

American Foreign Policy Council

MACEDONIA

QUICK FACTS

Population: 2,100,025 (July 2016 est.)

Area: 25,713 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Macedonian 64.2%, Albanian 25.2%, Turkish 3.9%, Roma (Gypsy) 2.7%, Serb 1.8%, other 2.2% (2002 est.)

Religions: Macedonian Orthodox 64.8%, Muslim 33.3%, other Christian 0.4%, other and unspecified 1.5% (2002 est.)

Government Type: Parliamentary democracy

GDP (official exchange rate): \$9.922 billion (2015 est.)

Map and Quick Facts courtesy of the CIA World Factbook (November 2018)

OVERVIEW

Ethnically- and religiously-divided Macedonia is on the front lines of the European migrant crisis, and was a major transit corridor between Greece and Serbia before that border closed in March 2016. The threat of terrorists posing as migrants has been noted by both local and international authorities. Also, over 100 ethnic Albanian Muslims have fought in jihadist groups like Al Nusra Front and ISIS in Syria and Iraq.¹ This led to the passage of a law on foreign fighters in September 2014, and increasing police activity resulting in the arrests of several alleged terrorist recruiters and fighters.

As in neighboring Kosovo and Albania, Macedonia has been targeted by radical Muslim preachers and Arab-funded charities for many years. By 2014, divisive ethnic politics and the development of an impressionable young generation of Muslims led to the phenomenon of local Albanian youth joining ethnically-based battalions in Syria, or recruiting at home. While approximately 50 fighters have been killed in battle, more have returned home, representing a concern for security planners. There

are fewer ethnic Albanians from Macedonia joining the conflict than those from Albania and Kosovo, and those that have joined do not seem to have acquired the same reputations for violence or high levels of leadership.

However, Islamism itself in Macedonia is more pervasive socially and influential politically than in Albania or Kosovo, because of religious and rural-based conservatism, and as a result of specific political tactics employed by radicals in recent years. However, the greatest unknown factor for the future is what impact the aftermath of the failed Turkish coup of July 2016 will have on the behavior and popularity of ethnic Albanian political parties; for, while Macedonia is a strong ally of Turkey, there is internal disagreement within the local Muslim communities and parties regarding support for or opposition to controversial cleric Fethullah Gülen and his Islamic movement. While most Muslims in Macedonia (and the Balkans) do not support Gülen, influential Muslim politicians and commentators are more amenable to him, which raises the possibility of greater religious debate between competing camps in ethnic Albanian political life.

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

Islamist activity in Macedonia is most widespread in areas where the Muslim population—the vast majority of whom are ethnic Albanians—is concentrated: parts of the capital, Skopje, the towns and villages between Kumanovo and Tetovo (near the border with Kosovo), and numerous towns like Gostivar, Debar, Kicevo and Struga located along the western border with Albania. However, ethnically-mixed areas exist in other regions of the country as well, such as in the central mountain massif south of Skopje. They too provide fertile ground for Islamist activity.

The organization that officially represents Macedonia's Muslim population of 675,000 is the Islamic Community of Macedonia (ICM).² As in other regional countries, however, its authority has been challenged by Arab-funded and trained young radicals over an extended period of time. Several violent confrontations have occurred since 2003, sparked by armed extremists seeking to install their candidates in Macedonia's mosques, especially in the capital of Skopje.³ Later, in July 2010, the ICM's leading cleric, *reis-ul-ulema* Sulejman Rexhepi, admitted that the ICM had lost control over several Skopje mosques, following a fight and near-riot in a mosque under Wahhabi control.⁴ And in September 2010 (following a fruitless private appeal to the United States ambassador four months earlier), he publicly called upon U.S. and EU representatives to help the ICM counter the growing influence of radical Islam.⁵ Since then, some of the mosques involved have been targeted by police as having provided ideological indoctrination to young Muslims who would travel to Syria to fight.⁶

While international diplomats have for years warned about fundamentalist threats to Macedonia's stability, until the participation of Albanians in the Syrian *jihad* became public in 2014, most considered Islamic infighting to be little more than internal politicking between rival ethnic Albanian parties over property proceeds and other financial interests. Nevertheless, in Macedonia today, fundamentalist Islam (in the form of veiled women, men in traditional garb and long beards, and increased public challenges to secularism) is unmistakably becoming more visible in daily life.⁷

While there is certainly some truth to the skeptics' charge of Islamism as mere "business," the participation of local fighters in Syria and Iraq has provided evidence to the contrary. In late August 2016, while announcing the arrest in Turkey of five Macedonian Albanians en route to Syria, Interior Minister Mitko Chavkov stated that at least 25 other Macedonian citizens had been killed while fighting in the Syrian civil war, and 50 were presumed to still be there.⁸

Rather than destroying existing Islamic institutions, Wahhabi extremists have sought instead to take over authority where they can. To establish control, they have historically used NGOs, charities and publishing entities, domestic and international conferences, political events, "human-rights" activities and various demonstrations.⁹ At the same time, these radicals have expedited the goals of Saudi Arabia and other Islamic states by overseeing the construction of hundreds of foreign-funded mosques.¹⁰ The Islamist activity that led to fighters going to the Middle East was concentrated in several mosques in Skopje and Tetovo long associated with radical preachers. However, in many cases authorities have still been unable to arrest these figures because there is no solid evidence that they have done anything illegal.¹¹

The complexity of Islamic affairs in Macedonia is growing as multiple internal and external actors vie for power and influence. Aside from the ICM and their Wahhabi opponents funded by the Gulf and other Islamic states, Turkey has a deep footprint in the country, owing to five centuries of Ottoman control. With the long-simmering feud between Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan and controversial cleric Fethullah Gülen finally boiling over with a failed coup against Erdogan's government in July 2016, entrenched interests in Macedonia associated with both sides came under pressure.

