



NORTH MACEDONIA

Quick Facts

Population: 2,125,971 (July 2020 est.)

Area: 25,713 sq km

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

Government Type: Parliamentary republic

GDP (official exchange rate): \$11.37 billion (2017 est.)

Source: CIA World FactBook (Last Updated September 2020)

INTRODUCTION

Ethnically-and-religiously divided North Macedonia has seen significant turbulence since its 2015 political crisis, which was followed by the larger European migration crisis. North Macedonia has been affected by this latter trend, serving as a transit corridor for international migrants between Greece and Serbia, and the attendant threat of terrorists posing as migrants has been noted by government officials as a result. Yet even before these crises, security risks involving Islamism existed in North Macedonia, which has cooperated with U.S. counterterrorism efforts and joined the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS.¹ According to the U.S. State Department's most recent Country Reports on Terrorism, Roughly 150 ethnic North Macedonians volunteered to join the al-Nusra Front and ISIS in Syria and Iraq.² In response to this trend, the North Macedonian government in September 2014 passed a "foreign fighters law," which criminalized participation in foreign terrorist groups among North Macedonian nationals. Subsequently, several alleged terrorist recruiters and fighters were arrested by local police as part of a large-scale law enforcement operation dubbed "Operation Cell." Then, in February 2018, a new government introduced an ambitious strategy for countering extremism and terrorism.³ Evidence indicates that this approach has been effective.⁴

Some critics (such as officials in neighboring Kosovo) claim that the country's imams have been instrumental in preaching a radical agenda that has helped to indoctrinate fighters.⁵ Several radical imams have been arrested as a result, and the country's official Islamic Community has admitted that certain mosques operate outside of its control.

The West's support for North Macedonian anti-terrorism efforts picked up following the creation of a new government in 2017, which controversially agreed to change the country's former name and constitution to please Greece in the so-called Prespa Agreement of June 2018. While supporters of the agreement hoped that Greece would thus drop its veto of North Macedonian NATO and EU membership, some Greek politicians vowed to never ratify the deal. Indeed, the Prespa Agreement was opposed by a majority of both Greeks and North Macedonians. Nevertheless (and despite a referendum in September 2018), North

Macedonian leaders vowed to press ahead with unpopular constitutional changes. The political development has important implications for national cohesion and radicalism in the country, since fears have swirled for years that ethnic Albanian Muslims, who have no allegiance to the North Macedonian name or identity, could demand autonomy. Given the religious affiliation of this demographic, Islamism has always lurked in the background, even during amicable day-to-day relations between North Macedonia's different ethnic and religious groups.

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

Islamist activity in North Macedonia is most widespread in areas where the Muslim population—the vast majority of whom are ethnic Albanians—is concentrated: parts of the capital, Skopje, the towns and villages between Kumanovo and Tetovo (near the border with Kosovo), and towns like Gostivar, Debar, Kicevo and Struga located along the western border with Albania. However, ethnically mixed areas exist in other regions of the country as well, such as in the Central Massif Mountains south of Skopje. Along with some enclaves in the west of the country, a residual Turkish population dating from Ottoman times is scattered in several villages in the east, near Stip and Radovis. The number of new foreign fighters originally from North Macedonia has sharply declined since 2016. This is due, in part, to a series of updates to the national Criminal Code, which punished participation in foreign militaries, paramilitaries, or police forces. Lines of counterterror effort which enforced these code updates did so under the moniker “Operation Cell.” “Operation Cell” and its follow-up, “Cell 2,” were a series of police raids in 2015-2016 which resulted in the arrests of 16 Syrian-trained fighters working with domestic extremist groups.

The organization that officially represents North Macedonia's Muslim population of approximately 675,000 is the Islamic Community of North Macedonia (ICM).⁶ In recent years, few altercations or inter-religious problems have occurred, though the management of the Community and its possessions remains prone to politicization among ethnic Albanian parties.

