



# ALBANIA

## Quick Facts

Population: 3,074,579 (July 2020 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): \$13.07 billion (2017 est.)

*Source: CIA World FactBook (Last Updated September 2020)*

## INTRODUCTION

*Islamist trends in Albania parallel similar developments in other Balkan countries. These 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 country's Muslim population.*

*While Albanians of all faiths have historically co-existed peacefully, the participation of Albanian fighters in ISIS—and subsequent foiled terrorist plots within Albania itself—indicate that Islamic radicalism has become an important future security challenge for the country. The foundations for radicalism were 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 Islamism has never found mass appeal, Albania has always been a place of interest for both terrorist groups and those hunting them—as demonstrated by CIA operations targeting terrorist cells in the country beginning in August 1998.*

*The number of people leaving Albania to join ISIS and the al-Nusra Front over the past two years declined significantly in tandem with the strategic reversals experienced by both groups. 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 or foil terrorist plots organized from the Middle East or Western European diasporas—the most high-profile of which, at least so far, was a failed plot to attack the Israeli soccer team in a match played in Albania in November 2016.<sup>1</sup>*

*In response to the challenges posed by growing radicalism, the Obama administration created a*

*NATO Center of Excellence devoted to countering radicalization in what was then the Alliance's newest member state. As of this writing, the center has not yet become fully operational.<sup>2</sup> However, then-U.S. Defense Secretary James Mattis complimented Albania in 2018 for "punching above its weight" as a NATO member, participating in anti-terrorism missions in Afghanistan, and being the first state to provide arms to the Trump administration's anti-ISIS coalition.<sup>3</sup> As with other regional nations, Albania's security cooperation against terrorism has been (and will be) conducted in cooperation the U.S., EU, and regional security partners.*

## ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

As of January 2020, the official population of Albania stood at 2.846 million.<sup>4</sup> However, some religious leaders (particularly Orthodox and Evangelical ones) have claimed in the past that the numbers of their co-confessionals are officially underrepresented. The issue became so controversial that a Council of Europe report stated that the census "cannot claim to be reliable and accurate," due to its unprofessional execution.<sup>5</sup> There has been no official census since 2011; while one is scheduled to be conducted by the end of 2020, it will likely be delayed – perhaps substantially – due to the currently ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>6</sup>

Albania's Muslim population 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.<sup>7</sup> Secondly, the World Bektashi Center in Tirana officially represents the Shi'a Bektashi Sufi order (which makes up around 20 percent of Albania's Muslim population), and has a longstanding presence in the country. Sent to Albania in the 1920s by the newly secularist Turkish Republic, this group shares some similarities with Turkey's Alevi Muslims.<sup>8</sup> However, the Bektashi order is considered heretical by many Muslims for its more relaxed, liberal practices and theological differences. The Bektashi are particularly despised by the third and most dangerous Islamic group present in Albania: the puritanical minority of Muslims who are attracted to *Wahhabism* and other extreme forms of Islam now prevalent in the Arab World. The latter population has been involved with 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, adherents to *Wahhabism* 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>9</sup>

Roughly 500 Albanian citizens were recruited to join the Islamic State and al-Nusra between 2012 and 2015, according to the U.S. Military Academy's Combatting Terrorism Center (USMACTC).<sup>10</sup> This, however, appears to have been a passing phase; as of September 2020, national authorities maintained that no Albanians had joined extremist groups in Iraq or Syria within the preceding four to five years.<sup>11</sup>

Like other locales in Europe, however, Albania is a target for terrorist attacks. The Islamic State's territorial decline has increased the group's emphasis on creating instability in Europe. It has exhorted fellow radicals to act alone in accomplishing this objective, as occurred in August 2016 when a Kosovo Albanian attacked and attempted to kidnap several people in the southern town of Vlore.<sup>12</sup> Because Albania seeks to develop its coastal tourism industry, officials are concerned that any successful attacks would damage this much-needed source of income. While the local radical *imams* responsible for recruiting young villagers for ISIS were all behind bars by 2018, German journalists visiting Leshnica found that locals still feared their influence from within the prison; the local mosque was all but abandoned, having been deemed "cursed" by villagers.<sup>13</sup> According to the U.S. State Department, Albania has seen no recent instances of

terrorism within its borders.<sup>14</sup>

While radicalism remains low, it is important to note that the Albanian language was one of several chosen by the Islamic State for its early propaganda. 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>15</sup> 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 air-strike in 2017, Muhaxheri had remotely coordinated terrorist cells in Albania, Kosovo, and Macedonia the previous year. 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 be capable of leading such an operation came as a shock to many.<sup>16</sup>

