necessary legal changes in criminal legislation, where participation in foreign wars was defined as a criminal offense; drafting plans and strategies for the rehabilitation of returnees from the war zones of Syria and Iraq; designing and implementing socio-economic programs in the zones or families that were identified as the key bases for the recruitment of jihadist volunteers; cooperating with the leaders of the Islamic religious community for proper religious education with the aim of de-radicalizing persons that returned from war zones, as well as a close cooperation with the united international community against terrorism.¹⁵

From the analysis of the structural models of Islamic terrorism, it is observed that such terrorist groups operate in a form of organizational network and this method of organization is particularly evident in Al-Qaeda, and later in ISIS as well.¹⁶ This way of organization has gained strength in an era of rapid development of information and communication technologies. In this information age, network structures appear to have some important advantages compared to the other organizational forms. For example, compared to the hierarchical structures that usually dominated in terrorist groups before, these terrorist organizations, operating in the form of a network, are more flexible, more mobile; they better adapt to changing circumstances, and

¹² The White House: National Strategy for Combating Terrorism, September 2006, at <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/nsc/nsc2006/>

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Ghosh, Shreyasi: “Understanding Terrorism in the Context of Global Security”, *Socrates Journal* Vol. 2, n° 2 (2014), p. 98, at <https://www.socratesjournal.com/index.php/SOCRATES/article/view/27>

¹⁵ Qeveria e Kosovës, *Strategjia për Parandalimin e Ekstremizmit të Dhunshëm dhe Radikalizmin që Shpie në Terrorizëm - 2015-2020* (Government of Kosovo, Strategy on Prevention of Violent Extremism and Radicalization Leading to Terrorism), at http://www.kryeministri-ks.net/repository/docs/STRATEGY_parandalim_-_ENG.pdf

¹⁶ Stepanova, Ekaterina: “Terrorism in Asymmetrical Conflict, Ideological and Structural Aspects”, *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute - SIPRI Research Report n° 23* (2008), pp. 128-135, at <https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/files/RR/SIPRI23.pdf>



are more stable during system shocks and times of crisis. The advantage of this organization is that a certain structure should have this direct connection with its main elements. From this perspective, the main characteristic of these groups is their non-hierarchical and decentralized character. Such groups gain considerable advantages in asymmetrical confrontation against less flexible and less mobile state structures. The lack of a strict hierarchy and of a single structured central leadership that exercises direct control over its subordinate units complicates the task of destroying these movements. This decentralized organization pattern is noted to have been employed a lot, especially by Al-Qaeda.¹⁷

Based on the organization and operation principles of Islamic terrorist organizations with transnational operation, security experts started to label these threats as new threats, and assessed that a new strategic model is needed to confront this phenomenon. To argue that transnational Islamic terrorism presents a completely new threat in relation to security, they raised several main claims: *“The claim that transnational terrorism, with groups operating without geographically defined targets, requires a strategic reaction, which is different from that required for nationalist groups. The modern communications technology and the availability of technical knowledge have made transnational organizations capable of achieving strategic influence. The frequency of terrorist attacks around the world has increased so much that terrorism must be a major strategic concern. The ideology behind Islamic groups, currently a cause for concern, drives them to pursue a completely new level of destruction.”*¹⁸

Due to the complexity that the Islamic terrorism poses as a threat to security, the counter-response by states must also adapt new strategic forms, and remodel approaches to combat this phenomenon. The forms of threats posed by the transnational Islamic terrorism are highly heterogeneous, and, for this reason, states have found themselves largely unprepared to effectively confront this threat. States, with their security apparatus, were prepared for a completely different nature of threats to security. Their defensive and offensive capabilities were built to confront a well-defined adversary. Whereas in the fight against terrorism, the adversary is not a unified alliance with a centralized organization and control, but rather several smaller, decentralized organizations, it is difficult to establish a clear front line in the fight against them.

In this type of warfare, terrorist groups were seen to have an advantage over the traditional forms of state security, based on the manifestation of several characteristics of these groups: they are agile, dispersed, well-organized organizations, capable of adapting and transforming under pressure. Unlike these groups, states are slow, sluggish, highly hierarchical, and bureaucratic. Although they have the capacity to mobilize many resources to deal with a problem, they cannot do this quickly and efficiently.¹⁹

In the fight against transnational terrorism, the key political and military actors, such as the USA, EU, NATO, and other countries, are reshaping their security strategies and security structures to effectively confront these threats. This new conceptualization of security issues primarily includes matters related to the education and training of security structures and extends to issues concerning the development of military technology. Now, more than ever, security issues are being viewed from the perspective of interaction with various non-state actors, including civil and private entities, in addition to state actors.²⁰

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Baylis, John; Wirtz, James J.; Cohen, Eliot and Gray, Colin S. (2013): *Strategjia në Botën Bashkëkohore - Hyrje në Sistemet e Strategjisë* (Strategy in the Contemporary World - An Introduction to Strategic Studies) / Tiranë, UET Press, p. 357.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* p. 248.

²⁰ *Ibid.* pp. 232-240.



Modern Islamic terrorism is no longer just a subversive structure, hijacking planes, and carrying out kamikaze attacks. The events of the end of the 20th century and of the beginning of the 21st century demonstrate that the current terrorism is capable of waging a subversive and terrorist war, as well as participate in major armed conflicts, as is the case with the terrorist group “ISIS, whose formation officially occurred in 2013 when its creation was announced by the group’s leader, cleric and self-proclaimed caliph, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.”²¹

In 2013, Baghdadi announced the official rebranding of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria - ISIS, while in 2014, he announced the official establishment of the caliphate. This announcement, combined with early military successes in Mosul and Raqqa, caused an influx of thousands of foreign fighters into the region to join ISIS ranks. The phenomenon of foreign terrorist fighters who joined ISIS has become one of the key concerns for many countries and it has contributed to the spread of terrorist threats beyond direct conflict zones.²²

3. Threats from international terrorism in Kosovo

The Republic of Kosovo, located in the Western Balkans region, with a majority Muslim population, traditionally known for practicing a moderate and tolerant form of Islam towards different religious groups, until the end of the war in 1999, had no concerns about conflicts of a religious nature. Even tolerance and coexistence with other religious communities such as Catholic, Orthodox, Bektashi, etc., was a value of Kosovar society that has been cultivated over the centuries. According to its constitution, Kosovo is a secular state, and the ideological and political orientation of the Government of Kosovo is pro-Western, while the vast majority of the Albanian population of Kosovo are moderate Muslims. Citizens of the country have practiced a completely moderate form of Islam over the centuries, coexisting with other religious communities present in Kosovo. According to the 2011 population census in Kosovo, the majority of the population belongs to the Sunni Muslim religion.²³ Before 1999, Kosovo was dominated by a moderate Islam, based on Hanafi school, and the Muslim community was characterized by a high level of interfaith tolerance.

