

# American Foreign Policy Council

## ALBANIA

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### QUICK FACTS

Population: 3,038,594 (July 2016 est.)

Area: 28,748 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Albanian 82.6%, Greek 0.9%, other 1% (including Vlach, Roma (Gypsy), Macedonian, Montenegrin, and Egyptian), unspecified 15.5% (2011 est.)

Religions: Muslim 56.7%, Roman Catholic 10%, Orthodox 6.8%, atheist 2.5%, Bektashi (a Sufi order) 2.1%, other 5.7%, unspecified 16.2%

Government Type: parliamentary republic

GDP (official exchange rate): \$11.54 billion (2015 est.)

*Map and Quick Facts courtesy of the CIA World Factbook (December 2016)*

### OVERVIEW

*While Albanians of all faiths have historically co-existed peacefully, lingering radicalism has since the early 1990s been fueled by external Islamic states and organizations that have established themselves or allied with like-minded local Islamist groups. Since 2011, the conflict in Syria has tapped into an existing extremist underground in the country.*

*Today's Islamist stirrings in Albania parallel similar developments in other Balkan countries. Such states share several important characteristics: low education and a lack of especially youth employment opportunities, especially for young people; indigenous Muslim populations; a transition from former autocratic socialist or communist governments, and the entrenched presence of foreign Islamist forces attempting to educate local Muslims, build mosques, provide public services, make investments, and otherwise build influence.*

*While the number of Albanian citizens joining Middle East terrorist groups like ISIS and the Al Nusra Front has significantly declined with these groups' territorial losses since 2015, the question of Islamic radical-*

*ism remains open in a country that has historically been more nationalist than religious. The more visible role of the Greek-supported Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church has also concerned some Albanian Muslim communities. The failed coup in Turkey in July 2016, which Turkish President Erdogan blamed on U.S.-based cleric Fethullah Gülen, may result in further internal divisions between Sunni Muslims in Albania, with some evincing support for Gülen and his extensive networks of schools and charities, and others opposing them.*

*While it has not been significantly affected by the European migration crisis, Albania has developed security measures in response to potential radicalization efforts by migrant networks. It uses its status as one of the region's few NATO members to its advantage; the Obama administration committed to supporting counter-terrorism initiatives for the region that would be based in Tirana, including a NATO Center of Excellence for researching the causes of violent extremism.*

*Nevertheless, the very existence of such ventures indicates that the country does have a problem. Albania has become more known as a producer of jihadists, as several arrests and current trends have indicated. Like other Balkan countries, Albania has passed legislation targeting citizens who have sought to travel to the Middle East to wage jihad, with some effective results. Nevertheless, even though political Islam has thus far failed to make inroads, Islamic extremism will continue to be monitored carefully, due to the larger connections between extremists from Albania and their ethnic kin in nearby Macedonia, Kosovo and Montenegro. Ethnic Albanian extremists also will continue to threaten the authority of the mainstream Muslim community in this wider region.*

## ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

The population of Albania is 2.8 million.<sup>1</sup> 80 percent of those citizens are Muslims.<sup>2</sup> In this population, there are three distinct groups. The Muslim Community of Albania is the major body representing the country's Sunni Muslims (and Albanian Muslims in general), and is deemed to be the most "legitimate" representative of Albanian Muslims by the state and the international community.<sup>3</sup> Secondly, the World Bektashi Center in Tirana officially represents the Shi'ite Bektashi *Sufi* order (comprising around 20 percent of Albania's Muslim population), which has a longstanding presence in the country and shares some similarities with Turkey's Alevi Muslims.<sup>4</sup> However, the Bektashi order is considered heretical by many Muslims for its more relaxed, liberal practices and differing theology. The Bektashi are particularly despised by the third and most dangerous Islamic group present in Albania—the puritanical minority attracted to *Wahhabism* and other extreme forms of Islam prevalent in the Arab world. The latter population has been involved with recruiting fighters for Middle Eastern conflicts since 2014.

*Wahhabis* comprise an unknown minority in Albania, as they operate largely outside of official structures. Although they continue to make determined efforts to usurp power from legitimate Islamic representatives, *Wahhabis* have also established parallel institutions, ranging from mosques to schools and charities. In July 2012, a Catholic charity leader voiced alarm over a perceived increase in Islamic fundamentalist attitudes among young Muslims – particularly those returning from schooling in Saudi Arabia and Turkey. This foreign training was associated with increasing fundamentalism.<sup>5</sup>

With the outbreak of the Syria conflict, this fundamentalism has manifested in the form of terrorist recruitment among local youth. This has been noted particularly in the capital, Tirana, and in impoverished villages in southeastern Albania, such as Leshnica, Zagoracan and Rremenj. Since 2011, some 24 young Muslims from these villages alone have disappeared into Syria, where several are presumed to have died in fighting – along with the individual responsible for their recruitment, former Leshnica *imam* Almir Daci.<sup>6</sup> When surveyed in May of 2015, 500 ethnic Albanian fighters were believed to be in Syria and Iraq, with approximately 150 of them Albanian citizens.<sup>7</sup> By August 2016, the number of recruits had dropped considerably, though Albanian experts viewed this decline as reflecting a relative loss of territory – and thus reduced personnel needs – on the part of the Islamic State, rather than a decline in overall radicalism in the country.<sup>8</sup>

Indeed, as elsewhere in Europe, Albania may actually become more at risk of “lone wolf” terrorist attacks with the Islamic State’s decline in territorial control in the Middle East and its exhortations to fellow radicals to act alone. As of August 2016, Albania had not yet seen such a terrorist attack. However, a Kosovo Albanian with a prior criminal record did attack and attempt to kidnap several people in the southern town of Vlore that month.<sup>9</sup> This episode caused significant worry among government officials, because Albania has tried in recent years to develop its coastal tourism industry, and any successful attacks would damage this much-needed source of income.

