



ALBANIA

Quick Facts

Population: 3,047,987 (July 2017 est.)

Area: 28,748 sq km

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

Government Type: Parliamentary republic

GDP (official exchange rate): \$13 billion (2017 est.)

Source: CIA World FactBook (Last Updated April 2018)

INTRODUCTION

While Albanians of all faiths have historically co-existed peacefully, the participation of Albanian fighters in ISIS—and subsequent foiled terrorist plots in Albania itself—indicate that Islamic radicalism has become an important future security challenge. The foundations for radicalism were actually laid in the early 1990s, when foreign Islamic states and organizations sought to gain influence in a country then just emerging from 45 years of Communist dictatorship. While radical Islamism has never found mass appeal, Albania has always been a place of interest for both terrorist groups and those hunting them—as was attested to as long as two decades ago by CIA operations against international terrorist cells in the country.

Islamist trends in Albania parallel similar developments in other Balkan countries. Such states share several important characteristics: a lack of employment and educational 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. And, as in neighboring Kosovo, the attempts of the Vatican to bolster Catholicism in Albania have angered parts of the Muslim population.

Through 2017, the number of Albanian leaving to join ISIS and the al-Nusra Front had declined significantly in response to the strategic reversals both groups have faced in the Middle East. However, as with other regional countries experiencing the same phenomenon, Albania's success in stemming the departure of foreign fighters has been offset by new problems. These include the need to deradicalize returning fighters, and to deal with terrorist plots organized from the Middle East or Western European diaspora—the most high-profile of which, so far, was a foiled plot to attack against the Israeli soccer team in a match played in Albania in November 2016.¹

In response to the challenges posed by growing radicalism, the Obama administration during its time in office chose to create a NATO Center of Excellence in the Alliance's newest member state, to be devoted

to countering radicalization. However, as of 2017, this center had not yet become fully operational, and the major elements of security cooperation against terrorism were still carried out via state engagement with the US, EU, and regional security partners.

Islamism in Albania is a particularly fascinating topic because of its historic and multi-layered nature. The still predominant Sunni branch of Islam was introduced by the Ottoman Turks, who ruled for 500 years (until 1912). Just over a decade later, the new secular Turkish Republic deported a significant number of Sufi Muslims to Albania. Following the Communist rule of Enver Hoxha, in which religion was banned, Albania returned to its Muslim, Catholic, and Orthodox faiths. But along with the Wahhabi proselytizing from Gulf states since the 1990s, Albania has recently become a place of exile for an Iranian opposition group, while the political rift between Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and U.S.-based Turkish cleric Fetullah Gülen has been felt in Albania, as in other regional states.

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

The population of Albania stands at 2.8 million,² 80 percent of whom are Muslims.³ This cohort, in turn, is made up of 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.⁴ 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, having been sent to Albania in the 1920s by the newly secularist Turkish Republic; this group shares some similarities with Turkey's Alevi Muslims.⁵ 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 now prevalent in the Arab world. The latter population has been involved with recruiting fighters for Middle Eastern conflicts since at least 2014.

Wahhabis comprise a minority of unknown size 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.⁶

Recruitment for ISIS and al-Nusra in Syria's civil war, in which several hundred Albanian citizens have participated, was most notable 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.⁷ 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.⁸ 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 Albania itself.⁹

Indeed, as elsewhere in Europe, Albania is becoming a target for terrorist attacks. The Islamic State's territorial decline in the Middle East throughout 2016 and 2017 has increased its emphasis on creating instability in Europe. The terror group has exhorted fellow radicals to act alone toward this objective, as occurred in August 2016 when a Kosovo Albanian with a prior criminal record attacked and attempted to kidnap several people in the southern town of Vlore.¹⁰ This episode caused significant concern 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 from its earliest stages. In fact, the above-mentioned Almir Daci became a well-known propagandist for ISIS, and participated in a brigade specifically composed of Balkan recruits.¹¹ In Syria, the main Albanian military leader among the ranks of ISIS, the Kosovar Lavdrim Muhaxheri, became notorious after a video of him beheading a captive appeared online. Before being killed in an airstrike in 2017, Muhaxheri had remotely coordinated terrorist cells in Albania, Kosovo, and Macedonia in 2016. Police were able to prevent their plot to attack a soccer game in Albania between the Israeli and Albanian national teams in November 2016. However, the fact that an Albanian-led network from the Middle East could in fact be capable of leading such an operation came as a shock to many.¹²

Indeed, Albanians have historically taken pride in maintaining ethnic cohesion, despite being cumulatively composed of differing Christian and Muslim groups. If politically-oriented Muslim extremists (from NGO groups to actual terrorist supporters) gain influence, it could easily endanger this cooperative legacy. For the official leadership of the Muslim community, the primary challenge has been to fend off rivals both formal and informal. During the last decade and more, 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.