After the international intervention and the end of the war in Kosovo in 1999, a number of international charity organizations provided humanitarian aid to Kosovo and helped rebuild the country. While Western countries have channeled their aid through institutional channels helping to build a democratic society, Gulf countries have used a different approach, supporting poor rural Muslim communities in Kosovo, and using humanitarian relief in exchange for accepting versions of radical Islam.²⁴

A number of organizations from Gulf countries took advantage of socio-economic weaknesses of local communities in Kosovo, especially in rural regions, to indoctrinate particularly young people with radical Islam, which opposed traditional religious practices in Kosovo and inter-ethnic tolerance. The hidden intention behind the humanitarian aid was “to

²¹ Robillard, Michael: “Terrorist Group (ISIS)”, Research Papers, Counter Terrorism Ethics, at: <http://counterterrorismethics.com/terrorist-group-isis/>

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Agjencia e Statistikave të Kosovës, “Regjistrimi i Popullsisë Ekonomive Familjare dhe Banesave në Kosovë 2011 - Popullsia sipas gjinisë, etnicitetit dhe vendbanimit (Kosovo Agency of Statistics, 2011 Population, Households and Housing Census in Kosovo - Population based on gender, ethnicity and residency), at <https://ask.rks-gov.net/media/1613/popullsia-sipas-gjinise-etnicitetit-dhe-vendbanimit.pdf>

²⁴ KIPRED (Instituti Kosovar për Kërkime dhe Zhvillime të Politikave), “Çfarë u ndodhi shqiptarëve të Kosovës: Ndikimi i fesë në identitetin etnik në periudhën e shtet ndërtimit” ((Kosovo Institute for Policy Research and Development, “What happened to Kosovo Albanians: The impact of religion on the ethnic identity in the state building-period”), Policy Paper, n° 1/16, p. 40, at http://www.kipred.org/repository/docs/What_happened_to_Kosovo_Albanians_740443.pdf



control the population's spiritual life, to politicize Islam and to encourage intolerance towards secularism and religious plurality in Kosovo."²⁵

The country's institutions themselves have acknowledged this form of indoctrination in radical Islam, recognizing that the spread of the phenomenon of violent extremism and radicalism in the Republic of Kosovo was done by some NGOs, local and foreign organizations, as well as individuals who embraced radical views.²⁶

The connection between humanitarian organizations originating from Gulf countries and the spread of extremism and religious radicalism in Kosovo was also noted in the U.S. Department of State Country Report on Terrorism 2016, which noted that "The threat of violent Islamist extremism has been growing in Kosovo, assisted in part by funding from foreign organizations that preach extremist ideologies and violent extremist groups actively using social media to spread propaganda and recruit followers."²⁷

What was sown for a ten-year period by some organizations from Gulf countries, finally began to manifest itself in practice in Kosovo. This was initially manifested in the lectures of some religious clerics who showed clear signs of political Islam and of the cultivation of religious extremism among Islamic believers. This then resulted in the participation of fighters from Kosovo in ISIS wars, and even in committing or attempting to commit terrorist attacks in different countries by citizens of Kosovo origin. The lack of proper institutional oversight over the investments of these organizations allowed them to find free ground for operation and unhindered access to carry out their activities.²⁸

Circumstances created from indoctrination into the streams of radical Islam in Kosovo, as a country known for interreligious harmony, influenced the emergence of extremist streams, which then resulted in the participation of Kosovo citizens in terrorist groups like ISIS. This, in fact, resulted in some Kosovars responding to the call to resist the Assad regime in Syria and Iraq, including men, women and children who willingly, and in some cases forcibly, accompanied their partners who were foreign fighters.²⁹

Kosovo began to undertake the first serious actions to combat the phenomenon of religious extremism and religious terrorism from 2014 onwards. On September 17, 2014, Kosovo Police, in cooperation with the State Prosecutor's Office, arrested 15 people, among them 12 imams, on suspicion of having committed criminal offenses against the constitutional order and the security of the Republic of Kosovo.³⁰

From the beginning of 2016, a series of coordinated countermeasures and military operations undertaken against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) succeeded in defeating

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Qeveria e Kosovës, Strategjia për Parandalimin e Ekstremizmit të Dhunshëm dhe Radikalizmin që Shpie në Terrorizëm - 2015-2020 (Government of Kosovo, Strategy on Prevention of Violent Extremism and Radicalization Leading to Terrorism), pp. 9-10, at http://www.kryeministri-ks.net/repository/docs/STRATEGY_parandalim_ENG.pdf

²⁷ U.S. Department of State: National Report on Terrorism 2016, Washington DC, 2017, p. 135, at https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/crt_2016.pdf

²⁸ Kursani, Shpend: "Rishikimi i Literaturës 2017-2018, Ekstremizmi i Dhunshëm në Ballkanin Perëndimor (2019), Forumi i Kërkimit të Ekstremizmit ((Literature review 2017-2018, Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans 2019, Extremism Research Forum), at <https://www.rcc.int/swp/docs/277/extremism-research-forum-literature-review-2017-2018-violent-extremism-in-the-western-balkans-2019rn>

²⁹ Visoka, Gëzim; Beha, Adem, "Hartëzimi i perspektivave vendore mbi radikalizmin në Kosovë", Instituti i Kosovës për Paqe - KIP dhe Community Building Mitrovica - CBM ("The mapping of national perspectives on radicalism in Kosovo"), Kosovo Institute for Peace - KIP and Community Building Mitrovica - CBM, 2021, p. 10, at [https://www.cbmitrovica.org/uploads/RCT/Country_Perspectives_Mapping_\(SHQ\).pdf](https://www.cbmitrovica.org/uploads/RCT/Country_Perspectives_Mapping_(SHQ).pdf)

³⁰ Koha.net, "Zyrtare: 15 të arrestuar për terrorizëm, 16 lokacione të bastisura" ("Officially confirmed: 15 arrested for terrorism, 16 locations raided"), at <https://archive.koha.net/?id=27&l=25692>



this terrorist formation. At the beginning of 2018, ISIS almost lost control of the territory it held in these two countries.³¹ But the loss of ISIS caused fear and panic in different countries, in Kosovo as well, awaiting the influx of returnees to their countries of origin.

When ISIS started to lose the territories that it had under its control after the military intervention against them, this created new threats to the security of European countries, including Balkan countries and Kosovo. These new threats, influenced from abroad, concern, among others, the recruitment of foreign fighters in Kosovo who became part of the ISIS war in the regions of Syria and other territories involved in the conflict. The phenomenon of Kosovo citizens joining this conflict gradually turned into terrorism and violent extremism that grew within Kosovo itself.

The frontal defeat of ISIS resulted in a change in its operational strategy, making the nature of threats increasingly variable. The network of its supporters, scattered across many countries, presents a widespread threat anywhere in the world.

