

RADICALIZATION IN ALBANIA

*Searching for ideological
and structural roots*

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CVE	Countering Violent Extremism
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
KMSH	Albanian Muslim Community
LAI	League of Albanian Imams
SCC	State Committee for Cults
SSR	State Secretariat for Religion

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The overall objective of this study is to identify and explore the ideological drivers of radicalization in Albania by analyzing the process of Albanian religious revival and the reestablishment of the religious infrastructure and institutions. This study sheds light on the encompassing social, political, and economic factors that fueled the process of radicalization in the country. By focusing on a thorough analysis of the religious and educational backgrounds of Imams, their indoctrination into a conservative interpretation of Islam, sharply at odds with Albania's traditional version of Islam, and the curriculum of Islamic education in the country, we uncover the dynamic factors that drove the proselytization and radicalization during the country's religious revival period (1990 – 2001).

Among the drivers identified, there are a series of components that played a role in the process. Contextual factors enabled the penetration of unfamiliar doctrines and interpretations. There were three main factors that enabled this. First, it was the high level of informality under which religious revival took place. The Albanian Muslim Community (KMSH), the country's leading institution for all matters on Islam, was extremely unable to lead the efforts. It

lacked among others human capacities, as Enver Hoxha's regime had prosecuted the majority of Muslim clerics and scholars with the institutional, religious, and administrative knowledge. KMSH also lacked the financial capabilities to provide the religious services, including education of new imams as most of its properties were confiscated by the communist regime. As Albania opened to the world, foreign organizations and individuals with a proselytizing agenda filled the void.

Chief among them is informality. As the regime collapsed it created a void that was filled with processes lacking institutional knowledge, respect for traditions and an intrinsic motivation to improve. Instead, they often sought to fundamentally replace the old with the new, be it an ideological, political, institutional or a practical matter. As a result, ad-hoc solutions lacking vision were often implemented. Similarly, Albania's Islam went from being institutionally prosecuted to a fundamental right overnight. An immediate desire to practice religion, not just Islam, erupted like a volcano. Yet, in absence of a central institution such as the Albanian Muslim Community (KMSH) to lead the efforts and provide the necessary educational and religious services sought, informal religious classes and services were pro-

vided. Given that a whole generation of clerics were prosecuted during communism, mosques and other religious institutions destroyed, these religious courses were often provided in complete disregard to the traditions and values that had become a cornerstone prior to communism. Foreigners played a key part in this role.

Turkey and the Gulf Arab states were the main source of the money, ideology and human capital that led the efforts for Albania's revival of Islam. They opened schools, established NGOs, build hundreds of mosques and operated in absence of institutional oversight, be it from state authorities, or KMSH which was financially drained, institutionally weakened, and lacking in capacities. With all this investment came caveats. Key among them was the interpretation of Islam which they taught, and preached in privately ran mosques, by Imams on their payroll, namely Salafism and Wahhabism which stood in sharp contrast to the traditional version of Islam practiced in Albania. Their efforts were further rewarded as young clerics trained in Arab countries at conservative religious institutions returned home, bringing with them their controversial interpretations, and preaching them on social media and illegal mosques which were built without the appropriate permits and remained outside the jurisdiction of the KMSH. Individuals attending them sought to play a bigger role in the country's life, by refuting Albania's long-standing values such as religious coexistence and secularism which sparking a swift public and institutional reaction. As a result, a series of organizations with links to terrorist organizations were banned in early 2000s. A decade later when over 140 Albanian's joined ISIS in Syria and Iraq, the reaction was firmer as institutional, legislative, and security

measures were taken to curb the phenomenon.

While we find that many of them have played an important role in the short term, sustainable solutions require enhanced efforts. Particularly important it will be to assert the independence, authority and self-reliance of KMSH by returning more of its confiscated properties, or by increasing the state financial support. In addition, the weakening of religious education due to legislative measures that diminish higher education opportunities for Madrassa students, and the subsequent secularization of their religious curricula hampers their appeal and reputation. To ensure local clerics are trained with an appreciation for local interpretations and understandings in Albania, the Department of Islamic Studies at the KMSH-led Beder University must be consolidated. We found that schisms emerging from varying from different religious interpretations, mainly divided between those adhering to Hanafi School of Islam and Hanbali have had a perverse impact, leading to institutional and public reactions that weight on the reputation of Islam. A further split took place after the failed coup in Turkey fueling the perception that Islam and KMSH are a proxy for foreign influences.

Fundamentally, this study asserts that the national features of Albanian Islam are a treasure that must be preserved and cultivated. There are two venues through which this can be obtained. First is education which provides an instrumental platform for cultivating and reasserting the importance of Albanian Islam. Another way to support this process is through an increase of publications, including periodicals, an area KMSH has a rich tradition, dating back to 1930s.

Recommendations to KMSH:

- In cooperation with state institutions, assert its authority over all Muslim institutions in the country, including mosques and madrassas which remain outside its jurisdiction;
- Strengthen the national features of Albania's Islam (tolerance, cooperation, liberalism) by:
 - KMSH assuming a direct role in administering all Muslim educational institutions;
 - Unify the curricula of Madrassas;
 - Consolidate the country's Islamic Studies at University level;
 - Improve the compensation and working conditions for Madrasa teachers;
 - Curb private and unregulated religious teaching;
 - Enhance cooperation with the country's Ministry of Education to take concerted measures to tackle issues related to religious education.
- Facilitate dialogue with parallel organizations which undermine its authority to bridge the ideological gap and enhance ideological, institutional, and administrative cohesion;
- Refute external ideological, political or financial influence which comes with caveats and risks turning the institution to a proxy for their own agenda;
- Establish formalized channels in tandem with state institutions through which external financial assistance is vetted. This curbs malicious foreign influence, prevent private donations from imams or mosques which do not comply with KMSH rules and principles;
- Consolidate internal democratic governance and foster strict financial transparency in accordance with its own history as a means of building trust and curbing speculation;

Recommendations to the Government of Albanian:

- Assist KMSH in becoming self-sufficient by returning its confiscate properties during the communist regime and increase its budget contributions to make KMSH self-sustainable;
- Amend legislation to enable the conversion of foreign diplomas' in theology as a means of scrutinizing and validating their academic credentials;
- Take legislative and administrative measures to curb the ideological and financial influence of external actors in domestic religious affairs by regulating their operations.

Recommendations for civil society, relevant experts and research institutions and media

- Strengthen the communication and collaboration as well as increase the exchange of information, knowledge, networking and partnerships between religious communities and CSOs active in the fields of CVE, irreligious dialogue, civic education, etc.
- Raise capacities and contacts between media and religious communities and experts (in a tripartite dialogue) in order to minimize and eliminate repeating and exacerbating uninformed and inaccurate reporting and coverage which may lead to hate speech, Islamophobia, wrongful understanding of phenomena relevant to religious developments.
- Increase relevant research and policy advocacy focus on religious education as well as on civic education in general as the key investment for a peaceful future.
- Establish regular and systematic mechanism of dialogue and cooperation between multiple stakeholders of the nongovernmental sector and religious communities in order to assist the prevention, early diagnosis of radicalism that has the potential to result in violent extremism as well as to intensify the effectiveness of the efforts against it.

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this study is to analyze the core of radicalization – namely, its origin and its development as a process in Albania. To address this, we pursue an evolutionary approach by investigating the chronologic trajectory of the development of Albanian Islam both as doctrine and as organized community. It starts with an analysis of Islam's genesis in the country dating back to the 14th century and continues with an overview of its national features. Substantial attention is given to the Albanian Awakening Movement (also known as National Renaissance) in the late 19th century, whose ideas materialized as the country obtained its independence in 1912. King Zog's reign (1925 – 1939), the communism (1944-1991) and the subsequent period under which religion was reinstituted, constitute the four periods under which religion fused with national features.

There are several characteristics which stand out in the process. The aim of the National Renaissance period was to amplify the importance of language and nationality over religious identity. In this realm, the National Awakening Movement played a pivotal role as it laid the foundation of this idea with the motto "the religion of Albanians is Albanianism," extracted from a Pashko Vasa poem, a prominent figure of the time.¹

Following the declaration of independence in 1912, successive governments adapted a secular stance on religion.

King Zog's government, both when he was a president and later as a self-proclaimed King, played an important role in firmly establishing this tradition. His government asserted state authority over religious institutions. In his pursuing of nationalizing religion, a process through which local norms and traditions were inserted into the practice of religion, he minimized religious relations with the outside world, banned religious communities from foreign financial support, and allocated sufficient resources to finance their religious and educational activities (Misha, 1999).

Throughout these periods, unlike other religious communities, Islam has always been perceived with a degree of susceptibility from authorities. A key factor related to this is its association with the Ottoman Empire under whose authority Albanians were subjugated for over four centuries. Hence, upon the establishment of the Albanian Muslim Community (KMSH), Islam's governing

¹ "The religion of Albanians is Albanianism" is a line from one of the most important poems of Pashko Vasa, a key figure of the National Renaissance movement. This movement culminated in the declaration of independence in 1912.

body in 1923, the organization asserted its independence from the Ottoman Caliphate under whose ideological and administrative influence had been from its inception, marks an attempt to break away from its past. Six years later, KMSH's high council became autonomous from the rest of the Muslim world by taking several measures that were ahead of their time. It officially abrogated the Sharia law and annulled several practices of the Islamic tradition, including polygamy and the obligation to wear a face cover for women (Popovic, 2006). Meanwhile, Islamic education became fully independent from foreign influence. Its teaching standard became highly regarded by the society at large, irrespective of religious affiliation.

Much of this was reversed with the arrival of communists to power at the end of WWII. Enver Hoxha's regime sought to eradicate any trace of religious influence, which led to the prosecution of religious leaders, demolition or repurposing of religious buildings, and a complete ban on the practice of religion. As a result, a "new man" was created in the vision of communists who saw religion as an enemy and declared Albania an atheist state in 1976.² The difficulties of reinstituting Islam after the fall of communism constitute the core of this study.

The subsequent chapters provide an analysis of Islam's revival between 1991 to 2018. Much like Albania's socio-political life, this period features a high degree of informality for Islam in Albania. When communism crumbled, religious communities, including Islam, faced a daunting challenge. Their physical and

clerical infrastructure was dismal, while financial and administrative capacities at disposal were insufficient to cope with the scope of the work that lay ahead.³ A wide range of foreign donors rushed in to fill the void. Among them were organizations and clerics with dubious motives, including some who had ties to terrorist organizations.⁴ At first glance, it was all a promising and harmless process, as ad-hoc educational institutions were created, new clerics were being trained, and dozens of mosques were built, including areas where there had not been any. It took years for analysts, clerics, historians and authorities to recognize the ramifications resulting from the lack of oversight and regulation on religious matters.

Lasting issues emerged, as attendees of classes in Albania, and hundreds of others in Gulf countries were taught a conservative form of Islam (Bumci, 2004) whose values differ sharply from the traditional version Islam taught and practiced in Albania. In this study, this phenomenon is loosely defined as the "Arabization of Islam," a process through which a new form of Islam closely associated with Wahhabism and Salafism emerged as these students started leading religious services and religious teaching. For much of the 2000s their activities went unnoticed by the general public. However, this changed when news broke out that over 100 Albanians had made *hijrah* (migration) to join ISIS in Syria and Iraq, a development which instigated a swift reaction from state authorities.

As a result, the country's penal code was amended in 2014, under which

² Article 37 of the constitution of 1976 stipulated that "The state does not recognize any religion and supports the development of atheist propaganda..." – for more see, <http://shtetiweb.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Kushtetuta-e-Republikes-Socialiste-Shqiperise-1976.pdf>

³ Interview with former KMSH Chair, Ermir Gjinishi.
⁴ Al-Haramain's Albania branch was subject to UNSC sanctions for its affiliation with Al-Qaeda in 2004, and its leader was extradited to Egypt where he was prosecuted. https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/sanctions/1267/aq_sanctions_list/summaries/entity/al-haramain%3A-albania-branch

partaking in terrorist organizations was criminalized; a national security strategy on countering-violent extremism was passed in 2015; and a series of arrests were made in 2015, 2016 and 2017⁵ leading to a significant diminishing of terrorist recruitment. Meanwhile, KMSH has bolstered its efforts to bring under its fold mosques that were outside of its jurisdiction and administration. Even though “normality” has ensued in the last two years, Islam continues to face challenges in integrating diverging factions. Adherents of the Hanafi School, which was the predominant interpretation in former Ottoman provinces constitutes the majority. An increasingly strong challenging faction is associated with the Hanbali school, known for its more conservative interpretation. In Albania, this group is associated with clerics trained at conservative institutions in Arab countries.

However, since the failed coup in Turkey, there’s a third faction that has emerged, known as followers of Abdullah Gülen organization or FETO, who face prosecution in Turkey, which has officially requested the extradition of several high ranking members – a call Albanian authorities have so far not complied with. This has split the Hanafi group into two and brought KMSH and Islam under scrutiny as sensitive to religious and political development in Turkey.

While on the surface these relations seem to lack any tension, there are sporadic instances, such as elections for the head of the KMSH leadership when they come to the surface.

To understand the phenomenon, we organized three roundtables, seven focus groups, and held a series of interviews with the leadership of KMSH, government representatives and individual

imams of mosques where recruitment took place.

What emerged was a clear synopsis of the predominant issues that have contributed to the process of radicalization in Albania. Chief among them, is the financial reliance on foreign donors which remains a key challenge for the foreseeable future. Unless, the KMSH becomes financially independent from foreign influence, it will be unable to assert its authority. The current financial support provided by the Government of Albania is insufficient for the needs of the institution. Returning some of its properties confiscated during Hoxha’s regime would help alleviate the issue. In addition, enhancing religious education in Albania would eliminate the need for students to continue their theological studies abroad. Furthermore, current legislation needs to pave the way to convert diplomas on theology obtained abroad through which the qualifications of religious leaders can be quantified and certified.

Ultimately, to overcome Islam’s challenges in Albania, more formalization and centralization is required. Neither can be obtained without the necessary human and financial resources. KMSH’s financial self-sufficiency is a prerequisite to its ability to assert its authority. The institution needs to set its house in order by building genuine internal structures that are inclusive, democratic and transparent. The latter will become increasingly important and a determinant to its public standing. These are not easy tasks, but the institution itself, and the Albanian Muslim community has a strong tradition in all these regards whose lessons which must serve as guidelines for any future action.

⁵ Albania: Extremism and Counter-Extremism, web: <https://www.counterextremism.com/countries/albania>

THE ALBANIAN ISLAM: UNDERSTANDING AND EXPLAINING

1.1 Building the Albanian traditions of Islam

“When the song of the hodja is heard from the minaret, Muslims stop what they are doing and head to the mosque after having washed their hands and feet in the stream of water. Friday afternoon the market is closed. It closes also on Sunday afternoon. Hence a delicate problem has been solved pleasing both Jesus and Muhammad. Tirana, inhabited by fifteen thousand Muslims and two thousand Christians has succeeded to treat both faiths equally.”

Nowlle Roger Revue des deux Mondes, 1922 (Sinani 2017)

The earliest accounts of Islam in Albania precede the Ottoman conquest. (Basha 2012) Prior to the Ottoman invasion, conversions were more episodic, and were mostly centered on individuals. Nonetheless, by the end of the late 14th century, and the first half of the 15th century, Albanians embraced Islam more substantially (Popovic 2006). The decisive military victory of the Ottoman army over the Albanian resistance came in 1478, following a strong rebellion lead by Gjergj Kastrioti Scanderbeg,

country's national hero. Ottoman rulers incentivized a process of “Islamization” through a series of administrative and tax measures, which culminated in the 17th and 18th century with mass conversions. By the time Albania declared its independence in 1912, the country's religious demographics had fundamentally been transformed. Islam constituted a solid majority of adherents among ethnic Albanians.

According to official data from the early years of independence, Muslims comprised 70 percent of the population, Christian Orthodox 20 percent, and Roman Catholics 10 percent.¹ De facto, this made Albania the only Muslim-majority country in the Balkans, a unique feature in a region dominated by Orthodox Christianity (Cimbalo 2013). However, unlike other countries of the region, religion has not played an equally significant role in the formation of national identity among Albanians.

¹ The 2011 census organized by the Institute for Statistics, a government agency, illustrates the numbers remain by enlarge unchanged (Census: Population and Residences, 2011, web 8 April 2019, <http://www.instat.gov.al/temat/censet/censusi-i-popullsis%C3%AB-dhe-banesave/#tab1>). Note that initial data incorporated Bekteshi, a Sufi order with a Shi'a lining, as well as Sunni Muslims as Muslims. It is also worth mentioning that the statistics of the most recent census were not universally accepted by religious communities as accurate or representative. Issues were raised by all religious communities, including recently established ones such as Protestants, for being misleading and unrepresentative.

