

American Foreign Policy Council

ALBANIA

QUICK FACTS

Population: 3,659,616

Area: 28,748 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Albanian 95%, Greek 3%, other 2% (Vlach, Roma (Gypsy), Serb, Macedonian, Bulgarian)

Religions: Muslim 70%, Albanian Orthodox 20%, Roman Catholic 10%

Government Type: Republic

GDP (official exchange rate): \$11.86 billion

Map and Quick Facts courtesy of the CIA World Factbook (Last Updated June 2010)



As the 2012 centennial of Albanian national independence was celebrated widely by Albanians across the Balkans, ethnic nationalism in the region swelled. Today, the country is reexamining its historical memory and identity, and in this context of uncertainty, a new Islamist challenge is emerging. While Albania's most severe terrorist-related activities appear to be consigned to the chaotic, post-communist 1990s, radical Islamism in Albania has manifested itself today in a social and cultural role, playing out—for the moment—chiefly within the country's Muslim community. This rhetorical (and occasionally violent) confrontation is supported by external Islamic states and organizations that have established themselves or allied with like-minded local Islamist groups in Albania.

Today's Islamist stirrings in Albania parallel similar developments in other Balkan countries. Such states share several important characteristics: indigenous Muslim populations, a transition from former autocratic socialist or communist governments, and a recent trend of foreign Islamist forces attempting to educate

local Muslims, build mosques, provide public services, make investments, and otherwise build influence. Albania does have a small population of fundamentalist Wahhabi Muslims, although it is more modest than those found in Macedonia, Kosovo, Bosnia, or the Sandzak region that straddles Serbia and Montenegro. Nevertheless, Albania's extremist Muslims, who tend to be young and educated in the Arab or wider Muslim world, are tightly connected with fellow ideologues in the region, and will continue to threaten the authority of the mainstream Muslim community in the country while also taking part in Islamist activities outside of Albania itself.

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

Almost 80 percent of Albania's 3.6 million citizens are Muslims.¹ In this population, three distinct groups can be distinguished. The Muslim Community of Albania is the major body representing the country's Sunni Muslims (and Albanian Muslims in general), and it is deemed to be the most "legitimate" representative of Albanian Muslims by the state and by the international community.² 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 Albania and shares some similarities with Turkey's Alevi Muslims.³ 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.

It is difficult to quantify the number of Wahhabis in Albania, as they operate largely outside of official structures. Although they continue to make determined efforts to usurp power from the country's legitimate Islamic representatives, Wahhabis have also established parallel institutions, ranging from mosques to schools and charities. Correspondingly, in July 2012, Peter Rettig, a Catholic charity leader, voiced his alarm over a perceived increase in Islamic fundamentalist attitudes among Albanian Muslims. He stated that he had encountered several instances of anti-Christian activities and social separatism from Muslims, particularly from members of the younger generation, in a manner that had been unprecedented even just two years prior. He also asserted that an increase in the number of young Muslims returning from schooling in Saudi Arabia and Turkey could have something to do with the trend of increasing fundamentalism.⁴

An ongoing trend in Islamist activities in Albania (and the Balkans in general)

is the manipulation of the concept of “civil society.” As part of this process, Islamist groups employ 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 disproportionate influence in poor, rural areas.⁵ And, despite their non-governmental designation, many are in fact informal entities supported by various governments (discussed below).

One of the more conspicuous Muslim NGOs is 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 by-laws. Because of this history, some seasoned foreign and local observers have concluded that the MFA was created to compete with official Islamic bodies.⁶ Indeed, the MFA has been accused of creating “parallel structures” from those of the official Muslim Community.⁷ Although the MFA claims merely to be interested in protecting human rights and opposing discrimination against Muslims, its public statements have revealed a more dogmatic agenda. Such statements include: 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.⁸

The degree of influence that such organizations currently wield over the public discourse remains limited. However, it is clear from their deliberate use of the English language instead of Albanian 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 their ability to maintain ethnic cohesion, despite being cumulatively composed of differing Christian and Muslim groups. If the MFA and other like-minded 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). Following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, 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 2002.⁹ Shortly before his death, Tivari had pledged to remove foreign Islamist elements from the country. In fact, the Albanian authorities believe that local Albanian extremists trained in Islamic states actually carried out his murder.¹⁰ 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.¹¹ Such homegrown threats are a new menace with which Albania must contend.