In recent years, this schism has divided Muslims in Albania. Rival factions arose in the Community's General Council, involving then-head mufti Selim Muca, who was in power from 2004-2014, 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 opponents among the Islamic leadership.¹³ 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 an outspoken conservative NGO, the Muslim Forum of Albania (MFA), and its international links with the Muslim Brotherhood.¹⁴

This political jockeying has created internal frictions within Albania's Muslim community, and distracted its leadership from dealing with attempts by religious extremists to strengthen their foothold in the country. 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. An MFA event in Kavaja in February 2008 attracted Islamists from Kosovo, Macedonia and elsewhere.¹⁵ A newer group, the Union of Islamic Youth, was then registered in Kavaja and was 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.¹⁶

The presence of foreign-funded radical groups since the 1990s has further aggravated the internal problems of the Islamic Community. For example, following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, the Bush administration asked Albania to close down 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 2002.¹⁷ Tivari had pledged to remove foreign Islamist elements from the country. Albanian authorities believe that local extremists trained in Islamic states actually carried out his murder.¹⁸ 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.¹⁹

More recently, Albania has faced a different kind of pressure from a key regional ally: Turkey. After

2013 and a widening rift between Turkish leader Recep Tayyip Erdogan and the Pennsylvania-based cleric (and one-time Erdogan political ally) Fetullah Gülen, Ankara pressured Albania to close Gülen-affiliated schools. The request came during President Erdogan's state visit in 2015, and again after the July 2016 coup attempt against Erdogan's government in Turkey.²⁰ While the Albanian government refused to do so, it came 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 officials."²¹

A final, still-unknown commodity in Albania is the negotiated relocation of an Iranian former militant group, something that has attracted the attention of the Islamic Republic's intelligence services. Albania has a long history of doing favors for the U.S. government and, in 2013, it accepted an offer from the Obama administration to grant asylum to about 250 members of Mohajedeen-e-Khalq (MEK). This Iranian "dissident group" was formerly considered a terrorist organization, as it had targeted Americans in Iran in the 1970s, before moving into the opposition against the Islamic Republic.²² In fact, the Albanian government has expanded this arrangement, and has taken in from 500-2,000 MEK members to date. During 2016 alone, Albania absorbed almost 2,000 MEK members as "asylum seekers" via the auspices of the UN High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR).²³

Although this historic Marxist-Shiite group has renounced violence, it still remains a notable enemy of the Iranian state, and the latter has used proxies like Hezbollah to attack it in Iraq. While this would be more difficult for Iran to do in Albania, the presence of the MEK in the country (and the larger support given to the group by Iran's archrival, Saudi Arabia) threatens to make Albania new terrain for proxy war—although the possibility has so far received very little media coverage outside of the country. Of more immediate concern, however, "is that the MEK presence poses a risk of inflaming sectarian divides in smaller communities, a phenomenon still in its latent state among Albanian Muslims," one local expert reported in 2017.²⁴

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

In the past decade, the number of mosques in Albania has increased rapidly, due to an ongoing process of legalizing previously non-recognized mosques. A 2009 survey stated that Albania had 568 Sunni mosques, as well as 70 Bektashi tekkes (lodges) and mausoleums.²⁵ By December 2015, however, officials had announced that 727 mosques existed in the country—of which at least 200 were not under the control of any official, sanctioned Muslim community organization.²⁶ At that time, former Muslim 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."²⁷

The following year, the country began the process of legalizing mosques that had been built since the early 1990s on state-owned land, often by shadowy foreign donors. In September 2016, it was reported that 957 structures—"most of them mosques"—were being granted property licenses by the government for the first time. Ylli Gurra, head of Tirana's Islamic Community, told media at the time that having official control of these mosques would allow the community to root out radicalism.²⁸ In truth, the acquisition represents a windfall for the Islamic Community (and Islamism in general), as even if many of these mosques have few attendees, their 'territorial mark' has now been cemented on the landscape, projecting a perhaps greater Islamic influence than is the case.