While radicalism remains low, it is significant to note that the Albanian language was one of several chosen by the Islamic State for its propaganda purposes. In fact, the above-mentioned Almir Daci became a well-known propagandist for ISIS, and participated in a brigade specifically composed of Balkan recruits.<sup>10</sup>

A trend in Islamist activities in Albania (and the Balkans in general) is the manipulation of the concept of “civil society.” Islamist groups have employed the liberal rhetoric of human rights and religious freedom in pursuit of an Islamic supremacist agenda. This is chiefly done through the public discourse of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) – entities utilized by Western state-builders since the 1990s as tools in the broader democratization movement in post-Communist Eastern Europe. NGOs and charities are also attractive to radical elements for money laundering purposes, as their financial records can easily be manipulated, and they can achieve dis-

proportionate influence in poor, rural areas.<sup>11</sup> And, despite their non-governmental designation, many are in fact informal entities supported by various governments (discussed below).

One of the more conspicuous forerunners of the Albanian Muslim NGO movement (active mostly between 2005-2010) was the Muslim Forum of Albania (MFA). The organization was created in 2005, during a heated feud between moderates and radicals over the official Muslim Community's bylaws. Because of this history, some seasoned foreign and local observers have concluded that the MFA was created to compete with official Islamic bodies.<sup>12</sup> The MFA was accused of creating "parallel structures" from those of the official Muslim Community.<sup>13</sup> Although the MFA claimed merely to be interested in human rights and opposing discrimination against Muslims, its public statements revealed a more dogmatic agenda. Such statements included: attacking Pope Benedict XVI for his comments on violence in Islam; condemning Albanian Christian groups and all church-building initiatives; denouncing the Danish cartoonist who famously drew the depictions of Prophet Mohammed in 2005; petitioning the government to accept Chinese Uighur prisoners being released from Guantanamo Bay; and insinuating that Albania's foreign Islamist residents are oppressed.<sup>14</sup>

The degree of influence that such organizations currently wield over the public discourse remains limited. However, it is clear from their use of the English language and their attempts to petition international organizations to their cause that they are interested not only in the internal, local Albanian audience, but in becoming part of a broader, global Islamic movement. In terms of Albania's national security and social cohesion, the biggest threat that this poses is the potential for Islamists to divide the nation on religious grounds; Albanians have historically taken pride in maintaining ethnic cohesion, despite being cumulatively composed of differing Christian and Muslim groups. If politically-oriented Muslim NGO groups continue to gain influence, it could easily endanger this cooperative legacy.

Most significantly, formal and informal Islamic organizations have been used to challenge the legitimate Muslim leadership in the country in order to implement a more radical policy and to overthrow the leadership. This type of activity has undergone a notable progression in the past decade. While Islamic extremism in Albania once was solely funded and fomented from abroad, in recent years it has found a foothold within the country itself. (The current activities of foreign Islamist charities and groups are discussed in greater detail below.)

As part of this evolution, extremists of Albanian background have been trained abroad, and some have returned to take up active roles in Albania (operating independently or as part of Islamist groups). Significantly, such activities began many years before the Syrian conflict and the rise of ISIS, which have drawn Albanian fighters to the Middle East. For example, following the September 11, 2001 terrorist at-

tacks, the Bush administration asked Albania to shutter several charities suspected to be fronts for radical activity; one, al Haramain, was suspected of organizing the murder of a moderate Muslim Community leader, Salih Tivari, in January 2002.<sup>15</sup> Tivari had pledged to remove foreign Islamist elements from the country. In fact, Albanian authorities believe that local extremists trained in Islamic states actually carried out his murder.<sup>16</sup> In 2006, other Muslim Community leaders received death threats after an extremist group tried, but failed, to change one of the Community's official statutes.<sup>17</sup>

Leadership challenges and internal conflicts within the official Albanian Islamic Community have allowed radical views to proliferate, while the official body remains occupied with its own internal problems. The Islamic Community is Albania's second-largest landowner, and some of the "scandals" surrounding the Community's leadership over the years have concerned alleged profiteering from land sales. This had the effect of dividing the Community's General Council between supporters of then-head *mufti* Selim Muca (in power from 2004 until 2014) and his opponents. On September 21, 2010, following an attempt by Muca's opponents to prosecute him for corruption, a special session of the General Council reconfirmed Muca's authority, and sacked four prominent opponents among the Islamic leadership.<sup>18</sup> This decision came four years after similar infighting, which resulted in the firing of the Mufti of Shkoder, Bashkim Bajraktari. U.S. officials were concerned at the time that Shkoder's Islamic leadership was "stacked with 'extremists'" due to the local influence of the MFA and its international links with the Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>19</sup>

This political jockeying has created internal frictions within Albania's Muslim community, and also distracted its leadership from dealing with attempts by religious extremists to strengthen their foothold. Muca, for example, was criticized for failing to stop the formation of a union of *imams* with reported *Wahhabi* leanings in Kavaja, located between Tirana and the Adriatic coast. In opposition to Muca, the above-mentioned Muslim Forum of Albania held an event in Kavaja in February 2008, attracting Islamists from Kosovo, Macedonia and other parts of the region.<sup>20</sup> A new group, the Union of Islamic Youth, was then registered in Kavaja and believed to be associated with *Wahhabi* elements (though available information about the group is sparse). Local and foreign observers agreed that the Kavaja mosque and its worshippers are increasingly wary of outsiders and seem to have more fundamentalist views.<sup>21</sup>

Ankara has pressured Albania to close Gülen schools, first during President Erdoğan's state visit in 2015, and again after the July 2016 coup attempt. While the Albanian government refused to do so, it has come under increasing pressure to tackle the alleged involvement of Gülenist 'parallel institutions' in public administration. Turkey has alleged that Albania is serving as a stronghold for the rival movement. After the coup attempt, Turkey officially requested Albanian police "to investigate and ultimately arrest a number of individuals allegedly supporting Gülen, who media indicated "may include public figures, journalists, analysts and even high-ranking of-

ficials.”<sup>22</sup> While such requests have put the government in a tough position, Albania’s primary allegiance to the US means that it is only likely to crack down on the Gülen movement if Washington does so first.

## ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

A 2009 survey citing Islamic Community officials found that Albania had 568 Sunni mosques, as well as 70 Bektashi *tekkes* (lodges) and mausoleums.<sup>23</sup> By December 2015, however, officials had announced that a grand total of 727 mosques existed in the country – of which at least 200 were not under the control of any official, sanctioned Muslim community organization.<sup>24</sup> Along with criticism from the government made at that time, former Islamic Community deputy director Ermir Gjinishi warned that if the clerical body did not “intervene immediately to change this situation next year, half of the mosques in Albania will pass out of its control.”<sup>25</sup>

Albania’s cumulative Muslim population accounts for 80 percent of the country’s 2.8 million people. Albania also has notable Catholic (10 percent) and Orthodox Christian (20 percent) populations. The latter is located chiefly in the southern part of the country, and includes the country’s Greek and Macedonian minorities. The 2009 survey reported over 1,100 Catholic and Orthodox churches in Albania.<sup>26</sup>

Nevertheless, secularism prevails, especially in rapidly-modernizing Tirana, and Albanian Muslims are much less devout in their practice than are ethnic Albanians in neighboring Kosovo and Macedonia. As in these countries and throughout the Balkan region, however, *Wahhabis* have exacerbated divisions within the Muslim community since 2010, with one security official stating in June 2016 that sectarian divisions are now “at the core of the rifts between Muslim communities.”<sup>27</sup>

While most Albanians are relatively secular-minded, an important trend for the future will be the relationship between the country’s different religious groups. The government was criticized by secularists for its plan to introduce the category of religious affiliation to the 2011 national census, as it could exacerbate the politicking between different faiths.<sup>28</sup> Muslims and Christian proselytizers eye one another warily, and often accuse each other of inappropriate actions. In a 2012 report for the Vatican, Archbishop Angelo Massafra of the Archdiocese of Shkoder-Pult expressed concerns over rising Muslim fundamentalism in Albania, as well as the perceived involvement of countries like Saudi Arabia and Turkey. He also expressed concerns over the recent opening of a new Islamic university in Tirana.<sup>29</sup> (Known as Bedër University, this center opened in April 2011).<sup>30</sup>

It is likely that the Vatican’s concern over the latter is less an expression of fear of radicalism than it is apprehensiveness over any further Islamic “re-awakening” among a relatively secular population. The Vatican has in recent years taken a proactive approach toward expanding its presence in Albania, something that has involved the

above-mentioned Papal visit of 2014 and increased involvement of (primarily Italian) Catholic schools and NGOs in Albania.<sup>31</sup> One key event for bolstering Catholicism in Albania and beyond was the September 4, 2016 canonization of Mother Teresa; the revered ethnic Albanian nun was born in Skopje, Macedonia and had ancestry in Kosovo. Tirana's international airport is named for her, and today she is an essential part of the international Albanian "brand." Anecdotal evidence suggests that this has caused an internal debate within Albanian populations of different faiths regarding Mother Teresa's rightful place in Albanian national identity and history.<sup>32</sup>

Albania's internal struggles as a nation questioning its religious values vis-à-vis broader personal and national aspirations have occasionally been heated. For example, in October 2003, the outspoken author Kastriot Myftari was arrested for "inciting religious hatred" after writing that Albanian Muslims should convert to Catholicism. (Myftari was ultimately acquitted).<sup>33</sup> More controversially, in November 2005, Islamists reacted sharply when then-President Alfred Moisiu, speaking before the Oxford Union in England, stated that Albanians followed a "shallow" sort of Islam, as the country's Christian heritage has much deeper roots.<sup>34</sup> The MFA and other Islamist groups accused Moisiu of "insulting Islam."

Inter-religious strife likewise has registered in more tangible ways. When local leaders announced that national hero Mother Teresa would be commemorated with a statue, three Muslim NGOs – the MFA, the Association of Islamic Intellectuals and the Association of Islamic Charities – condemned the initiative as a "provocation" against Islam.<sup>35</sup> (While the MFA was the most visible of the three organizations, the Association of Muslim Intellectuals is older, dating from the early 1990s, paralleling the creation of other, similar Islamist intellectual organizations in Bosnia and elsewhere.<sup>36</sup> In 1991, it was led by Bashkim Gazidede, whose tacit assistance to foreign terrorist-linked entities while serving as director of Albania's national intelligence agency is discussed in detail below.)