If politically-oriented Muslim extremists, ranging from NGO groups to actual terrorist supporters, gain influence, it could easily endanger Albania's cooperative legacy of prideful, ethnic cohesion (Albania also has Catholic and Orthodox Christian populations that make up significant portions of the national total.)<sup>17</sup> For the official leadership of the Muslim community, the primary challenge has been to fend off formal and informal rivals. For more than a decade, leadership challenges and conflicts within the official Albanian Islamic Community have allowed radical views to proliferate.

In recent years, this schism has divided Muslims in Albania. Rival factions arose in the Community's General Council, involving then-head *mufiti* Selim Muca, who was in power from 2004-2014, and his opponents. A special session of the General Council in September 2010 reconfirmed Muca's authority and sacked four opponents among the leadership.<sup>18</sup> Similar infighting occurred in 2006, causing the firing of the *mufiti* of Shkoder, Bashkim Bajraktari. U.S. officials were concerned 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), which maintains relations with the Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>19</sup>

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. Muca, for example, was criticized for failing to stop the formation of a union of *imams* with reported *Wahhabbi* 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.<sup>20</sup> A newer group, the Union of Islamic Youth, was then registered in Kavaja and was believed to be associated with *Wahhabbi* elements (though 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>

Since the 1990s, the presence of foreign-funded radical groups has aggravated the internal problems of the country's 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 Salih Tivari in January 2002.<sup>22</sup> A moderate Muslim community leader, Tivari had pledged to remove foreign Islamist elements from the country. Albanian authorities believe that local extremists trained in Muslim nations actually carried out his murder.<sup>23</sup> In 2006, other Muslim community leaders received death threats after an extremist group unsuccessfully tried to change one of the community's official statutes.<sup>24</sup>

More recently, Albania has faced a different 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, President Erdogan demanded Albania close Gülen-affiliated schools during a 2015 state visit, and again after the July 2016 coup attempt in Turkey.<sup>25</sup> Following the latter, 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."<sup>26</sup> While the Albanian government rebuffed those demands, Ankara has continued pressuring it to tackle the alleged involvement of Gülenist "parallel institutions" in

public administration to this day.

United Nations officials have recently expressed concern over the treatment by Albanian authorities of Turks wanted by Ankara due to alleged Gülenist affiliations.<sup>27</sup> In January 2020, Harun Celik, a Turkish citizen, was deported from Albania to Turkey; another, Selami Simsek, is awaiting deportation back to Turkey after his asylum request was denied in July.<sup>28</sup>

A final possible threat comes from the negotiated relocation of Mohajedeen-e-Khalq (MeK), an Iranian former militant group. Albania has a long history of doing favors for the U.S. government and, in 2013, it accepted the Obama administration's request to grant asylum to about 250 MeK members. The MeK was once considered a terrorist organization, as it had targeted Americans in Iran in the 1970s, before shifting to oppose the Islamic Republic the following decade.<sup>29</sup> As of 2018, when the most recent publicly available figures were published, roughly 2,300 MeK members were reported to live on a 34 hectare farm compound in the country's northwest.<sup>30</sup>

Although it has officially renounced violence, the Iranian state still considers the MeK an enemy and has used proxies like Hezbollah to attack it in Iraq. The presence of the MeK in Albania (and the broader support given to MeK by Iran's archrival, Saudi Arabia) threatens to make Albania a new front in a 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.<sup>31</sup> In recent times, the Trump administration's increasingly assertive pressure campaign against the Iranian regime has led some to speculate that the MeK might be used as a proxy by the United States in a future confrontation with the mullahs.<sup>32</sup>

## ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

In the past decade, the number of mosques in Albania has increased rapidly; due to an ongoing process of legalizing previously unrecognized mosques. A 2009 survey found that Albania had 568 Sunni mosques, as well as 70 Bektashi *tekkes* (lodges) and mausoleums.<sup>33</sup> By December 2015, however, government authorities had disclosed that 727 mosques existed in the country—of which at least 200 were not under the control of any official, sanctioned Muslim community organization.<sup>34</sup> 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.”<sup>35</sup>