This is particularly important when considering that Macedonia's main ethnic Albanian party, the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI), has members privately aligned with the rival Turkish camps (not to mention that Macedonia's small Turkish minority itself has two rival parties). The DUI has been a coalition partner in almost all Macedonian governments since 2002, after it was created by Ali Ahmeti (an ethnic Albanian who led the paramilitary National Liberation Army in the 2001 civil conflict). The Turkish government's demand that regional countries close Gülen-related schools after the 2016 coup put the party in a difficult position. While some party

leaders were seen as closer to Gülen, the majority of Muslims in the Balkans supported Erdogan. Diplomatic information alleges that it was actually DUI's Ahmeti who vetoed a governmental proposal to close Gülen entities in Macedonia.¹²

This internal political division could prove especially problematic, since an openly pro-Erdogan ethnic Albanian party, Besa, was created in November 2014. As of 2016, the party had not yet participated in national elections, but is relying on its lack of previous political 'baggage' (like corruption scandals) and its appeal to conservative Muslim voters. While the appeal of the party has not been tested, it has caused concern among both the DUI and its traditional rival, the more nationalist-leaning Democratic Party of Albanians (DPA). The inevitable result in all future elections will be increasing overtures among all three parties for the 'Muslim base' vote in a fairly conservative country.

For its part, the Turkish government and various charities have made the most of their opportunity within the country.¹³ Turkey is very active through its international development agency (TIKA) and supported NGOs in reaffirming the tangible signs of its Ottoman legacy in the country.¹⁴ The Erdogan government has long considered Macedonia a key part of its neo-Ottoman foreign policy of "strategic depth."¹⁵ And, not insignificantly in a country that has been actively hunting for foreign investors since 2006, Macedonia has welcomed dozens of major Turkish investors involved in everything from construction to management of the Skopje airport. These business and political ties have strengthened the bilateral relationship tremendously; indeed, when inaugurating the third Bosphorus Bridge in August 2016, President Erdogan welcomed Macedonian President Gjorge Ivanov to the ceremony—one of very few leaders to receive that invitation.¹⁶

President Ivanov has consistently been a strong supporter of Erdogan, for example defending the latter's reaction to 2013 protests in Turkey.¹⁷ Since Turkey is a key ally, this support has (despite Erdogan's pro-Islamist administration) actually benefited Macedonia's fight against terrorism. Indeed, Ivanov's August 25th visit for the bridge opening coincided with the announcement of a joint police and intelligence operation which resulted in the arrest of five Albanians from Macedonia in Istanbul, reportedly planning to join ISIS in Syria (discussed below).

Aside from foreign relations and state-level politics, the bedrock of funding for Islamist networks was established years ago, in often opaque ways, through NGOs and other entities. The official wealth of the ICM itself, in terms of funds, real estate and other assets, is neither publicly known nor discussed. Even less well-known is the total level of funding available to radical groups and the ways in which it is transmitted.

Part of this has to do with established tradition, such as the custom of communal payments seen in the construction of village mosques; locals can simply donate anonymously, drop cash in a box, and so on. Even when police have managed to trace some funds to extremist groups abroad, authoritative figures have never been publicly

disclosed. Nor do Islamists, despite their frequent calls for officials to show greater transparency, detail the provenance or amounts of their own funding.¹⁸ As a result, investigators have had to work deductively and, to some extent, rely on anecdotal or comparative information.

In general, officials believe that Islamists in Macedonia (as elsewhere in the region) employ a creative combination of methods to move money. Police sometimes reference the use of Islamic students returning from the Gulf as cash “mules.” Other financial sources include proceeds from narcotics trafficking or the sale of items ranging from plastic chairs to silver and gold. To escape the attention of authorities, Islamists sometimes eschew large bank transactions, instead breaking up payments and deposits into smaller amounts.

Finally, funds also come in through donations from ideologically sympathetic businessmen, officials and Diaspora Muslims for religious projects such as mosques, schools and publications.¹⁹ These donations are not always a secret; indeed, the donating country or organization is often prominently displayed on the entrance of the structure in question, or in the beginning of a book.