As in other regional countries, Arab-funded and -trained young radicals have challenged North Macedonian authorities, though this trend seems to be waning. Several violent confrontations occurred in the years following a 2001 domestic insurgency initiated by the Albanian National Liberation Army (NLA), which sought to install their candidates in North Macedonia's mosques, more rights, and greater civic employment opportunities.⁷ Later, in July 2010, the ICM's leading cleric, *reis-ul-ulema* Sulejman Rexhepi, admitted that the ICM had lost control over several Skopje mosques, following a fight and near-riot in one *Wahhabbi* mosque.⁸ In September 2010, Rexhepi publicly called on U.S. and EU representatives to help the ICM counter the growing influence of radical Islam.⁹ In 2016, some of the mosques involved were targeted in police raids like “Operation Cell” for their role in indoctrinating young Muslims who would subsequently travel to Syria to train and fight.¹⁰ This police activity has gone a long way toward solving the problem, but at the same time it has been used by nationalist Albanians to stoke distrust of the predominantly Christian North Macedonian majority.

While international experts have warned for years about fundamentalist threats to North Macedonia's stability, they considered Islamic infighting to be little more than internal politicking between rival ethnic Albanian parties over property proceeds and other financial interests until Albanian participation in the Syrian *jihād* became public in 2014. Nevertheless, compared to the preceding decade, fundamentalist Islam (in the form of veiled women, men in traditional garb and long beards) has become increasingly visible in daily life.¹¹

While there is certainly some truth to charges by skeptics that Islamism is merely “business” in North Macedonia, the participation of local fighters in Syria and Iraq has provided evidence to the contrary. In late August 2016, then-interior Minister Mitko Chavkov stated that at least 25 North Macedonian citizens had been killed while fighting in the Syrian civil war, and 50 were presumed to still be there at the time.¹²

In its 2016 *Country Reports on Terrorism*, the U.S. State Department reported that North Macedonia had conducted three “significant” counterterrorism operations during that year. The most significant one, a joint operation with Kosovo and Albania, resulted in the cumulative arrests of 23 ethnic Albanians over an ISIS-led plot to attack a soccer match between Israel and Albania.¹³ In the summer of 2017, ISIS announced that the Balkans would become the site of future operations.¹⁴

At the same time, expert analysis discerned that jailed ISIS veterans were accessing social media to distribute propaganda and possibly coordinate with other extremists.¹⁵ Almost a year later, another ethnic Albanian (a 23-year-old man from the Skopje area) was reported killed in Syria.¹⁶ On August 7, 2018, North Macedonian police reported the arrest of seven local *jihadist* suspects, in what they said was a continuation of the 2015-16 “Operation Cell.”¹⁷

Aside from actual *jihad* or terrorism activities, local extremists have often sought to seize control of existing Islamic institutions. They have historically used NGOs, charities, publishing entities, domestic and international conferences, political events, “human-rights” activities, and various demonstrations to do so.¹⁸ These radicals have expedited the goals of Saudi Arabia and other Islamic states by overseeing the construction of hundreds of foreign-funded mosques.¹⁹ The Islamist activity that led to fighters going to the Middle East was concentrated in several mosques in Skopje and Tetovo associated with radical preachers. However, in many cases, authorities have still been unable to arrest these figures due to lack of evidence.²⁰

Turkey’s deep footprint in the country, owing to five centuries of Ottoman control that lasted until 1913, adds to the complexities of local Islamism. With the long-simmering feud between Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan and controversial cleric Fethullah Gülen finally boiling over with a failed coup against Erdogan’s government in July 2016, entrenched interests in North Macedonia associated with both sides came under pressure. As the enmity between Erdogan and Gülen continued into 2017, North Macedonia came under tremendous pressure from Ankara to close schools associated with Gülen. Since 2018, North Macedonia’s Justice Ministry has confirmed that it has received 15 requests for extradition to Turkey.²¹ However, to date, North Macedonia has neither closed schools associated with Gülen, nor accepted the extraditions of individuals that Turkey has requested, as this would have been politically divisive and cause problems for a wide range of people unassociated with either side of the conflict. As time passes, it is becoming less and less likely that North Macedonian authorities will accede to such demands. However, the Turkish government maintains some influence on the country’s educational sphere with its own cultural center.