Leadership challenges and internal conflicts within the Albanian Muslim community are allowing radicalism to flourish, as moderates become increasingly intimidated and mired in controversy. The Muslim Community is Albania's second-largest landowner, and some of the "scandals" frequently invoked by critics of the Community's leadership concern alleged profiteering from land sales. In recent years, this has caused a division within the Community's General Council between supporters of head *mufti* Selim Muca and his opponents. The former seem to currently hold the upper hand: 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.¹² This came four years after similar infighting which resulted in the firing of the Mufti of Shkoder, Bashkim Bajraktari. It is interesting to note that U.S. officials were concerned at the time that the local Islamic leadership in Shkoder was "stacked with "extremists" due to the local influence of the MFA and its international links with the Muslim Brotherhood.¹³

This sort of political jockeying, however, has been deeply injurious. Not only has it created internal frictions within Albania's Muslim community, it has also distracted its leadership from dealing with attempts by religious extrem-

ists to strengthen their foothold. Muca, for example, has been criticized for failing to stop the formation of a union of *imams* with reported Wahhabi leanings in the large town of Kavaja, located between Tirana and the Adriatic coast. As a show of 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.¹⁴ A new group, the Union of Islamic Youth, is now registered in Kavaja and believed to be associated with Wahhabi elements (although available information about the group is sparse). In any case, local and foreign observers agree that the Kavaja mosque and its worshippers are increasingly wary of outsiders and seem to have more fundamentalist views.¹⁵

Such loose associations have been greatly expedited by the Internet, allowing them to operate across borders, with like-minded brethren coming and going to spread the word in Wahhabi-controlled mosques throughout the region. One advantage of this method of operations is that an organization's activities, funding and directives remain completely unregulated and unrestricted by any law or official body. This is not to say, however, that Islamists do not wish to take over the Muslim community of Albania. In fact, that is their ultimate goal—one that, if achieved, will confer control over vast amounts of money, properties and, crucially, legitimacy by default in the eyes of the state and the international community.

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

A 2009 survey carried out by a Tirana newspaper cited Muslim Community officials in revealing that at that time, Albania had 568 Sunni mosques, as well as 70 Bektashi tekkes (lodges) and mausoleums. It was not specified what percentage of these had been constructed solely since the end of the Cold War, however, was not delineated.

Aside from its clear Muslim majority, Albania also has notable Catholic and Orthodox Christian populations (the latter located chiefly in the southern part of the country, bordering Greece). The same survey indicated that, as of 2009, there were over 1,100 Catholic and Orthodox churches in Albania. 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 the Republic of Macedonia. As in these countries and throughout the Balkan region, however, the Islamist creed that is expanding most aggressively is Wahhabi fundamentalism. This new generation of Islamists is aggressively seeking to “convert” other Muslims (and

non-Muslims) by providing access to funds, travel, education and jobs, all with the sponsorship of outside Islamic states and interests.

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 introducing the category of religious affiliation to the national census in 2011, as it could exacerbate the politicking between different faiths in advance of the count, and especially the politico-religious rhetoric about it afterwards. Muslims and Christian proselytizers eye one another warily, and often accuse each of inappropriate actions. Most recently, Archbishop Angelo Massafra, of the Archdiocese of Shkoder-Pult, drafted a 2012 report for the Vatican in which he expressed concerns over rising Muslim fundamentalism and the involvement of countries like Saudi Arabia and Turkey in inculcating conservatism in Albania. He also expressed concerns over the recent opening of a new Islamic university in Tirana. (Known as Bedër University, this center opened in April 2011). It is likely that the Vatican's concern over the latter is less an expression of fear of radicalism than it is apprehensiveness over further Islamic 're-awakening' among a relatively secular population.

Albania's internal struggles as a nation questioning its religious values vis-à-vis broader personal and national aspirations have occasionally resulted in fireworks. 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). 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. The MFA and other Islamist groups accused Moisiu of "insulting Islam."