As discussed above, Islamist activity in Macedonia over the past 20 years has been guided largely by outside interests, such as Saudi and other Gulf state charities and proselytizers. A limited interest has also been evidenced from Pakistani and Malaysian groups.²⁰ Often, global Islamist NGOs registered locally or via Western Europe (the UK is a major hub) are used as intermediaries. However, since the 1990s, relatively fewer suspicious charities have been allowed to register in the country, in comparison to Albania, Kosovo and Bosnia, due to a measure of resistance from Macedonian security officials.²¹

Specific Islamist activity has taken different forms. One key area is the strategic construction of mosques along major highways, high ridgelines, near pre-existing churches or in close proximity to other mosques. According to a detailed Macedonian newspaper investigation in 2010, over 300 mosques had been built in the previous decade—88 alone between Skopje and Tetovo, the main ethnic Albanian-majority city, in northwestern Macedonia.²² At a cost estimated by the newspaper to reach \$1.5-\$2.5 million per mosque, the sum expended is staggering. According to the same report, Saudi Arabia alone committed over \$1.2 billion from 2003-2013 for building mosques, providing education, and sending local Muslims on the *Hajj*.²³ More recently, in July 2014, the cornerstone was laid for a Saudi-style, four-minaret mega-mosque in the Skopje district of Topansko Pole. Featuring an educational center, it was expected to be the largest mosque in Macedonia and among the largest in the Balkans.²⁴

Aside from mosque construction, Islamists in and with ties to Macedonia have been active around the world. The infamous “Fort Dix Six” plot to attack a U.S. Army base in Ft. Dix, New Jersey involved three ethnic Albanian émigrés from Macedonia,

and another from Kosovo.²⁵ In Switzerland, the popular referendum banning minaret construction began after an Islamist group led by another Albanian originally from Macedonia agitated in favor of such building.²⁶ During ethnic Albanian paramilitary uprisings in Kosovo and Macedonia in 1999 and 2001, respectively, Albanian Islamists openly sought to raise funds for the cause in Great Britain, Germany and elsewhere in Europe.²⁷ Although these revolts were generally secular, small numbers of foreign *mujahideen* are now known to have fought in both wars.

At the same time, even before the Syrian crisis and rise of ISIS, Muslims from Macedonia had gone to join al-Qaeda's *jihad* against the United States and the Coalition in Afghanistan (an estimate published in the British media in 2010 put the number at approximately 50).²⁸ During a joint press conference with Macedonian Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski in January 2010, then-Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman stated that radical Islam in Macedonia and the Balkans was a major concern.²⁹ This comment came only four months before three Muslims from Macedonia participated in the controversial "humanitarian flotilla" to break the Israeli blockade of Gaza, organized by the Turkey-based Islamic charity Humanitarian Relief Foundation (IHH).³⁰

For years, security experts have warned about rising Islamism in Macedonia—albeit without arousing much attention. In late 2004, for example, French counterterrorism expert Claude Moniquet estimated publicly that up to 100 individuals linked to terrorist organizations resided in Macedonia, and that the country was effectively being used as a terrorist safe haven.³¹ A year later, Macedonian intelligence officials disclosed that Malaysian proselytizers were regularly arriving to carry out missionary activities in Muslim towns and villages. The influx was a product of necessity; apparently, some of the visiting Islamists had either been expelled or feared being expelled from EU countries, due to political or extremist activities there.³²

Since the 1990s, hundreds of young Muslims from Macedonia have also gone to study in Islamic states, such as Egypt, Syria, Saudi Arabia and Malaysia, while others have come into contact with radical Islam while working in Europe. An unfortunate long-term result of this trend has been the development of a "next-generation" of local Islamists who have built their own networks. At the same time, Balkan Muslims ensnared by radical Islam while working abroad have developed these networks further upon their return back home. For example, a two-year investigation of radicals in northern Italy by the *Divisione Investigazioni Generali e Operazioni Speciali*, (The General Investigations and Special Operations Division, or DIGOS) police resulted in the detention of 29 Balkan Muslims, some of whom were from Macedonia and allegedly linked to al-Qaeda.³³

In 2012, dramatic evidence attesting to these developing radical trends emerged with a series of protests. The first large-scale protest occurred in the Albanian-majority town of Struga, ostensibly in reaction to an annual carnival in the nearby Christian

village of Vevchani. The carnival is traditionally light-hearted, poking fun at world leaders, social trends and general society. However, participants at the event mocked Islam, provoking groups of angry protestors to attack churches in Albanian- and Macedonian Muslim-populated villages in western Macedonia, and to even stone a group of Christians on a bus.

In a large and unprecedented protest in Struga, heavily-bearded men waving Albanian and green Islamic flags publicly denounced Christians. Although further investigation and input from intelligence officials revealed that there was a certain amount of local politics and financial interests behind the lurid affair, the demonstration confirmed the presence of extremists and their ability to organize violently on short notice.³⁴ Most troubling, perhaps, was that the whole incident became a high-level security concern. Top government leaders and foreign diplomats were forced to meet extensively and reaffirm their commitment to work together and overcome ethnic and religious differences.