Turkey is particularly important when considering that North Macedonia’s main ethnic Albanian party, the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI), has members privately aligned with rival Turkish camps. Ali Ahmeti (an ethnic Albanian who led the paramilitary National Liberation Army in the 2001 civil conflict) created the DUI and has been a coalition partner in almost all North Macedonian governments since 2002. Diplomatic information alleges that it was actually the DUI’s Ahmeti who vetoed a governmental proposal to close Gülen entities in North Macedonia.²²

Nevertheless, Turkish foreign policy continues to take a calculated position. Then-Minister of Foreign Affairs Ahmed Davutoglu praised Ahmeti as a “factor of stability” in the Balkans during a visit to Skopje in September 2017, just weeks before pivotal local elections.²³ The DUI entered an uneasy coalition with the formerly opposition Social Democratic Alliance of North Macedonia (SDSM), entailing mutual support for one another’s local candidates—an unusual practice—because the DUI feared the growth of Besa, the new pro-Turkish party that had thrown the nation’s traditional balance of power into disarray while eating into the DUI’s base. With Muslims in the Balkans typically supporting Erdogan, and popular perceptions that the DUI is corrupt, Turkish influence over local Muslim populations had grown. The December 2016 elections (Besa’s first) proved that its appeal lay with not only conservative older Muslim voters, but also with young Albanians angered by perceived political establishment.

For its part, the Turkish government and various charities have capitalized on their opportunities in North Macedonia.²⁴ By way of its international development agency (TIKA) and assorted NGOs, Turkey works to support an Ottoman legacy in North Macedonia.²⁵ The Erdogan government has long considered North Macedonia a key part of its neo-Ottoman foreign policy of “strategic depth.”²⁶ North Macedonia has welcomed dozens of major Turkish investors financially backing major projects. Business and political ties have strengthened the bilateral relationship tremendously; when inaugurating the third Bosphorus Bridge in August 2016, President Erdogan welcomed former North Macedonian President Gjorge Ivanov to the ceremony—one of a very small number of leaders to receive that invitation.²⁷

For his part, President Ivanov strongly supported Erdogan. Ivanov defended Erdogan’s reaction to the 2013 protests in Turkey²⁸ and Ivanov’s August 25th visit to Istanbul commemorating the bridge opening coincided with the announcement of a joint police and intelligence operation which led to the arrest of five Albanians from North Macedonia in Istanbul, who had reportedly been planning to join ISIS in Syria (discussed below).

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

Established tradition, such as communal payments to construct village mosques; locals can simply donate anonymously, drop cash in a box, and so on. Even when police have managed to trace some funds to extremist groups abroad, authoritative figures have never been publicly disclosed. Islamists rarely (despite their frequent calls for officials to show greater transparency) detail their accounting.²⁹ As a result, investigators have had to work deductively, relying in part on anecdotal or comparative information.

Officials generally believe Islamists in North Macedonia employ a creative combination of methods to move money. Funds come in through donations from ideologically sympathetic businessmen, officials and Diaspora Muslims for religious projects such as mosques, schools and publications.³⁰ These donations are not always secret; the donating country or organization is often prominently displayed on the entrance of the structure or in the beginning of a book.

Islamist activity in North Macedonia over the past 25 years has been guided largely by outside interests like charities and proselytizers from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states. Pakistani and Malaysian groups have also expressed limited interest.³¹ Often, global Islamist NGOs registered locally or via Western Europe act as intermediaries. However, since the 1990s, relatively fewer suspicious charities have been allowed to register in the country due to a measure of resistance from North Macedonian security officials.³²

Islamist activity in North Macedonia has taken different forms. One key area of activity is the strategic construction of mosques along major highways, high ridgelines, near pre-existing churches or in close proximity to other mosques. Between 2000 and 2010, over 300 mosques were built—88 alone between Skopje and Tetovo, the main ethnic Albanian-majority city, in northwestern North Macedonia.³³ The sum expended was staggering, with costs estimated at \$1.5-\$2.5 million per mosque. According to the same report, Saudi Arabia alone committed over \$1.2 billion from 2003-2013 for building mosques, providing education, and sending local Muslims on the Hajj throughout the Balkans.³⁴

Because Islamists with ties to North Macedonia have been active around the world, the issue cannot be understood as simply a national one. The infamous 2007 “Fort Dix Six” plot to attack a U.S. Army base in Ft. Dix, New Jersey involved three ethnic Albanian émigrés from North Macedonia, and another from Kosovo.³⁵ In Switzerland, the popular 2009 referendum banning minaret construction began after an Islamist group led by another Albanian originally from North Macedonia agitated in favor of such building.³⁶