Instead, Albania's national identity is formed around shared linguistic and heritage traits. Leaders of the National Awakening Movement (1831 – 1912) played a key role in this by adapting common ancestry and language as pillars for national cohesion. This was further enforced by efforts Albanian patriots made to develop and consolidate a "civil religion."²

Albanians have greatly benefit from this focus on commonalities which has underplayed the role of religious differences (Clayer 2009). As a result, Albanians identify first as Albanians and then as Muslims, Christians, Catholic, Bekteshi, Orthodox, Protestant or else. While this approach alone has made a viable contribution to its national cohesion despite religious diversity, it is worth mentioning that there are other contributing factors that have aided the process.

Chief among them is the meek penetration of religion in society and communal conscious. This is best encapsulated by Indro Montanelli, according to whom, religions – in Albania – remained foreign imposed superstructures, accepted only as labels. He concludes by adding that for Albanians', religion has always been more of a habit than a spiritual matter (Montanelli 2004). Lack of understanding of the sacred texts, which were translated relatively late in Albanian, has played an important role in this process.

The Muslim holy book was not translated fully in Albanian until 1985 when Feti Mehdiu, a Muslim cleric from Kosovo provided the most complete work to date (Ismaili 2016). Later translations were provided by Hasan Fendi Nahi and Serhif Ahmeti in 1988 and 1992 re-

spectively. However, earlier attempts to translated Islam's sacred book into Albanian commenced with the National Awakening Movement. Naim Frasheri, a leading Albanian thinker and national poet, despite being a Bekteshi himself, provided the earliest documented translation of the Kuran³, by translating a part of the Quran in his worked titled *Lessons* in 1894.⁴ This was exacerbated by the high level of illiteracy during Ottoman occupation, period in which writing Albanian was banned, which explains in part the late translation of the Bible and Quran.⁵

In addition, religious sermons were delivered in foreign languages. Combined, these factors hindered the ability of religion to penetrate deeply into society. As a result, Islam, just as other religions practiced in Albania, have had to adapt to the local norms, values and traditions. The nature of conversion, especially to Islam, was chiefly obtained through a top-down approach incentivized through policy measures which granted a convert better access to agreeable land, lower taxes, and other privileges. Notably, the converted claimed a new religion and changed his name, but was little informed on sacred texts, principles, values and obligations.⁶

³ He has provided translations of religious text relevant to Christians, Bekteshi and Muslims. For more, see: <http://www.albasoul.com/modules.php?op=modload&name=News&file=article&sid=640>

⁴ Elezi, Islam, "Disa tema dhe dilema rreth përkthimit të Kur'anit në gjuhën shqipe," Zani i Naltë, 2018, web, april 7 2019, <http://zaninalte.al/2018/09/disa-tema-dhe-dilema-rreth-perkthimit-te-kuranit-ne-gjuhen-shqipe/>

⁵ Attempts to provide a translation of the Bible and liturgy in Albanian date back to the Protestant Reformation Movement. The earliest Albanian script, Missal dates back to 1555, and is authored by Gjon Buzuku, a Catholic priest and consists of texts from the Bible. Parts of the text from the Bible were translated by Kristofor Kristoforidhi, a key figure of the National Awakening, in 1872. The Bible was translated in full only in 1994 by Dom Simon Filipaj, a Catholic cleric. For more, see: <http://albanianorthodox.com/bibla-shqip/>

⁶ Novices adopted new Muslim names and frequented the mosque periodically if one of them happened to be close by. Yet, internally their Christian worldview was well present even because lessons on Islamic doctrine happened very rarely. For a detailed explanation see Peter Bartl "Shqiptarët nga Mesjeta deri në Ditët Tona", pp 58-63.

² For the concept of "civil religion" see Gert Duijzings at "Qerbelaja e Naim Frashërit, Feja dhe Politika në Shqipëri." Përpjekja, 15- 16, Ed. Fatos Lubonja.

Importantly, religions practiced in Albania, including Islam, are imported ideologies embraced by natives. This has significant ramifications for the composition of local communities, which remained largely unchanged. As a result, even to this day, Muslims can trace back to only a few generations when their predecessors were converted to Islam, and some others have relatives who adhere to another religion. In other words, the composition of the kin remained unaltered. Hence, it is understandable how such religious diversity within the clan, naturally leads toward tolerance (Kadare 2003).

Despite the changes pertaining to personal and communal way of life that emerged as a result of conversions, many old customs, norms and community structures remained intact. None captures this perseverance than the Kanun of Leke Dukagjini, whose laws, although unwritten, had been closely observed by Albanians, predominantly in the north of the country. Such is its influence, as Mangalakova (2004) points out, that "It is difficult to comprehend the character, mentality and pattern of behavior of Albanians without taking into account the Kanun," the country's ancient codification of social norms. Kanun's ability to retain its influence over the centuries explains in part the relatively insignificant role of religion in society, politics and identity.

This meek penetration of religion displays itself in other important life matters such as marriage. For instance, the Kanun of Leke Dukagjini strictly adheres to exogamy⁷ and bans marriage

⁷ Article 16 of the Kanun, clearly outlines the rules under a man and a woman are allowed to get married. It indicates, that "a) There must be no blood relationship [...]; b) They must not be of the same clan [fis]; c) She must not be a niece of the clan [fis] of the young man who wants to marry her; [...] e) There must not be no spiritual relationship [...] The Kanun does not permit betrothal and marriage when any of the obstacles mentioned above exist as far back as the four hundredth generation" (Boman and Krasniqi, 2012, p. 10).

within kin. Notably, this strict observance throughout centuries have not been impacted by religious doctrine, be it Muslim or Christian which allow endogamy, and are much laxer on such matters. An individually centered approach to observation of faith and rituals has been impacted by a fusion of religious and traditional values. The survival of centuries old customs despite conversion to Catholicism, Orthodoxy and latter Islam indicate the role of religion, including Islam is constrained in Albania. The phenomenon is best captured by Edith Durham, who during her travels in the country, noted that:

....The Albanian remains Albanian. He is first of all Albanian. Religion always comes in the second place. [...] when an Albanian must obey circumstances, he does it in order to make circumstances obey him. He never takes Christianity seriously, but apparently, even Islam has not been introduced properly. [...] Some nations have a natural inclination towards religion. While Albanians, as a nation, do not care (Durham 2007)

Combined, these factors have played a decisive role in the establishment of what today constitutes the traditional Albanian Islam.⁸ Its features are coexistence with other religions, tolerance, acceptance of the concept of a nation-state. In turn, this uniqueness has for long received wide global recognition.⁹

Foreign reporters, diplomats, travelers, and scholars traveling through Albanian inhabited lands during the Otto-

⁸ Focus Group discussion, Tirana 2018.

⁹ During his visit to Albania in 2014, the first in Europe, he praised the country's religious harmony. For more, see: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/albania/11111600/Pope-Francis-says-Albania-is-a-model-of-religious-harmony-during-first-visit-to-Muslim-majority-nation.html>

man occupation, have marveled at the religious coexistence among Albanians which displayed itself through various forms, including mixed marriages. “The *Mohameddan* (Muslim) in this country marries a Christian woman and when he goes to the mosque, he takes his sons with him, whereas his daughters join their mother and go to church and then he himself goes to both the religious sites” (Hygens 2012). This would be fundamentally unattainable if religion played a central role in the life of Albanians.

Narratives have also played a role. Islam, given that it was intrinsically linked to the Ottoman Empire, remained a religion imposed by “occupiers.” In a historical perspective, Islam came to Albania via Turkey after centuries of dominance from Catholicism and Orthodoxy. As such, it owes much of its features from its predecessor. From a doctrinal point of view for instance, Albania’s Islam adheres to Hanafi School, which was predominant throughout the Ottoman Empire. Its “relatively liberal” legal doctrine on personal freedoms¹⁰ which has been emulated by Islam in Albania, has had a lasting impact. Formally, Albania’s Islam was separated from Turkey’s only in 1923, when the country’s governing body for Islam, the Albanian Muslim Community (KMSH) officially separated from the Ottoman Caliphate (Popovic 2006).

Albania became a haven for Bektashism, a Sufi Islamic order whose followers fled from prosecution in Turkey. Bektashism is unique in that it combines Christian and Islamic features. Historically, Bektashism has helped bridge the gap between Islam and Christianity (Doja 2009). An important development in this regard is its ad-

¹⁰ In comparison to other schools of thought, Hanafi is deemed as more liberal. For more, see: <http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t125/e798>

aptation of clear national features at the beginning of the 19th century (Bartl 2018). Combined, these features have enabled Bektashism to play an important role in Albania’s historical and political developments, in addition to making a viable contribution in fostering understanding between Islam and Christianity (Hasluck 1925). In addition to playing an important role in shaping the country’s Islam, Bektashims has played a prominent role in Albania’s history encapsulated by the work of Frasheri brothers (Naim, Abdyl, and Sami) who played a key role in the National Awakening Movement.¹¹

Together, these factors help explain the secondary role played by religion among Albanians at both, the individual and communal level. Irrespective of the drivers, they have culminated in the formation of a national identity which disregards religious affiliation; a secular political system; and an Islam with national characteristics which is tolerant toward other religions and embraces democratic values, even within its own structures.¹²

1.2 The Governance of Albanian Islam: the emergence and the fall of a liberal project

After the establishment of the independent Albanian state, the Muslim community faced three key issues in relation to its organization and functioning: the relationship with itself, with the government of Albania and other religious communities present in the country.

Chief among them, was the immediate need to determine the organizations internal governing structures. In lieu of experience with governance or

¹¹ According to the national census, they account for less than 15th of the population, yet have played a key role in historic and political processes within the Republic of Albania.

¹² Focus Group discussion, Shkoder 2018.

democratic processes, it faced a daunting task to choose a functioning model of administration that would suit its needs. As the country obtained its independence from the Ottoman Empire, the nature of the government emerging from the newly established structures, and the relationship between state and religion had to be determined. Even though Islam constituted most adherents, establishing it as a national religion was unattainable, not least because of the country's religious diversity. Albania's independence, which marked the culmination of the National Awakening Movement is a result of the sacrifices made by Albanians from all religious denominations (Bartl 2018). Furthermore, interreligious harmony was critical for national cohesion and stability. Given the sheer size of the Albanian Muslim community in comparison to others, its role was essential in establishing the nature of the country's interconfessional relations.

Decisions taken to resolve these outstanding issues play a decisive role for the future of Albania's traditional Islam. They shaped the identity of Islam in Albania for decades to come; its international organization structures, relations with the government and other religious communities.¹³

In the newly established Albania, relations between the state and religion, including Islam; religion communities amongst themselves; and religion and society consolidated into one of the most democratic processes in the post Ottoman Albania. Upon declaring its independence, founding fathers recognized the necessity to recognize and grant equal rights and fair treatment based on the conviction that preserving the Albanian nation required overcoming any potential divisions that could result from

¹³ Focus Group discussion, Librazhd 2018.

religious diversity (Cimbalo 2013).

Given the diverse religious landscape, where there were initially three principal religions, later became four,¹⁴ it was imperative to avoid declaring a national religion. Alternatively, the governance of Islam in Albania and national cohesion would have been endangered. Divisions along religious lines, which were not absent during the Ottoman occupation. Furthermore, centuries of Ottoman rule had fermented the need for central authority, as shown by peasant riots led by Haxhi Qamili, who sought a return under Sultan's rule (Panorama 2018).

The Albanian Muslims preserved the formal and informal structures inherited from the era prior to the formation of the state, which recognized the old religious and juridical hierarchy. According to J. Godart, the government kept paying the salaries for the *kadis* (religious judges) and the *mufti*-s, a practice that would persist until the new organization (Godart 2016). However, the government did not remain distant for long on religious affairs, especially Islam.

This was especially true in the 1920s, when the government despite adhering to the principle of secularism, it aimed to control religious institutions who in a big part of the country leveraged more power and presence than the government. Hence, control over them was essential for maintaining social cohesion, and preventing divisive elements.¹⁵ As a result, the government of the time played an important role in

¹⁴ Up until 1929 Albanian Sunni Muslims and Bektashis were united. In 1929 the separation of Bektashism as a distinctive religious community was made public but the official separation was recognized in 1945.

¹⁵ Albania declared independence in 1912, but the government was unable to assert itself in the country until the early 1920s. Following the riots led by Haxhi Qamili, the government sought to minimize the role of religious institutions in society. Committed intellectual secularists supported these actions who saw Islam as the remaining shelter for dangerous "oriental" influences. (Sulstarova, 2018). For more see: <http://zaninalte.al/2018/09/per-fe-dhe-atdhe->

the reorganization of the Muslim (Sulstarova 2018).

Through a special decree issued in 1923, the government established that religious communities must comply with a strict set of criteria before they could obtain formal recognition as legal and civil personalities. Six years later, a Law on Religion completed it by setting an advanced standard in the equal treatment of religions. This law incentivized democratic procedures and principles within the internal structures of the Muslim community, its administration, relation with other religious communities and the state.

The law of 1929 served as the basis upon which the separation of religion and state was achieved; secularity was institutionalized; and the religious plurality of Albanian society established. Application of these principles enabled Albania, the only Muslim-majority country in Europe to establish a pluralist vision on Islam, which facilitated the coexistence of democratic procedures with religious freedom. To date, Albania analyst and its religious affairs, consider this law among the most progressive regulatory norms, and an effective mechanism for interreligious conflict prevention (Cimbalo 2013). According to Cimbalo, (2013), this was possible in large part due to the failed attempts of foreign influencers to meddle in the country's religious affairs during the interwar period.

There are two key contributing factors to this process, which the government of Albania at the time identified and focused on. First, educational institutions responsible for preparing the clergy, publications and dogma. To this end, Islamic press in Albanian played an important role, whereas the

[argumentet-e-klerit-mysliman-ne-debatin-mbi-modernizimin-e-shqiperise-ne-vitet-20-30/](#)

establishment of the madrassa of Berat, which became the main educational hub through which future clergy were trained, was critical. A number of Muslim intellectuals made a viable contribution in this field as a series of religious books and publications, all in Albanian, were for the first time made accessible to their congregation (Popovic 2006). Furthermore, teaching was conducted in Albanian, and the school admitted students with a track record of academic excellence (Popovic 2006). Hence, the statute of KMSH required that Albanian be the official language of communication within the institution; its leaders be elected through a hidden vote; and upon election, the leader must swear loyalty to the King, the nation and KMSH's sacred statute (Duka 2014). This applied to lower ranking officials of the Albanian Muslim Community as well.¹⁶

Second, the governance and future of Islam would depend on the financial resources and capacities. This was made very difficult by the lack of finances and in general, by the very high level of poverty that existed in Albania. The governance of the Muslim community relied on the internal resources, on the revenues generated from the believers, as well as the finances allocated by the state in the form of salaries given to the clergy. According to the status of the Muslim community gifts and subventions from other states could not be accepted. This could happen only in the exception that the government would approve it (Duka 2014).

This is a crucial aspect of the heritage of the modern governance of religious communities in Albania because it

¹⁶ For a detailed account of the involvement of the government in the formation of internal structures of the Albanian Muslim Community, see Duka (2014) at: <http://zaninalte.al/2014/01/institucionet-fetare-gjate-mbreterimit-te-ahmet-zogut-nje-veshtrim-te-legjislacionit-te-kohes-1928-1939/>

prevented malicious foreign influences. (Cimbalo 2013) argues that Albania successfully adopted efficient juridical mechanisms which then guaranteed the right management of relations between state and religious communities, largely due to the avoidance of these outside pressures. Neutralizing the risk of foreign influences that could come in the form of financial assistance from other foreign centers or states was an additional guarantee for the governance and particularly, for the preservation of the Albanian tradition of Islam that had just started to consolidate and which was a precursor to the Albanian Islamic doctrine.

Subsequent steps taken related to the organization and the functioning of the KMSH preserved and developed an Islam which recognized local features such as the country's religious diversity. In the year 1923, the Albanian Muslim community officially separated from the Ottoman Caliphate under whose administrative and doctrinal influence it had been for centuries, effectively asserting its independence. During its first Summit, the Albanian Muslim Community (KMSH), the country's governing body for Islam, decided to become autonomous from the rest of the Muslim world and banned several widespread Islamic practices, including polygamy and the obligation to wear the face cover (*feredje*) for women (Popovic 2006).