A second, more serious protest occurred in the capital, Skopje, on May 4, 2012, after a police press conference reported the apprehension of several Albanian “Islamic extremists.” The men had been detained after a massive police operation to find the killers of a group of young Macedonian fishermen who had been murdered execution-style, along with an older man who apparently witnessed the scene. The killings sparked the biggest manhunt in state history, dubbed “Operation Monster,” in which 600 police officers were deployed. At subsequent protests in Skopje (with smaller ones in Tetovo and Gostivar), several thousand ethnic Albanian youth took to the streets, waving Albanian and Saudi flags and chanting “*Allahu Akbar*” and “death to the Christians.” Some were seen wearing provocative shirts with slogans like “Islam will dominate the world” and demanding the establishment of a Greater Albania.³⁵

The protest originated at the historic Yahya Pasha Mosque, which had been under Wahhabi control for at least 10 years. Since the young protesters attacked the municipal office of the local (and ethnic Albanian) mayor in the Cair neighborhood of Skopje, security experts also read this as a sign that the extremists are now beyond the control of the ethnic Albanian political mainstream.³⁶ There were also reports of fights on public buses between Macedonian and Albanian youth and attacks by the latter on elderly Macedonians.

The trial of the suspected gunmen was deferred twice, and witnesses and family members of those killed were only able to face the defendants in court in December 2012 and January 2013.³⁷ Although police did not charge him with direct involvement, longtime Islamic radical Shukri Aliu was believed to have ignited the protests by calling for an “Arab Spring” uprising targeting the government, and seeking the participation of *imams* throughout the country.³⁸ Aliu was extradited from Kosovo at the end of 2012 in connection with physical attacks on several *imams* near the village of Kondovo that took place in 2005. In December 2015, a Skopje court overruled an

appeal from the five men accused of the murders, upholding life sentences for the crime. This decision sparked complaints from ethnic Albanians, but no protests on a similar level were seen. However, media alleged that the Special Prosecutor's Office (set up in September 2015 to investigate a very opaque 'government wiretapping' affair) would like to revisit the case, so there is room in the future for further ethnic and religious politicization.³⁹

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

The greatest defining—and most complicating—factor relating to Islamism in Macedonia is its intimate linkage with ethnic identification and ethnic-based politics. Local attitudes toward Islamic groups, and Islam in general, are not rigidly defined and remain in a perpetual state of flux, as does the general sense of ethnic identification among different groups, Christian and Muslim alike. This unique situation arguably makes a true understanding of Islam and society more difficult in Macedonia than in any other country in Europe.

Nearly 70 percent of the national population of 2 million is composed of ethnic Macedonians, a Slavic people who speak a language similar to Bulgarian and Serbian. While most are Orthodox Christian, a small number are Muslim—holdovers from Ottoman times, when those who converted enjoyed special benefits. Ethnic Albanians, who comprise 25 percent of the population, are almost entirely Muslim, predominantly from the Gheg sub-group common to northern Albania and Kosovo.

Other Muslim populations include Turks (four percent of the total population), Roma (around three percent), and about 17,000 Bosniaks.⁴⁰ However, a 2011 Pew report on global Muslim population growth trends indicates that, through 2030, Macedonia will experience a higher projected increase in number of Muslims to non-Muslims (5.4%) than any other European country. Pew expects that by 2030 some 40.3% of the total Macedonian population will be Muslim. This demographic trend will have severe political and social implications.⁴¹ However, it should be noted that the unexpected European migration crisis of 2015 will also alter the population balance in Northern European countries, which are far more attractive targets for terrorist attacks than is Macedonia.

The chronic polarization between ethnic Macedonians and Albanians intensified during the 2001 conflict, when Kosovo-led Albanians took up arms, allegedly for more rights and civic employment opportunities, in the so-called National Liberation Army of subsequent DUI president Ali Ahmeti. Under international pressure, a peace treaty—the Ohrid Framework Agreement—was signed shortly thereafter by leaders of the four major political parties existing at that time. The agreement stipulated a quota system for issues like public sector hiring, flag and language use, and

so on. Thus followed a territorial decentralization that amounted to political horse-trading between the then-ruling coalition of the Socialist SDSM and the DUI, an ethnic Albanian party formed by the leadership of the former rebel group, the NLA.

The decentralization institutionalized the ascendancy of Islam over large and territorially contiguous swathes of the population, particularly in northern and western Macedonia, where the majority of the country's Albanian Muslims live. The artfully designed new municipalities of 2005 ensured that Albanian mayors would be elected for the first time in ethnically mixed towns like Struga in the southwest, and that historically Turkish municipalities would also fall into Albanian hands. The Turks were rewarded, however, when two ethnically Macedonian Muslim municipalities, Plasnica and Centar Zhupa, were declared "Turkish." However, this new situation also caused resentment within the larger Muslim community as Albanian nationalism was employed to change whole demographics. To win votes, Macedonian Muslim populations were (and are) told that they were "really" Albanian, since they were Muslim; at the same time, savvy Albanians were telling outside observers that they themselves were not particularly religiously observant, in order to avoid being perceived as radicals.

One result of this political tug-of-war was the creation of a new identity: that of the "Torbeshi." Once used in a demeaning fashion, the name derives from the Macedonian word for bag (*torba*); historically, it insinuated that those thus classified would change their religion for whatever riches were given to them (by the previous Ottoman authorities). The ethnically Macedonian Muslims thus classified are typically the odd ones out in society; while they speak the Macedonian language of their Christian kin, they are Muslims like the Albanians. Fitting in with neither side, they are now turning to their religion as a defining factor, or else starting to identify themselves as Muslim Albanians.