At the same time, even before the Syrian crisis and the rise of ISIS, about 50 Muslims from North Macedonia had joined al-Qaeda’s *jihad* against the United States and the Coalition in Afghanistan.³⁷ During a joint press conference with then-North Macedonian Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski in January

2010, then-Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman stated that radical Islam in North Macedonia and the Balkans was a major concern.³⁸ Four months later, three Muslims from North Macedonia participated in the controversial “humanitarian flotilla” organized by the Turkey-based Islamic charity Humanitarian Relief Foundation (IHH) to break the Israeli blockade of Gaza.³⁹ An Israeli-organized cultural event in Skopje was guarded by a Mossad contingent considered unusually large by past standards, indicating Israeli perceptions of Islamic terror threats.⁴⁰

For years, security experts have warned about rising Islamism in North Macedonia —albeit without arousing much attention. In 2012, dramatic evidence of developing radical trends emerged with a series of protests, the first of which was in the Albanian-majority town of Struga and was a reaction to an annual carnival in the nearby, predominantly Christian village of Vevchani. While the carnival is traditionally light-hearted, participants at the event mocked Islam; in response, groups of angry protestors attacked churches in Albanian and North Macedonian Muslim-populated villages in western North Macedonia and stoned a group of Christians on a bus. Although further investigation and input from intelligence officials revealed local politics and financial interests were, in part, behind the lurid affair, the demonstration confirmed and its ability to organize on short notice.⁴¹ Most troubling, perhaps, was that the whole incident became a high-level security concern. Top government leaders and foreign diplomats were forced to meet extensively and reaffirm their commitment to work together and overcome ethnic and religious differences.

A second, more serious protest occurred in the capital, Skopje, on May 4, 2012, after a police press conference disclosed the apprehension of several Albanian “Islamic extremists.” The men had been detained after a massive police operation to find the killers of a group of young North Macedonian fishermen who had been murdered execution-style, along with an older man who apparently witnessed the scene. The killings sparked the biggest manhunt in North Macedonian history—in which 600 police officers were deployed. At subsequent protests in Skopje (with smaller ones in Tetovo and Gostivar), several thousand ethnic Albanian youths took to the streets, waving Albanian and Saudi flags and chanting “Allahu Akbar” and “death to the Christians.” Some were seen wearing provocative shirts with slogans like “Islam will dominate the world” and demanding the establishment of a Greater Albania.⁴²

The protest originated at the historic Yahya Pasha Mosque, which had then been under *Wahhabbi* control for at least 10 years. Since the young protesters attacked the municipal office of the local (and ethnic Albanian) mayor in the Cair neighborhood of Skopje, security experts saw this as a sign that the extremists were now outside the ethnic Albanian political mainstream.⁴³ There were also reports of fights on public buses between North Macedonian and Albanian youth and attacks by the latter on elderly North Macedonians.

The trial of the suspected gunmen was deferred twice, and witnesses and family members of those killed were only able to face the defendants in court.⁴⁴ Although police did not charge him with direct involvement, longtime Islamic radical Shukri Aliu called for an “Arab Spring”-type uprising targeting the government, and sought the participation of *imams* throughout the country.⁴⁵ Aliu was extradited from Kosovo at the end of 2012 in connection with physical attacks on several *imams* near the village of Kondovo some seven years prior. In 2015, a Skopje court overruled an appeal from the five men accused of the murders, upholding life sentences for the crime and sparking complaints from ethnic Albanians. Further ethnic and religious politicization is expected, however; media outlets alleged that the Special Prosecutor’s Office (set up in September 2015 to investigate a very opaque “government wiretapping” affair) would like to revisit the case.⁴⁶

Certain political developments accompanying North Macedonia’s political crisis were bound to increase inter-ethnic and inter-religious tensions. Unfortunately, the United States exacerbated problems by supporting the relatively unpopular SDSM party after 2015. The party’s nominal leader (and the country’s prime minister), Zoran Zaev, tried to win ethnic Albanian votes wherever they may be found (he cam-

paigned as far as Switzerland), promising unsolicited concessions to the ethnic Albanian population.