The lack of ISIS control over the territory has led to the increase of its presence in the virtual sphere that continues to ideologically influence and affect individuals who have not had the opportunity to join the Caliphate in order to further the goals of ISIS by other means. This type of strategy has affected many attackers known as “lone wolves” and IS fans around the world, who can launch attacks based on IS goals and in accordance with its ideology.³²

In its early stages, the Caliphate attracted many foreign fighters to Syria and Iraq to join their efforts to establish the so-called “Islamic State”. As of 2012, over 20,000 (twenty thousand) people from all over the world have joined IS. The Utopian image of a life in the Caliphate was one of the main attractive factors.³³

Following the U.S.-led air strikes against ISIS, the organization suffered heavy losses, including control over large parts of the territory and financial resources. The military defeat of ISIS made many foreign fighters feel disillusioned about their decision to join the terrorist organization, as well as the treatment of civilians under its control. After suffering defeats, ISIS began to change its operational strategy. The self-proclaimed Caliph, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, called on Muslims around the world to abandon their decadent homelands and immigrate to the Islamic State.³⁴ The leaders of this group call on their followers to stay where they are and fight the infidels, where it hurts them the most.³⁵

The change of approach by ISIS has contributed to an increase of threats and the growing potential for attacks in Europe and Kosovo, as a significant number of fighters have returned from this group to these regions. In line with the new strategy, ISIS announced that anyone can be a Caliphate soldier, without having to travel to Syria or Iraq or having formal relationships with the organization. According to this approach, ISIS supporters can commit

³¹ Dempsey, M.P. (2017): “The Caliphate Is Destroyed, But the Islamic State Lives On”, Foreign Policy, at: <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/11/22/the-caliphate-is-destroyed-but-the-islamic-state-lives-on/>

³² Mc Cants, W. (2017): “After the fall of ISIS, what’s next for counterterrorism? Experts discuss” Brookings. 3 October 2017, at <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2017/10/03/after-the-fall-of-isis-whats-next-for-counterterrorismexperts-discuss/>

³³ The Soufan Group: Foreign Fighters, An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq, The Soufan Group, December 2015 at https://www.cverefenceguide.org/sites/default/files/resources/TSG_ForeignFightersUpdate3.pdf

³⁴ “Isis leader calls on Muslims to ‘build Islamic state’ (2014), at: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middleeast-28116846>

³⁵ *Ibid.*



“jihad” through attacks against their countries to kill civilians or members of state institutions that oppose the IS ideology.³⁶

The conflict in Syria and Iraq indeed led to the participation of a significant number of fighters from Kosovo and the entire Balkan region in this war. As of 2012, about 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 fighters, but they appear in the official records as participants in the conflict.³⁷

According to the official data, it results that about 403 people from Kosovo joined terrorist organizations in Syria and Iraq. According to these data, about 40 children were born in conflict zones to parents from Kosovo.³⁸ Around 135 individuals have returned to Kosovo and they are being tried in local courts. Roughly 75 fighters from Kosovo are reported to have been killed, while approximately 190 individuals are estimated to have remained in conflict zones.³⁹

A special challenge to the security of the country is presented by fighters returning to Kosovo from war zones, who have been subject to a process of indoctrination in extremist religious ideologies and, this way, they have been motivated to carry out attacks in areas beyond the conflict, in order to serve the ISIS ideology. Foreign fighters, participants in the ISIS war or supporters of the ISIS ideology, proved to pose a danger to the security of many European countries, where these ISIS supporters were involved in several attacks such as: 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 2017.⁴⁰

Despite the fact that no terrorist attacks were carried out in Kosovo by fighters that returned from the war zone, there were serious attempts to do so, but they were successfully prevented by security authorities. At least 5 people from the fighters that returned to Kosovo planned to carry out terrorist attacks.⁴¹ One of the cases that proves the involvement of a returned fighter in planning a terrorist attack is the well-known “Case of Israel”.⁴² Kosovo Police, in cooperation with partner agencies, has arrested 22 people for this case, suspected of planning an attack against Israel’s national football team, during a World Cup qualifying match, which took place in the neighboring Albania. Out of 22 suspects, one was a foreign fighter who returned from ISIS.⁴³ In the other case, known as the “Badovci case,” Kosovo Police arrested 5 people, two of them were part of the fighters that have returned.⁴⁴ While in the third case, which

³⁶ Hassan Hassan: “Its dreams of a caliphate are gone. Now Isis has a deadly new strategy”, The Guardian, 31 December 2017, at: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/dec/31/isis-dreams-of-caliphate-gone-now-deadly-new-strategy>

³⁷ The Soufan Group, *op. cit.*

³⁸ Perteshi, Skender: “Përtej Shkaktarëve: Rreziqet e Reja të Ekstremizmit të Dhunshëm në Kosovë”, Qendra Kosovare për Studime të Sigurisë 08/2018 (“Beyond the triggers: New threats of violent extremism in Kosovo”, Kosovo Center for Security Studies), at https://qkss.org/images/uploads/files/violent-extremism-alb_249565.pdf

³⁹ *ibidem.*

⁴⁰ Reed, A., Pohl, J., Jegering, M. (2017): “The Four Dimensions of the Foreign Fighter Threat: Making Sense of an Evolving Phenomenon”, at <https://icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/ICCT-Reed-Pohl-The-Four-Dimensions-of-the-Foreign-Fighters-Threat-June-2017.pdf>

⁴¹ Perteshi, Skender, *op. cit.*

⁴² Kursani, Shpend: “Vlerësimi i Rrezikut për Kosovën nga Pavarësimi Shkurt 2008 - Qershor 2017” (“Kosovo Risk Assessment Report Since Independence February 2008 - June 2017”), QKSS, at http://www.qkss.org/repository/docs/KS-RiskAssessment-eng_201377.pdf

⁴³ *Ibid*

⁴⁴ *Ibid*



was prevented by Kosovo Police in 2013 in Prishtina and in Gjilan, two of the seven arrested suspects were fighters who had returned from participation in ISIS.⁴⁵

When we talk about the risk posed by foreign fighters of Kosovo origin, who participated in the ISIS organization or other terrorist organizations, Kosovo has a specific characteristic compared to many other countries. Kosovo has a large number of citizens who have migrated over the years to different countries of the European Union or to USA. A number of them ended up joining the ISIS organization or other organizations operating in Syria and Iraq. This category of fighters of Kosovo origin proved to pose a risk not only for Kosovo, but even for the other countries where they lived with their families. Out of the total number of fighters from Kosovo, it resulted that 48 of them are from Kosovo diaspora. The majority of this category of fighters who were involved in attacks in different countries were individuals who do not have strong ties with Kosovo, but they represent the new generation of migrants that left Kosovo with their families at an early age during the wars of 1990s in former Yugoslavia. A case where this category of fighters of Kosovo origin was involved in terrorist conspiracies is the case of two brothers, Hysen and Shkumbin Sherifi, who were convicted by the United States District Court for the Eastern District of North Carolina, for plotting to behead federal agents.⁴⁶

Other cases where members of the Kosovar diaspora were involved in terrorist attacks are cases in Turkey and Iraq. In March 2012, in Turkey, a man of Kosovo origin was involved in the attack on Turkish soldiers and police officers in the province of Nigde, leaving three people dead and many injured.⁴⁷ In Iraq, Blerim Heta, of Kosovo origin, but living in Great Britain, from where he joined IS, carried out a suicide attack in Baghdad in March 2014, killing about 50 people.⁴⁸ In 2018, Kosovo authorities managed to arrest another 28-year-old suspect of Kosovo origin, with Belgium citizenship, who was involved in planning attacks against NATO peacekeeping soldiers in Kosovo. This person intended to carry out attacks in Kosovo and Belgium, in cooperation with his girlfriend, who is the sister of another person from Kosovo, arrested for terrorist activities.⁴⁹

These cases that took place in Kosovo prove the complexity of actions of terrorist organizations, which, through sophisticated forms of organization, manage to have a global reach. In fact, this organization in the form of a network also hinders the fight of state authorities, because, in this confrontation, the enemy can be anywhere, regardless of the fact that leaders of the terrorist organization act lonely in any country or territory, as is the case of ISIS.