Ethnic Albanian parties will continue to pressure the Macedonian Muslims of the western Mavrovo-Rostuse and Struga-area villages to declare themselves Albanians. This process of ethnic "conversion" directly expedites the dreams of Albanian ultranationalists who seek the federalization or territorial division of Macedonia along ethnic and religious lines. A further indication that the Albanian-dominated Islamic Community seeks hegemony over all believers (be they Turkish, Roma, Bosniak or Torbeshi) came with the comments of Reis Sulejmani in 2012 that there should be one national language (i.e., Albanian) in order to "reduce tensions" between Muslims.⁴² However, the efforts of ethnic Albanian parties to assimilate more conservative, religiously-minded Torbeshi minorities has also enhanced the parties' religious character.

One victim of the growth of fundamentalist Islam has been the country's more peaceful Bektashi Order—a minority within a minority. Comprised primarily of ethnic Albanians, this more liberal branch of Islam is considered heretical by many Muslims

worldwide. In Macedonia, they are particularly despised by Wahhabis, who condemn them as being even worse than Christians and Jews.⁴³ During and after the brief 2001 war, the country's main Bektashi shrine, the historic Harabati Baba Tekke in Tetovo, was vandalized and partially occupied by Islamic radicals associated with the NLA. Members of the order who have spoken out against the extremists have been threatened and, despite entreaties to successive Macedonian governments, the Bektashis still cannot register themselves as a distinct religious group.

In October 2010, the ICM controversially authorized a rival, so-called "Bektashi" order from the southwestern village of Zajas as the only legitimate such community in Macedonia.⁴⁴ However, the "real" Bektashis, whose base is in Tetovo, are recognized by outside Bektashi organizations. They thus criticized DUI-influenced decisions to recognize a parallel Bektashi group that they feared would give the ICM future control over any properties claimed from the state under the denationalization process.⁴⁵

On a broader level, the major social issue within the Muslim community is the gap between the younger and older generations of Muslims. Young Islamists, confident in their own studies in Arab states, tend to depict older leaders of Macedonia's Islamic Community as "communists" who do not understand Islam correctly, due to their different experience growing up in the former Yugoslavia.⁴⁶ Yet the perceived discrepancy is rarely put to the test (say, through a televised theological debate). Rather, it is generally carried out through violence and intimidation. Since intimidation is often carried out subtly and occurs within tight-knit communities, it is seldom reported.⁴⁷ For the time being, therefore, the primary victims of Islamist activity in Macedonia remain the country's Muslims themselves.

ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

In Macedonia, the state's ability to counteract extremism and engage it is conditioned by a unique factor that makes it much more complex than in other regional countries: that is, the increasing tendency of political parties from the ethnic Albanian minority to purposefully blur the boundaries between ethnic and religious identity. This tendency has been seen in social and political life (some examples are noted above), but it also has impeded Macedonian authorities' ability to both pass counter-terrorism legislation and conduct operations. When an Albanian is arrested because of a religiously motivated crime, a backlash often arises that the individual is the victim of ethnic discrimination; and when arrested for nationalist extremism, the counterargument is made of alleged religious bias. In this situation, police have had to tread carefully, and this more than anything else explains the relatively small number of terrorism-related arrests compared to Kosovo and Albania, where no such ethnic minority problem exists.

Because of the migrant crisis and Syrian civil war, the Macedonian state has had to divert resources and attention from dealing with the domestic Islamist threat. The

current crisis began in early 2015, and neatly coincided with the European migration crisis, which saw some one million illegal migrants and refugees transit Macedonia from Greece en route to Western Europe. Keeping control of this flow required considerable police and military assets to be redirected to the country's southern border with Greece and its northern one with Serbia, under the law on crisis situations that was declared by President Gjorge Ivanov in August 2015 and later extended.⁴⁸

In line with a U.S. request and legal assistance, Macedonia passed a foreign fighters law banning the participation of citizens in foreign conflicts on September 3, 2014.⁴⁹ While no one voted against it, several prominent members of the ethnic Albanian coalition partner, DUI, abstained. Similar laws have been passed in other Balkan countries since 2014. In Macedonia, it provided a solid base for the state to begin systematically targeting known radical preachers, recruiters and returned foreign fighters from the Middle East.

The results can be seen in several related sweeps by special police, under the title Operation Kelija (Cell). In early August 2015, police targeted mosques, NGO offices and residences associated with recruiters and fighters for ISIS, in Skopje, Tetovo, Gostivar, Kumanovo and Struga.⁵⁰ Nine suspects were arrested in the action, including Rexhep Memishi, a well-known radical *imam* opposed to the ICM. Another 27 suspects were at large, believed to be in the Middle East. The US Embassy in Skopje praised the action as a contribution to regional and global efforts against the “evil of terrorism.”⁵¹ In March 2016, a court sentenced six persons (including the self-proclaimed *imam*) to seven years in prison.