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.<sup>36</sup> Ylli Gurra, head of Tirana's Islamic Community, told media outlets at the time that having official control over these mosques would allow the community to root out radicalism.<sup>37</sup>

Secularism prevails throughout the country 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 at least 2010. One security official stated in June 2016 that sectarian divisions are now “at the core of the rifts between Muslim communities.”<sup>38</sup>

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.<sup>39</sup>

It is likely that the Vatican's concern over the latter is less an expression of fear of radicalism than

apprehensiveness over any further Islamic “re-awakening” among a relatively secular population. The Vatican has taken a proactive approach to expanding its presence in Albania in recent years. The Pope visited Albania in 2014 and Catholic schools and NGOs have increased their activities in the country.<sup>40</sup> Mother Teresa, the revered Albanian nun born in Macedonia with ancestry in Kosovo, was canonized in 2016. Tirana’s international airport is named for her, and today she is an essential part of the international Albanian brand. Anecdotal evidence suggests this has spurred debate among Albanians regarding Mother Teresa’s rightful place in the country’s national identity and history.<sup>41</sup>

Albania’s internal struggles over religious values and broader personal and national aspirations have occasionally been heated. 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>42</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, and that the country’s Christian heritage has much deeper roots.<sup>43</sup> In response, the MFA and other Islamist groups accused Moisiu of “insulting Islam.”

In general, Albanian Islamic officials have sought to highlight the historic tolerance between religions within the country when speaking to foreign media. As the country becomes more confident of its place in Europe, the leadership has also become more vocal on general Muslim issues worldwide. For example, in June 2018, Muslim Community Chairman Skender Bruçaj condemned the government of far-off Myanmar, telling a Bangladeshi newspaper that “what is happening to the Rohingya is unacceptable, a clear violation of human rights.”<sup>44</sup>

Inter-religious strife likewise has manifested 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>45</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 areas 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>46</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>47</sup> which has operated in Albania since 1991.<sup>48</sup>

Finally, Albania’s Shiite Bektashi Dervish order is notable. It became entrenched in southern Albania from the 18<sup>th</sup> century onward and is associated with a more liberal form of Islam. In 1923, the Bektashi order 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 *Wahhabbi* 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.<sup>49</sup> 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.”<sup>50</sup>

## ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

Under Ottoman rule (from the 14<sup>th</sup> to the early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries), large numbers of Albanians converted to Islam to capitalize on better opportunities for state employment and career advancement. Under the Communist dictatorship of Enver Hoxha, religion was officially banned in 1967, but the country returned to its religious faiths after Hoxha's death in 1985. Modern Albania's state engagement with Islamism began when the first post-Communist government welcomed Islamist governments and interests in the early 1990s. While then-president Sali Berisha was not religious, he surrounded himself with devoted Islamists, attracting foreign investment from the Gulf. Kuwaitis began visiting, offering an "ambitious" investment plan in exchange for an opportunity to build mosques.<sup>51</sup> Soon after, the Islamic Development Bank (IDB) began offering investment opportunities and the chance for Albanians to learn Arabic or to study in Islamic states.<sup>52</sup> Under President Berisha, Albania became the first European member of the Organization of the Islamic Conference; which consequently resulted in the "unilateral abolition" of visa requirements for citizens of Muslim countries. This made Albania a desirable option for international fugitive terrorists seeking access to Europe;<sup>53</sup> several senior al-Qaeda figures established an operational base on Albanian territory (though that network was dismantled by the CIA in the late 1990s).<sup>54</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. The Arab-Albanian Islamic Bank also was established in Tirana,<sup>55</sup> where Osama bin Laden was reportedly the major stockholder and founder.<sup>56</sup> The bank bankrolled the construction of 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>57</sup> Some analysts believe the true agenda of these foreign investors was to gradually transform Albania into an Islamic state through economic aid, proselytization, and finally the establishment of Islamic governance.<sup>58</sup> Western security officials became "deeply suspicious"<sup>59</sup> of foreign *jihadists* in Islamic charities who visited Tirana that year, including Osama bin Laden. Bin Laden presented himself as a wealthy Saudi businessman offering humanitarian aid<sup>60</sup> when in fact he was actually sponsoring Al Haramain, a charity later classified as a terrorist entity by the United States government.<sup>61</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, Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini Society and another terror-linked charity, the International Islamic Relief Organization (IIRO), which employed Mohammed al-Zawahiri, the younger brother of future al-Qaeda second-in-command Ayman al-Zawahiri. After a detained Islamist became an informant, it was revealed that Albania was known among *jihadists* as a "safe hotel" where they could hide out with the tacit approval of the state,<sup>62</sup> with the help of Islamist penetration of Albanian intelligence.