Inter-religious strife likewise has registered in more tangible ways. The northern, majority-Catholic city of Shkoder, bordering Montenegro, has provided visible examples. After a public cross was put up in January 2006, it was vandalized, presumably by Islamists, who have been very active in competing with the city's Christian population. 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. (While the MFA is 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. 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 1994. 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. 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 late Libyan strongman Muammar Qaddafi himself, has been linked by American investigators to the dissemination of radical Islam and funding for Hamas.

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— is being 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. Other such charities support of orphans in order to raise them according to Islamist ways. Taking the lead in developing programs to solve vendettas and poverty via Islamic means is the UK-registered (but globally active) charity Islamic Relief, which has operated in Albania since 1991.

The question of foreign influence in the Albanian Muslim community is not limited to the Arab world; Turkey's presence in Albania is also growing, which may further shape the development of the country's Islamist movements. The Islamist-leaning government of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Ankara has repeatedly indicated interest in expanding its sphere of influence throughout former Ottoman lands, including Albania. Turks have justifiable concerns about the state of Ottoman mosques and other historic monuments, especially in light of the massive efforts to co-opt them that have been made by Saudi Arabia and other Islamic states with no historic legacy in

the region. Thus, since the end of Communism, a key component of Turkey's relationship with its former province has been in the area of cultural preservation. Nevertheless, there is increasingly a fine line between restoration and education work and the fundamentalist proselytizing of Turkish Islamist groups such as the *Insani Yardim Vakfi* (the Foundation for Human Rights and Freedoms and Humanitarian Relief, commonly referred to as the IHH). Known for its humanitarian work, the IHH has long been suspected by Israel of broader terrorist links (the charge was investigated, though not fully, by the U.S. government following the controversial "aid flotilla" it sent to Gaza on May 31, 2010). Turkish universities throughout 2011 and 2012 also continued to develop cooperation with Tirana's new Islamic university, deepening the level of engagement between the Albanian Muslim community and global Islamic academia.

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.

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 in order 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. Soon after, the Islamic Development Bank (IDB) began offering substantial investment and opportunities for Albanians to learn Arabic and study in Islamic states. 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. 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). As of 2012, Albania was still Europe's only OIC member state. The government has recently sought to use its connections with Islamic governments abroad for political ends (for example, to lobby for them to recognize the independence of their ethnic brethren in Kosovo), which would likely involve some form of reciprocal obligation.

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. Osama bin Laden was reportedly the majority stockholder and founder of this bank. 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). 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. 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.

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 national intelligence agency (SHIK). By 1994, the increasing presence of foreign jihadists in Islamic charities had made Western security officials "deeply suspicious." Osama bin Laden, at that time based in Sudan, visited Tirana that

year, presenting himself as a wealthy Saudi businessman offering humanitarian aid. However, bin Laden was actually sponsoring the charity Al Haramain, later classified as a terrorist entity by the United States government.

The Albanian government 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. The arrival of an Egyptian foreign ministry delegation 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.

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 among Europe’s most dangerous terrorist entities. 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.

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. A letter released by a London-based al-Qaeda newsletter on August 5, 1998 promised a violent response: 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 Muslim Albanian separatists in the neighboring Yugoslav province of Kosovo. (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.) 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. (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).

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. 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.

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. 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. 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.

The current status of Albania's state relations with radical Islamist groups is more opaque. 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. 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).

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. 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. 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.

The Albanian state's strengthened cooperation with the pro-Islamist government in Turkey, which has its own Balkan aspirations, is 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. 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). The Albanian government is also allowing large-scale proselytizing and relief works led by the previously-mentioned Turkish IHH, among other charities and organizations that could reasonably be considered to have extremist ties. Yet on even the level of basic social discourse, Turkey looms large in the current reconceptualization of Albanian identity, given its Ottoman past and Albania's place within it.

While Wahhabi groups remain very much a minority among Albanians today, it is clear that they do have supporters within the government and the "mainstream" Islamic community. Of concern is the likely future need of any Albanian government to interact with such groups, as they continue to seek a more prominent role in the religious and political life of the country. This will invariably legitimize them and their demands, which will in turn add to the increasing prominence of Islamism in public discourse. Thus, while Albania can no longer be said to pose the terrorist threat it did during the 1990s, its fortunes are of pivotal interest as part of the broader social phenomenon of growing Islamism in the Balkans.