In July 2016, the operation continued with a further sweep and arrest of four more ISIS-related Islamists.⁵² The third part was completed in August 2016, when Turkish police extradited five Macedonian Albanians suspected of having links with ISIS. They had been arrested in the Aksaray neighborhood of Istanbul while preparing to go to Syria.⁵³ Information from security sources indicates that this was not the first time Macedonian and Turkish police have cooperated on identifying and arresting Macedonian nationals associated with Islamist groups on Turkish soil.

The success of these operations is ironic. While Macedonian police seem finally able to act against Islamic radicals with less danger of causing backlash from local Muslims, the fact that they have to deal with this threat at all indicates the unfortunate outcome of two decades of extremist ideology and infrastructure development in the country. The involvement of young *ihadists* from Macedonia and other Balkan countries in Syria since 2013 is proof of the effectiveness of the ideological, financial and logistical strategies practiced by radical supporters, years before the Syrian crisis provided a trigger for young Muslims to make the transformation from extremists to *ihadists*.

While Macedonia remains frozen out of the EU, owing to the unresolved disagreement with EU member Greece over the country's name (Greece has a province called

Macedonia as well), it has nevertheless enjoyed robust security cooperation with neighbors Serbia, Bulgaria and especially Turkey. Indeed, the level of security cooperation with these countries in the future will greatly influence Macedonia's ability to fight extremism at home. One of the major problems for non-EU members (like Macedonia, Serbia and Turkey) is that they are excluded from the EU's database system that has been used for cataloging asylum seekers (EURODAC). Given the vast number of migrants who have crossed through these countries in recent years, and in light of ongoing concerns that terrorists may be among them, these non-EU countries are being left to create bilateral or otherwise special methods of cooperation and intelligence-sharing. Since the mass migration phenomenon is targeting Northern Europe, not the Balkans, it would be more in the interests of the EU to cooperate with these countries than the other way around. However, for various reasons, the bloc has done an insufficient job in cooperating.⁵⁴

ENDNOTES

[1] Adrian Shtumi, Ethnic Albanian Foreign Fighters in Iraq and Syria, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, April 30, 2015. <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/ethnic-albanian-foreign-fighters-in-iraq-and-syria/>

[2] The ICM's official website is www.bim.org.mk. The BIM acronym comes from the Albanian-language version of the name, Bashkesia Fetare Islame. Note that the institution is often referred to by its Macedonian name and acronym, Islamska Verska Zaednica (IVZ). International sources also refer to it as the Islamic Religious Community (IRC). All of these acronyms refer to the same official body.

[3] The most infamous examples of Salafi violence date from the turbulent reign of former Skopje *mufti* Zenun Berisha, who used a sort of Islamist private guard to take over several mosques, impose preferred candidates for jobs, and generally assert his authority. Accounts of intimidation, beatings and attacks against moderates such as former *Reis* Arif Emini and former Skopje *mufti* Taxhedin Bislimi were widely reported in the local media. A comprehensive account of these events, citing some of the leaders involved, is given in Christopher Deliso, *The Coming Balkan Caliphate: the Threat of Radical Islam to Europe and the West* (Praeger Security International, 2007), 82-86.

[4] Svetlana Jovanovska and Branko Gjorgeski, "Radical Islam In Macedonia Worries Western Observers," *WAZ/EU Observer*, July 8, 2010.

[5] "Macedonia: Moderate Muslims Seek Help Against Sect," Associated Press, September 20, 2010.

[6] "Special forces conduct raid against IS," *The Economist Intelligence Unit*, August 12, 2015, http://country.eiu.com/article.aspx?articleid=833431267&Country=Macedonia&topic=Politics&subtopic_2.

[7] See Deliso, *The Coming Balkan Caliphate: the Threat of Radical Islam to Europe and the West*.

[8] “MVR so detali: makedonski drzhavjani uapseni vo turtsija planirale zaminuvane na boishtata vo sirija kako del od id,” (“MOI details: Macedonian nationals arrested in Turkey planned departure battlefields in Syria as part of ISIS”), *Kurir*, August 27, 2016, <http://kurir.mk/makedonija/vesti/mvr-so-detali-makedonski-drzhavjani-uapseni-vo-turtsija-planirale-zaminuvane-na-boishtata-vo-sirija-kako-del-od-id/>.

[9] Islamic NGOs in Macedonia include both international franchises and local entities. Some belong to umbrella organizations, allowing them to participate in a variety of events internationally, and thereby network with like-minded ideologues from Islamic states.

[10] Bojan Pancevski, “Saudis Fund Balkan Muslims Spreading Hate Of The West,” *Sunday Times* (London), March 28, 2010. Further factual details are cited in “Milijarda Evra Investirani Co Radikalniot Islam (Billion-euro Investment In Radical Islam),” *Nova Makedonija*, July 6, 2010.

[11] According to a senior security official, as of May 2016 some 80 such Islamists were being kept under 24-hour surveillance, as they could not be arrested, but still posed a potential threat. Author interview with Macedonian security official, May 2016.

[12] Author interview with Macedonian official, August 2016.