The second Nano government (1997-1998) cooled relations with the Islamic world, irritating Islamist investors when it failed to send a delegate to the 1998 OIC conference. Local experts in Albania noted that the Egyptian Islamic Jihad's (EIJ) Tirana cell was among its most important, as it was expert in falsifying documents to facilitate the transit of suspected terrorists.<sup>63</sup> The cell's increasing strength coincided with the merger of Ayman al-Zawahiri's EIJ and al-Qaeda was seen as one of the world's most dangerous terrorist entities.<sup>64</sup> In mid-1998, covert American involvement in a renewed round of CIA-ordered SHIK kidnappings of *jihadis* in Tirana was leaked by "euphoric" SHIK agents, enraging the *jihadist* internationale.<sup>65</sup> A letter released by a London-based al-Qaeda newsletter on August 5, 1998 promised a violent response.<sup>66</sup> Two days later, terrorists bombed the U.S. embassy in Nairobi, Kenya, killing 213 people and injuring more than 4,000 and a second embassy attack, in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, killed 11 and injured 85, revealing 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."

Regardless, 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>67</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 *jihād*.<sup>68</sup>) It was thus little surprise that adverse security conditions persisted in Albania during the following months. For example, then-Defense Secretary William Cohen canceled a celebratory visit in mid-July 1999, as he was being targeted by al-Qaeda operatives in Tirana.<sup>69</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>70</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>71</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 sponsor of terrorism by the U.S. Treasury Department in October 2001.<sup>72</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>73</sup>

Economically, Albania's courtship with foreign Islamic funders continued, with the Islamic Development Bank (IDB) in October 2010 offering millions for infrastructure and other projects.<sup>74</sup> 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.<sup>75</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>76</sup>

While *Wahhabbi* 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.<sup>77</sup>

Approved in May 2016, this new NATO Center of Excellence, once completed, will become the first of its kind in the region. It 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. In the long-term, reintegration of former IS and Al-Nusra fighters into Albanian society is likely to be a challenge for the state.

## ENDNOTES

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40. 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,

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41. This observation is based on numerous interviews by the author with Albanian Muslims and Catholics since 2014.
  42. U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, “Albania,” in *International Religious Freedom Report 2004* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of State, 2005), [www.state.gov](http://www.state.gov).
  43. 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).
  44. ““Even after murdering hundreds of believers, they couldn’t lift the belief from our hearts,”” *Dhaka Tribune*, June 16, 2018, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/world/2018/06/16/faith-defeats-oppression-in-albania>.
  45. Llazar Semini, “Mother Teresa Statue Causes Friction,” Associated Press, March 20, 2006.
  46. This testimony is recorded in an online summary of a trip to Albania by young Islamists from the Turkish IHH (Humanitarian Relief Foundation, or İnsani Yardım Vakfı 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.
  47. 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.”
  48. 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).
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  53. Remzi Lani and Fabian Schmidt, “Albanian Foreign Policy Between Geography and History,” *The International Spectator* XXXIII, no. 2 (April-June 1998).
  54. See Christopher Deliso, *The Coming Balkan Caliphate: The Threat of Radical Islam to Europe and the West* (Praeger Security International, 2007), esp. chapter 2.
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  57. Franz Gustincich, “From Lenin To Bin Laden,” *Gnosis: Online Italian Intelligence Magazine* (March 2005), [www.sisde.it](http://www.sisde.it).
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  67. Wayne Madsen, “Mercenaries In Kosovo: The U.S. Connection To The KLA,” *The Progressive*, August 1999.
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