In 1929, Albania abrogated Sharia law, an act which further helped "nationalize" the country's Islam. In the same year, a detailed law was enacted through which religious communities could acquire the benefits, privileges and responsibilities derived from it. More importantly, it fundamentally shaped their internal organizational and functional features. In addition, it preserved

the spirit and principles of the Constitution, according to which Albania has no official religion while the freedom of religion and of its practice were guaranteed by law. As the country was undertaking a series of deep reforms to modernize, it aimed to prevent religion from playing a political role, by decreeing that religion could not be used to achieve political goals (Fischer 2012).

Indeed, the reform of King Zog to regulate the functioning of the religious communities, as well as the relation of the state towards them alongside all the policies that he followed towards religion, yielded a considerable impact in the entire process of state building. According to Ismail Kadare, one of the secrets why the kingdom of Zog achieved to establish order in Albania just a short time after finding the country in complete chaos, is exactly the legislation for the relations of the Albanian state with the three religions.¹⁷

During the kingdom of Zog, Albania took important measures to modernize Islam. This process of modernization did not include Albanians outside its current borders. As a result, when Kosovo and Albanian inhabited parts of North Macedonia joined Albania during WWII, it became clear that there existed fundamental differences among on the understanding and practices of Islam. It seemed irrelevant they were all ethnic Albanians, Sunni Muslims and belonged to the Hanafi school.¹⁸ Explanatory factors for the stronger religious sentiments in both Kosovo and Macedonia are attributed the stronger pres-

¹⁷ Even though it was drafted three quarters of a century before the current days, this legislation is the best so far in the history of Albania and one of the best in Europe because it is based on the Albanian tradition of Islam. See Ismail Kadare, "Feja dhe qytetërimet në mijëvjeçarin e ri", Qendra shqiptare për të drejtat e njeriut, Tiranë 2003, pp. 13- 20.

¹⁸ Even now after several decades, there are significant differences and it is a visible fact that the Albanian society in Kosovo and Macedonia are much more religious than in Albania.

ence of religious jurisprudence, which were disbanded in Albania,¹⁹ in addition to religious and ethnic tensions which were by enlarge absent in Albania.

During WWII, both Italians and Germans did not meddle with the administration of religions in Albania. The anti-fascist National Liberation Council which became the provisional government prior to Albania's liberation in October 1944, issued among its first acts a Human Rights declaration which recognized among other freedoms, the right of faith and consciousness and the equal rights for all religions.²⁰ These were reversed with the arrival of communists to power. The latter's commitment to succumb the influence of religion in society unraveled decades of efforts to consolidate the national features of Albania's religious communities, along with their educational and spiritual infrastructure.

1.3 Ground Zero: Islam under communism

...Not many days went by and the door of our cell opened. A major officer entered and asked each of us our name...

- *All of you priests?*

- *Yes all.*

- Do you see what it means to have a revolution? Until now the laws of the bourgeoisie considered the clergy as untouchable whereas now, we can bring here in even God himself accompanied just by two policemen. This is the strength of our Party.

- What about you, hodja effendi (Mr. hodja) he charged at Hafiz Dërguti, - what are you doing here?

- I am just like all the other clerics...²¹ (Basha 2012)

Albania's communist regime abhorred religion and sought to curb its influence in society. Enver Hoxha's Communist Party considered religious ideology as incompatible with communism and was particularly keen on preventing the Vatican meddling in internal affairs. The objective was to neutralize any potential challenger to its power. Hence, the Communist Party, and gradually Enver Hoxha, transformed Albania into a dictatorship. This monopoly on power helped enabled Hoxha and his power circle to dictate his cult of personality and communist ideology which eventually were the only ones allowed to be promoted in the country.

This anti-religious sentiment delivered a devastating blow to religion once it became policy. The demise of religious freedoms and institutions implemented by the communist regime was based on three objectives:

- Gradual annihilation of economic resources in possession of religious communities through the agrarian reform, followed by property and wealth. Their economic destruction was further enhanced through a series of laws and taxes,²² and a dra-

²¹ Divide and conquer was a key tactic used by Hoxha's regime. This quote illustrates how imprisoned priests and imams formed a closer bond as they jointly suffered from communism's fervent prosecution of religion.

²² Through the communist agrarian reform, the Albanian Muslim Community lost 3 163 hectares of land and 61 000 olive trees. The law on extraordinary taxation for the spoils of war also affected the properties of the Albanian Muslim Community since it imposed on them unrealistic taxes. For example, for the Vlora Vakef (properties) the tax was 64 000 francs which was higher than the value of the institution itself. Similarly, the Vakef of Durres was taxed with 30 000 francs. The government introduced also a new tax called "vergjia", a sort of wealth tax that amounted to about a third of the value of the assets.

¹⁹ See Alexandre Popovic and Giovanni Gimbalò.
²⁰ Ibid, See also "Historia e Shqipërisë", Volume 2, pp. 200-210.

matic decrease in financial support from the state budget.²³

- The de-legitimization of religious doctrine; destruction of religious infrastructure,²⁴ including educational institutions of different religions.²⁵
- De-legitimization of clerics through propaganda, phony court proceedings supported by fabricated accusations and unproven charges, leading to their arrest, imprisonment and even prosecution.^{26,27}

To avoid any possible backlash, these policies were implemented gradually. After all, irrespective of their faith, members of religious groups had fought on different sides during WWII. As a result, any action against religious leaders was preceded by a wave of propaganda. To nullify any claims that they would prosecute religion, they deceived the public with announcements in favor of upholding the preexisting principles and structures intact.

Consequently, the Constitution of 1946 stipulated among others to guarantee freedom of religion, provide financial support for religious communities from the state budget, and uphold the country's secular principle. Furthermore,

this constitution banned the establishment of political parties with religious basis.²⁸ If we compare these constitutional principles with those of the pre-war government, we notice that the communists relied heavily on their predecessor's legislation. Moreover, the communist government asked the religious communities to reorganize their own internal governance, guarantying them the freedom to carry on their activities within the law and the statutes approved during the government of King Zog.

It seemed that the legislation would create the adequate space for the restart of the functioning of the religious communities, including the largest of them, the Muslim one.²⁹ Even though the government had committed to assist the communities functioning with financial resources, the assets and wealth that the Muslim community had in possession in 1945 were sufficient to support its own activities (Basha 2012). This was high time for the Muslim community which in 1946 counted among its staff about 1 500 people, the majority of whom were clergymen and the rest employees.³⁰ However, in spite of the declared support for religious communities, the regime's aim to put any competing ideology or source of power under its full control took precedence.

With the consolidation of the communist regime came the radical shift in its approach toward religion. Its hardened position left no room for compromise, while its actions were supported by a series of changes in legislation, propaganda campaigns and mobilization

Durres Vakef data.

23 In the beginning of the 1950s the state allocated 12 million Leke for the Muslim Community and 2, 8 million Leke in 1965.

24 In September 1967, the communist government of Albania announced the closing of 2169 religious buildings, among which were mosques, monasteries and churches. For more, see Pano Nikolla, *Religion and Civilization in the new Millennium*, Albanian Center for Human Rights, Tirana 2003.

25 According to the archives of the Albanian Muslim Community (KMSH), in 1964 the government of Albania forced the closure of the Tirana Madrasa which was the country's sole educational institution and center for Islamic culture in Albania.

26 In 1964, the government decided to close the Madrasa of Tirana which was in fact the only institution of Muslim education and the only center of Islamic culture in Albania. Archive of the KMSH.

27 In the beginning of the 50s the regime arrested, among others, the intellectual elite of the Islam community in Albania including the director of the Tirana Madrasa, Hafiz Ismet Dibra, professors of the Institute of the Islamic School Hafiz Ibrahim Dalliu as well as some scholars of the Islamic religion such as Myfti Musa, Stefën Hasani, the Chair mufti of Korca, etc.

28 The Constitution of People's Republic of Albania 1946, <http://shtetiweb.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/STATUTI-I-ASAMBLESE-KUSHTETONJE%C2%A6%C3%AASE-1946.pdf>

29 According to the 1945 Census the results were that 58-70 percent were Muslims, 17 percent Orthodox and 10 percent Catholics. It is clear that the figure for the Muslims included the Bektashi community members.

30 Archives of the Albanian Muslim Community.

of its support base. By mid-1950's the power had strongly tilted in favor of the regime. This process culminated with a full war on religion, dominated by fusing nationalism with communist ideology.

To justify its war on religion, the regime adapted the motto of the National Awakening Movement, "The religion of Albanians is Albanians."³¹ While its proponents used to unify the nation, the communists put to use to eliminate all forms of religion including here, of course, the Muslim one.³² This war escalated with the establishment of diplomatic ties with China. To demonstrate its seriousness as a strategic partner, Albania implemented its own cultural revolution.

Consequently, religion was banned; religious infrastructure was destroyed or repurposed; and clergy were either imprisoned or prosecuted. Any religious institution, publication, personal that had survived previous assaults on religion were delivered a final blow with the declaration of Albania an atheist state in 1976 – the first and only of its kind in the world to this day.³³ This was institutionally, spiritually and physically consequential for all religious communities as efforts to reinstitute religion after 1990s have shown. While much has been recovered or substituted, values that persisted prior to communism, including in the educational realm remain a distant dream.

³¹ This is an extracted quote from a poem "Oh Albania" (1878) by Pashko Vasa, in which he called for national unity.

³² "The Communist regime propaganda claimed that Islam, Orthodox and Catholic Christianity were all foreign philosophies imposed on Albania by foreign agents and which seriously endangered the national integrity", Miranda Vickers.

³³ Article 37 of the constitution of 1976 stipulated that "The state does not recognize any religion and supports the development of atheist propaganda..." – for more see, <http://shtetiweb.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Kushtetuta-e-Republikes-Socialiste-Shqiperise-1976.pdf>

THE REVIVAL OF ISLAM AND EMERGENCE OF RADICALIZATION

2.1 Religion is back but Secularism prevails

With the fall of the communist regime, the country entered a deep transitory period, in which religion has been one of the most important factors in social transformations that occurred. The revitalization of religious faiths and communities after the decades' long ban, unprecedented in any other country of the former Communist East, was a difficult enterprise. As the country underwent deep political, economic and social transition, the key issue faced by religion as it revitalized itself was to determine the role it could and should play in the formation of the new Albanian identity.

Following decades of strict imposition of atheism, in 1991 Albania was an almost fully secular society. The sudden acquired religious freedoms after the collapse of communism required serious and coordinated efforts to undo the deeply rooted atheist traits in society. While the communist era policies have contributed to this, irreligious features of the Albanian society are not exclusively a result of the Hoxha regime.³⁴

³⁴ Nathalie Clayer suggests that the secular trend is old in Albania and that this predisposition existed even amidst intellectuals and officials of the Muslim faith which had studied either in the West or in the capital seat of the Ottoman Empire where Western ideas were very well present. See "Zoti në vendin e Mercedesëve, Komunitetet fetare në Shqipëri prej vitit 1990", Përpjekja Nr. 20, Tiranë 2005, p.11.

Upon coming formally to power in 1945, permitted the practice of religion for a brief period, an era under which King Zog's approach to religion, namely the separation of state and religion was maintained. Notably, in this period, the role of religion in social processes was not tangible,³⁵ as it played a small part in Albanians daily life. As the regime crumbled, religion had become ever more absent in people's lives, as whole generations grew in complete absence of religious teachings, rites and ceremonies.

Nonetheless, it remained unresolved whether the secular model of society's *modus operandi* would be preserved. Even if there was no doubt that religion could not play the part of organizing ideology of the state, there was no clarity whether religion would play a role in public life. Questions regarding the impact religion would have on the daily lives of Albanians and shape their identities, following the demise of the "*the new man*" that communism built. It remained a dilemma what values would fill its void. The lack of direction and coordination as the country entered a transformative period further exacerbated the issue.

While socio-political attitudes have since then shifted on many issues as Albansians travel more, are better educated,
³⁵ Focus Group discussion, Elbasan 2018.

and generally more prosperous, their attitude towards religion has not changed significantly. A 2018 survey published on World Religion Day based on three Gallup polls shows Albania as the least religious country in the Balkans (Smith, Oliver 2018). Asked if they feel religious, only 39% of those interviewed responded positively, making Albania one of the 20 least religious countries, and slightly less than Germany (34%), Spain (37%) and Switzerland (28%).³⁶ This makes Albania the only country in the Balkan Peninsula with a “Western style” attitude toward religion (Tanner 2018).

In the same vein, data related to the observance of religious practices and attendance at services confirm the trend. A 2011 survey indicates that only 16 percent of Albanians confirmed they regularly attend services and observe practices (Blumi and Krasniqi 2014). Meanwhile, the number of Albanians identifying with a particular religion also declined.³⁷ This is not surprising given the initial euphoria for religion displayed by different age groups in the early 1990’s was going to be difficult to maintain.

First religious services, held on 4 November 1990 at the Catholic Graveyard, and two weeks later at the Lead Mosque in Shkodra, were attended by

³⁶ Albania makes a striking contrast with neighboring countries, Greece (71%), Macedonia (88%), Kosovo (83%), Serbia (72%), Montenegro (71%), Bosnia (65%) and Croatia (70%). For more see: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/maps-and-graphics/most-religious-countries-in-the-world/>
³⁷ In 1999, 63 percent of Albanian citizens do not attend religious services. They visit the mosque or the church just once a year. Only 9 percent follow services once a week. See Gjergj Sinani, “Fenomeni Fetar në Shqipëri”, in Shqipëria në Tranzicion dhe vlerat, Sociology Department, University of Tirana, 1999. In the year 2011, only 5 percent of citizens follow religious services compared to 68 percent who never follow them or do so extremely rarely. See “Albania twenty years After: People on state and democracy”, Albanian Institute for International Studies, Tirana, 2011. P 54. In the year 2015, there is another decrease in the part of citizens who follow the religious practices. According to an AIIS poll, 76.6 percent of citizens do so very rarely (once a year on key holidays) or even never. See AIIS: “Assessment of risks on national security / the capacity of state and society to react: Violent Extremism and Religious Radicalization in Albania”, 2015 at <http://www.aiis-albania.org/?q=node/368>

thousands of Albanians. This hunger for religion was supported by a plethora of books and publications being fervently distributed. The speed with which these events unfolded contributed to the perception that religion would become an important component in the country’s socio-political life.³⁸

Even though, the secular character of Albania was sustained, and the role played by religion in public sphere remained peripheral, the perception was that religion occupied a central place in both public and political life of the country (Clayer 2005). This notion masked concerns that the country would become more religious, and more Islamic (Misha 2008). These fears were fueled by attempts to replace the traditional Islam practiced in the country with more radical forms such as Wahhabism (Misha 2003). They were further exacerbated by the construction of hundreds of religious objects and buildings throughout the country.³⁹

In relation to Islam, there were two key developments fueling concerns that Islam could seek to increase its role in Albania’s public and political life. First, the massive influx of foreign missionaries and preachers representing sects and interpretations unfamiliar to Albanians (Clayer 2009). Second, the country’s revived relations with the Arab world, and its contentious membership in the Islamic Conference in 1992 (Deliso 2007).

All these signs of “new religiosity” started to gradually fade. The membership of Albania in the Islamic Conference might have facilitated a more favorable environment for the penetration of radical doctrines, which differed from the traditional moderate Albanian Islam

³⁸ One of the key foundations of Egypt financed the translation and publication of 1 million copies of the Koran in the Albanian language but they took them back. Interview with Remzi Lani.

³⁹ Focus Group discussion, Shkoder 2018.

interrupted in the 60s. However, in the last three decades the dominant characteristics has been the secularism of Albanian society, whereas religion has never had a significant role in the public sphere and even less in the political one.

2.2 The arrival of Radicals

.... In the international Tirana Airport "Mother Teresa" in Rinas, among the citizens waiting for their flights, there were a dozen of young boys and a girl of about the same age which were staying secluded in a corner of the hall. In fact, all the other passengers were turning their heads to see them. The boys had long beards and the girl was completely covered in black, leaving outside only her eyes...

(Misha 2003)

The first concerns about the entrance and appearance of a radical stream and radical elements in the Albanian Islam were brought up by the Albanian press⁴⁰ in early 2000s. Through their reporting and analysis, the media provided details of changing dynamics, including unusual dress patterns used by clerics and believers⁴¹; unfamiliar rituals practiced before and during religious services, especially during the funerals; and, an ever-increasing number of veiled women and girls on the streets. This was particularly striking since *feredje*, a Muslim veil used by women in Turkey and former Ottoman areas, was banned by law in 1929.

40 See Artan Fuga, "A rrezikohemi nga integralizmi fetar në Shqipëri", Gazeta Koha Jone, Piro Misha Gazeta Korrieri. A series of similar articles and debates were made in the Albanian media also in Kosovo and Macedonia.