In this respect, the most important factor for security-watchers through 2013 was the participation of Albanian fighters (whether from Albania, Kosovo or Macedonia) on the side of jihadis in Syria. In August 2013, Tirana-based security expert Illir Kulla claimed that approximately 300 Albanians from these three countries had gone to fight in Syria; according to relatives of the deceased, often having left without telling their families. The most common route has been via Turkey, perhaps leading some credence to Iranian state media claims that Turkish Islamist charities like the IHH have been training and organizing Albanian jihadis for Syria.

ENDNOTES

[1] 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://pew-forum.org/newassets/images/reports/Muslimpopulation/Muslimpopulation.pdf>.

[2] The community's website is www.kmsh.al.

[3] The official Bektashi order website can be found at www.bektashi.net.

[4] 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)

[5] Risto Karajkov, "The Young And The Old: Radical Islam Takes Root In The Balkans," *Transitions Online*, May 3, 2006, www.tol.cz.

[6] See Miranda Vickers, "Islam In Albania," Advanced Research and Assessment Group, Defence Academy of the United Kingdom, March 2008, www.da.mod.uk.

[7] The MFA's official website is www.forumimusliman.org.

[8] 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.

[9] Vickers, "Islam In Albania."

[10] Karajkov, "The Young And The Old."

[11] "Selim Muca Reconfirmed As Head Of Albanian Muslim Community," *Asat Television* (Skopje), September 20, 2010.

[12] Although it was created in the northern city of Shkodra, the MFA has long had a power base in Kavaja.

[13] Vickers, "Islam In Albania."

[14] 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.

[15] "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.

[16] 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.

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

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

[19] The group keeps an informative official website, www.aiitc.org.

[20] 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, as well as in other Islamic media.

[21] 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 İnsani Yardım Vakfı 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.

[22] 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."

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

[24] *CRS Report for Congress: Israel's Blockade of Gaza, the Mavi Marmara Incident, and Its Aftermath* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, June 23, 2010).

[25] Vickers, "Islam In Albania."

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

[27] Remzi Lani and Fabian Schmidt, "Albanian Foreign Policy Between Geography And History," *The International Spectator XXXIII*, no. 2 (April-June 1998).

[28] Grace Halsell, "Special Report: Albania And The Muslim World," *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*, June 1994, <http://www.washingtonreport.com>.

washington-report.org/backissues/0694/94006020.htm.

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

[30] Franz Gustincich, "From Lenin To Bin Laden," *Gnosis: Online Italian Intelligence Magazine* (March 2005), www.sisde.it.

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

[32] *Ibid.*, 15.

[33] Vickers and Pettifer, *Albania: From Anarchy to a Balkan Identity*, 105.

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

[35] US Treasury Press Release, "JS-1703: Additional Al-Haramain Branches, Former Leader Designated By Treasury As Al Qaida Supporters," June 2, 2004, www.ustreas.gov.

[36] Burr and Collins, *Alms for Jihad: Charity and Terrorism in the Islamic World*, *Ibid.*, 146.

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

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

[39] Kullolli, *Proselytization in Albania by Middle Eastern Islamic Organizations*, 58.

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

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

[42] 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.

[43] 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.

[44] 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," *Southeast Europe Times*, March 11, 2010, http://www.setimes.com/cocoon/setimes/xhtml/en_GB/features/setimes/features/2010/03/11/feature-03.

[45] "Pentagon Chief Cancels Albania Visit Over Terror Threat," CNN, July 15, 1999.

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

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

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

[49] *Ibid.*

[50] Author's correspondence with OIC official, October 2010.

[51] Kullolli, *Proselytization in Albania by Middle Eastern Islamic Organizations*, 62.

[52] 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>.

[53] See "Islamic Development Bank Expresses Interest In Albania For Increase Of Bank's Presence Through Private Sector," *Balkans.com*, July 6, 2010.

[54] 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 TIKa Web site, www.tika.gov.tr.

[55] *Ibid.*

[56] For example, see the following interview, which tacitly implies that the Ottoman period represented the high point of Albania's development, and that Islam is thus a "normal" part of the country's future path. Vahide Ulusoy, "Interview With Ervan Hatibi On Albanian Muslims," *Worldbulletin.net*, July 22, 2008.