Zaev did not win an outright majority and was unable to form a government in December 2016. Ethnically Albanian party leaders drafted a platform (known as the “Tirana Platform”) weeks after a visit from Obama-era CIA chief John Brennan. The Tirana Platform primarily benefited ethnic Albanians, and Zaev was able to win their political support. The demands for ethnic “rights” were seen as ultranationalist and chauvinistic not only by North Macedonians, but also by the country’s Turkish, Roma Serb and Vlach populations, sparking nationwide protests that lasted until a violent incident in the parliament following the illegal election of an ethnic Albanian parliamentary speaker on April 27th.⁴⁷ The West quickly rushed to recognize the new Zaev-led government, which offered a draft language law, expanding mandatory rights for the usage of Albanian to parts of the country where no Albanians live.⁴⁸

In January 2020, with the political crises of the past five years still fresh in the country’s collective memory, Zaev called for early elections to be held that April and stepped down from the presidency in the hopes of ensuring fair processes. The new, technical government, led by Zaev’s Minister of Interior and freshly minted Prime Minister Oliver Spasovski, was tasked with preparing for new elections.⁴⁹ Zaev’s Social Democrat party would go on to win the election (postponed until July due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic) and he reassumed the role of prime minister on August 30.⁵⁰ Zaev’s reelection, combined with the ways in which the North Macedonian government handled certain aspects of the coronavirus pandemic (such as permitting select religious communities to continue in-person worship despite a nationwide lockdown and curfew) and poor election turnout will likely enflame existing inter-ethnic and religious tensions.⁵¹

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

Nearly 70 percent of the country’s national population of two million is composed of ethnic North Macedonians, a Slavic people who speak a language similar to Bulgarian and Serbian. While most are Orthodox Christian, a fraction is Muslim. Ethnic Albanians, who comprise 25 percent of the population, are almost entirely Muslim, predominantly from the Gheg sub-group common to northern Albania and Kosovo. Other Muslim populations include Turks (four percent of the total population), Roma (around three percent), and about 17,000 Bosniaks.⁵²

A 2011 Pew report on global Muslim population growth trends indicates that North Macedonia will experience a higher projected increase in number of Muslims to non-Muslims (5.4%) than any other European country through 2030; Pew expects that by then some 40.3% of the total North Macedonian population will be Muslim. This demographic trend, in turn, will have severe political and social implications.⁵³

The greatest defining—and complicating—factor about Islamism in North Macedonia is its intimate linkage with ethnic identification and politics. Local attitudes toward Islamic groups, Islam in general, and the general concept of ethnic identification remain in a perpetual state of flux. This unique situation arguably makes a true understanding of Islam and society more difficult in North Macedonia than in any other country in Europe. The specific conflation of Albanian hardline nationalism and Muslim affiliation makes this a combustible issue, hampering law enforcement and promoting a culture in which political negotiation and a perceived need for international mediation still dominate.

The chronic polarization between ethnic North Macedonians and Albanians is, however, overblown and both populations have a general tolerance for one another. This is where foreign (specifically-Western) political interference has proven so negative. The polarization intensified during the country’s 2001 political conflict, in which Kosovo-led Albanians took up arms against DUI president Ali Ahmeti’s NLA. Under international pressure, a peace treaty—the Ohrid Framework Agreement—was signed shortly thereafter by leaders of the then four major political parties. A territorial decentralization bill two years later – essentially, political horse-trading between the then-ruling SDSM and DUI – solidified control of Albanian

political parties across large swathes of northern and western North Macedonia.

On a broader level, the major social issue within the Muslim community is the gap between the younger and older generations. Young Islamists, confident in their own studies in Arab states, tend to depict older leaders of North Macedonia's Islamic Community as "communists" who do not understand Islam correctly, due to the latter's different experience growing up in the former Yugoslavia.⁵⁴ Yet the perceived discrepancy is rarely put to the test (say, through a televised theological debate). Rather, it is generally carried out through violence and intimidation. Since intimidation is often carried out subtly and occurs within tight-knit communities, it is seldom reported.⁵⁵ For the time being, therefore, the primary victims of Islamist activity in North Macedonia remain the country's Muslims themselves.

ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

In North Macedonia, the state's ability to counteract extremism is conditioned on the ability of ethnic Albanian parties to blur the boundaries between ethnic and religious identity. This tendency has been visible in social and political life, but has impeded the ability of North Macedonian authorities to pass counter-terrorism legislation or to conduct operations. When an Albanian is arrested for a religiously motivated crime, there is often a backlash claiming that the individual is the victim of ethnic discrimination; and when that individual is arrested for nationalist extremism, the counter-argument alleges religious bias. In this situation, police have been forced to tread carefully; this more than anything explains the relatively small number of terrorism-related arrests in North Macedonia as compared to Kosovo and Albania, where no such ethnic minority problem exists.

Because of the migrant crisis and the Syrian civil war, North Macedonia had to divert resources and attention away from dealing with the domestic Islamist threat. The political crisis began in early 2015, coinciding with the European migration crisis. During the migration crisis, some one million illegal migrants and refugees moved from Greece *en route* to Western Europe by way of North Macedonia.⁵⁶ Keeping control of this flow required considerable police and military assets to be redirected to the country's southern border with Greece and its northern one with Serbia.

In line with U.S. requests, North Macedonia banned citizens from participating in foreign conflicts on September 3, 2014 through a series of "foreign fighter laws."⁵⁷ While no one voted against the measures, several prominent members of the ethnic Albanian coalition partner, DUI, abstained from voting in favor of it. Similar laws have been passed in other Balkan countries. The law, which threatens any returning fighters with jail time, is meant mostly to deter aspiring *ihadis*. In North Macedonia, it provided a solid basis for the state to systematically target known radical preachers, recruiters and returned foreign fighters from the Middle East.

The results can be seen in several related sweeps by special police, under the title "Operation Kelija (Cell)." In early August 2015, police targeted mosques, NGO offices and residences associated with recruiters and fighters for ISIS, in certain Muslim-majority cities.⁵⁸ Nine suspects were arrested, including Rexhep Memishi, a well-known radical *imam* opposed to the ICM. Another 27 suspects were at large, believed to be in the Middle East. The U.S. Embassy in Skopje praised the action as a contribution to regional and global efforts against the "evil of terrorism."⁵⁹ In March 2016, a court sentenced six of the individuals (including the self-proclaimed imam) to seven years in prison.

In July 2016, the operation continued with a further sweep and arrest of four more ISIS-related Islamists.⁶⁰ The third part was completed in August 2016, when Turkish police extradited five North Macedonian Albanians suspected of having links with ISIS. They had been arrested in Istanbul while preparing to go to Syria.⁶¹ Information from security sources indicates that this was not the first time North Macedonian and Turkish police have cooperated to identify and arrest North Macedonian nationals associated with Islamist groups on Turkish soil.

The European migrant crisis and subsequent terrorist attacks in Western Europe since 2015 raised concerns over the potential for terrorists to penetrate Europe disguised as asylum seekers through countries like North Macedonia. During the crisis, one of the major problems for non-EU members (like North Macedonia, Serbia and Turkey) was their exclusion from the EU's database system for cataloging asylum seekers (EURODAC). Given the vast number of migrants who have crossed through them in recent years, these non-EU countries are being left to create bilateral or otherwise special methods of cooperation and intelligence-sharing. Since the mass migration phenomenon is targeting Northern and Western Europe, not the Balkans, it would be more in the interests of the EU to cooperate with these countries than the other way around. However, for various reasons, the bloc has done an insufficient job in doing so.⁶²

In its 2017 report, the State Department noted that "North Macedonia's capacity to detect and deter acts of terrorism without international support needs to be strengthened." Similarly, the report cites North Macedonia's "uneven" implementation of a 2015 five-year CVE strategy.⁶³

U.S attitudes soon shifted, however. Following the (very controversial) creation of a leftist coalition government led by SDSM and DUI in 2017, this CVE program was replaced by a more comprehensive strategy developed in consultation with international partners. Its organizational framework was given the rather grandiose name of National Committee for Countering Violent Extremism and Countering Terrorism, or NCCVECT.⁶⁴ The strategy as stated focuses on countering foreign fighters, religious extremism, developing deradicalization programs and tackling the "nexus" of crime, corruption and terrorism. In August 2018, the Pentagon praised the North Macedonian government for agreeing to repatriate ethnic Albanian foreign fighters captured in Syria- a decision that caused concern among regular citizens.⁶⁵ Even without new challenges such as importing terrorists, the government's official objectives will be challenged by a continuing lack of capacity and the serious long-term challenges to the state introduced by the June 2018 Prespa Agreement with Greece.