41 Albanian Muslim clerics and practitioners which were sporting three quarter length pants and long beards.

Parallel to these images which started to take space in the public sphere, there were important developments within the Albanian Muslim Community (KMSH), Islam's governing body in the country, where two rival groups emerged. The first subscribed to the traditional Islam practiced in Albania and represented most of the Muslim population. Its leadership consisted of clerics and religious teachers who survived communism. The other group, identified by the media as the radicals or the extremists, consistent mainly of "young students that had graduated in Arab countries or which had followed courses in various Islamic foundations" (Bumci 2004).

Albeit the visible growing rift between these groups, it was initially unclear what drove this divergence. With time passing, questions ensued whether this was a result of a power struggle for ideological or economic dominance. More importantly, was this being dealt by Albanians without foreign interference, and what would this mean for the future of Islam in the country.⁴²

Clarity over these questions became central for the Albanian Muslim Community in 2000s. Differences in interpretation of Islam and its future vision in the country worsened prospects for cooperation amongst these two factions. As a result, the group of clerics trained in the Middle East were rejected by KMSH's leadership structures. They were also dismissed and rejected by the Committee of Cults, a key government institution which refused to establish relations with another group. This hostility towards this group fueled their animosity with both the government and Islam's governing body.⁴³

42 Interview with Ermir Gjinishi, September 2018.

43 Interview with senior representative of Muslim Community, Tiranë, June 2018.

KMSH's internal style of governance has also contributed to the clash between these groups. Despite claiming to be democratic, Islam's governing body was far from a model of democratic leadership. Later allegations of mismanagement of funds and other resources intensified, and its leaders were accused of corruption and abuse of power. Substantive as they may be, these claims do not suffice to explain the rift. This was an ideological war among factions, which despite representing Islam, their interpretations were largely incompatible with each other.⁴⁴

This demonstrated itself in various forms. Adherence to the Hanafi School by the faction representing Albania's traditional Islam was deemed at best deformed and at worst unrepresentative of "the real Islam" by the group consisting of Middle Eastern educated clerics.⁴⁵ Instead, they referred to the school of Wahhabism as the genuine form, and made efforts to spread its appeal, especially in rural areas (Blumi and Krasniqi 2014). Furthermore, conception of behavior, appearance and dress of Muslims, both men and women, preached by these factions stood in striking contrast. As their battle for influence grew, this had far reaching repercussions for the KMSH, Albanian Muslims, religious coexistence and identity.

Tensions between the two groups reached a tipping point in 2002 when the head of the General Secretariat of the Albanian Muslim Community, Salih Tivari, was assassinated under mysterious circumstances in his office. Two years after his assassination, media reports revealed a private correspondence, according to which Tivari had revealed to Al-Haramain Foundation

that he was planning on minimizing the influence of foreign organizations in Albania. While the murder remains unsolved to date, state attorneys did not rule out the option that it was motivated by doctrinal conflicts within the KMSH (Bumci 2004). Coincidentally, in the same year, the Al-Haramain Foundation branch, allegedly linked to Al Qaida, ceased its operations in Albania.

Ideological divergence was not limited to the premises of the KMSH. Media reported that a Muslim student of the University of Tirana, fully covered, boycotted a lecture on Naim Frashëri, a prominent figure of the Albanian Renaissance, and Albania's national poet, arguing that "her religion did not permit her to listen and learn about Naim Frashëri" (Misha 2008). In a similar vein, another student at the country's largest university, refused to take an exam in which she was asked to answer questions on the work of Gjergj Fishta,⁴⁶ a key intellectual figure of the last century, and a prominent Catholic figure. In both cases, the religion of the author, Bektashism and Catholicism respectively, were used as motives for their actions. Similarly, in 2006, several Muslim organizations denounced the City Council's decision to erect a statute of Mother Teresa in the city center under the pretext that she is a Catholic figure. As such, they argued, "If there must be a statue, let it be in a Catholic space."⁴⁷

An important element of the ideological rift in the rival groups of the Muslim community was narrative, which revolved around hostility towards the West, its policies, and blaming "Christian Europe" (Emmerson and Young

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ The statement was first published in the Albanian Muslim Forum, and was supported by several other Islamic NGO's. A group of protesters, mostly young students, took the city streets to denounce the decision. The KMSH was in favor of the statue being installed and denounced opposing groups. For more see: <http://www.forummusliman.org/terezashkoder.html>

⁴⁴ There have been also some explanations which claim that they have simply used ideology for other purposes.

⁴⁵ Interview with B. Armand.

2003). This was enforced by articles claiming that “the real enemies of Albania are Christian-European imperialism and its tools”, while the justification for the extreme poverty of the Albanian was caused by “the abuse and humiliation that Christian Europe imposed on the Albanian people during a hundred years” were widely distributed in the internet (Misha 2003).

These developments were forewarning of the risk friction in the Albanian religious realm. First, the ideological divide between groups within the KMSH, with one seeking to restore Albanians traditional Islam, and the other seeking to establish a model applied in Arab countries, especially Saudi Arabia, risked an internal clash between the country’s Sunni Muslim’s. Second, they warned against risks posed to the country’s religious coexistence, which could lead to an eventual increase of tension between the Sunni majority, and the Bekteshi order. Third, they also reminded Albanians about a potential rift between two distinct faiths, namely Muslims and Catholics, which was unprecedented.

2.3 Securitization of Islam

Mixed reactions ensued as imams were charged with “inciting religious hatred, recruiting jihadi fighters and sending them to fight for the Islamic state.” While most discussions in the media and public circles focused on the individual’s legal infringements, a smaller group blamed Islam (IDK 2016) for playing its part in persuading Albanians to join ISIS.

In retrospect, a smaller but non-negligible group criticized the verdict and claimed that “imams were being punished not only for their acts but also for their convictions.” For them, the decision was based on a perceived threat and the “judgment against them had

been purely political and even ideological.” However, neither explained why more than a hundred Albanians made the journey to Iraq and Syria. Although the scale of radicalization, as the number of those fighting alongside ISIS demonstrate, were a tangible fact and not a matter of perception and interpretation, the identification of Islam as the root cause for radicalization remained theoretically and empirically unsupported.

Nonetheless, claims that Islam in Albania was suffering due to a “constructed threat” required further investigation. Not least, because Islam in Albania and especially its revitalization process since 1991 had been subject to varying levels of securitization, a process through which state actors treat a subject, in this case Islam as a matter of security (Shipoli 2018). Similarly, questions about the role and degree of impact played by securitization in the process of radicalization demanded immediate attention. This is a probable unintended side effect of securitization.

If Islam is considered a threat and a risk to national security, or segments within the KMSH community are singled out as a threat by state structures or the society, an expected outcome is that the group in question ends up being marginalized. In response, the target group deepens its isolation by building “protecting walls” as *structural violence*⁴⁸ is applied against them. The latter has by enlarge been influenced by the presence of Islamophobia in post-communist Albania (Rakipi 2015).

However, despite being a constant phenomenon, the perception of Islam as a threat to security has not dominated to the extent where it influences the

⁴⁸ The concept ‘structural violence’ associated with perpetual injustice and preventable suffering is developed by Johan Galtung in his article: “Violence, Peace and Peace Research”, Sage Publications, 1966.

mainstream understanding of Islam as an ideology. Nor has it instigated a thorough debate about the role of Islam as a religion in private, public, and least in political life. Furthermore, the KMSH and its relations with other religious communities present in the country or state institutions were spared this generalization. A key contribution factor to this is the deeply rooted social understanding of the religion in the country. Hence, it was not Islam per se, but the kind of Islam being promoted and its unrecognizable features that were the issue.

This ultimately related to revitalization of Islam in the country. Decades of prosecution by the communist regime had destroyed the religious infrastructure of Islam in the country. Following the reinstitution of religion in the country, the needs of religious communities were monumental.⁴⁹ This ground zero demanded the renormalization of KMSH, rebuilding of the religious infrastructure, training of new clerics, distribution of educational materials, and organization of religious ceremonies. Given the country's dire economic condition and institutional chaos that followed, none of these needs could be met without outside. To meet the ensuing needs, a plethora of foreign organizations, chiefly from the Middle East, entered the country. Their support was far-reaching:

...The charity organizations and foundations started to arrive in the beginning of the year 1991. They started to build with their funds the new mosques in the cities and villages of our country... they sponsored the madrassas and reestablished

49 In 1939, Albania numbered 1667. By 1990, the country's population had quadrupled but the number of mosques had drastically fallen to only half a dozen which were largely unfunctional. For more, "Islami ne Shqiperi gjate shekujve", Ali Basha.

the centers for Islamic culture. It was with their funds that the expenses of keeping the religious personnel were being covered and it was with their funds that our students were sent to study theology abroad in the best recognized universities of theology in the Islamic world...especially in the Arab countries. (Basha 2012)

Islam's revitalization through a fully foreign-funded process raised concerns, that soon turned political. The dependency on foreign funds was reaching. Through their funds, religious and educational infrastructure was built⁵⁰ while the training of new clerics, and even the salaries of KMSH employees and imams were depended on the sponsorship of foreign foundations.⁵¹ Critics at the time were concerned with the rising influence of foreigners in Albania, while dependency on their funding reversed the precedent set by King Zog in 1929 through a special decree which banned religious communities from receiving assistance from abroad.⁵²

At first glance, this was expected given the important role of foreign countries and organizations in Albania's political, economic and social transformation. However, the increased foreign influence in the country's Islam came with fears that this financial reliance led to Albania's traditional Islam being dependent on its sponsors ideological bent.

Concerns were twofold. First, the features of the "new Islam" were drastical-

50 At least up until the year 2001, all the madrassas in Albania were managed by foreign Islamic groups. Cited from Nathalie Clayer, *Perpjekja 20*, Tiranë 2005, p.20.

51 Ibid. In the beginning of the 90s about 90 percent of the budget of the KMSH came from foreign sources.

52 Interview with Piro Misha, author of "Escaping from prisons of history" (2008), researcher and publicist.

ly different with the traditional forms. Namely, it was stricter, demanded a rigorous following of religious rules, and was overall less liberal and tolerant than its local traditional forms. This fueled worries that this “new Islam” would eventually seek to play a growing role in society and put the country’s secular character at risk. Second, the deformation of the traditional form of Islam practiced in Albania was gradually endangering the country’s religious harmony. These considerations had an immediate impact in turning it into a political issue, which subsequently led to its securitization.

Amidst this debate there were unsettled voices claiming Islam was being treated unfairly. After all, other religious communities were largely dependent on foreign sponsorship. The Holy Sea⁵³ played a key role in helping reinstitute the Catholic Church in the country, while Orthodox received substantial foreign assistance.⁵⁴ However legitimate these claims, they failed to spark the spirited debate. Notably, global developments associated with war on terror following the September 11 attacks in US soil, played a key role in shaping the debate in the years to come.

As a result, the construction of Islam as a security threat deepened, while the tendency to equate violence with it became more prevalent.⁵⁵ Revelations that Middle Eastern organizations that were involved in the country’s revitalization of Islam had also sheltered terrorists in the country, and facilitated their activities (Deliso 2007) deepened the construction of Islam as a security threat. Fur-

⁵³ Until the year 1995 only 14 percent of the Catholic clerics that worked in the country were Albanian (Clayer, 2009).

⁵⁴ It was not a secret that the activities of the Orthodox Community were being financed by foreign donors related to the Archbishop Anastas Janullatos sent by the Patriarchate of Istanbul.

⁵⁵ Already cited by Aldo Bumci, “Debating National Security”, John Esposito” Political Islam Beyond the green menace, Current history”.

thermore, reports that Al Qaeda had operations in the country consolidated the notion that Islam posed a security threat to Albania (Shala 2003). In response, the government toughened its position against foreign Islamic foundations operating in the country. As a result, many were short after forced to seize their operations in the country.

Parallel with the securitization of Islam emerged a new narrative which claimed that the underlying agenda behind foreign-funded Islamic operations in the country was to turn Albania into an Islamic state. According to Deliso (2007), this was to be obtained through a three stage process, commencing with economic assistance, followed by proselytization and culminating with the establishment of an Islamic government.⁵⁶ While much can be debated about this theory’s credibility, the fact that many of these organizations started their activities as disguised charity organizations in the early 1990’s and continued to propagate religion in society has provided ample evidence of their motives. The fact that many of those who attended their religious courses came out challenging long-standing traditions such as religious coexistence, and rejected the notion that someone of a different religious background, be them revered national or literature figures such as Naim Frasheri and At Gjergj Fishta could be studied did not bode well with the public. Hence, this narrative had both appeal and relevance among the general public.

Given the increasing stigmatization of Islam in Western Europe, and Albania as a Muslim-majority country has been dubbed by a new narrative as a cause for the formers reluctance to accept it as a potential or candidate country, to

⁵⁶ For more, see Deliso, p.61.

grant it visa free travel or to open negotiation talks. The fact that Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina are also making slow progress in their integration process has given ammunition to those supporting this narrative. All these nar-

ratives underline a level of skepticism underpinning the historical image of Islam among Albania's renaissance leaders who saw its rapprochement with the West both as a necessity and a return to its own roots.

RADICALIZATION THROUGH EDUCATION

3.1 The roots of radicalization

When the news⁵⁷ came out that around 150 Albanians had joined ISIS, the general reaction was that of shock. To explain the motives leading them to join the ill-famed group's fight, local analysts blamed the anti-terror international context, noting that fellow citizens who traveled to Syria and Iraq were mere "victims" of this wide trend. There was little said about push factors leading to their radicalization. Nor was a thorough analysis of what caused their understanding of Islam to reach the needed level of radicalization that made them willing to risk their lives, and often those of their children for the cause laid out by ISIS.

This tendency to attribute the drivers solely to outside factors, still dominates Albania's debate on radicalization. However, this explanation trajectory fails to consider socio-economic factors, local grievances, narratives, individual traits or other related push factors that led those who joined ISIS to radicalize. Its premise is that the sudden appearance of ISIS in Syria and Iraq, and the subsequent reporting on it, pushed dozens of Albanians down the radicalization

path. Later, it was the same people who joined its ranks as inspired fighters, willing to give it all so the group could reach its objective of establishing a Caliphate. Evidently, this outlook is inconclusive and helps little to provide an understanding of the underlying facets.⁵⁸

A closer analysis uncovers the multi-variable push factors behind their radicalization. In the case of Albania, push factors for radicalization were intertwined with elements of a weak or failed state.⁵⁹ Chief among them is the feeling of marginalization and isolation. Corruption, nepotism and negligence combined with weak institutions have increasingly made it more difficult for people outside the circle of power to acquire benefits. As such, access to welfare or justice systems, clean drinking water, paved roads or guaranteed food safety; opportunities, including in health and education hardens people. Furthermore, it pushes them to seek solutions to their problems outside the walked path, which makes them accessible to alternative explanations, simultaneously making them more prone to radical influences.⁶⁰ Seen in the light of

⁵⁸ Interview with Pirro Misha. August 2018.

⁵⁹ For the 'weak state phenomenon' see Joel S. Migdal, Migdal. "Strong Societies and Weak States, State- society Relations and state capabilities in the third world." Princeton University Press, 1998. Also see: Robert I. Rotberg, "Failed States in a World of Terror", Foreign Affairs 81(4):127-140.

⁶⁰ See Albert Rakipi "Lindja e një ideologjie

⁵⁷ The Grand Mufti of Tirana, Ylli Gurra announced that 140 Albanian citizens had made the "hijrah" – trip to Syria and Iraq to join ISIS. For more, see: <https://www.kohajone.com/2015/11/21/myftiu-i-tiranes-ne-siri-140-shqiptare/>

these developments, the new “caliphate” for which Albanians and their families went to fight and strove to contribute to, appealed to them in a way as it made them feel important, sought to take care of them and offered a meaningful life. In contrast, the state had never “taken care of them”⁶¹.

This predicament is supported by the geographical map of radicalization which corresponds to a large degree with areas most affected by socio-economic disparities enforced by widespread poverty and unemployment. Correspondingly, these are areas where the presence of the state is either very weak or fully absent (AIIS 2015). As a result, basic public services such as roads, schools, postal offices and health centers were lacking. The latter were not just symbols of the presence of the state, but also most importantly essential institutions for community governance. During communism, this was somewhat acceptable given the equally dire economic situation of the whole country. But ever since, the growing disparity between haves and have nots, or between the urban and rural areas, has increased substantially the vulnerability of the latter who as a result feel abandoned by their own state and have little hope the future will be any better. Under such circumstances, anything apart from the status quo seems appealing.⁶²

The role of socio-economic factors such as low employment opportunities, deprivation and poverty, especially in rural areas, have played an important role in the radicalization process (IDM 2015). In response, the country’s nation-

al strategy against violent extremism has incorporated economic policies with practical interventions (Ministry of Interior 2015) as a means of enhancing resilience against radicalization.