Albania's Muslim population accounts for 70 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.²⁹

Nevertheless, secularism prevails throughout the country, 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 wider 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.”³⁰

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 doing so could exacerbate the politicking between different faiths. This has indeed occurred, with particularly religious leaders, particularly Orthodox and Evangelical ones, claiming their numbers had been underrepresented in the census. The issue became so controversial that a subsequent Council of Europe report stated that the census “cannot claim to be reliable and accurate,” due to its unprofessional execution.³¹

Today, Muslims and Christian proselytizers continue to 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.³² (Known as [Bedër University](#), this center opened in April 2011).³³

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 to expanding its presence in Albania, something that has involved a Papal visit of 2014 and increased involvement of (primarily Italian) Catholic schools and NGOs in Albania.³⁴ One key event 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 the country’s national identity and history.³⁵

Albania’s internal struggles as a nation over religious values and 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).³⁶ 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, and that the country’s Christian heritage has much deeper roots.³⁷ In response, 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.³⁸ (While the MFA was the most visible of the three, 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.³⁹ In 1991, it was led by the late 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.)

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 Isla-

mists. 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.⁴⁰ Taking the lead in developing programs to solve vendettas and poverty via Islamic means is the UK-registered (but globally active) charity Islamic Relief,⁴¹ which has operated in Albania since 1991.⁴²

A final aspect of note is Albania's Shiite Bektashi Dervish order, which became entrenched from the 18th century onwards, primarily in southern Albania. As a more liberal form of Islam, it in 1923 dropped Ottoman-enforced practices such as polygamy and the forced wearing of the hijab (veil) by women. Three years later, the Albanian government took in 25,000 members of the Bektashi order expelled from Turkey during Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's secularization campaign. In Albania, as elsewhere, the Bektashis are denounced by Wahhabi elements as heretical.

The Bektashi themselves do not engage in proselytizing, and 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.⁴³ Rather, Bektashi leaders have reached out to the West to try and take on a higher profile as an example of a peaceful and tolerant movement, and the Albanian government helped to fund the establishment of the Bektashi World Centre in Tirana in November 2015. According to a U.S. State Department report on religious freedom from that year, "the Bektashi were also constructing or restoring several places of worship in Korca, Permet, Gjirokaster, and Elbasan. Property disputes with the government delayed progress."⁴⁴

ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

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 Bektashi also developed a presence in the country. Under the Communist dictatorship of Enver Hoxha, however, religion was officially banned from 1967 onward, and all religious groups were persecuted by the state.

The deep history of modern Albanian engagement with Islamism is worth examining, as it is more extensive than that of any other regional state, except perhaps Bosnia, since the end of the Cold War. 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 the early 1990s. Then-president Sali Berisha was not himself 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.⁴⁵ Soon after, the Islamic Development Bank (IDB) began offering substantial investment and opportunities for Albanians to learn Arabic and study in Islamic states.⁴⁶ 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.⁴⁷ 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 late 1990s).⁴⁸

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. The same year, predating similar investments by the West, the Arab-Albanian Islamic Bank was established in Tirana.⁴⁹ Osama bin Laden was reportedly the major stockholder and founder of this bank.⁵⁰ 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).⁵¹ 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.⁵² Some analysts believe the true agenda of these foreign investors was to, over time, transform Albania into an Islamic state, through economic aid, proselytization, and finally the establishment of Islamic governance.⁵³

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."⁵⁴ Osama bin Laden, at that time based in Sudan, visited Tirana that year, presenting himself as a wealthy Saudi businessman offering humanitarian aid.⁵⁵ However, bin Laden was actually sponsoring the charity Al Haramain, later classified as a terrorist entity by the United States government.⁵⁶

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, the 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.⁵⁷ The arrival of an Egyptian foreign ministry delegation in Albania in 1995 prompted the CIA to reach out to the by-then 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.⁵⁸

Indeed, despite the assistance provided by the SHIK on this occasion, Islamist penetration of Albanian intelligence continued, and help provided by the agency to the U.S. suffered a corresponding decline. The SHIK would only be 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 the world's most dangerous terrorist entities.⁵⁹ 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.⁶⁰

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.⁶¹ A letter released by a London-based al-Qaeda newsletter on August 5, 1998 promised a violent response.⁶² 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.⁶³ (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.⁶⁴) 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 previously identified as dangerous.⁶⁵ (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).⁶⁶

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.⁶⁷ 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.⁶⁸