Another similar organization, the Albanian Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization, has kept a fairly low profile, despite having existed since 1996. According to the organization, it is active chiefly in educational areas, such as teaching and translating Islamic texts from Turkish, Arabic and Persian. It also aims to preserve Islamic culture, and maintains links with likeminded organizations both inside the country and abroad.<sup>37</sup> Notably, some of the AIITC's foreign partners are known to have extremist ties. For example, in October 2010 the AIITC announced a plan to cooperate on translation projects with the Libyan World Islamic Call Society (also known as the World Association for the Islamic Call); this Libyan umbrella group of 250 charities, established by the late Libyan strongman Muammar Qaddafi himself, has been linked by American investigators to the dissemination of radical Islam and funding for Hamas.<sup>38</sup>

Foreign Islamic charities still operating in the country have moved beyond the initial phase of relief and infrastructure projects, and are now becoming more involved with social issues. For example, one of Albania's intractable problems – the practice of clan vendettas in the mountainous northeast, which continues to restrict the movement and social life of entire families – has been exploited by foreign Islamists. Dedicated efforts have been made to increase Islamist teaching in these areas, which are historically associated with smuggling, paramilitary activities and isolationism. Hundreds of students are reportedly undertaking Islamic education in rural towns like Koplik, with some going on to study in Turkey or the Middle East.<sup>39</sup> Taking the lead in developing programs to solve vendettas and poverty via Islamic means is the UK-registered (but globally active) charity Islamic Relief,<sup>40</sup> which has operated in Albania since 1991.<sup>41</sup>

The question of foreign influence in the Albanian Muslim community is not limited to the Arab world; as stated, Turkey's presence in Albania is also growing, which may further shape the development of the country's Islamist movements. The Erdogan government's strategic interest in expanding its sphere of influence throughout former Ottoman lands, including Albania, is common knowledge. Turks have justifiable concerns about the state of Ottoman mosques and other historic monuments. The key unknown question regarding Albanian-Turkish cooperation involves the above-mentioned antagonism between Erdogan and Gülen, and the way in which their rivalry will play out in both bilateral relations and within the local Muslim population.

The final aspect of note in Turkey's relationship with Albanian Muslims is the Bektashi order, a more liberal and mystical variety of Islam with strong ties between the two countries, which is denounced by *Wahhabi* elements as heretical. With different factions tolerating and opposing the Bektashi, the degree of Turkish support for them will help determine whether or not they survive in the face of extremist challenges. The Bektashi themselves, who do not engage in proselytizing, are aware that they are vulnerable. However, while Iran has offered funding to help ensure their future, the Bektashi leadership claims that it has not and will not accept funds from Iran.<sup>42</sup>

## ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

Historically, the Albanian state's relationship with Islam has been critical in the evolution and practice of Islam in the country. Under Ottoman rule (from the 14th to the early 20th centuries), large numbers of Albanians converted to Islam to capitalize on better opportunities for state employment and career advancement. Sunni Islam became most popular in central and northern Albania, while the Shi'ite Bektashi Dervish order became established, from the 18th century onwards, primarily in southern Albania. The latter, more liberal form of Islam in 1923 dropped Ottoman-enforced practices such as polygamy and the forced wearing of the *hijab* (veil) by women. The

same post-WWI Albanian government took in 25,000 members of the Bektashi order expelled from Turkey in 1926 during Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's secularization campaign; the World Bektashi Center remains based in Tirana to this day.

Under the Communist dictatorship of Enver Hoxha, religion was banned from 1967 on, and all religious groups were persecuted by the state. Thus, the most pivotal moment in the modern Albanian state's relationship with Islam came when the first post-Communist government opened its arms to outside Islamist governments and interests in 1990. Then-president (and current prime minister) Sali Berisha himself was not religious, but sought out foreign investment of any kind. His election in 1992 was therefore followed by visits from Kuwaitis who offered an "ambitious" investment plan in exchange for an opportunity to build mosques in Albania.<sup>43</sup> Soon after, the Islamic Development Bank (IDB) began offering substantial investment and opportunities for Albanians to learn Arabic and study in Islamic states.<sup>44</sup> President Berisha also made Albania the first European member of the Organization of the Islamic Conference; one momentous consequence of this decision was the "unilateral abolition" of visa requirements for citizens of Muslim countries, making Albania a desirable option for international fugitive terrorists wanting to disappear into Europe.<sup>45</sup> In this way, several senior al-Qaeda figures were able to establish an operational base on Albanian territory (although that specific network was dismantled in the 1990s).<sup>46</sup>

By 1994, private Saudi investors in the telecom, textile, banking and transport sectors, often through the IDB, were extending multi-million-dollar lines of credit to Albania. In the same year, predating similar investments by the West, the Arab-Albanian Islamic Bank was established in Tirana.<sup>47</sup> Osama bin Laden was reportedly the majority stockholder and founder of this bank.<sup>48</sup> The bank built hundreds of mosques, sent Albanians to Islamic universities abroad, and paid poor Albanians on the condition that their women wear the *chador* (veiled outer garment).<sup>49</sup> Hundreds of young Albanians went to study in Islamic countries, or undertook the *Hajj* – in 1993 alone, more than 1,000 Albanians made the pilgrimage to Mecca.<sup>50</sup> The "true agenda" of the foreign investors was to over time transform Albania into an Islamic state, through economic aid, proselytization, and finally the establishment of Islamic governance.<sup>51</sup>

Most sinister, however, was the Albanian state's relationship with the world's most dangerous Islamist terror networks. While President Berisha was not ideologically motivated, other high-level figures were in fact devoted Islamists, including the late Bashkim Gazidede, then director of the country's national intelligence agency (SHIK). By 1994, the increasing presence of foreign *jihadists* in Islamic charities had made Western security officials "deeply suspicious."<sup>52</sup> Osama bin Laden, at that time based in Sudan, visited Tirana that year, presenting himself as a wealthy Saudi businessman offering humanitarian aid.<sup>53</sup> However, bin Laden was actually sponsoring the charity Al Haramain, later classified as a terrorist entity by the United States government.<sup>54</sup>