This strategy of the organization was also manifested by the terrorist organization ISIS, especially after the losses it suffered in Syria and Iraq. As a result, threats from terrorism shifted their dynamics to global and local levels. Through this new strategy, ISIS moved to the stage where it does not seek foreign fighters to participate in the battlefield, but it recruits fighters, through its network, to carry out terrorist attacks in other countries. These new developments are proven in cases that took place in Kosovo as well.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*

⁴⁶ U.S. Department of Justice, "Convicted Terrorist Sentenced to Life in Prison for Plotting to Kill Witnesses in His Terrorism Trial," (2013), at <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/convicted-terrorist-sentenced-lifeprison-plotting-killwitnesses-his-terrorism-trial>.

⁴⁷ Likmeta, Besar: "Turkey Arrests Albanians After 'Terror' Attack" *Balkan Insight* 2014, at <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/three-albanians-arrested-in-turkey-terror-attack>.

⁴⁸ Al Jazeera, "Kosovo tries to stem flow of ISIL recruits", 2014 at <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2014/9/23/kosovo-tries-to-stemflowofisilrecruits.html>

⁴⁹ "Detaje të reja nga tentim-sulmi kundër KFOR-it" ("New details on the attempted attack against KFOR"), 9 June 2018, Prishtina, at <https://www.evropaelire.org/a/sulm-kunder-kforit-/29281207.html>



The threat of terrorism, which was developed internally in Kosovo, increased as a result of violent extremist ideologies, spread among the families of foreign fighters from Kosovo, especially among those that follow conservative lessons. These families are reluctant to accept any support from state authorities and refuse any kind of cooperation. They would rather seek help from informal radical religious groups that continue to operate in Kosovo. As a result of this, Kosovo was seriously endangered by these threats. During 2016-2017, state security authorities managed to prevent about four attempted terrorist attacks in Kosovo.

4. Institutional measures against extremism and terrorism in Kosovo

In order to prevent and combat the phenomenon of violent extremism and terrorism, the Republic of Kosovo has undertaken a series of steps that focus on addressing the causes that lead to extremism and terrorism, and repressive measures against persons involved in such organizations. The Government of Kosovo has joined the Global Coalition against ISIS in the fight against terrorism and adopted a legal framework that addresses the problem of terrorism and the prevention of violent extremism. In accordance with this commitment, in 2015, the Assembly of the Republic of Kosovo approved the Law on Prohibition of Joining the Armed Conflicts outside State Territory. According to this law, whoever organizes, recruits, leads or trains persons or group of persons with the aim of joining or participating in armed conflicts outside the territory of Kosovo shall be sentenced with imprisonment from 5 to 15 years, whereas fighters that participate in foreign wars shall be sentenced with imprisonment from 3 to 15 years.⁵⁰

In addition to this, in 2015, the Government of Kosovo approved the Strategy on Prevention of Violent Extremism and Radicalization Leading to Terrorism. In this strategic document, a series of policies have been formulated for state institutions, together with civil society organizations, media, and religious organizations in Kosovo, to take measures to raise the awareness through lectures in schools, design media campaigns on the consequences of violent extremism, and provide an alternative narrative to that presented by the protagonists of the Islamic State.⁵¹ The strategy of the Republic of Kosovo against extremism and terrorism aims to use a comprehensive approach in combating these phenomena, including those known as soft measures, in the fight against extremism and terrorism. As a result of this approach, this strategy articulates roles for stakeholders, with relevant expertise, that extend beyond traditional counter-terrorism efforts, such as border control and tracking of terrorist financing. The strategy addressed the so-called favorable conditions for the spread of terrorism, including underdevelopment, education, lack of good governance and economic, social and political marginalization. Kosovo's strategy against extremism and terrorism has been drafted taking into account the addressing of all aspects of counter-terrorism measures set forth in the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, unanimously approved in 2006.⁵²

The UN Counter-Terrorism Strategy includes measures beyond the implementation of law and security, such as respect for human rights, and measures to address the conditions

⁵⁰ Kuvendi i Republikës së Kosovës, Ligji Nr. 05/L -002 Për Ndalimin e Bashkimit në Konflikte të Armatosura Jashtë Territorit të Vendit 12 mars 2015 (The Assembly of the Republic of Kosovo, Law No. 05/L-002 on Prohibition of Joining the Armed Conflicts outside State Territory, 12 March 2015), pp. 1-3, at <http://old.kuvendikosoves.org/common/docs/ligjet/05-L-002%20sh.pdf>

⁵¹ Qeveria e Republikës së Kosovës - Ministria e Punëve të Brendshme, "Strategjia për Parandalimin e Ekstremizmit të Dhunshëm dhe Radikalizimit që Shpie në Terrorizëm 2015 – 2020" (The Government of the Republic of Kosovo - Ministry of Internal Affairs, "Strategy on Prevention of Violent Extremism and Radicalization Leading to Terrorism 2015 – 2020"), 2015, pp. 1-33, at: https://kryeministri.rks-gov.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/STRATEGJIA_PER_PARANDALIMIN_E_EKSTREMIZMIT_TE_DHUNSHEM_DHE_RADIKALIZIMIT_QE_SHPIE_NE_TERRORIZEM_2015-2020.pdf

⁵² United Nations- General Assembly, Counter-Terrorism Strategy, 20 September 2006, at <https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/60/288>



conducive to the spread of terrorism, such as addressing the fundamental risk factors for terrorism, preventing and combating terrorism, building governmental capacities against terrorism, ensuring respect for human rights and the rule of law, etc. The Government of the Republic of Kosovo has used this approach in its strategy with comprehensive and interactive measures.

Three years after the first strategy, in 2018, Kosovo adopted the next State Strategy against Terrorism and the Action Plan, according to which terrorist fighters who have participated in foreign wars are considered a threat to the secular and democratic character of Kosovo's institutions.⁵³ Regarding the implementation of the measures defined in the action plan of this strategy, the Office of the Prime Minister of Kosovo has appointed a National Coordinator to supervise and implement this legal and strategic framework against terrorism.