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.⁶⁹ 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 sponsor of terrorism by the U.S. Treasury Department in October 2001.⁷⁰ 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.⁷¹

On the economic level, Albania's courtship with foreign Islamic funders continued, with the Islamic Development Bank (IDB) in October 2010 offering millions of dollars for infrastructure and other projects.⁷² The announcement came only three months after then-Prime Minister Berisha hosted a high-level IDB delegation, and thanked the organization for its assistance (past and present) in development efforts in Albania.⁷³ 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.⁷⁴

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 greater 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.⁷⁵

Approved in May 2016, this new NATO Center of Excellence, once completed, will become the first of its kind in the region, and is considered a political victory as much as a security one for the Albanian government over regional rivals. However, while the Albanians are primed to take a stronger role in the region, lingering competition between Balkan states remains an impediment to greater political trust and intelligence-sharing. Thus fighting terrorism and radicalization within the country is likely to remain largely a matter of bilateral or multilateral effort, rather than a truly integrated regional one.

ENDNOTES

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31. “Third Opinion on Albania, adopted on 23 November 2011,” Council of Europe, June 4, 2012. Available here: http://www.coe.int/t/dghl/monitoring/minorities/3_fcnmdocs/PDF_3rd_OP_Albania_en.pdf

32. 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.

33. 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>.

34. 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>.

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

36. “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.

37. 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.

38. L Lazar Semini, “Mother Teresa Statue Causes Friction,” Associated Press, March 20, 2006

39. 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>.

40. 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. 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.

41. On its main website, 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.”

42. The charity’s efforts to combat clan vendettas and develop rural places like Koplik can be seen on their website, www.islamicreliefalbania.com.

43. Vickers, “Islam In Albania.”

44. Albania 2015 International Religious Freedom Report. U.S. Department of State, <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/256369.pdf>

45. Miranda Vickers and James Pettifer, *Albania: from Anarchy to a Balkan Identity*, New York University Press, 1997, p 105

46. Vickers and Pettifer, *Albania: From Anarchy to a Balkan Identity*, 102-105.

47. Remzi Lani and Fabian Schmidt, “Albanian Foreign Policy Between Geography And History,” *The International Spectator* XXXIII, no. 2 (April-June 1998).

48. See Christopher Deliso, *The Coming Balkan Caliphate: the Threat of Radical Islam to Europe and the West*, Praeger Security International (2007) pp. chapter 2

49. 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>.

50. J. Milton Burr and Robert O. Collins, *Alms for Jihad: Charity and Terrorism in the Islamic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 147-149.

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2005), www.sisde.it.

52. Damian Gjijnuri, "Albania's Counter-Terrorism Policy Options: Finding A Strategy Of Common Sense," U.S. Naval Postgraduate School Thesis, 2004, 12.

53. Damian Gjijnuri, 15.

54. Vickers and Pettifer, *Albania: From Anarchy to a Balkan Identity*, 105.

55. Chris Stephens, "Bin Laden Opens European Terror Base In Albania," *Sunday Times*, November 29, 1998.

56. 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.

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58. John Crewdson and Tom Huntley, "Abducted Imam Aided CIA Ally," *Chicago Tribune*, July 3, 2005.

59. Andrew Higgins and Christopher Cooper, "CIA-Backed Team Used Brutal Means To Break Up Terrorist Cell In Albania," *Wall Street Journal*, November 20, 2001.

60. Kullolli, *Proselytization in Albania by Middle Eastern Islamic Organizations*, 58.

61. R. Jeffrey Smith, "US Probes Blasts' Possible Mideast Ties," *Washington Post*, August 12, 1998.

62. Deliso, *The Coming Balkan Caliphate*, 40.

63. Wayne Madsen, "Mercenaries In Kosovo: The U.S. Connection To The KLA," *The Progressive*, August 1999.

64. 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.

65. 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.

66. 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, 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," *South-east Europe Times*, March 11, 2010, http://www.setimes.com/cocoon/setimes/xhtml/en_GB/features/setimes/features/2010/03/11/feature-03.

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68. The incidents were widely reported, for example see "Albanian Police Arrest More Islamists," *RFE/RL Newline* 3, no. 33, February 17, 1999.

69. Bill Gertz, "Hijackers Connected To Albanian Terrorist Cell," *Washington Times*, September 18, 2001.

70. US Treasury Press Release, "JS-2727: Treasury Designates Bin Laden, Qadi Associate," September 19, 2005, www.ustreas.gov.

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