The Albanian government likewise welcomed other dangerous charities like the Revival of Islamic Heritage Society, Muwafaq (“Blessed Relief”) Foundation, the bin Laden-linked World Assembly of Muslim Youth, Taibah International and Iran’s Ayatollah Khomeini Society. Another terror-linked charity, the International Islamic Relief Organization (IIRO), employed Mohammed al-Zawahiri, younger brother of future al-Qaeda second-in-command Ayman al-Zawahiri. He had reportedly been tasked by bin Laden himself with finding “legitimate cover” for Egyptian Islamic Jihad members involved with assassinations or attempted assassinations of Egyptian leaders.<sup>55</sup> The arrival of an Egyptian foreign ministry delegation in Albania in 1995 prompted the CIA to reach out to the by-now highly-compromised SHIK. One detained Islamist became an informant, marking a temporary breakthrough on the intelligence front. The informant in turn revealed the embarrassing truth that Albania had come to be known among *jihadists* as a “safe hotel” where they could hide out with the tacit approval of the state.<sup>56</sup>

Indeed, despite the assistance provided by the SHIK on this occasion, Islamist penetration of Albanian intelligence continued, and assistance provided by the agency to the U.S. suffered a corresponding decline. The SHIK would only be truly reformed once the Berisha government was ousted; in January 1997, the collapse of an investment pyramid scheme left ordinary Albanians penniless, leading to total anarchy and the looting of state arsenals. In April 1997, the SHIK was suspended by the caretaker government. June elections saw the ascent of an Orthodox Christian prime minister, Fatos Nano, who had previously been jailed by Berisha. Ex-SHIK director and *jihad* sympathizer Bashkim Gazidede reportedly escaped to the Middle East, and several arrest warrants were later issued for him by the new government.

The Nano government cooled relations with the Islamic world, irritating Islamist “investors” when it failed to send a delegate to the 1998 OIC conference. A CIA re-training course for the SHIK, and the removal of pro-Islamist SHIK officials and Islamic Community leaders, came at a time when the result of a merger of Ayman al-Zawahiri’s Egyptian Islamic Jihad and al-Qaeda was being assessed by the CIA as having produced one of Europe’s most dangerous terrorist entities.<sup>57</sup> Local experts in Albania noted that the EIJ’s Tirana cell was among its most important, as it was expert in falsifying documents to facilitate the transit of suspected terrorists.<sup>58</sup>

In mid-1998, a renewed round of CIA-ordered SHIK kidnappings of *jihadis* in Tirana led to the rendition of several men to Egypt. Unfortunately, covert American involvement was leaked by “euphoric” SHIK agents, enraging the *jihadist internationale*.<sup>59</sup> A letter released by a London-based al-Qaeda newsletter on August 5, 1998 promised a violent response:<sup>60</sup> just two days later, terrorists bombed the U.S. embassy in Nairobi, Kenya, killing 213 people and injuring more than 4,000. A second embassy attack, in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, killed 11 and injured 85. These incidents revealed that ongoing counter-terrorist operations in Albania could trigger Islamist

attacks globally, which put the Balkan country into the new and nebulous category of “dangerous ally.” The U.S. State Department temporarily closed diplomatic facilities in Albania and Americans were warned to avoid the country altogether.

Nevertheless, Albania remained a key ally for the Clinton administration’s determined efforts to arm and train Albanian separatists in the neighboring Yugoslav province of Kosovo.<sup>61</sup> (Ironically, at the same time American officials were also stating openly that Albania was hosting Iranian, Chechen, Afghan, Algerian and Egyptian *mujahideen* who were offering their services for a Kosovo *jihad*.<sup>62</sup>) Yet U.S. support for Kosovar Muslims (and Bosnian Muslims in their own previous war against the Serbs) failed to make America beloved throughout the Muslim world. However, during the brief Kosovo refugee crisis in the spring of 1999, the U.S. government allowed massive humanitarian activity to be carried out by some of the very same foreign organizations and individuals that it had identified as dangerous.<sup>63</sup> (The connection between such charities and Albanian extremists active in the Balkans was noted over a decade later, when a radical *imam* was expelled from Kosovo).<sup>64</sup>

It was thus little surprise that adverse security conditions persisted in Albania during the following months. For example, then-Defense Secretary William Cohen had to cancel a celebratory visit to the country in mid-July 1999, as he was being targeted by remaining al-Qaeda operatives in Tirana.<sup>65</sup> Several months earlier, the police had detained a Saudi-trained Albanian national accused of conducting surveillance on U.S. facilities, as well as two well-armed terrorist cell members in Tirana.<sup>66</sup>

Soon after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, U.S. government officials, speaking off the record, disclosed a connection between the al-Qaeda plotters and Albania-based Islamic terrorists.<sup>67</sup> In Tirana, attention turned to Yassin al-Qadi, founder and chief investor in the Muwafaq Foundation. Although he denied all charges, al-Qadi subsequently was designated a terrorist sponsor by the U.S. Treasury Department in October 2001.<sup>68</sup> The multi-millionaire Saudi investor was accused of laundering \$10 million for Osama bin Laden through his business interests and charities. In 2002, the Albanian government seized a 15-story business center owned by al-Qadi in Tirana and expelled his business partner, Abdul Latif Saleh; the latter had been associated with the Tirana charities created by al-Qaeda, and was accused by U.S. investigators of cooperating with al-Qaeda while in Albania.<sup>69</sup>

In July 2005 elections, the Nano government was defeated and Sali Berisha reclaimed power. Ex-SHIK chief Gazidede, the charges against him having been dropped since 2003, returned from exile and took up a different position in Berisha’s new government (he has since died of natural causes). Although many of the charities and terrorist-linked entities that plagued Albania during Berisha’s first stint in power have been uprooted, a new and multifaceted dynamic is visible today in the activities of the Albanian state concerning Islamism.