[13] For example, in the year 2010 alone, some 80 Islamic students from Turkey were known to be studying at the *madrassa* in the eastern town of Stip—with an announced plan for increasing this number in coming years to 500, and eventually to 1,500. “Turski Studenti Go Sardisaa Stip (Turkish Students Occupy Stip),” *Dnevnik* (Skopje), December 28, 2010.

[14] For one example, Turkish State Minister Faruk Celik visited Skopje in December 2010 to mark the TIKA’s renovation of the magnificent 15th-century mosque of Mustafa Pasha. He also met with top leaders of the country’s Islamic community. See “Turkey Says To Continue Repairing Ottoman Arts In Macedonia,” www.worldbulletin.net, December 21, 2010, <http://www.worldbulletin.net/servisler/haberYazdir/67671/haber>.

[15] For more on the doctrine of “strategic depth” developed by then-Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmed Davutoglu, see Ioannis N. Grigoriadis, “The Davutoglu Doctrine and Turkish Foreign Policy,” Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP), April 2010.

[16] “3rd Bosphorus bridge inaugurated,” TRT World, August 25, 2016, <http://www.trtworld.com/turkey/3rd-bosphorus-bridge-inaugurated-172455>.

[17] Sinisa Jakov Marucic, “Macedonians Divided Over President’s Support for Erdogan,” *Balkan Insight*, July 8, 2013, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/macedonian-president-s-whole-hearted-support-for-erdogan-divides-critics/2027/2>.

[18] For an example of this prevailing hostile attitude, note the comments of Islamic NGO leader Bekir Halimi to a journalist: “We are fully entitled to receive funding from both governmental and non-governmental sources from Saudi Arabia.” See Pancevski, “Saudis Fund Balkan Muslims Spreading Hate Of The West.” The article also notes that Halimi “refuses to name the sources of his funding.”

[19] Ibid.

[20] Deliso, *The Coming Balkan Caliphate*, 73-78.

[21] For example, a former Macedonian counterintelligence chief, Zoran Mitevski, recounted that in 1996 U.S. diplomats accused him of being “undemocratic” when he blocked several terror-linked Saudi charities from registering in the country. Deliso, *The Coming Balkan Caliphate*, 81.

[22] “Milijarda Evra Investirani Co Radikalniot Islam (Billion-Euro Investment In Radical Islam).”

[23] Ibid. These figures roughly correspond with those given in Pancevski, “Saudis Fund Balkan Muslims Spreading Hate Of The West,” as well as with figures given to the author by Macedonian security officials.

[24] “New Mosque Built in Topansko Pole Will Be the Biggest Mosque in Macedonia,” *Independent.mk*, July 28, 2014.

[25] Three of the men involved in the plot, brothers born in the Albanian-majority town of Debar, were arrested for their role in the failed attacks on U.S. soldiers at Ft. Dix. Garentina Kraja and William J. Kole, “Brothers Behind Fort Dix Plot Were From Pro-U.S. Enclave,” *Associated Press*, May 10, 2007.

[26] Devorah Lauter, “Swiss Voters OK Ban On Minarets,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 30, 2009.

[27] Organizations such as the former “Albanian Islamic Society” in London raised money for fighters in 1999 and 2001. British media also reported that mosques frequented by Albanians were also being solicited for war donations. See David Bamber and Chris Hastings, “KLA Raises Money in Britain for Arms,” *Kosovo.net*, April 23, 2000. When ethnic Albanians in Macedonia rebelled in 2001, Jakup Hasipi, a nationalist imam from the remote village of Slupcane in northeastern Macedonia, was dispatched to preach and solicit funds in Albanian Diaspora mosques, in European cities like Leverkusen and Hamburg. As with other leading Islamists, videos of this now-deceased *imam* delivering his sermons in such places are widely available on the Internet.

[28] Pancevski, “Saudis Fund Balkan Muslims Spreading Hate Of The West;” See also “Vahabisti Vrvuvaat Borci Za Dzihad Bo Makedonija” (“Wahhabis Recruit Fighters For Jihad In Macedonia”), *Vecer*, March 29, 2010. These claims correspond with testimony made by different Macedonian security officials and local Muslims to the author since 2004.

[29] A summary of the foreign minister’s statements are available on the website of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs (www.mfa.gov.il).

[30] Goce Mihajloski, "Makedonskite Humanitari Se Vratija Od Israel" ("Macedonian Humanitarians Returned From Israel"), *A1 Televizija* (Skopje), June 5, 2010.

[31] Christopher Deliso, "Fissures In Balkan Islam," *Christian Science Monitor*, February 14, 2006.

[32] "Malaysian, EU-Rejected Islamists Penetrate Macedonia," www.balkananalysis.com, September 28, 2005.

[33] "Wahhabis In Labunista Antagonize Locals, As New Details Emerge About Italian Arrests," www.balkananalysis.com, January 5, 2007. Two ethnically Macedonian Muslims were later expelled from Italy; classified DIGOS wiretap transcripts seen by the author indicate that they were in touch with Bosnian radical groups and were aiding the movement of Bosnian and Arab extremists into Macedonia.