Other push factors that have been identified by research, include social injustice or even *structured violence*⁶³ and which causes the marginalization of certain communities. In this case the violence is not caused by an identifiable actor but by invisible structures which adhere to *cultural constructs* (UNDP 2016). They have a perverse effect of depriving people from basic rights and needs⁶⁴ which besides food and shelter, it incorporates identity, cultural values and recognition. This is not however limited to widely marginalized communities, such as the Roma, but it arguably includes conservative Muslims who widely display their religiosity with untrimmed beards or full body hijabs. This Islamophobia is entrenched in post-communist Albanian state and justified by its European aspirations.⁶⁵

However, *weak state, socio-economic factors or structural violence* do not provide sufficient explanations of the causes leading to religious radicalization and violent extremism. After all, Albania has featured the attributes of a weak state since 1991. In 1997, the country was engulfed by anarchy following the collapse of pyramid schemes in which people lost all their savings. Such was the degree of chaos that ensued, that the government lost control of its

63 The concept ‘structural violence’ was developed by Johan Galtung in his article: “Violence, Peace and Peace Research”, Sage Publications, 1966.

64 About fifty percent of Albanians believe that the most vulnerable groups to radicalization are individuals and families in need, unemployed youth and people who believe they are being discriminated because of their beliefs. See IDM study on Violent Extremism, 2015.

65 According to the 2016 “European Islamophobia Report” published by SETA, this “reflects and recycles” the European Islamophobia to stigmatize Muslims while perpetuating discrimination. For more, see: <http://www.islamophobiaeurope.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/ALBANIA.pdf>

të re.” Gazeta Mapo. See also: “Assessment of risks on national security and the capacity of state and society to react: Violent Extremism and Religious Radicalization in Albania,” AIIS 2015, <http://www.aiis-albania.org/?q=node/368>

61 Interview with S.V, returnee from Syria.

62 Focus Group discussion, Pogradec 2018.

territory, its borders and almost all the state institutions crumbled.⁶⁶ Ever since, considerable efforts have been invested to consolidate the independence and effectiveness of state institutions, increase security and improve welfare. Notably, Albania has also become a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) since 2009, which is a testament to the enhanced effectiveness of its institutions and security. Contrary to what this narrative suggests when it implies that the weakness of state institutions is at the heart of the radicalization, fail to recognize that those who joined ISIS in Iraq and Syria, did so at a point when Albania's institutions were stronger than they have been since the fall of communism.

Similarly, the narrative arguing that socio-economic factors are the cause leading to the radicalization of Albanian foreign fighters are misleading and their overall contribution cannot be taken at face value. In 1992, the country's GDP per capita was a meager \$218, whereas in 2015 when the highest number of foreign fighters from Albania left, this figure had increased twentyfold.⁶⁷ During this time, a considerable number of Albanians emigrated abroad, and made a viable contribution to the country's development through remittances and investment. In contrast to the early 1990s with the time foreign fighters from Albania joined ISIS, the country was better off by any measure as poverty was reduced, opportunities had increased, and the general quality of life had improved. It is important to note that if the argument of socio-economic factors as drivers were to be considered, then it would be safe to

assume that radicalization would have been higher immediately after the fall of communism, and not in 2015. Hence, it is difficult to consider the arguments that a *weak state, socio-economic factors and structural violence* constitute the foundation for religious radicalization in Albania in isolation from other contributing factors.

Instead, the answer was to be found in the process of religious revival which along the reinstitution of Islam's spiritual and physical infrastructure, laid the ideological interpretations that paved the way for radicalization. Amid foreign assistance allocated in support to religious revival in Albania, penetrated organizations and foundations with extremist views who made a viable contribution in the radicalization process. As a result, when the cause of ISIS started to rally supporters from all over the world, religious radicalization had already taken root in Albania.⁶⁸

In 1992, when religious freedoms were reinstituted, following decades of institutionalized atheism, Albanians were more secular than ever. Islam, as other religions in Albania, and knowledge of it was prevalent only among older generations. Two generations born during communism had never encountered religion in their lifetime. Ironically, as communism crumbled, representatives of a third generation of communist youth groups who were supposed to continue the "war on religion" were overnight entrusted the task of revitalizing it, even though they lacked even the most basic knowledge on the topic (Basha 2012).

To overcome this challenge, significant

⁶⁶ After the major social unrest and turmoil that the fall of pyramid schemes caused.

⁶⁷ Data from the World Bank indicates that GDP per capita in 2014 had reached \$4,278. For more, see: <https://data.worldbank.org/country/albania?view=chart>

⁶⁸ According to a 2013 Pew survey, "12 percent of the Muslims asked would support the official recognition as law of the Sharia law in Albania whereas 6 percent justified the suicide bombers as necessary to protect Islam." For more, see: <https://www.pewforum.org/2013/04/30/the-worlds-muslims-religion-politics-society-overview/>

efforts were put into providing them with the necessary training. Initially, education resembled a crisis response unit, with trainings held in public spaces and mosques. Establishment of contact and cooperation with foreign donors was a key aspect of this process. As support poured in, more structured, ad-hoc courses were organized. Later, Albanian students were sponsored to attend theological universities in the Islam world⁶⁹ where they were taught the locally dominant Islamic school of thought. The process was generally chaotic as it lacked coordination and checks,⁷⁰ with KMSH playing a peripheral role.

As a result, returning clerics were eager to proclaim their understanding of religion, as they learned abroad, to fellow Albanians. Not long after, two predominant factions emerged: one which sought to reinstitute Albania's traditional Islam, both in schools and mosques, and their alternative who wanted to establish Sharia Law and other conservative institutions. In this endeavor, they saw the challenge posed by the general lack of knowledge and secularism as a motivation to exploit the existing vacuum of religion and knowledge of it to spread their ideology.⁷¹

3.2 Evangelization through education

...Pupil: Teacher, can I ask you a question? I heard yesterday about the issue of these of ISIS. I don't understand

⁶⁹ Interview with Ermir Gjinishi, August 2018.

⁷⁰ Focus Group discussion, Tirana 2018.

⁷¹ Armand A. admits that religion or Islam had no role to play in his family. He hasn't seen anyone praying at home." Not my parents, not even my grandparents. During Ramadan none fasted. But we did celebrate various holidays including the day of Summer and Nowruz - the holiday of Bektashis. For the first time I went to the mosque when I was 17 in 1991, an Arab came to our village mosque that had just been built. Later we attended courses and after that I went to the El Agri Institute. Later I went for university studies in Saudi Arabia." Interview with A. A. September 2018.

how... these are they Muslim or what are they... ISIS?

Teacher: *What is ISIS? A Muslim organization that seeks to protect the Muslim people from for example Syria or Palestine or Egypt. They are fighting for this country.*

Pupil: *So, they are good?*

Teacher: *Agree. They are good but the state wants to fight them.*

Pupil: *So even though the news says that they are bad, they are good?*

Teacher: *Yes of course. Are we to trust the news?*

Pupil: *Teacher but how can they be good when they kill people?*

Teacher: *Why, how many people have they killed?*

Pupil: *So, they are good even though they kill people?*

Teacher: *Well... Didn't they broadcast that good news that "Hey people we killed Bin Laden!" Did they kill Bin Laden?*

Pupil: *So, Bin Laden was a good man?*

Teacher: *How many officers did they put to task to kill Bin Laden?*

Pupil: *Well teacher, Bin Laden...*

Teacher: *Out of 28 people that participated in the raid to kill Bin Laden, 26 of them have been killed.... 26. The Italians [media] has given it, these are real news.⁷²*

The period commencing with the collapse of communism until the turn of the century has played a key role in shaping Albanian Islam. This period corresponds with the formal reinstitu-

⁷² 17 January 2017. Video broadcasted by Top Channel. Emine Alushi, temporary teacher at the Madrassa of Shkodra, available at : https://youtu.be/n7emkgVWQ_k

tion of KMSH and the revival of Islam's physical and spiritual infrastructure in the country. Educational institutions of Islam were also established during this period, laying the foundations for religious education and preparation of future clerics.

This was not a uniquely Albanian issue, since most of the Balkan Muslims born after 1945 were deprived the right to religious education, and freely practice their faith (Karcic 2016). Hence, when religious rights were reintroduced in 1991, following the fall of communism, there were no structures in place, or enough materials and personnel to reestablish Muslim education in the country. However, unlike the Orthodox and Catholic communities who have a central institution or figure to settle matters of doctrine and administration, Muslims lacked such a centralized institution to provide them with the necessary guidance and support. This gave a free rein to varying factions to preach without any oversight or restrictions for dogmatic uniformity.

There were two main areas that required an immediate attention. First, it was the need for training new clerics who would lead the evangelization efforts. This went hand in hand with the need to make KMSH a functioning and operational institution. Second, it was the necessity to provide Albanians of different age groups with knowledge on religion. The latter was subject to high levels of informality.⁷³

As a result, teachers were often mere improvisers, with little knowledge or training on Islam. However, this did not stop them from establishing themselves as devoted Muslim clerics since there was no institutional check on them, their qualifications or the con-

tent they preached.⁷⁴ Similarly, neither the Ministry of Education nor the KMSH had established a unified curricula these preachers or the institutions they had built were required to comply with. This paved the way for all sorts of foreign foundations to finance any training, or religious activities they desired, enabling all forms, including ultra-conservative, and even radical interpretations to be taught and preached freely.

Foreign organizations, mainly from the Middle East were at the whelm of this process. Their local operations provided substantial financial and material assistance. This included, financing the construction of hundreds of mosques throughout the country,⁷⁵ salaries of the clergy and personnel of Madrassas. According to Basha (2012), Middle Eastern financial support fueled the entire operation of Islamic religious activities in Albania.

Among the diverse activities of foreign organizations financing Islam in Albania, education stands out. Many clerics from the Islamic world were placed in Tirana and in other regions. Most of them served simultaneously as teachers moving from town to town and in the rural areas and as imams in the new mosques. The first lessons about Islam came to Albanians exactly from this “wandering teachers”⁷⁶ which in most of the cases were clerics with experience in their home countries. Under their supervision, young zealous men attended foreign sponsored short-term courses that qualified them to become imams and serve in local mosques, constructed or reconstructed by the same foundations. In addition, courses on Is-

⁷³ Focus Group discussion, Librazhd 2018.

⁷⁴ Interview with Ermir Gjinishi, August 2018.

⁷⁵ Only a few mosques that survived Hoxha's Cultural Revolution, namely, the Mosque of Et'hem Bej in Tirana and the Mosque of Korca, which were designated monuments of culture.

⁷⁶ Interview with high official KMSH, Albania.

lam were provided to the public.⁷⁷

To further expand their outreach, these foundations launched a wide charity campaign whose target were vulnerable and impoverished communities (Basha 2012). This bolstered their legitimacy and popularity, especially in areas where KMSH structures were either weak or fully absent. While at first sight, their charitable operations may be no cause for concern, their efforts to evangelize and force beneficiaries to attend their religious trainings are.⁷⁸ In addition, they were able to preach their interpretation of Islam free from interference from KMSH or state structures, and plant the seeds of a new congregation that responded only to them. Such was the degree of their power fueled by financial independence, and freedom to teach what they wanted, that they rivaled the KMSH for decades.

Foreign organizations have played a very important role in reinstating Islam in Albania since 1991, something for which the KMSH has expressed its gratitude. However, these efforts have not come without caveats, as efforts have been made to change the dogma, meaning and practice of Islam in the country. Their operations applied various methods to pressure their followers and beneficiaries to modify their behavior so they can adhere to conservative Islamic practices and norms. This demanded that women be covered up, children attend Koranic school, and men grow their beards. Educational institutions that were financed by them, were supplied with publications translated in Albanian that supported this way of thinking (Misha 2008).

A key instrument they used was financial conditionality. This was significant, given that they operated mostly in rural,

marginalized, or impoverished areas. Funds were cut in case of non-compliance. According to Krasniqi (2018) there are verifiable cases this conditionality was applied with Bektashi beneficiaries who were asked to convert to Sunni Islam.

In addition to organizations that influenced the Islamic education in Albania, were financial institutions. Chief among them is the Albanian-Arabic Islamic Bank which has financed the construction of mosques and sponsored the education of thousands of young Albanians through short courses at home and in Islamic centers abroad, including Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Egypt, Malaysia and Pakistan. People attending our focus group discussions claimed that the Bank would pay impoverished families a monthly fee of \$25 in exchange for having their children attend religious lessons where Salafism and Wahhabism were taught.⁷⁹

Their efforts to influence the national nature of the Albanian Islam especially through religious education sparked a debate among experts, analysts and journalists (Bumci 2004). However, it failed to capture the attention of KMSH or relevant state institutions. It took over a decade for the consensus to be reached that through Islam religious education, be it in formal institutions such as madrassas, or informal settings, these organizations were proselytizing Albanians and changing the face of Islam in the country.

As a result, it was not just other religions that were the target of their efforts, but also Muslims who began “converting” to a new version of Islam which proclaimed as the only “real Islam” by its proponents. Over time, its followers became more vocal, and started occupying a new space in the

⁷⁷ Focus Group discussion, Elbasan 2018
⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Focus Group discussion, Elbasan 2018.

public debate. Fifteen years later, they sought to replace the country's constitution and laws with the Sharia law and relevant institutions to uphold it.⁸⁰ Furthermore, they bluntly refuted notions that had been a pillar of Albanian Islam. For them, "Islam can coexist with other faiths but not with democracy. Whoever says that Sharia can coexist with democracy is a hypocrite" (Warrick 2016). Clearly, their aim was not merely to change the face of Islam practiced in the country, but also to declare Islam a state religion around which the state ideology would be organized.⁸¹

3.3 Education, proselytization and radicalization

Apart from financing educational activities in Albania, foreign organizations sponsored young Albanians to further their religious education abroad in Islamic countries. This represented a huge wave in which hundreds attended Islamic universities in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Malaysia, Qatar, Syria, Jordan, Yemen, United Arab Emirates and Turkey between 1991 to 2000. KMSH figures estimate that 1357 of them received their education abroad. However, the number could be higher given that not all those who went on to study abroad reported or sought the blessing of the institution.⁸²

80 Interviews with former high officials of the KMSH.

81 On an Albanian-language website (www.selefi.org), Salafi Imams provide question and answer sessions on a wide range of topics. A user asked what would the judgement be for becoming a member of the Socialist Party, to which Imam Albani answered: "There is absolutely no distinction among the communist, socialist, or democratic party - all of which are merely names denoting one thing only: that the person is a kufr." (Kufr meaning, the "denial of the Truth" according to Salafist scholars. Also means "ingratitude," the willful refusal to appreciate the benefits that God has bestowed.) Although their true identities remain unclear, the imams on the website provide guidance on different topics through apps like Telegram. They urge citizens not to engage in any democratic or political process (i.e. voting) or follow local laws. Instead, they recommend Sharia as the legal regulating framework for their lives. See selefi.org

82 Vickers, Miranda, See Islam in Albania, 2008. Ermir Cjinishi confirmed the data during our interview.

The role of foreign organizations was not limited to financial sponsorship. Instead, they played a key role in the selection of the country and institution by Albanian students. As a result, the majority of the 2500⁸³ students who attended theological schools or universities during the last 25 years, the majority went to Saudi Arabia, the Gulf States, Indonesia and Jordan. The rest, less than a fourth of them, went to Turkey.⁸⁴

A favorable political climate in Albania aided the expansion of the "pro-Arab" group whose influence among Muslims increased. Albania's membership in the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) in 1992, a European country with a Muslim majority has seemingly encouraged an increased economic and religious interest from Islamic countries.⁸⁵ Recently freed from the communist yoke, Albania despite having a clear pro-western leaning in its foreign policy, sought to explore relations with other regions of the world.

Albeit the heated debates and criticism over the negative implications this membership would have on Albania's Euro-Atlantic integration⁸⁶, it is correct to state that membership in OIC created a favorable climate for religious communication and cooperation. Unsurprisingly, in this the period the "pro-Arab" group made significant advances at the expense of the "pro-Turk" group.

However, starting in 2001, the process of "Arabization" of Islam in Albania was in retreat. This slow down cannot be ex-

83 Archives of the Albanian Muslim Community (KMSH), Interview with KMSH official, Tirana, September 2018.

84 Archives of the KMSH

85 See Christopher Deliso "The Coming Caliphate: The threat of Radical Islam to Europe and the West", Prager Security International, 2007. Chapter 2.