Albania's membership in the Organization of Islamic Conference – ignored, but not abrogated during the Nanos government – has been restored, in recognition of the OIC's growing influence in the United Nations and as a means of lobbying Muslim countries to recognize Kosovar independence.<sup>70</sup> Through this, the Albanian government is also seeking to show the world that it has some degree of influence in world affairs. At the same time, while it is constitutionally prevented from funding religious facilities, the government approved the Muslim Community's plan to create the Islamic university in Tirana that was opened in 2011. The initiative was presented as a proactive effort to counter extremism by affording students the opportunity to study at home (rather than in the broader Arab world).<sup>71</sup>

Nevertheless, Albania's courtship with foreign Islamic funders, begun in the early 1990s, appears to be continuing, with the Islamic Development Bank (IDB) in October 2010 offering millions of dollars for infrastructure and other projects.<sup>72</sup> The announcement came only three months after Prime Minister Berisha hosted a high-level IDB delegation, and thanked them for their assistance (past and present) in development efforts in Albania.<sup>73</sup> In January 2012, three years after Albania had opened an embassy in the United Arab Emirates, the two countries established a Committee on Economic Co-operation. In addition to its investments in other Balkan states, the UAE in 2012 was funding the construction of the Tirana-Elbasan highway and the airport in Kukes, projects worth roughly \$100 million.<sup>74</sup>

The Albanian state's strengthened cooperation with the pro-Islamist government in Turkey, which has its own Balkan aspirations, is yet another sign of current relations with outside Islamist forces. In June 2010, the official headquarters of the Muslim Community of Albania was renovated by the Turkish International Cooperation and Development Agency (TIKA), at a cost of roughly \$350,000 REF.<sup>75</sup> At the time, TIKA officials together with Albanian government and Islamic officials disclosed that Turkey plans to reconstruct other Islamic facilities (as it has done since the end of Communism).<sup>76</sup> The Albanian government has also, as stated, green-lighted the Turkish-funded mega-mosque (located, ironically, on George W. Bush Street in central Tirana).

While *Wahhabi* groups remain a distinct minority, the visible presence of Albanian fighters in Syria and Iraq, and their active recruitment efforts in Albania itself, has re-oriented the government to take advantage of its strong relations with the U.S. and its own NATO membership. Thus, under the similarly left-leaning administrations of Barack Obama and Albanian premier Edi Rama, plans were laid for a regional center on studying the phenomenon of foreign fighters and countering violent extremism.<sup>77</sup>

Approved in May 2016, this new NATO Center of Excellence will become the first of its kind in the region, and is considered a political victory as much as a security one for the government over regional rivals. However, while the Albanians are thus primed to take a stronger role in the region, lingering competition between Balkan

states does not mean that greater trust or intelligence-sharing will result. Rather, it indicates that fighting terrorism and radicalization will remain largely a matter of bi-lateral or multilateral effort, rather than a truly integrated regional one.

## ENDNOTES

- [1] "Population, Total," The World Bank, 2015, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL>.
- [2] See Tracy Miller, ed., *Mapping the Global Muslim Population: A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World's Muslim Population* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, October 2009), <http://www.pewforum.org/files/2009/10/Muslimpopulation.pdf>.
- [3] The community's website is [www.kmsh.al](http://www.kmsh.al).
- [4] The official Bektashi order website can be found at [www.bektashi.net](http://www.bektashi.net).
- [5] "Turkey, Saudi Arabia Promoting Stricter Islam in Albania," Catholic News Agency, July 20, 2012, <http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/turkey-saudi-arabia-promoting-stricter-islam-in-albania/>.
- [6] Aleksandra Bogdani, "Albanian Villages Ponder Local Spike in ISIS Recruits," *Balkan Insight*, April 25, 2016, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/albanian-villages-ponder-local-spurt-of-isis-recruits-04-22-2016>.
- [7] Adrian Shtuni, "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>.
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- [9] Fatjona Mejdini, "Albanian Police Arrest 'Terror Attack' Suspect," *Balkan Insight*, August 16, 2016, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/albania-police-charge-a-man-from-kosovo-with-terrorism-08-18-2016>.
- [10] Joby Warrick, "In Albania, Concerns over the Islamic State's Emergence," *Washington Post*, June 11, 2016, accessible at <http://www.stripes.com/news/europe/in-albania-concerns-over-the-islamic-state-s-emergence-1.414273>.
- [11] Thus, while arguing that Albania's generally tolerant and pro-Western outlook prevents it from becoming radicalized, analyst Arben Kullolli notes that "foreign supporters of Islamic organizations have started to work more intelligently, operating through think-tanks and continuing to convert Albanian Muslims into Wahhabism, especially in poor rural regions." Arben Kullolli, *Proselytization in Albania by Middle Eastern Islamic Organizations*, (Monterey, CA: Master's Thesis Naval Postgraduate School, March 2009).
- [12] See Miranda Vickers, "Islam In Albania," Advanced Research and Assessment Group, Defence Academy of the United Kingdom, March 2008, [www.da.mod.uk](http://www.da.mod.uk).