[34] See Chris Deliso, "After Macedonia's Islamic Protests, Investigators Search for Significance amidst a Confusing Array of Motives and Clues," www.balkananalysis.com, February 13, 2012, <http://www.balkananalysis.com/macedonia/2012/02/13/after-macedonias-islamist-protest-investigators-search-for-significance-amidst-confusing-array-of-motives-and-clues/>.

[35] "Macedonia protests signal surge of radical Islam," Euractiv, May 14, 2012, <http://www.euractiv.com/enlargement/protests-macedonia-signal-radica-news-512663>.

[36] Author interview with Macedonian security official, June 2012.

[37] Sinisa Marusic, "Macedonia Mass Murder Trial Witnesses 'Saw Gunmen,'" *Balkan Insight*, January 18, 2013. Available at <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/witnesses-saw-armed-men-at-skopje-s-mass-murder-site>.

[38] "Shukri Aliu Povikuval na Arapska Prolet vo Makedonijua," ("Shukri Aliu Called for an Arab Spring in Macedonia"), Sitel TV, December 6, 2012, <http://www.sitel.com.mk/shukri-aliu-povikuval-na-arapska-prolet-vo-make-donija>.

[39] Sinisa Jakov Marusic, "Macedonia Upholds Albanians' 'Terrorist Murder' Sentences," *Balkan Insight*, December 14, 2015, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/macedonia-court-confirms-terrorist-murders-sentence-12-14-2015>.

[40] These numbers derive from the 2002 national census. The data is available in several PDF files on the official website of the State Statistical Office of Republic of Macedonia, www.stat.gov.mk.

[41] *The Future of the Global Muslim Population: Projections for 2010-2030* (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2011). The relevant part of the report is available online at <http://www.pewforum.org/future-of-the-global-muslim-population-regional-europe.aspx>.

[42] The comments were made after a controversy in which the Roma (Gypsy) minority in the Christian-majority city of Prilep built a mosque, against the wishes of the Albanian-controlled ICM. Aleksandar Pavlevski, "Islamic Leader Calls for Common Language to Reduce Tensions," *SETimes*, November 29, 2012.

[43] Author's interviews with Islamist Muslims, Gostivar, Macedonia, May-June 2010.

[44] "IVZ Prizna Bekteska Verska Grupa Bo Makedonija" ("The IVZ Recognized A Bektashi Religious Group In Macedonia"), *Kanal 5 TV*, October 21, 2010.

[45] "Koj Se Vistinskite Bektasi Vo Makedonija?" ("Who Are The Real Bektashi In Macedonia?"), *Deutsche Welle-Macedonian*, November 14, 2010.

[46] "Opasnost Od Radikalizam I U Makedonikija" ("Danger From Radicalism In Macedonia Too"), *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, September 11, 2010. In the author's personal experience, the meme of "old Communists" (older, traditionalist Muslims) as being allegedly ignorant is a very pervasive one, and invoked frequently by Islamists in the country.

[47] Some examples include: physical attacks against clerics deemed to be in the way of Islamists and their goals; pressure for females to wear conservative religious dress; orders for moderate Muslims not to associate with Christians; injunctions against shopkeepers against selling alcohol; perpetuation of the archaic custom of arranged marriages for teenage girls; threats against young Muslims seen to be engaging in Western "hedonism;" violence against Muslim journalists seeking to report on any such issues, and so on.

[48] For a detailed account of Macedonia's security response to the migrant crisis, see Chris Deliso, "Macedonian Migration Policy and the Future of Europe," *Balkananalysis.com*, December 23, 2015, <http://www.balkananalysis.com/macedonia/2015/12/23/macedonian-migration-policy-and-the-future-of-europe/>.

[49] See Chris Deliso, "Asymmetric Threats Challenge Macedonia before Easter and Elections," *Balkananalysis.com*, April 25, 2016, <http://www.balkananalysis.com/macedonia/2016/04/25/asymmetric-threats-challenge-macedonia-before-easter-and-elections/>.

[50] Sinisa Jakov Marusic, "Macedonian Police Targets ISIS Suspects," *Balkan Insight*, August 6, 2015, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/macedonia-launches-anti-terror-busts-08-06-2015>.

[51] Sinisa Jakov Marusic, "Macedonia Arrests Nine ISIS Suspects," *Balkan Insight*, August 7, 2015, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/macedonia-arrests-nine-isis-suspects-08-07-2015>.

[52] Maja Zuvela, "Macedonian police arrest four suspected of Islamic State links," *Reuters*, July 9, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-macedonia-idUSKCN0ZP0RV>.

[53] “Kelija 3: Five Jihadists from Macedonia, Members of ISIL, Arrested,” *Vecer*, August 27, 2016, <http://vecer.mk/makedonija/kjelija-3-uapseni-5-dzihadisti-od-makedonija-chlenovi-na-isis>.

[54] Chris Deliso, “Mistrust and Different Priorities Vex EU-Macedonian Security Cooperation,” *Balkananalysis.com*, May 27, 2016, <http://www.balkananalysis.com/blog/2016/05/27/mistrust-and-different-priorities-vex-eu-macedonian-security-cooperation/>.