86 The membership in the Islamic Conference did not become an obstacle for Albania to integrate in the Euro-Atlantic structures. In 1995 Albania was accepted to the Council of Europe and was the first country in South Eastern Europe which applied also to NATO. Membership to NATO took a period of almost two decades to materialize in 2009.

plained merely by connecting it to the September 11 terrorist attacks in US (Deliso 2007). It is true, that following the attacks, the government of Albania, and law enforcement agencies reflected deeply on the activities of foreign foundations operating in the country. Some of them had also served as cover for Al Qaeda operations and had provided logistical support to its networks (Bumci 2004). This made Albania unamicable terrain for Saudi and Gulf organizations with a religious or humanitarian focus. The root cause for the retreat in the “Arabization” process from Albania was the gradual and peaceful refusal of a conservative version of Islam that did not sit well with the local tradition by KMSH, Muslims and society at large. Despite having been unable to practice their religion during communism, local families adhering to the Muslim faith had retained Albania’s traditional values of Islam. Hence, they lead the efforts that rejected the conservative version of Islam exported from the Gulf, which was culturally not compatible with Albania.

In discussions with focus groups we inquired about the motives that led graduates of these institutions to pursue a religious education. What we learned is not far from the general held belief which stipulates that studying theology was not a primary objective when they embarked on their study abroad journey. In fact, a considerable number of them, excluding some whose families had a stronger religious tradition, confirmed that their primary incentive was to boost their professional prospects study abroad promised.⁸⁷ This is highly believable given Albania’s dire socio-economic conditions as the country emerged from decades of isolation, leading to a massive wave of

migration.⁸⁸ The country’s intelligentsia constituted a large part of the migrants, which had a direct impact on education standards. Furthermore, sky high inflation and poverty, made it exceptionally challenging for students from rural areas to pursue their higher education at home.⁸⁹

Considering the circumstances, the appeal of a fully financed study abroad journey, even though it was in the Middle East and Turkey, cannot be underestimated. Backers of these scholarships were well positioned to exert influence on what students from Albania studied, and which universities they attended. While Turkey remained a viable alternative with an attractive financial package, most students opted for Gulf countries⁹⁰. The key difference between the two was that scholarships in Turkey underwent a long formal process led by KMSH structures. Such process was long, complex, and very formalized. It even required the approval from the Ministry of Education. In comparison, the process of pursuing theological education in Gulf countries was simple and marred by informality.

Focus groups we held with people who had studied in these countries described the process in detail. According to them, an individual or organization would get in touch with potential candidates and start the conversation. From this point on, the decision belonged solely to the student prospect, his family and the sponsoring entity.⁹¹ Organizations providing ad-hoc religious lessons in rural areas played a

⁸⁷ Focus Group discussion, Tirana 2018.

⁸⁸ Between 1991 and 1997, it is estimated that 20% of the population migrated, mostly to neighboring Greece and Italy. For more see: <https://albania.iom.int/migration-and-albania>

⁸⁹ Interview with senior official of KMSH, Tiranë, August 2018.

⁹⁰ Interview with Ermir Gjinishi, KMSH’s former deputy director.

⁹¹ Interview with former high official of the KMSH, Tirane, October 2018.

key role.⁹² In addition, they played a key role in proliferating the belief that *real Islam* is taught in Saudi Arabia and Gulf states⁹³ but not in Turkey. Graduates of institutions in Gulf countries we met for the purpose of this study, spoke fervently about this while emphasizing that unlike in Turkey, Islam is a key organizational feature of these societies.

In contrast, the objective of KMSH was train new clerics and Muslim scholars in countries where Hanafi School dominated in teaching and society. To lure aspiring students, it established contact and signed cooperation agreements with partner organizations in countries like Turkey. However, implementation proved challenging as financial offers provided by Gulf countries proved comparatively advantageous with generous financial offers and a straight-forward non-bureaucratic process. Those who took on the offer to study in Arab countries where Hanbali school is taught and practiced did so without the approval or knowledge of KMSH and its structures. In most cases, it was private initiatives, be it through donations from individuals or organizations that made it possible for students to go study abroad in these countries (Bumci 2004).

This eagerness to study abroad is understandable given the context of the time when a big part of the country's intelligentsia, including teachers, either moved to the cities or abroad. As a result, the quality of teaching dropped drastically in a short period of time. Meanwhile, there was no existing formal theological education be it for Islam or other denominations. Given the circumstances, those who financially backed the training of new clerics in schools where Hanbali School was taught, made a conscious strategic in-

vestment with a long-lasting impact. Its ramifications are felt to this day as the very nature of the country's Islam was challenged by these clerics and their followers.

In the same vein with informal religious classes in 1990s, proselytization was key as students attended training schools and universities which promoted Wahhabism and Salafism.⁹⁴ Notably, attendees of our focus groups noted that students were conditioned to study Islam in exchange for their financial support. Their religious influence was however not constrained to their formal studies. These students lived in societies that by any measure are strikingly conservative compared to Albania, in some of which, Saudi Arabia being a case in point, Sharia law serves as a regulatory framework for public and private life. Hence, upon their return, clerics brought with them their theological understanding along with the cultural interpretations of the countries they studied in.

Notwithstanding, religious education through played a key role in the process of radicalization. This is enabled through the informal religious teachings provided by questionable NGO's and individuals between 1991 and 2001, many of which preached a radical form of Islam that stands in sharp contrast to the traditional form practiced and taught in Albania prior to communism. The training and eventual return of young clerics educated in schools where Wahhabism and Salafism were taught further exacerbated the issue. It is not a surprise then that the Imams of Unaza e Re and that of Mezez mosques who recruited the majority of those who went to fight for ISIS received their

⁹² Focus Group discussion, Pogradec 2018.
⁹³ Interview with A.A, September 2018.

⁹⁴ Proselytizing in the 90s was a phenomenon that happened not just in Albania but all over the Balkans even before happening in Albania, and also it happened in other religions as well, that started to enter such as Protestants or Jehovah's Witnesses which were entirely unknown to Albanians.

religious training in countries where Hanafi school is neither practiced, nor taught. Furthermore, many of them came from families with no religious tradition. What they all had in common

is that they attended informal religious classes that were taught, sponsored, or both by hardline Muslim preachers from the Arab peninsula.

DEEPENING SECULARIZATION OF ISLAM

4.1 “You have the office we have Jammati”

There are two main doctrinal divisions that emerged following the return of foreign educated Muslim leaders to Albania. About two thirds of them belong to the Jammat⁹⁵ (the community of believers) consisting of those who have been trained in the Arab world, chiefly in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Egypt, Syria, Jordan.⁹⁶ The other group is composed of clerics trained in Turkey who hold key positions in the KMSH, and the country's main cities. Their main difference is doctrinal, as the first group adheres to the Hanbali juridical school of Islam, and the latter to the Hanafi.

There are considerable differences between these two schools. Not least, because Hanafi enjoys a long-lasting tradition which corresponds with the longevity of Islam in Albania, given that it was the jurisprudence practiced in the Ottoman Empire. Hence, when one speaks of Albania's traditional Islam, they implicitly refer to the Hanafi school, which over time has also developed unique local features. One such feature, according to (Popovic 2006) is its emphasis on religious coexistence and harmony. Reforms implemented

in the early 20th century have further added to its local features, which some have considered as attempts to modernize it. These include the abrogation of Sharia law, the annulment of religious courts, and the banning of veils for women.

Clerics who “have in their hands most of the jammati” are inclined towards the Hanbali school (Norris, 1993), which is a strict traditional jurisprudence, considered as one of Islam's most conservative and is practiced chiefly in Gulf countries. Notably both movements of Salafism and Wahhabism adhere to it.⁹⁷ A key feature of both these movements is to restore Sharia law, categorically refuse infusion of national features into Islam, and return to the “true Islam” by embracing the practices of early generations after the prophet, and refuting interpretation (Roy 2004). The main institutions these Albanian clerics attended include the Islamic University of Madinah,⁹⁸ Al Zhar University in Cairo, International Islamic University of Ma-

95 Interview with Y. G

96 Interview with official from Muslim Community. September 2018.

97 The followers prefer the term Salafism instead of Wahhabism. See Oliver Roi “Neofondamentalizmi ose salafizmi”, in “Globalizmi i Islamit”. Botimet IDK, Tirana 2004, p 136- 168.

98 Among its key objectives is a “Commitment to the Book and Sunnah on the approach of the Salafi.” See: <https://iu.edu.sa/Page/index/20234>. Furthermore, the university's syllabus is firmly preoccupied with concerns of Wahhabism (Farquhar, 2013). For more see: http://etheses.lse.ac.uk/3289/1/Farquhar_Expanding_the_Wahhabi_Mission.pdf

laysia.⁹⁹ Other, non-university institutions include the Abu Nour Institute for Islamic Calling in Damascus.¹⁰⁰

The export of conservative Islamic doctrines such as Wahhabism and Salafism into Albanian Islam goes parallel with the process of religious revitalization in Albania. Education has been a primary venue through which they have penetrated the country. This includes religious education provided in Albania, and the training of Albanian clerics abroad. However, additional claims have been made that Salafism entered the country through mujahedeens who came to the Balkans to “protect their Muslim brothers” during the Bosnian war (Becirevic 2016).

Their presence in Albania went undisturbed, although small, for over a decade. Mujahedeens strategically chose the Dibra region as their base of operation, which sits between the borders of Kosovo, Macedonia and Albania. Awareness towards them culminated with the arrest of imams from Unaza e Re (Tirana area) and Mëzez¹⁰¹ mosques who recruited most ISIS recruits in Albania. Their court cases received wide media attention, and the information revealed during the hearings uncovered important details about their

⁹⁹ While the universities themselves may not use materials in their curricula that leads them to radicalization, series of studies have indicated how they play an important role in people with radical tendencies to meet. As per Al Zhar University, see <https://clarionproject.org/egypts-al-azhar-university-global-security-threat/>

¹⁰⁰ The institute is “a masjid at heart, but it is also a high school and a Shari’ah college, and it offers a number of preparatory programs for foreigners who wish to master Arabic and study the Islamic sciences.” For more see: <https://damascusdreams.wordpress.com/2007/05/22/study-experience-2-abu-nour-the-dawraat-2/>

¹⁰¹ On May 3, 2016 as judge Liljana Baku read the court decision, defendants refused to attend the process, claiming they do not recognize the court. The three clerics, Bujar Hysa, Genci Balla and Gert Pashja, were found guilty for recruiting people to engage in terrorist acts, incitement of hate and public pleas for terrorism. They were sentenced to 18, 17 and 17 years of imprisonment in high security facility. They preached at mosques that were not authorised by KMSH and are believed to have required the majroti of Albanians that went to Syria to join ISIS.

goals, vision and beliefs. Among them, they refused to engage with the process, noting that they did not recognize the power of the country’s Constitution and the laws deriving from it. Instead, they proclaimed to recognize the will of God and requested to be judged in accordance with Sharia law.¹⁰²

While incidents such as this, or others mentioned throughout this study clearly establish the connection between foreign education and influence and radicalization, it remains challenging to fully assess its degree. There are two main reasons for that. One is that with the securitization of Islam, and the general refusal of the wider public to embrace their ideas, many such believers and practitioners have withdrawn into a more subtle lifestyle, away from public attention. In other words, they are less keen on going public about their views, especially if it involves the media, which they by enlarge distrust as biased, and possibly Islamophobic. Another reason for this, is their concentration in areas where KMSH’s influence is negligible or absent. This however, in itself perpetuates the same radicalization risks as those previously experienced.

Efforts to counter this isolation and possible radicalization must be enhanced to reduce the potential for extremism and deviation from traditional interpretation of Islam. Considering the context, religious education is ever more important. It can serve as a resilient factor against the penetration of radical doctrines, which as have previously been the case, could lead to radicalization. The future of religious tradition must receive the attention it deserves as a strategically important investment for the future. In it depends the future of traditional Albanian Islam and Albania’s religious coexistence.

¹⁰² Interview with A. A. September 2018.

4.2 The Secularization of the Madrassa-s

*Our teachers of religion should be among the most carefully chosen and the best educated because they will carry a very heavy weight, the weight of educating children at a very young age with the spiritual point of view. Also, in our high schools boys should acquire **both the religious and secular education**. It is proven that every time a scholar possessed both he has been at a higher level than those who had only one, either secular or religious. Truth is that those who had been well educated in religion have always been more useful in view of the results obtained.*

– Journal of Islamic Culture (Kultura Islame September 1939-August 1944 2012)

Madrassas in Albania are the primary educational institutions for the teaching of Islam. In the country's history, their tradition is traced back to the 15th (Skura, Gjedia, & Kruja, 2018), which corresponds with the highest wave of Islamization among Albanians. However, they did not acquire the characteristics of a proper religious school until the country obtain its independence. Their programs, capacities and underwent a high degree of development in the following decades. As a result, in 1927, there were twelve fully functioning madrassa-s in the largest cities, including: Shkodër, Vlorë, Gjirokastër, Kavajë, Durrës, Tiranë, Krujë, Shijak, Peqin, Elbasan, Korçë and Berat. In addition, *mektebes* (elementary schools) were established in the premises or near the mosques and were ran by their respective imams.¹⁰³

¹⁰³ Ibid

Imams such as Hafiz Ali Korça and Haxhi Vehbi Dibra played a pivotal role in the development of Islamic education as leaders of the KMSH in 1930s. Subsequent reforms led to deep structural changes. As a result, madrassa's program was divided into three parts, corresponding with elementary education, middle school and high school. These structural changes were supported by significant changes in curricula and teaching with subjects such as history, language and culture were fully integrated with lessons on Islam.¹⁰⁴ As a result, madrassas, despite being Islamic religious schools, were deemed highly regarded for their modernity and quality.¹⁰⁵ Furthermore, they formed the basis for Islamic studies at the university level.

The significance of madrassas established by Muslim intellectuals in the 1930s is not limited to Islam. At a time when Albania's literacy rates were sky high, the presence of such schools provided a viable opportunity for contributing to national development. In this vein, Madrassas became important centers where national culture was being developed alongside the teaching of Islam. This had a lasting impact as it provided an impetus to the formation of national identity, burying any doubts of the time that Islam would continue to hold the country back by serving as a bridge with Turkey, who under the disguise of Ottoman Empire had subjugated Albania for over four centuries.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ According to the changes approved by both the government and the Muslim Community the madrassa would be constituted by the following three categories: "The elementary category would last for 3 years, the middle school category 5 and the higher one 4 years." The madrassa of Tirana started its activity under the name Higher Madrassa. According to the decision taken in the III Congress of Albanian Muslims organized in 1929, all other madrassas were closed. Due to this decision the name changed again to General Madrassa. [6] Article 57 of the Statute of this III Congress stipulated that the General Madrassa would have only two levels: the unique one and the middle school one. Gentiana Skura et al. 2018.

¹⁰⁵ Focus Group discussion, Elbasan 2018.
¹⁰⁶ Ibid

The success, legitimacy and authority that these schools professed is neatly connected to their ability to merge religious and secular curricula.¹⁰⁷

“Education in the madrassa-s of the 30s had very high standards. The quality of teaching in the madrassa was not due to any particular factor or subject but it applied to all subjects in the program and that brought up the scientific and religious-cultural level of the students. The Muslim religion therefore had to do with education and gave a contribution to the formation of students which acquired a combination of the morality of Islam and the morality of being a good citizen.”¹⁰⁸

Historical developments have not been kind to either the excellence, status or prominence these Madrassas established. The communist regime of Enver Hoxha shares a big part of the blame for their demise, as his government instituted atheism, hence making them short-lived. Efforts to reinstitute religious education after the collapse of communism and reestablish the old Madrassa have been painfully slow.¹⁰⁹ Returning them to their previous standards has also proven challenging as foreign organizations who financed the revival of Madrassas had a different vision for their future. There were two issues preventing them from applying a similar

standard of teaching. First, their conservative interpretation of Islam stood in sharp contrast to what was taught at these schools before WWII. A second issue related to teaching methods, where religious teachings were taught alongside other subjects prior to communism. Meanwhile, the new sponsors of Madrassas in post communism were less keen on this fusion. While efforts to return to their pre-WWII standard have increased with KMSH consolidating its role and oversight, today’s Madrassas are still far away from that model.

The challenge for religious education in general and Madrassas is multifaceted. Education has become an industry of its own, with dozens of private schools of all levels competing for the best and brightest students. Competing against secular schools has become ever more difficult for religious institutions, as Albanian parents seek to boost their children’s life prospects.¹¹⁰ Current data on the number of students attending Madrassas may indicate a strong interest in religious education. In spite of, the reason why many parents chose them is based on their strong reputation for discipline and focus on sciences. Indicative of this is the low number of graduates who go on to study theology at university level, which according to Skura et al (2018) is less than 5 percent.