- [13] Risto Karajkov, "The Young And The Old: Radical Islam Takes Root In The Balkans," *Transitions Online*, May 3, 2006, [www.tol.cz](http://www.tol.cz).
- [14] The MFA's official website is [www.forumimusliman.org](http://www.forumimusliman.org). It has not been updated for some time, however, which seems to indicate that it is no longer very active,
- [15] U.S. Treasury Department, "Press Release JS-1703: Additional Al-Haramain Branches, Former Leader Designated By Treasury as Al Qaida Supporters," June 2, 2004, [www.ustreas.gov](http://www.ustreas.gov).
- [16] Vickers, "Islam In Albania."
- [17] Karajkov, "The Young and The Old."
- [18] "Selim Muca Reconfirmed As Head Of Albanian Muslim Community," *Alsat Television (Skopje)*, September 20, 2010.
- [19] "Impasse Ends After Islamic Council Votes to Dismiss Shkodra Mufti," *Wikileaks*, *Wikileaks Cable 06TIRANA1209*. Retrieved January 2013.
- [20] Although it was created in the northern city of Shkodra, the MFA has long had a power base in Kavaja.
- [21] Vickers, "Islam In Albania."
- [22] Ebi Spahiu, "Attack on Gülen Movement Increasingly a Cornerstone of Turkey's Foreign Policy in the Balkans," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Volume 13, Issue 141, <https://jamestown.org/program/attack-on-Gülen-movement-increasingly-a-cornerstone-of-turkeys-foreign-policy-in-the-balkans/>.
- [23] Entela Resuli, "Ne Shqiperi 638 Xhami Me 1.119 Kisha (In Albania There Are 638 Mosques And 1,119 Churches)," *Tirana Observer*, December 23, 2009.
- [24] Fatjona Mejdini, "Uncontrolled Mosques Proliferate in Albania," *Balkan Insight*, December 17, 2015, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/state-slams-albanian-muslim-over-uncontrolled-mosques-12-17-2015>.
- [25] Fatjona Mejdini, "Uncontrolled Mosques Proliferate in Albania," *Balkan Insight*, December 17, 2015, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/state-slams-albanian-muslim-over-uncontrolled-mosques-12-17-2015>.
- [26] Entela Resuli, "Ne Shqiperi 638 Xhami Me 1.119 Kisha (In Albania There Are 638 Mosques And 1,119 Churches)."
- [27] Ebi Spahiu, "Jihadist Threat Persists in Kosovo and Albania Despite Government Efforts."
- [28] In any case, the census as completed was inconsistent with perceived reality, for example understating the percentage of Orthodox Christians and increasing the number of non-affiliated persons who would socially and culturally be considered as being from one of the three major faiths.
- [29] While the Vatican had not released the detailed report at time of writing, some comments from it were available at the Vatican Insider website: [http://vaticaninsider.lastampa.it/fileadmin/user\\_upload/File\\_Versione\\_originale/Sintesi\\_2012\\_lingua\\_italiana\\_RAPPORTO.pdf](http://vaticaninsider.lastampa.it/fileadmin/user_upload/File_Versione_originale/Sintesi_2012_lingua_italiana_RAPPORTO.pdf).

[30] According to the website of the university, it caters to students from 15 countries with particular focus on Albanians from home and abroad. The university has a capacity of 2000 students at present. See <http://www.beder.edu.al>.

[31] For a detailed analysis of the role of the Catholic Church in Albania's historic development and current orientation, see Matteo Albertini and Chris Deliso, *The Vatican's Challenges in the Balkans: Bolstering the Catholic Church in 2015 and Beyond* (Balkananalysis.com, 2015), <https://www.amazon.com/Vaticans-Challenges-Balkans-Bolstering-Catholic-ebook/dp/B00S30A7BQ>.

[32] This observation is based on numerous interviews by the author with Albanian Muslims and Catholics since 2014.

[33] "Albania," in U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, *International Religious Freedom Report 2004* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of State, 2005), [www.state.gov](http://www.state.gov).

[34] The comments that incensed Islamists were perhaps taken out of context; the president was speaking about religious tolerance among the Albanians. Nevertheless he caused a sensation by stating "that part of the Albanians which did not convert into Islam has in its tradition not simply fifteen centuries of Christianity, but two thousand years of Christianity... The Islamism in Albania is an Islam with a European face. As a rule it is a shallow Islamism. If you dig a little in every Albanian you can discover his Christian core." The original text of the speech was published on the official website of the President of Albania, [www.president.al](http://www.president.al).

[35] Llazar Semini, "Mother Teresa Statue Causes Friction," Associated Press, March 20, 2006

[36] Mentioned in Xavier Bougarel, "Islam And Politics In The Post-Communist Balkans," Harvard University Kokkalis Program on Southeastern and East-central Europe, January 28, 2006, 6, <http://www.hks.harvard.edu/kokkalis/GSW1/GSW1/13%20Bougarel.pdf>.

[37] The group keeps an informative official website, [www.aiitc.org](http://www.aiitc.org).

[38] Matthew Levitt, *Hamas: Politics, Charity and Terrorism in the Service of Jihad* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 187. The announcements about book production and translation cooperation between the World Islamic Call Society and the AIITC were posted in October 2010 on the Society's group's official website, [www.islamic-call.net](http://www.islamic-call.net), as well as in other Islamic media.

- [39] This testimony is recorded in an online summary of a recent trip to Albania by young Islamists from the Turkish IHH (Humanitarian Relief Foundation, or *Insani Yardim Vakfi* in Turkish), and available at the organization's website, [www.ihh.org.tr](http://www.ihh.org.tr). The unusually significant proselytizing efforts going on in Koplik in the 1990s were noted long ago, for example in Miranda Vickers and James Pettifer, *Albania: From Anarchy to a Balkan Identity* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 100.
- [40] On its main website, [www.islamic-relief.com](http://www.islamic-relief.com), Islamic Relief describes itself as "an international relief and development charity which envisages a caring world where people unite to respond to the suffering of others, empowering them to fulfill their potential."
- [41] The charity's efforts to combat clan vendettas and develop rural places like Koplik can be seen on their website, [www.islamicreliefalbania.com](http://www.islamicreliefalbania.com).
- [42] Vickers, "Islam In Albania."
- [43] Miranda Vickers and James Pettifer, *Albania: from Anarchy to a Balkan Identity*, New York University Press, 1997, p 105
- [44] Vickers and Pettifer, *Albania: From Anarchy to a Balkan Identity*, 102-105.
- [45] Remzi Lani and Fabian Schmidt, "Albanian Foreign Policy Between Geography And History," *The International Spectator* XXXIII, no. 2 (April-June 1998).
- [46] See Christopher Deliso, *The Coming Balkan Caliphate: the Threat of Radical Islam to Europe and the West*, Praeger Security International (2007) pp. chapter 2
- [47] Grace Halsell, "Special Report: Albania And The Muslim World," *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*, June 1994, <http://www.washington-report.org/backissues/0694/94006020.htm>.
- [48] J. Milton Burr and Robert O. Collins, *Alms for Jihad: Charity and Terrorism in the Islamic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 147-149.
- [49] Franz Gustincich, "From Lenin To Bin Laden," *Gnosis: Online Italian Intelligence Magazine* (March 2005), [www.sisde.it](http://www.sisde.it).
- [50] Damian Gjijnuri, "Albania's Counter-Terrorism Policy Options: Finding A Strategy Of Common Sense," U.S. Naval Postgraduate School Thesis, 2004, 12.
- [51] *Ibid.*, 15.
- [52] Vickers and Pettifer, *Albania: From Anarchy to a Balkan Identity*, 105.
- [53] Chris Stephens, "Bin Laden Opens European Terror Base In Albania," *Sunday Times*, November 29, 1998.
- [54] United States Department of the Treasury, "Press Release JS-1703: Additional Al-Haramain Branches, Former Leader Designated By Treasury As Al Qaida Supporters," June 2, 2004, [www.ustreas.gov](http://www.ustreas.gov).