Regarding the implementation of measures defined in this strategy, Kosovo has established responsible national and local mechanisms for the implementation of specific measures. Kosovo Ministry of Internal Affairs has established the Division for the Prevention and Reintegration of Radicalized Persons, within the Department of Public Security, whose role is to reintegrate persons who have returned from foreign conflict zones. Furthermore, the Kosovo Correctional Service, with the assistance of the U.S. Government, has developed special programs that aim to support their rehabilitation and separation from radical religious beliefs.⁵⁴ One of the measures defined in this program is the holding of courses on skills development. On the other hand, the Ministry of Justice signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Islamic Community of Kosovo, whereby the latter undertook to deliver lectures on deradicalization, in Kosovo prisons, for former foreign fighters.⁵⁵

In 2019, Kosovo amended the Criminal Code, which covers terrorist financing, identity fraud, travel to foreign wars and engagement in terrorist activities.⁵⁶ Concerning the increase of the financial supervision for the activities of NGOs and organizations that could potentially use their resources for terrorist financing, in 2016, supplementations were also made to the Law on Prevention of Money Laundering and Combating Terrorist Financing, defining measures that limit the possibility of terrorist financing through disguised transactions. Measures were fully adapted in this law in accordance with the recommendations of FATF - the Financial Action Task Force, which is an independent intergovernmental body that develops and promotes policies to protect the global financial system against money laundering, terrorist financing and the financing of proliferation of mass destruction weapons.⁵⁷ In accordance with the goals of preventing terrorist financing, the Central Bank of Kosovo approved, on November 26, 2016, the Regulation on Prevention of Money Laundering and Financing of Terrorism. Measures for the supervision of bank transactions were added in this regulation, and measures

⁵³ Qeveria e Republikës së Kosovës - Ministria e Punëve të Brendshme, "Strategjia Stetërore Kundër Terrorizmit dhe Plani i Veprimit 2018 – 2023 (The Government of the Republic of Kosovo - Ministry of Internal Affairs, "The State Strategy Against Terrorism and the Action Plan 2018 – 2023"), February 2018, pp. 5-18, at <https://kryeministri.rks-gov.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Strategjia-Shtetërore-kunder-Terrorizmit-dhe-Plani-i-Veprimit-2018-2023-narrative.pdf>

⁵⁴ QKSS, 'Zbërthimi i përgjigjes së Kosovës ndaj të kthyerve nga zonat e luftës në Siri dhe Irak' (KCSS, 'The breakdown of the Kosovo response against the returnees from the conflict zones in Syria and Iraq'), 2020, p. 36, at https://qkss.org/images/uploads/files/violent-extremism-alb_256843.pdf

⁵⁵ Visoka, Gëzim; Beha, Adem: "Hartëzimi i perspektivave vendore mbi radikalizmin në Kosovë", Instituti i Kosovës për Paqe - KIP dhe Community Building Mitrovica - CBM ("The mapping of national perspectives on radicalism in Kosovo", Kosovo Institute for Peace - KIP and Community Building Mitrovica - CBM), 2021, p. 12, at [https://www.cbmitrovica.org/uploads/RCT/Country Perspectives Mapping \(SHQ\).pdf](https://www.cbmitrovica.org/uploads/RCT/Country Perspectives Mapping (SHQ).pdf)

⁵⁶ Kuvendi i Republikës së Kosovës, Kodi Penal i Republikës së Kosovës 23 nëntor 2018, nenet 131-137 (The Assembly of the Republic of Kosovo, Criminal Code of the Republic of Kosovo, 23 November 2018, Articles 131-137), at <https://gzk.rks-gov.net/ActDocumentDetail.aspx?ActID=18413>

⁵⁷ FATF- Financial Action Task Force, what is the FATF, at <https://www.fatf-gafi.org/about/whatwedo/>



with clear criteria for reporting suspicious transactions were also defined.⁵⁸ This Regulation applies to all banks, branches of foreign banks, microfinance institutions, insurance companies and non-bank financial institutions. Through the policies and measures taken to address and prevent terrorist financing, Kosovo institutions demonstrate their capability to respond to new threats and serve as a reliable partner to the international coalition of states involved in the fight against violent extremism and transnational terrorism.

Kosovo has used approaches similar to international standards in the fight against terrorism and violent extremism. Kosovo's approach to combating this phenomenon is focused on punitive and preventive measures. After the increase of the number of Kosovo citizens that joined fights in Syria, the institutional reaction of Kosovo focused exclusively on gathering intelligence and on law enforcement operations that aimed at targeting hotbeds and individuals promoting radical narratives that stimulated involvement in the conflict. The first phase of the reaction led to the arrest of several individuals and religious leaders, as well as in the closure of several non-governmental organizations and online forums that promoted violent extremism. In the second phase, after direct threats to security from returning fighters and potential fighters decreased, Kosovo's policy agenda on violent extremism shifted towards a comprehensive approach that focused on prevention, disengagement, rehabilitation, and reintegration measures. With the adoption of the two strategies addressing the issues of extremism, radicalization and terrorism, there was a significant shift from an exclusive focus on intelligence and law enforcement activities to cross-sectoral mobilization for prevention, de-radicalization, and reintegration. The strategy utilized a new approach to conceptualize the phenomenon, including "push and pull" and "economic and social" factors, and emphasized the necessity for a cross-sectoral engagement at various levels (local and central) of Kosovo's institutions.⁵⁹

In addition to national mechanisms, Kosovo has also become part of and supported international initiatives aimed at combating violent extremism that leads to terrorism. Kosovo was among the first countries to adapt the legal framework for regulating and sanctioning the participation of its citizens in foreign conflicts as part of the Global Coalition Against ISIS (Global Coalition - Kosovo). In addition to this, Kosovo has signed a bilateral Implementing Agreement for the Joint Action Plan on Counter-Terrorism for the Western Balkans 2019-2020.⁶⁰ Kosovo has also established an official working relationship with EUROPOL, paving the way for enhanced cooperation on a range of security issues, including violent extremism and terrorism.

Despite the legislative measures and numerous operational actions that were undertaken, the multiple threats from terrorism seriously challenged the operation of Kosovo's institutions. During 2016-2017, threats of violent Islamist extremism have been growing in Kosovo. These threats were assisted in part by funding from foreign organizations that preach extremist ideologies and violent extremist groups actively using social media to spread propaganda and recruit followers. In this period, approximately 315 foreign terrorist fighters from Kosovo have

⁵⁸ Banka Qendrore e Republikës së Kosovës, "Rregullorja për Parandalimin e Pastrimit të Parave dhe Financimit të Terrorizmit" (The Central Bank of the Republic of Kosovo, "Regulation on Prevention of Money Laundering and Terrorism Financing"), 2016, at

https://bqk-kos.org/repository/docs/korniza_ligjore/shqip/Rregullorja%20per%20parandalimin%20e%20pastrimit%20te%20parave.pdf

⁵⁹ Avdimetaj, Teuta: "De-radikalizimi dhe Integrimi: Korniza Ligjore dhe Politike", De-radikalizimi në Evropë dhe më gjerë: Zbulohet, Zgjidhet, Riintegrohet, dhe Qendra Kosovare për Studime të Sigurisë - QKSS ("De-radicalization and Integration: Legal and Political framework", De-radicalization in Europe and beyond: Detect, Resolve, Reintegrate, and the Kosovo Center for Security Studies), 2021, at

https://qkss.org/images/uploads/files/violent-extremismeng_978757.pdf

⁶⁰ *Ibid*



traveled to Syria and Iraq to fight for ISIS or al-Nusrah Front (al-Qa'ida's affiliate in Syria), of which approximately 58 have been killed.⁶¹ During this period, the Government of Kosovo has implemented measures and actions from the comprehensive strategy and action plan to combat violent extremism. The Kosovo Police Counterterrorism Directorate started to enhance its investigative capacities by increasing personnel and developing a cyber-counterterrorism unit.