Notwithstanding, this reputation has been achieved at the expense of religious curricula, which has over time shifted away from the focus of Madrassas¹¹¹ which despite maintain their image as religious institutions, they have come to resemble secular schools. This has sparked a reaction among Muslims

¹⁰⁷ Madrassas as institutions were able to survive the conditions of WWII but after the coming to power of the communists in 1944, the space of these institutions as unique for religious education in Albania, started to shrink gradually. A number of notable scholars and clergy was persecuted, killed or imprisoned whereas in 1946 the Madrassa of Tirana was closed.

¹⁰⁸ Interview with Ali Zaimi, head of the Tirana Madrassa

¹⁰⁹ In 1991 the Madrassa of Tirana reopened followed by those of Berat, Durrës, Korçë, Elbasan, Kavajë.

¹¹⁰ Interview with senior official from the Albanian Muslim Community, September 2018.

¹¹¹ See KMSH, Madrassas at <https://www.KMSH.al/al/komuniteti-mysliman-i-shqiperise/medresete/> The Albanian Muslim Community opens and sustains Islamic religious schools of the pre-tertiary level according to the needs specified in each region and respecting the laws and bylaws about pre-tertiary

Distribution of religious subjects at Tirana's 9-year elementary cycle (Skura et al. 2018)

Nr.	Religious subjects	Class 6	Class 7	Class 8	Class 9	Total
1.	The Notable Kur'an	2 hours/ week	2 hours/ week	2 hours/ week	2 hours/ week	8 hours/ week
2.	Faith	2 hours/ week	2 hours/ week	2 hours/ week	2 hours/ week	8 hours/ week
Total		4 hours/ week	4 hours/ week	4 hours/ week	4 hours/ week	16 hours/ week

who are concerned with their secularization. Some complain that following the shift, it has become difficult to find schools with a focus on Islamic teaching, where curricula is primarily focused on religious teaching.¹¹² Other Muslims claim that “madrassas are being stripped of their mission of Islamic religious education on purpose.”¹¹³ Finding a medium between the demands of the market, and those that favor more Islamic subjects in the curricula is likely to continue in the decades to come, as private education consolidates itself.

Religious education faces other challenges as well. The current legislation in place,¹¹⁴ poses limitations and curbs their potential. According to Albania's 1995 Law on Education, Madrassas are not considered a religious school. As such, they must adhere to restrictions on curricula that can be taught which is overwhelmingly tilted towards non-religious subjects. Moreover, any subjects that are taught there must receive the prior approval from the Ministry of Education. This legislative framework demonstrates the secondary importance assigned to religious education in the country and the tendency to secularize religious schools. This goes against the 1930s model but

also, against the expectations of Muslim believers, and the community who expect them to be centers for Islamic education.¹¹⁵

What's more, religious subjects are integrated in the madrassa curricula to “support and complement the topics and issues dealt by other subjects such as civics education” rather than serving as separate entities (Skura, Gjedia and Kruja 2018). As a result, in the last three years, madrassas of Tirana, Kavaja, Korça, Elbasan and Berat have allocated only 17 hours for religious subjects which amounts to less than 15 percent of the total program. Madrassas of Shkodra and Durrës designate even less time to religious subjects, 14.5 and 12.5 percent respectively.¹¹⁶

Criteria set for admission into universities by the Ministry of Education has had a negative impact on religious institutions curricula.¹¹⁷ In response, the latter have had to adjust by diminishing the number of hours allocated to religious subjects or risk their students failing to meet the required hours of non-religious topics for admittance in universities.¹¹⁸ Other structural changes, such as reformatting of high school

education in the Republic of Albania.

¹¹² Interview with G. Kruja, October 2018

¹¹³ Interview with Armand R. Tirane, 2018.

¹¹⁴ Ibid

¹¹⁵ Albanian Muslim Community, Madrassas, <https://www.KMSH.al/al/komuniteti-mysliman-i-shqiperise/medresete/>

¹¹⁶ Ibid

¹¹⁷ Interview with the Director of the Tirana Madrassa, December 2018.

¹¹⁸ Focus Group discussion, Tirana 2018.

to three years from four that it was until 2008, have also pushed Madrassas to adapt a more secular curricula.¹¹⁹

These issues have been exacerbated by the lack of a framework through which diplomas obtained abroad on theological studies can be converted and recognized by Albanian institutions.¹²⁰ The government has adopted such an extreme decision in knowledge there is no functional university offering theology degrees in either public or private universities.¹²¹

Even though the motives for this decision have not been made public, the objective is to curb the influence of religious ideologies such as Salafism.¹²² Seemingly, the government has drawn lessons from the chaotic transition when hundreds of foundations disguised as religious and charity organizations exported political Islam and the Salafi ideology. This is illustrative also of the lesson learned from the same period when dozens of Albanian students attended religious schools in the Arab world. Upon their return, they presented an issue with their conservative interpretation of Islam and their fusion of culture and religion.¹²³ The establishment of Al-Qaeda affiliates in the country and 140 foreign fighters have undoubtedly contributed to this approach.

In the meantime, there are ongoing efforts to improve theological education in the country. The establishment of KMSH-led Beder University in 2011 marks a positive development for Islamic education in the country. To date it is the only higher education institution with a dedicated faculty on Islamic sci-

ences which provides students the opportunity to study theology.¹²⁴ However, Beder is not a theological institution.¹²⁵ Similar to Madrassas, the university offers degrees in a wide range of social sciences. While it may reduce the need for aspiring Muslim clerics to continue their education abroad, it does little to eliminate it given its limited capacities and unconsolidated reputation, especially among hardliners.

4.3 Less...Religion is more.... bad religion

An analysis of the issue of religious education in Albania reveals three interconnected issues. Their development will decide the fate of Albania's traditional Islam, which in turn is a precondition for the continuation of the country's longstanding tradition of religious coexistence and harmony. The latter is the basis for the country's own stability and security.

Chief among them is the issue of the accommodation of ideological differences between Sunni Muslims, namely those who adhere to the Hanafi Tradition and those who embrace the conservative interpretation of the Hanbali School. The latter has greater financial clout and enjoys a higher presence in rural areas where traditional structures are either weak or completely absent. As a result, this group could increase in numbers and tip the balance between the two schools. Considering its members role in the recruitment and radicalization of Albanians who joined ISIS, and their controversial beliefs in relation to other religious communities in the country, it becomes ever more important to mend these differences.

¹²⁴ Interview with G. Kruja, November 2018.

¹²⁵ University College 'Beder' offers study programs of the first and second cycle with two faculties and a total of seven departments which offer degrees in social sciences.

¹¹⁹ Interview with Director of Madrasa of Tirana. December 2018

¹²⁰ Focus Group discussion in Librazhd, 2019.

¹²¹ University of Beder, is established by the SEMA Foundation and KMSH. It has a department of Islamic Sciences and offers degrees but cannot be a genuine theological department nor does it aim to be one.

¹²² Interview with Piro Misha, October 2018

¹²³ Interview with Genti Kruja, October 2018.

A second issue is religious education. The future of Islam in Albania is highly reliant on the education of future clerics. Currently, Islam's religious education infrastructure lacks the necessary resources and capacities to facilitate their training in the country. As a result, it remains largely unpredictable what kind of interpretation will be preached by Muslims leaders in the future.

The third issue is related to the overall religious education in the country, and whether they can develop the necessary capacities to take ownership of the task. And if they do, will the teachings of Islam adhere to the traditional interpretation of Islam or will a new form take its place.

Resolving these three issues is essential for the preservation and development of Albania's tradition of Islam. Nonetheless, even if the above-mentioned issues are rectified, controversial issues will continue to persist given the gap between the two streams and the vision of those that represent them. Meanwhile, the governments discouraging policies for young Albanians to continue their religious education abroad without providing an alternative is unlikely to yield the desired results. For instance, the non-recognition of foreign diplomas on theology has done little to curb the employment of foreign educated Albanians in mosques. Instead, it discourages people who have a genuine inclination toward the subject and want to serve the *jammāt*.

Furthermore, this approach is unlikely to rectify the differences between the two main groups representing Sunni Muslims in the country as education is at the heart of all these divisions. Not least because lack of a functioning Islamic education infrastructure paved the way for the training of Albanian clerics abroad, who upon return aimed

to infuse their conservative outlook into teaching, preaching and observation of Islam. Now they constitute the majority of imams serving in Albania.¹²⁶ Meanwhile, the curricula taught at Madrassas and Beder University is drafted by KMSH's Directory for Education and require the approval of its board. Notably, they openly embrace the inclusion of the Hanafi School in the curricula.¹²⁷

Meanwhile, adherents of the Hanbali school object this approach, claiming that "[we] true Muslims believe that they could be anything but religious schools to teach Islam."¹²⁸ Irrespective of the latter's size, this "exclusion" makes it further unlikely that their children will obtain their religious education in the country. Moreover, the government's decision not to validate diplomas obtained abroad can negatively influence and deepen ideological chasm within the Albanian Muslim Community.

The weakening of religious education through the secularization of the religious schools and through controversial decisions that have generated de facto paradoxes seems to have been an attempt to protect the traditional Albanian Islam from deformations and other influences that come from foreign ideologically extreme schools. However, despite these good intentions it is very likely that the shrinkage of Islam from the religious curricula can produce a boomerang effect. It can be transformed into a process of de-legitimization of the Islam taught in the traditional religious education institutions and therefore parallel to it, the start of the legitimization of another version, "the real Islam."¹²⁹ The latter could happen quickly in the context of today's technological and digital revolution.

¹²⁶ Interview with R. K, professor in one Madrassa.

¹²⁷ Albanian Muslim Community, section madrassas.

¹²⁸ Interview, Armand R. September 2018.

¹²⁹ Interview with Deputy Chair of KMSH, Laurent Luli.

THE (NON) GOVERNANCE OF ISLAM

5.1 Institutional Obstacles

The governance of Islam in Albania has faced daunting challenges. Ever since KMSH was established, its role as the country's sole entity responsible for administering and overseeing all religious, educational and cultural activities pertaining to Islam has been challenged by socio-political dynamics. Subsequent regimes have imposed their policies on religious communities in Albania, including the country's Muslim community governing structures.

None have contributed more to the formation of Albanian Islam than King Zog who affirmed the authority of the state over religion through a series of legal measures.¹³⁰ Chief among them was his attempt to instill national features into all religious communities. There were several elements that his regime singled, including the necessity to use Albanian as an official language. In financial terms, the state provided them with the necessary financial support while it strictly prohibited foreign donations and had an overbearing authority to oversee all their expenditures. What's more, religious institutions were to teach pupils about national culture in addition to religious teachings,

and religious leaders were required to pledge alliance to the king (Duka 2014).

Following the collapse of communism, the absence of a legal framework posed a major obstacle for religious communities to organize themselves, especially KMSH which had previously not relied on foreign assistance. Initially they relied on laws and statutes¹³¹ considered relevant for the circumstances. These laws provided a framework through which the KMSH could be re-established and formally registered. Similarly, the law for the restitution and compensation of property¹³² nationalized by the communist regime enabled the return of some KMSH properties.

Parallel with these efforts, ad hoc solutions sought to revive Islam in Albania. Given the limitations created by the absence of a legal framework in addition to the chaotic political and economic conditions at the beginning of 1990's permanent solutions presented a challenge. Fundamental questions remained unresolved. Namely, the governing philosophy of religious institutions, including Islam; the relationship

¹³⁰ Duka, Valentina, Institucionet fetare gjatë mbretërimit të Zogut, Zeri Islam, web. 30 April 2019, <http://www.zeriislam.com/artikulli.php?id=2793>

¹³¹ Hence up until the preparation of the constitutional package and relevant laws the activity of the KMSH was indeed governed by the law on nonprofit organizations and the law on foundations. In addition, the law on trade associations was also used.

¹³² Law nr. 7491 "Për kthimin dhe kompesimin e pronave e tokave ish pronarëve", datë 29.04.1991 "Për dispozitat kryesore kushtetuese".

of the state with religion, and relations between religion, politics and society. Ultimately, it was not merely the governing model but also the function of religion in the country that had to be determined, as Albania sought to break ties with its communist regime which had essentially declared war on religion.

As the country was trying to establish a pluralist system, hold elections and define its constitutional future, there was little time for a comprehensive framing. The foundations of a new legal framework were launched alongside constitutional changes in 1991, when the country adopted a provisional constitution. A new constitution was adapted through a national referendum in 1998. This new legal regime determined the relations between the state, religion and society.

Consequently, the constitution of 1991 clearly stated that “Albania is a secular state” and “it respects the freedom of religion and facilitates the conditions for the practice of religion.”¹³³ The constitution of 1998 establishes the governing philosophy of religion, in both letter and spirit, relations between the state and religion and guarantees the freedom of its citizens to practice their faith. It stipulates that “Albania does not have an official religion” and that “the state is neutral in questions of faith and conscience.” Moreover, the constitution “guarantees the freedom of expression in public life.”¹³⁴

Meanwhile, the religious landscape was changing fast. Unlike constitutional changes which took almost a decade, the reinstitution of religious infrastructure developed at a quicker pace. Even though religious institutions were unable to fund themselves, and most of their confiscated properties remained in the hands of others, they became re-

liant on foreign donations, which often exploited the informality of the country to further their agenda. As a result, the majority of the mosques built in Albania between 1991 and 1998 were built without the knowledge of the KMSH while many of them were constructed without a permit.

Until 1999, an estimated 450 to 500 mosques operated outside the jurisdiction and control of the KMSH given that they were built, financed and maintained by foreign Islamic organizations. Similarly, Islamic educational institutions were under foreign control. Until 2001, organizations from Saudi Arabia and Northeast of Africa reinstituted and administered all the Madrasahs which at the time were the country’s sole Islamic educational institutions (Raxhimi 2010). In addition, this network of organizations and foundations financed the administrative structures of KMSH in Tirana and other districts. Imams who delivered religious services at foreign funded mosques were also on the payroll of these organizations, the majority of which were from Arab countries.¹³⁵

Lack of a strong, independent central institution to administer, oversee and manage religious activities in the country posed a disproportionate challenge for Islam. For instance, the Catholic or the Orthodox Church could rely on their respective structures, and singular sources of funding such as the Vatican or the Greek Orthodox Church, while KMSH did not have a patron of a similar nature. Similarly, both these churches could rely on clerics trained abroad to lead religious services as there are no significant differences in interpretation of sacred texts between a Catholic priest trained in Italy, or an Orthodox

¹³⁵ A part of the financing came from the Muslim Community in Turkey or other organizations from the same country. Additionally, a number of students, although relatively much lower, chose to study in Turkish universities.

¹³³ Constitutional package, Article 7, April, 1991.
¹³⁴ Constitution of the Republic of Albania 1998, Article 10.

priest trained in Greece with another educated in Albania. This is not the case however with Sunni Muslims who were faced with foreign clerics with no familiarity with Albania's traditional Islam (Clayer 2005). During this period, the penetration of Islam was particularly sensitive, especially Wahhabism and clerics trained at the University of Cairo or other Egyptian universities whose interpretation stood in stark contrast with the local understanding of Islam (Bougarel and Clayer 2001). Reversing this trend, required significant efforts including institutional and financial support. Until these two are provided in higher levels, segments within the Muslim community will remain dependent on foreign assistance.

5.2 The Economic Nexus of the Albania's National Islam

The process of religious renationalization is not possible, nor can it be guaranteed without enough financial support. This is especially true with Albanian Islam, for which renationalization implies a return to the traditional version of Islam renowned for its moderation. KMSH is an independent body and is expected to have sufficient financial resources to uphold its necessary bureaucratic and organizational expenditure, including salaries for Imams, scholars and religious teachers, in addition to necessary funds for the creation of clerical infrastructure in mosques, muftis and centers of religious culture. Equally important is the financing of national religious education.

Failure to achieve financial independence could reintroduce the same level of risk the country experienced in 1990's, when the communist regime collapsed, and religious freedoms were reinstated. The concept of nationaliza-

tion of religion, and especially the nationalization of Islam in Albania is unattainable unless it is backed by legal and national financial resources. During his reign, King Zog established a clearly defined legal framework which enabled his regime to oversee the implementation of the concept of religious nationalization in addition to providing religious institutions with enough financial assistance.

The key factor which could lead to the failure of the concept of religious nationalization, and by extension threaten the demise of Albanian traditional version of Islam is economic in nature. Unfortunately, the current legal framework which is primarily based on the King Zog's legal regime, risks becoming ineffective as it lacks sufficient economic backing as it did back then.

