

# Limited Reach and Appeal in Kosovo

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Those who use radical and extremist methods to achieve their political goals employ the most horrifying and inhumane ways to kill, terrorize, and punish people, and do so with a high level of resilience and transformative abilities. The skills and intimidation they utilize allow them to successfully recruit among communities that are marginalized, economically disempowered, and uneducated. They use organized crime networks, radical imams, contemporary propaganda tools such as social media, and false promises to gain trust – especially from young people, who have in one way or another been subject to discrimination, lack of opportunities, social immobility, and no access to quality education.

This is one part of the problem with terrorism. The other is ever-growing autocratic governance. Governments that have been unable to provide programs to address the trauma of past conflicts in countries in transitions and that are failing to deliver on the promises of democracy – good governance, jobs, quality education, health services and ability to travel freely – provide an opportunity for terrorist infiltration. Therefore, the engagement of the West with the Muslim world should go far beyond the narrow lens of radicalism and extremism in the Middle East. This is also happening in countries in the Balkans that are struggling to establish true accountable democratic institutions, where existing organized crime and corrupt networks are serving the needs of groups like the Islamic State (also known as ISIS or ISIL) by facilitating recruitment and organizing human trafficking rings.

The Kosovar people endured 10 years of living in severe conditions under the Slobodan Milosevic regime and 15 years of uncertainty after the 1998 – 1999 Kosovo war. We now have a generation of people who not only have inherited the trauma of their parents but have also suffered through war, become refugees, and for 15 years, have been waiting for jobs, freedom of movement, and are highly exposed to post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). In this post-war situation, all social safety nets of the past have disintegrated and the state institutions are ill-equipped, if at all, to deal with the effects of trauma and PTSD.

Kosovo's new generation has the highest rate of unemployment in the region. It is estimated that 60 percent of the population is under the age of 25, with more than 65 percent of them unemployed. These same people are the only ones on the whole European continent who cannot travel outside of the region, since Kosovo is not a part of the Schengen Area of free movement. These reasons, plus the fact that an unregulated pharmaceutical sector allows for easy access to and abuse of narcotics and antidepressants, can be attributed to why a small number of Kosovars become indoctrinated, manipulated, and brainwashed by extremist recruiters to fight in Syria and Iraq.

Additionally, Kosovo has been struggling to establish proper accountable democratic institutions, and in many cases, both the Kosovo judiciary and EULEX (EU rule of law mission) have failed to implement the rule of law and bring the "powerful" to justice, contributing to radicalism thriving.

At times, religion has been misused to influence people's votes, as religion has been one of the main organizing principles after the war. Very often, individuals vote under the direction and suggestion of the imams. On the other hand, the rhetoric of fighting radicalism and extremism is used by the political establishment as a way to cover up failures, use wiretapping and surveillance against political opponents, and to be seen as the only partners to the international community. This campaign to fight radicalism is therefore used to justify keeping certain politicians in power, even at the cost of major electoral fraud and industrial vote rigging.

It is worth emphasizing, though, that in the last six months, not a single case of recruitment by ISIS or other extremist groups has been recorded in Kosovo. Another important note is that all of the recruits prior to this recent period travelled to Syria. The reason for the lack of new recent recruits is two-fold: First, the attraction and curiosity doesn't exist anymore, and second, those recruited who have survived and returned are telling horrific stories about their experiences. Also, the fact that so many of them were killed and the stories about what is happening to their families in the war zones once they are dead are both powerful deterrents for anyone considering going to Syria.

Most recruits who have gone to Syria have no intention of returning to Kosovo. They either establish a new life there or die for the "glory of god." Therefore, we should not give much credence to the notion that they will return to conduct the same activities back home. There

is no public support for that. In Kosovo, it is traditional for families of those who have died to receive many visitors during mourning. In the cases of families grieving someone killed in the war in Syria, nobody visits. It is a sign of public condemnation, and very often, the families are ashamed to open their doors.

But why have any Kosovars gone to fight in Syria in the first place? The answer is not necessarily to join ISIS. There was some confusion in the beginning; many in Kosovo associated Syrian President Bashar al-Assad with former Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic. Media reports about mass killings, use of chemical weapons against civilians, cracking down on civil society with military action, and destroying historical sites in Homs and Aleppo triggered memories of the past for some, which caused the first wave of Kosovar people going to fight alongside the Syrian opposition. There was also an early call from government institutions in Kosovo to help liberate Syrians from Assad's regime.

Small numbers of Kosovars going to fight is not new. They are victims of their own situation and of a very weak and unstructured government. I strongly believe that the imams in Kosovo, who were also recruiting individuals to training camps in Pakistan, found an opportunity to expand their offer. Their indoctrination and recruitment process is purely financially motivated. A small number of imams get paid according to how many people they can recruit.

Their efforts, however, have limited reach and appeal, and there is no basis for concern or alarm as such efforts are not accepted by the general population, nor are they nurtured as part of the secular brand of Islam that has been practiced in Kosovo for centuries. New mosques built by wealthy individuals from Saudi Arabia stand empty. Saudi Arabia's investments of individuals and their indoctrination efforts are producing nothing but disappointment for their investors. More than 90 percent of Kosovars continue to support and demand the integration of Kosovo in the European Union and NATO.