During this period, trials were ongoing in Kosovo courts for 59 suspects arrested in August 2014. During 2016, Kosovo authorities arrested 32 individuals on terrorism-related charges. Authorities also secured several high-profile convictions, including the sentencing of seven citizens to 42 years imprisonment on terrorism charges in May, and five individuals to 49 years imprisonment for ISIS involvement in July.⁶² Additionally, the Ministry of Public Administration suspended the activities of 21 NGOs suspected of supporting violent extremism.⁶³

In 2018, the Government of Kosovo continued to implement its comprehensive strategy for combating violent extremism and updated its action plan. This year, the Government approved its third counterterrorism strategy and action plan for 2018-22.⁶⁴ Kosovo continued to fight the threat of terrorism through close cooperation with the United States. Kosovo is a member of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS. According to the U.S. Department of State Report, in this period, more than 400 Kosovar men, women, and children have traveled to Syria and Iraq to join terrorist groups, of which approximately 130 individuals have returned to Kosovo, while about 200 remain in the conflict zone.⁶⁵ In this year, 29 suspects were tried. Kosovo imams, previously arrested on terrorism-related charges, were acquitted. Kosovo police arrested six additional individuals on terrorism-related charges and courts issued 20 judgments of conviction for terrorism-related criminal offenses. The State Prosecutor's Office issued four new indictments on terrorism charges involving 11 individuals.⁶⁶

There was no terrorist incident in the territory of Kosovo in 2019. In this period, Kosovo institutions, with the U.S. assistance, repatriated four suspected FTFs (foreign terrorist fighters) and 106 family members from Syria. However, there was a delay in the rehabilitation of returnees from the conflict zone. Due to the lack of resources and capacities, the government mechanism for prevention and reintegration, within the Ministry of Internal Affairs, did not provide relevant services and assistance to the returnees. In September of this year, the Basic Court of Prishtina convicted six defendants for planning terrorist attacks in Kosovo, Albania, Belgium, France, and North Macedonia, including planned suicide bombings in Kosovo against KFOR troops, night clubs, and Serb Orthodox churches between December 2017 and June 2018. This case was investigated by Kosovo Police, Kosovo Intelligence Agency, with substantial U.S. investigative and prosecutorial assistance, including the tracking of attempted arms purchases.⁶⁷

During 2020, Kosovo continued to fight the threat of terrorism through close cooperation with the United States and the other countries of the Global Coalition to Defeat

⁶¹ U.S. Department of State, Country Reports on Terrorism 2016- 2017 Kosovo, at: <https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2016/>

⁶² *Ibid*

⁶³ Koha.net, "Për aktivitet të dyshimtë u pezullua puna e 21 OJQ-ve" (The operation of 21 NGOs was suspended due to suspicious activity), 19 January 2017, at: <https://archive.koha.net/?l=152670>

⁶⁴ Qeveria e Kosovës, Strategjia Shtetërore kundër Terrorizmit dhe Plani i Veprimit 2018 – 2022 (Government of Kosovo, State Strategy against Terrorism and Action Plan 2018 – 2022), at <https://konsultimet.rks-gov.net/viewConsult.php?ConsultationID=40243>

⁶⁵ U.S. Department of State, Country Reports on Terrorism 2018 Kosovo, at <https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2018/>

⁶⁶ *Ibid*

⁶⁷ *Ibid*



ISIS. In this period, the Government of Kosovo drafted a new combined strategy and an action plan against terrorism (CT) and countering violent extremism (CVE) until 2025.⁶⁸ With the assistance of its partners, it also took care of the repatriates of 2019. Women and children were provided reintegration assistance through programs funded by the U.S., Europe and the Division for Prevention and Reintegration (DPR) of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. The DPR and the Ministry of Education helped 37 of the 74 returned children to enroll in school and, with the help of international donors, they provided assistance to the returned women for their reintegration and employment.⁶⁹ In July 2020, Kosovo signed an agreement with the European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation (EUROPOL), for the appointment of a Kosovo Police liaison officer to EUROPOL.⁷⁰

Members of Kosovo Police, specifically the Counterterrorism Department, have received training in counterterrorism investigations and identification and seizure of digital evidence, and have received associated equipment grants. U.S. Mentorship programs have succeeded in increasing the cooperation and information sharing between Kosovo Police and the Kosovo Correctional Service.⁷¹

The range of comprehensive measures undertaken by the Republic of Kosovo, including legislative measures, the establishment of operational cooperation with international partners, criminal prosecution, and operational actions, is one side of the coin in Kosovo's efforts to confront this global threat. This is because policies, strategies, and various legal measures faced difficulties at several levels of implementation. First, at the internal inter-institutional coordination between law enforcement and justice institutions. These difficulties of inter-institutional coordination in matters of law enforcement are also reflected in various international reports, such as in the European Commission's Progress Reports on Kosovo, as well as in the U.S. Department of State Reports.

The 2018 U.S. Department of State Report⁷² highlights the fact that Kosovo's legislative framework is sufficient to prosecute individuals suspected of committing or supporting terrorist activities, but there are challenges in implementation, and that Kosovo officials recognize the need to improve interagency cooperation.