Current financial capacities of KMSH are not enough to cover a considerable number of Imams, especially those serving Albania's rural villages.¹³⁶ Whereas the salaries provided by the Albanian Muslim Community to Imams serving full time in its main muftini-s are among the lowest in the country, sometimes even lower than the country's minimum wage.¹³⁷ Other religious workers, including the KMSH's bureaucrats or those serving in centers of Islamic culture receive equally low wages.¹³⁸

The condition of the religious education, which is also under the administration of the Albanian Muslim Community is even more critical. Even though madrasa teachers, including religious, social science and natural sciences are paid almost the same as those in the public sector, these salaries are not enough to maintain the standards, or

¹³⁶ Interview with staff of muftini-s in Pogradec, Librazhd, Diber, Korçë, Elbasan, Shkoder. Focus groups in Elbasan, Librazhd.

¹³⁷ Interview with D.S, high official within the KMSH.

¹³⁸ Interview with R.A.

encourage improvements. Finances are particularly missing in supporting reconstruction or expansion of current infrastructure or the increase of human capacities that would help religious institutions continue to be attractive in an increasingly competitive industry.

KMSH's resources are insufficient to support the building or reconstruction of mosques or other relevant institutions. Given the needs of the institution, their budget does not suffice to support research or publishing. It is for this reason the construction of Tirana's Namazgja Mosque is financed by funds from the Turkish Islamic Community (*Diyanet*). Upon completion, it will be the largest mosque not only in Albania, but the whole region. The fact it is financed by foreign funds has resurfaced public debates at the core of which is the nationalization of Islam, which risks being undermined as long as it is not supported by national and legal sources.

This issue is exacerbated by the inadequacy of KMSH budget to cover the salaries of imams and other religious workers who are instead on the payroll of foreign foundations¹³⁹ which are locally registered as not-for-profit NGO's. This presents a dual challenge for KMSH. First, by not paying them, its structures and legitimacy are undermined. Second, given that imams are not reliant on KMSH for compensation, they are less likely to comply with its regulations. Ultimately, unless KMSH is able to cover its expenses as it did prior to WWII with the help of state assistance, Albania's traditional Islam will continue to be challenged by alternative interpretations.

Seemingly, the *Achilles heel* in providing a sustainable solution can be reached by reinstituting KMSH prop-

erties seized by Hoxha's regime which have yet to be returned. Prior to the WWII, KMSH was the country's largest landowner, and as such had under its possession several mortmain properties (*vakifs*) such as olive groves, arable land and other sources that generated enough income allowing KMSH to finance itself and its activities.

The newly established communist regime aimed to religiously neutralize the country, a project which started with the gradual expropriation of religious properties among which the KMSH was the country's largest landowner. The second part of the communist strategy was to gradually reduce state subsidies allocated to religious communities, although not completely stopping them. The objective was clear: eliminate the economic base of KMSH through reforms which reached their peak during the agricultural reform.¹⁴⁰ Subsequently, it lost its independence and became dependent on state subsidies which by this point had been reduced by 70 percent.¹⁴¹

Unlike the communist government, successive governments since 1991 have not sought to control religion. Nonetheless, they have thwarted efforts to

¹⁴⁰ With the implementation of the agrarian reform the assets of the foundations (*vakifs*) diminished substantially together with their arable lands, vineyards, olive trees and animals. Due to the reform, in the cities the mosques, about 150 of them, lost their properties which reached up to 2 hectares. See A. M. Basha and Cimbalo.

¹⁴¹ At least since 2012 and onwards, the state budget dedicated and distributed to the religious communities is about 1 million USD. For the year 2012 The Council of Ministers approved funds for the religious communities at the sum of 99 243 000 AL LEK. The Muslim Community had 28,16 million AL LEK for the following distribution: 11 400 000 went to pay at least half of the minimum wage for the administration staff, 14 760 000 for paying the salaries of teachers in the religious schools, of all cycles elementary, secondary and university level; 2 000 000 for the reconstruction of the Chair venue of the KMSH. The amount of subventions of the KMSH totals at 28,7 percent of the entire fund. The Orthodox Church receives 24 370 000 AL LEK, which amounts to 24,5 percent of the fund whereas the Catholic Church receives 24,72 million AL LEK or 24,9 percent. Additionally, the World Chair Bektashi Community receives 21,9 million or 22,1 percent. Source: Archives of the KMSH, Interview with Piro Misha.

¹³⁹ Interview with O.XH. Focus Groups Elbasan, Librazhd, Shkodër.

return their properties that were lost during the communist regime. According to the former head of KMSH, Skender Bruçaj, as much as 80 percent of its properties have not been returned.¹⁴² KMSH's regional administrations would not need subsidies if a considerable amount of their properties confiscated by the communist regime were to be returned. The return of properties to their previous owner is however not an issue limited to religious institutions but remains as a key challenge for the establishment of order and rule of law. It is important to state that there are no concrete discriminatory policies being pursued against religions in general or Islam in particular. However, within the Muslim community, there's a segment of people who believe that Islam is more discriminated against in the process compared to other religious groups. There are two contributing factors which are non-religious in nature. First, KMSH's horizontal structures make it more difficult to speak with one voice. Furthermore, it had more properties than other religious communities confiscated, given that KMSH was the country's largest landowner.

Subsequent governments have failed to provide solutions to these issues. With the passing of time, returning properties become ever more challenging as institutional delays and corruption further complicate the matter. Meanwhile, the government adapted law 10140 on May 15, 2009 through which it allocates funds from the state budget to religious communities.¹⁴³ At its current levels, it remains inadequate for the needs of respective communities.¹⁴⁴ The distri-

142 Interview with Skender Bruçaj, Head of the Albanian Muslim Community.

143 Ruci, Ani. Deutsche Welle. Web 30 prill 2019, <https://www.dw.com/sq/projektligj-p%C3%ABr-financimin-nga-buxheti-i-shtetit-t%C3%AB-komuniteteve-kryesore-fetare-ne-shqip%C3%ABri/a-4227047>

144 The 2019 budget is 109m Albanian Leke, or 880,000 EUR, distributed to the four listed

communities. Web. 28 April 2019. <http://www.gazetadita.al/qeveria-109-milion-leke-per-komunitetet-fetare-si-do-te-ndahen-parate/>

145 Interview with Servet Gurra, Chairperson of the Committee of Cults, Tirana.

146 Interview with Skender Bruçaj, Head of KMSH, Tirane, July 2018.

147 Ibid.

In the case of KMSH, the funds allocated by the government are used to pay the salaries of madrasa teachers, accounting for 40 percent of institutional salaries including relevant taxes and social security contributions.¹⁴⁷ It is important to note that according to KMSH, Imams are listed as religious teachers. If the state could cover the salaries (even partially) of these "religious teachers" it would provide a substantial help to KMSH, even though it would not allow for the proper functioning of the religious infrastructure. Albeit a possible increase of the KMSH budget due to more funds being allocated from the state budget, the institution would not be able to avoid voluntary donations from institutions or individuals operating in Albania.

Notwithstanding, the increase of funds allocated from the state potentially risks the independence of the KMSH and would return it under the influence of the government, which in the case of a hybrid regime such as Albania's, it could make the institution vulnerable to political pressure and control. Hence, the solution is not to increase the state budget for KMSH, but to return the properties confiscated by the communist regime.

communities. Web. 28 April 2019. <http://www.gazetadita.al/qeveria-109-milion-leke-per-komunitetet-fetare-si-do-te-ndahen-parate/>

145 Interview with Servet Gurra, Chairperson of the Committee of Cults, Tirana.

146 Interview with Skender Bruçaj, Head of KMSH, Tirane, July 2018.

147 Ibid.

5.3 Albanian Muslim Community: Who is who?

Islam in Albania is represented by different factions as a result of foreign influence. Until 2016, there were two main division represented by those adhering to the traditional interpretation of Islam, and a more conservative branch consisting of adherents to the Hanbali School. However, this reliance on foreign funding became subject to developments abroad. As a result, Turkey's failed coup resulted in a divide between those who support Fetullah Gülen, whose organization has a strong presence in Albania and those who side with the government's stance.

Until then, the differences among Muslim groups were ideological in nature and revolved solely around the nature of Islam in Albania. These competing factions represented two different schools of Islam: those favoring an "Arab" approach sought to reformulate Islam from its core and replaced it Wahhabism or Salafism. The second group favored a "Turkish" approach to Islam, namely the school of Hanafi which is closer to the traditional version of Islam practiced in the country. Those in favor of a more Arab approach to Islam refused the authority of KMSH¹⁴⁸ and established the League of Albanian Imams (LHSH) as an official organization in 2010.¹⁴⁹ The rivalry within the KMSH is essentially a clash between "pro-Arab" and "pro-Turk" factions.¹⁵⁰ Following the ban of several foreign organizations operating in Albania after September 11 attacks, the "pro-Turk" group made tangible advances which has produced the effect of "Turkeyza-

tion" of Islam in Albania.

The rivalry has shifted the balances, but it has not led to a final defeat. The "decisive" victory of the "pro-Turk" faction (Raxhimi 2010) has not eliminated the influence of the "pro-Arab" faction within the KMSH, even though it has significantly diminished its representation, something that has made many of its adherents feel unrepresented by the hierarchy of KMSH. Reconciliation has not been attained, not least because of the ideological differences are not mendable.¹⁵¹ However, they are not the only groups vying for the control and influence of KMSH.

The 2016 failed coup in Turkey has resulted a split within the "pro-Turk" faction, which is now divided between supporters of Fetullah Gülen, whom the government of Turkey accuses as being behind the coup and its adversaries within the premises of the KMSH. In principle, the divide is not ideological but political. The main leaders of KMSH in Tirana, and the regional muftis are under the control of individuals who are allegedly members of the Gülenist movement. They also administer the country's Islamic educational institutions, excluding that of Shkodra and Beder University. However, a rivalry between three different factions has the potential to weaken the governance of Islam in Albania. If history serves us, this should be cause for concern as fragile administrative structures could create a vacuum which can be exploited by groups with a radical leaning as we have seen before with the penetration of Al-Qaeda affiliates.

The effects of these divisions on Islam, its relations with other religious communities and the government have yet to be determined. An unresolved issue

¹⁴⁸ Interview with Armand R.

¹⁴⁹ Almost a decade later, and the LHSH continues to challenge the power structure of KMSH. Among its objectives, is to issue Fatwa's on relevant issues. For more see: <http://www.lidhjahoxhallareve.com/l/historiku/>

¹⁵⁰ Interview with Piro Misha, October 2018.

¹⁵¹ Interview with high official of KMSH, Elbasan, November 2018.

of this nature has been posed by the frequent demands from the Turkish government to extradite members of the Gülenist movement to Turkey. Albeit having resisted handing them over so far, the government of Albania has publicly accepted that Gülenists pose a national security threat to the country

(Shqiptarja 2018). Once more, this issue has raised concerns that Albania risks being a proxy for ideological clashes between different factions. These concerns are unlikely to fade until Albania's Islam can retain its independence from foreign interference, be it political, ideological or financial.

CONCLUSION

Following the news that over 140 Albanian citizens had made *hijrah* (migrate) to join ISIS in Syria a wave of reactions ensued. Two key interpretations emerged from it. One, of them identified poverty and marginalization as key drivers for their radicalization. The alternative interpretation claimed that it was the presence of structural violence in the communities from which foreign fighters emerged that was to be blamed. Yet, neither sufficed to explain the phenomenon and its scale in the case of Albania. A thorough examination was needed to consider the chronologic trajectory development of Albanian Islam both as a doctrine and as a community.

Albanian Islam features, namely, moderation, tolerance for other religions, acceptance of the state and democracy as compatible with the practice of religion, represents a less than welcoming environment for radicalization. Not least because religion has never played a principal role in the formation of the society, nation or the state. Arguably, religion continues to play a limited role in the individual, family and communal life. There are varying factors contributing to this. At the structural level, religion has often succumbed to local traditions, norms and interpretations of life. The strong role played by the

Kanun of Leke Dukagjini for instance, in structuring the life of the individual and the community, is a case in point. Hoxha's anti-religious policy has also played its role in diminishing the role of religion in the life of Albanians, as generations grew in complete isolation from religious influence. Furthermore, the country's religious diversity within kin has also played a role as all of them are intrinsically and equally Albanian. As a result, national identity is rooted in common language and ancestry.

Albania today is home to a longstanding religious harmony between its three main religious denominations and has harbored a moderate version of Islam since before the establishment of the Albanian state in 1913. Indeed, the work of the great renaissance activists, writers and poets made nationalism the heart of the independence movement, superseding any religious differences. Subsequent powers have strictly adhered to this domain and further enforced secularism.

This tradition was challenged by the infusion of conservative interpretations between 1990 and 2001 when religious revival was led and financed by foreigners. Longstanding institutional and traditional values faced a roadblock, as KMSH could not assert its indepen-

dence, authority and build on its legacy. Followers of conservative interpretations created schisms in the Muslim community, while challenging long-standing traditions. This had ramifications beyond the individual, as it tried to redefine what it meant to be a Muslim, an Albanian and what that means for living in a secular society alongside members of the community that practiced a different religion or none. Notably, they were not foreigners, but Albanians.

As a result, claims that radicalization was an exclusive export did not suffice. While foreign preachers, individuals and organizations who financed the re-establishment of Islam both physically and spiritually played a key role in the process, it was locals who embraced what they taught who localized the issue. In other words, radicalization was a “foreign seed” which landed in a fertile “soil,” one where traditional Islamic institution was out financed, outnumbered, and out efforted. Local factors including a moderate interpretation of Islam, a peripheral role of religion in the life of the individual and the community may have played a dual role. In one hand, it has prevented these interpretations from amassing its appeal. On the other, it has isolated others who still sought to adhere to their principles and values. This seems to have further motivated them to affirm their presence, seek legitimacy and advocate for prominence of their interpretation.

Debates ensued until reports broke out that an estimated 140 Albanians went to fight in Syria and Iraq. State authorities responded swiftly, leading to what we consider the “securitization of Islam.” While this delivered a blow to those recruiting foreign fighters, and others hoping to join as the phenomenon came to a full stop, our discussions

with focus groups reveal that it may have further cornered groups who do not embrace the mainstream interpretation of Islam in the country. Efforts to bridge the ideological rift seem to have fallen short. Paying lip service will do little to mend the difference between competing factions within Albanian Muslims. Disregarding one-another will not provide the necessary solutions to common issues such as education.

To the present day, religions education in Albania fails to meet the needs of the community of believers, Imams and teachers. This is exemplified by the curricula in Madrassas which has suffered as a result of the attempts to conform with the country’s secular norms and admission requirements in Albanian universities. The only university that offers theological high studies, Beder University College has a single department of Islamic Sciences and hence cannot be considered a full-fledged theological tertiary education institution. Moreover, its reputation, though quite good regarding its standards, has been marred by the perception that it is run by “Gülenist” supporters.

Though the key ideological conflict and rivalry of the first decades of transition, that between so called “pro Turk” faction and “pro-Arab” faction is now in retreat and at least officially the first one has gained the upper hand, schisms in Turkey where the government is in a full fight mode against Gülen has caused a rift among the “pro Turk” faction. One clear illustration of this is the imported conflict between factions, Gülenist and against, that has descended into the competition of the KMSH leadership. The process of electing a new head of the KMSH this year¹⁵² was presented

152 “KMSH appoints new leader amidst strong debate”, Tirana Times, March 2019, <http://www.tiranatimes.com/?p=140783>

in the media and discussed even by high level politicians as a struggle for power over the religion of the majority in Albania between the Diyanet that represents the Turkish state and the remnants of the Gülen movement in the country. One of the candidates was blunt in accusing the “Gülenists” for his loss and for capturing the KMSH.

At the heart of the vulnerability problem that arises from foreign influence stands the economic dependence of KMSH from outside. To the present day, neither the legislative framework nor the amount of the financial resources that the KMSH receives from the state suffices to achieve its goals and assert its authority. This is concerning as it poses a risk to Albanian Islam, which assumes the separation of state for-

mer religion, the coexistence between faiths, the Hanafi School and a pervasive tolerant and moderate spirit of practice.

One potential option to reduce this economic dependency which then influences a whole network of imams, preachers, teachers and centers is to restore the properties and assets of the KMSH confiscated during the communist regime. However, property issues in Albania are the Achilles heel as they determine whether KMSH can become self-reliant. Until that is achieved, it is difficult to see the country’s governing body be able to provide the necessary institutional, educational, and moral role it ought to play. Without it, there is no guarantee issues of the past will not be repeated.

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