- [55] Burr and Collins, *Alms for Jihad: Charity and Terrorism in the Islamic World*, *Ibid*, 146.
- [56] John Crewdson and Tom Huntley, "Abducted Imam Aided CIA Ally," *Chicago Tribune*, July 3, 2005.
- [57] Andrew Higgins and Christopher Cooper, "CIA-Backed Team Used Brutal Means To Break Up Terrorist Cell In Albania," *Wall Street Journal*, November 20, 2001.
- [58] Kullolli, *Proselytization in Albania by Middle Eastern Islamic Organizations*, 58.
- [59] R. Jeffrey Smith, "US Probes Blasts' Possible Mideast Ties," *Washington Post*, August 12, 1998.
- [60] Deliso, *The Coming Balkan Caliphate*, 40.
- [61] Wayne Madsen, "Mercenaries In Kosovo: The U.S. Connection To The KLA," *The Progressive*, August 1999.
- [62] See "Kosovo Seen As New Islamic Bastion," *Jerusalem Post*, September 14, 1998, and Barry Schweid, "NATO Braces For Wider Kosovo Fight," *Associated Press*, June 17, 1998.
- [63] For example, see the following, exquisitely detailed summary of Saudi-led refugee efforts, with financial totals, activities carried out, and organizations and individuals involved. Hussein Saud Qusti, "Unsung Heroes," *Saudi Aramco World* 50, no. 4, April 1999, <http://www.saudiaramcoworld.com/issue/199904/unsung.heroes.htm>.
- [64] Kastriot Duka, an imam originally from Elbasan in Albania, told journalists that he had been assisted in his efforts to build mosques, teach orphans and preach in a Kosovo village during the 1999 relief efforts by a member of an Islamic charity based in Britain. See Paola Casoli, "Terror And Gratitude: Albanian Imam's Kosovo Mission," [www.serbianna.com](http://www.serbianna.com), December 29, 2007. Duka, who continued to rely on funding from UK-based "charities," would be deported from Kosovo back to Albania by Kosovar authorities in March 2010 for allegedly preaching radical Islam. See Linda Karadaku, "Kosovo Deports Self-Proclaimed Imam, Closes Mosque," *Southeast Europe Times*, March 11, 2010, [http://www.setimes.com/cocoon/setimes/xhtml/en\\_GB/features/setimes/features/2010/03/11/feature-03](http://www.setimes.com/cocoon/setimes/xhtml/en_GB/features/setimes/features/2010/03/11/feature-03).
- [65] "Pentagon Chief Cancels Albania Visit Over Terror Threat," *CNN*, July 15, 1999.
- [66] The incidents were widely reported, for example see "Albanian Police Arrest More Islamists," *RFE/RL Newline* 3, no. 33, February 17, 1999.
- [67] Bill Gertz, "Hijackers Connected To Albanian Terrorist Cell," *Washington Times*, September 18, 2001.
- [68] US Treasury Press Release, "JS-2727: Treasury Designates Bin Laden, Qadi Associate," September 19, 2005, [www.ustreas.gov](http://www.ustreas.gov).
- [69] *Ibid*.
- [70] Author's correspondence with OIC official, October 2010.

[71] Kulloli, *Proselytization in Albania by Middle Eastern Islamic Organizations*, 62.

[72] As part of this outreach, Albania—along with other IDB member states such as Pakistan, Sudan, Indonesia and Uzbekistan—is slated to receive a portion of a new \$772 million tranche for development projects. See “IDB Approves \$772m For New Projects,” *Arab News*, October 6, 2010, <http://www.gulfbase.com/site/interface/NewsArchiveDetails.aspx?n=153337>.

[73] See “Islamic Development Bank Expresses Interest In Albania For Increase Of Bank’s Presence Through Private Sector,” *Balkans.com*, July 6, 2010.

[74] Igor Jovanovic, “United Arab Emirates To Invest in Serbian Agriculture,” *SETimes.com*, January 19, 2013.

[75] The event was covered by various local media outlets, as well as foreign Islamist ones. See, for example, “Turkey Rebuilds Albanian Muslim Community’s Headquarters,” *worldbulletin.net*, June 30, 2010; See also the official TIKKA Web site, [www.tika.gov.tr](http://www.tika.gov.tr).

[76] *Ibid.*

[77] Fatjona Mejdini, “Albania to Host NATO Centre on Foreign Fighters,” *Balkan Insight*, June 23, 2016, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/albania-will-host-nato-center-on-foreign-terrorist-fighters-06-23-2016>