The necessary legislative amendments in Kosovo, in the field of combating terrorism, are also found in the U.S. Department of State Report, highlighting, inter alia, the amendments to the criminal code, which include a variety of changes to assist in the fight against terrorism and implement the latest regional conventions and protocols, including the Council of Europe 2017 Convention on the Prevention of Terrorism and the EU Directive on Combating Terrorism.⁷³ The amendments cover all aspects of terrorism financing, encompassing the concept of crypto-currencies within the amended definition of funds as they represent digital value. Kosovo introduced two new laws to deal with terrorists who steal or use another person's identity or use the account information of another person, and terrorists who travel in or out of

⁶⁸ Qeveria e Kosovës, Strategjia Kombëtare për Luftën kundër Terrorizmit dhe Plani i Veprimit 2021-2025 (Government of Kosovo, National Strategy Against Terrorism and Action Plan 2021-2025), at [file:///C:/Users/Lenovo/Downloads/KonsultimiPublik-312%20\(2\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/Lenovo/Downloads/KonsultimiPublik-312%20(2).pdf)

⁶⁹ U.S. Department of State, Country Reports on Terrorism 2020 Kosovo, at <https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2020/kosovo/>

⁷⁰ EvropaElire.org, "EUROPOL-i me marrëveshje pune me Kosovën", 30 korrik 2020 (EUROPOL signs a working agreement with Kosovo", 30 July 2020), at: <https://www.evropaElire.org/a/europol-me-marreveshje-pune-me-kosoven-dhe-gjykatenspeciale/30756562.html>

⁷¹ U.S. Department of State, Country Reports on Terrorism 2020 Kosovo, at <https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2020/kosovo/>

⁷² U.S. Department of State, Country Reports on Terrorism 2018 Kosovo, at <https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2018/>

⁷³ *Ibid*



Kosovo for terrorist activities. The latter allowed Kosovo to prosecute terrorists using Kosovo as a transit point and assist foreign countries in pursuit of terrorists. Law enforcement authorities demonstrated adequate capacity to detect and prevent several terrorist plots in Kosovo and abroad. The Kosovo Police Counterterrorism Directorate (KPCT), which is responsible for counterterrorism investigations, increased their investigative capacities by increasing personnel and developing a cyber-counterterrorism unit. The U.S. Department of State supported these efforts through the Antiterrorism Assistance program.⁷⁴

The efforts of the country's institutions in the fight against terrorism were, however, accompanied by some structural difficulties in the sense that the internal institutional coordination was not at a satisfactory level. The investigation and detection authorities had difficulties in proper coordination, especially with the justice system. In fact, international reports assess that Kosovo has effective police and financial intelligence mechanisms, and this has been achieved thanks to numerous trainings provided to these mechanisms by various international agencies, but Kosovo still suffers from an inefficient justice system. Kosovo is still at an early stage in developing a well-functioning judicial system. While some progress is being made, the overall administration of justice continues to be slow, inefficient and exposed to political influence.⁷⁵

In research conducted by the OSCE Mission in Kosovo regarding the handling of terrorism cases, several deficiencies of the law enforcement and justice institutions are mentioned in the implementation of the legislation for the handling of terrorism cases, and in some instances, the lack of professional competence is evident in accurately understanding the elements that constitute the entirety of aspects of terrorist acts. It is said, among other things, that there is a lack of clarity of the evidence underpinning the charging of indictments, pre-trial detention is routinely ordered before any evidence underpinning the indictment has been served, with insufficiently detailed disclosure being served upon the defense in the early stages to justify an accused's detention, the judgments are not justified well, while terrorist financing is under-prosecuted. There has only been one conviction for financing terrorism in 2019 despite the FIU having referred 16 cases to the police in 2019.⁷⁶

Despite the general capacity of the Kosovo investigation authorities to undertake financial investigations, specifically in terrorism related cases, no prosecutions were carried out in relation to terrorism financing offenses in a number of cases where the funding aspects seemed to be clearly identified. For the period between 2018 and 2020, there was only one final terrorism financing conviction of a series of 16 cases referred to the police by the Financial Intelligence Unit.⁷⁷

This deficiency in Kosovo's institutions is also highlighted in the 2019 EU Progress Report for Kosovo,⁷⁸ where, inter alia, it is emphasized that law enforcement agencies and judicial institutions in Kosovo "continue to respond firmly to terrorism," but "the fight against money laundering and terrorist financing is not effective enough to produce convincing results." The 2018 Council of Europe findings predict that additional training is needed for the

⁷⁴ *Ibid*

⁷⁵ European Commission - Countries insights, Key findings of the 2022 Report on Kosovo. Brussels, 12 October 2022, at [file:///C:/Users/Lenovo/Downloads/Key_findings_of_the_2022_Report_on_Kosovo\(1\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/Lenovo/Downloads/Key_findings_of_the_2022_Report_on_Kosovo(1).pdf)

⁷⁶ OSCE, Handling of Terrorism Cases by the Kosovo Criminal Justice System, September 2022, at <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/9/1/526215.pdf>

⁷⁷ *Ibid*

⁷⁸ Raporti i Vlerësimit për pajtueshmërinë e Kosovës me standardet ndërkombëtare kundër pastrimit të parave dhe luftimit të financimit të terrorizmit, qershor 2018 COE [Projekti kundër krimit ekonomik në Kosovë (PECK II)], fq. 75 (Assessment Report on compliance of Kosovo with international anti-money laundering and combating the financing of terrorism standards, June 2018 COE [Project against Economic Crime in Kosovo (PECK II)], p. 75), at <https://rm.coe.int/assessment-report-on-compliance-of-kosovo-with-international-antimone/16809381e1>



prosecution of terrorist financing, including the funding of foreign fighters and local persons joining paramilitary or terrorist groups in the conflict zones.⁷⁹

Some deficiencies in Kosovo's justice system regarding the handling of terrorism cases are also evident in the 2021 U.S. Department of State Report, which presents some specific cases handled in Kosovo courts, whose decisions reflect low sentences, improper construction of charges to support judgments of conviction, and fragile interagency cooperation. This report presents important law enforcement actions in the following cases:

- "The case of Sadat Topojani, who was granted conditional release in January. Topojani was an ISIS recruiter who had been at the center of an investigation into the distribution of extremist propaganda within the Kosovo prison system.

- In April, the Kosovo Appeals Court acquitted all defendants involved in the "Hurricane" case of terrorism-related charges. The defendants' convictions on firearms offenses were affirmed, however, and they all remained incarcerated.

- In April, the Prishtina Basic Court sentenced Nuredin Sulejmani to three years in prison for participating in ISIS during 2013-14. U.S.-based assistance in obtaining evidence played an important role in securing this conviction.

- In September, the Supreme Court of Kosovo upheld a five-and-a-half-year prison sentence for Visar Qukovci's participating in ISIS, while ordering a retrial on charges of child abuse. Qukovci, an FTF repatriated in 2019, had filmed videos in which he placed a suicide vest on his infant son. The Prishtina Basic Court in June had sentenced the defendant to eight months in prison for child abuse charges, which were added to the previous sentence.

- In October, Kosovo Police, assisted by U.S. authorities, arrested five individuals suspected of planning an attack and seized an AK-47 weapon, ammunition, a handheld rocket-propelled grenade launcher and shells, explosive materials, electronics, etc.

- In December, the Prishtina Basic Court sentenced Kreshnik Podvorica to two years and six months in prison for incitement to commit terrorism. Podvorica was found guilty of publishing content glorifying terrorist acts in Syria and inciting terrorist acts, including video publications of a terrorist act committed by his brother in Syria."⁸⁰

However, for 2021, there is an improvement in terms of tracking terrorist financing. The unit responsible for this, the Financial Intelligence Unit, as a member of the Egmont Group, has conducted effective monitoring of suspicious transactions through cooperation in exchanging information with partner states. As a result of this information, a person, repatriated in July, was charged with terrorism financing.

Another significant handicap that has impacted the functioning of institutions and that also impacted the effectiveness in the fight against terrorism is the security and political situation in north of Kosovo, which continues to limit Government's ability to exercise its authority in that area. The situation in the northern part of the country remains fragile and volatile, where even currently, in 2023, there are tensions and operations by armed groups that resist the efforts of the Government of the Republic of Kosovo to establish full institutional authority in that area. Even, in May 2023, in the Government's attempt to place the elected mayors in municipal facilities, citizens of the area, and armed groups as well, tried to resist this

⁷⁹ *Ibid*

⁸⁰ U.S. Department of State, Country Reports on Terrorism 2021 Kosovo, at <https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2021/kosovo>



attempt by force and, as a result, 25 soldiers of the NATO peacekeeping forces in Kosovo (KFOR) were injured. Police officers were also injured and journalists were attacked.⁸¹

Despite all these difficulties in implementing measures against terrorism, they have had a significant effect in reducing cases of terrorism in Kosovo. During the period of 2018-2020, cases of terrorism within Kosovo were relatively low, whereas in 2021 and 2022, there were no cases of attacks or planning of terrorist attacks. An ongoing issue that continues to be a concern for Kosovo's institutions in the fight against terrorism is the return of fighters from Kosovo from conflict zones. These individuals are initially dealt with through criminal measures, holding them accountable under the Law on Prohibition of Joining the Armed Conflicts Outside State Territory. As far as the rehabilitation of returned persons is concerned, the strategic documents of the Republic of Kosovo outline advanced measures and programs, but there have been failures in their implementation, primarily due to the lack of financial resources.

Within the framework of regional cooperation, the Government of Kosovo has worked closely with Albania and North Macedonia. However, there have been obstacles and challenges, especially with Serbia, which does not recognize Kosovo's statehood. These political reasons make cooperation fragile, and in most cases, there is no cooperation.

In 2021, based on the identified deficiencies, the Government of Kosovo began the drafting of a new Strategy combined with the Action Plan Against Terrorism and Violent Extremism for 2023-27. The Government appointed the Minister of Interior as the national coordinator of this strategy. A slight progress of Kosovo in the fight against terrorism is also acknowledged in the 2022 Report of the European Commission, where it is highlighted that "some progress was made in the fight against terrorism and the fight against and prevention of violent extremism, in line with the objectives set out in the EU-Kosovo implementing arrangement for the Joint Action Plan on Counter-Terrorism for the Western Balkans." The Kosovo authorities need to be more effective in their efforts to combat money laundering and the applicable law should be brought in line with the EU *acquis* and international standards.⁸²

5. Conclusion

This research concludes that international terrorism poses a serious threat to the security of small countries like Kosovo. The fight against international terrorism makes collaborative and interactive approaches on a global scale necessary. Narrow approaches to security are insufficient to address the complexity of threats in the fight against transnational terrorism. The successful fight against this phenomenon requires the undertaking of multiple measures that address the aspects of prevention and favorable conditions that serve to encourage extremism and terrorism.

It also shows that Kosovo was late in taking measures that would influence on the prevention of the rise of religious extremism, because, for almost a decade, it did not pay proper institutional attention to the activity of some organizations from Gulf countries, which invested in the promotion of religious extremism and indoctrination in political Islam. Serious measures began to be undertaken as of 2014 when serious problems related to religious extremism were manifested.

⁸¹ Top Chanel, Plagosja e ushtarëve të KFOR-it në veri të Kosovës, reagojnë përfaqësuesit e superfuqive [Wounding of KFOR soldiers in the north of Kosovo, representatives of the superpowers react], 29.05.2023, at <https://top-channel.tv/2023/05/29/plagosja-e-ushtareve-te-kfor-it-ne-veri-te-kosoves-reagojne-perfaqesuesit-e-superfuqive/>

⁸² European Commission - Countries insights, Key findings of the 2022 Report on Kosovo, Brussels, 12 October 2022, at file:///C:/Users/Lenovo/Downloads/Key_findings_of_the_2022_Report_on_Kosovo%20(3).pdf



A comprehensive and multilateral approach is reflected in Kosovo's efforts to fight terrorism, and this is clearly expressed in the strategies of 2015 and 2018 against extremism and terrorism, as well as from Kosovo's participation in multilateral mechanisms. In these strategic documents, a series of policies have been formulated for state institutions, together with civil society organizations, media, and religious organizations in Kosovo, to take measures to raise the awareness through lectures in schools, design media campaigns on the consequences of violent extremism, and provide an alternative narrative to that presented by the protagonists of the Islamic State. In the direction of implementing a multilateral approach to combating terrorism, Kosovo applied sanctions and implemented government decisions that prohibited the activities of several organizations from Gulf countries, some of which were in the lists of the U.S. Department of State. In order to maintain the security of the country and based on the information from the Police and the Kosovo Intelligence Agency, at the end of 2015, the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Government of Kosovo ordered the revocation of operation permits for 14 non-governmental organizations originating from Gulf countries.

The undertaking of such measures proved to be effective in Kosovo. These measures contributed, *inter alia*, to raising the awareness of citizens and this resulted in the decrease of cases of religious extremism in Kosovo, and of cases of citizens joining the causes of political Islam.

However, the comprehensive measures undertaken by the Republic of Kosovo, including legislative measures, the establishment of operational cooperation with international partners, criminal prosecution, and operational actions, are one side of the coin in Kosovo's efforts to confront these threats from terrorism. The implementation of these measures in practice was accompanied by many obstacles and difficulties. Firstly, there were challenges in terms of internal inter-institutional coordination between law enforcement and judicial institutions, and secondly, the low level of understanding of the overall aspects of terrorist acts.

The drafting of new legislation has encountered difficulties in implementation, in particular due to the lack of adequate training for judges and prosecutors, and the unsatisfactory level of professionalism has been reflected in court decisions and, in some cases, at the investigation stage. In addition, there has been a significant delay in the detection and prosecution of terrorist financing, as evidenced by the fact that only one case in this category had resulted in a conviction by 2021, despite the fact that the Financial Intelligence Unit processed a large amount of information of this type.

Despite all the efforts, the failures were also reflected in the rehabilitation of people returning from war zones, where rehabilitation programmes were not fully implemented due to lack of financial resources and some of them, such as the aspects of psychological support and resocialisation, remained only as goals on paper. These difficulties in Kosovo's counter-terrorism efforts are also reflected in various international reports, such as the European Commission's Progress Reports on Kosovo and the U.S. Department of State's reports, although in these assessments, especially for the period 2021-2022, progress is acknowledged by Kosovo's institutions, especially in operational actions and cooperation with partners.

In terms of international cooperation, Kosovo had a close partnership with the United States, both in operational actions and in various training programmes, while close regional cooperation included Albania and North Macedonia. However, for political reasons related to Serbia's non-recognition of Kosovo's statehood, cooperation with Serbia was almost non-existent. On the contrary, the period from 2021 saw heightened tensions over the situation in northern Kosovo, despite efforts by the EU and the US to mediate dialogue between these two countries with the aim of normalising relations between them.



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