The coronavirus pandemic has worsened hate speech, as well as ethnic and religious intolerance and divisions. As a result of endemic fake news, rumors spread about unequal treatment available for ethnic Albanians and North Macedonians, as did claims that the government was biased toward certain ethnic and religious groups. Blame for the rise in COVID cases, for instance, has been specifically directed at citizens from the Muslim population.⁶⁶ Apparently, comments made by elected officials such as Dimitar Apasiev of the leftist Levica party, who had earlier claimed that North Macedonia was being completely "Islamicized," did not go unnoticed.⁶⁷

ENDNOTES

1. "82 Partners United in Ensuring Daesh's Enduring Defeat," The Global Coalition, n.d., <https://theglobalcoalition.org/en/partners/>
2. U.S. State Department, "North Macedonia," *Country Reports on Terrorism 2019, 2020*, <https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2019/north-macedonia/>; United States Department of State, "Macedonia," in *Country Reports on Terrorism 2017, 2018*, <https://www.refworld.org/docid/5bcflf9620.html>.
3. Government of the Republic of Macedonia, National Committee for Countering Violent Extremism and Countering Terrorism, "National Counterterrorism Strategy of the Republic of Macedonia (2018-2022)," February 2018, https://wb-iisg.com/wp-content/uploads/bp-attachments/6135/ct_national_strategy_eng_translation_sbu.pdf
4. U.S. Department of State, "North Macedonia," in *Country Reports on Terrorism 2019, 2020*, <https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2019/north-macedonia/>
5. This consensus is based on comments to the author made by several senior Kosovo officials since 2015.
6. The ICM's official website is www.bim.org.mk. The BIM acronym comes from the Alba-

nian-language version of the name, *Bashkesia Fetare Islame*. Note that the institution is often referred to by its Macedonian name and acronym, *Islamska Verska Zaednica* (IVZ). International sources also refer to it as the Islamic Religious Community (IRC). All of these acronyms refer to the same official body.

7. The most infamous examples of Salafi violence date from the turbulent reign of former Skopje *mufti* Zenun Berisha, who used a sort of Islamist private guard to take over several mosques, impose preferred candidates for jobs, and generally assert his authority. Accounts of intimidation, beatings and attacks against moderates such as former *Reis* Arif Emini and former Skopje *mufti* Taxhedin Bislimi were widely reported in the local media. A comprehensive account of these events, citing some of the leaders involved, is given in Christopher Deliso, *The Coming Balkan Caliphate: The Threat of Radical Islam to Europe and the West* (Praeger Security International, 2007), 82-86.
8. Svetlana Jovanovska and Branko Gjorgjeski, "Radical Islam In Macedonia Worries Western Observers," *WAZ/EU Observer*, July 8, 2010, <https://euobserver.com/news/30446>.
9. "Macedonia: Moderate Muslims Seek Help Against Sect," Associated Press, September 20, 2010, <http://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/sdut-macedonia-moderate-muslims-seek-help-against-sect-2010sep20-story.html>.
10. "Special forces conduct raid against IS," *Economist Intelligence Unit*, August 12, 2015, http://country.eiu.com/article.aspx?articleid=833431267&Country=Macedonia&topic=Politics&-subtopic_2
11. See Deliso, *The Coming Balkan Caliphate: The Threat of Radical Islam to Europe and the West*.
12. "MVR so detali: makedonski drzhavjani uapseni vo turtsija planirale zaminuvane na boishtata vo sirija kako del od id," ("MOI details: Macedonian nationals arrested in Turkey planned departure battlefields in Syria as part of ISIS,") *Kurir*, August 27, 2016, <http://kurir.mk/makedonija/vesti/mvr-so-detali-makedonski-drzhavjani-uapseni-vo-turtsija-planirale-zaminuvane-na-boishtata-vo-sirija-kako-del-od-id/>.
13. United States Department of State, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2016*, July 2017, <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/272488.pdf>.
14. "ISIS Threatens Terror Campaign in the Balkans," *Balkan Insight*, June 8, 2017, <https://balkaninsight.com/2017/06/08/isis-wows-to-wreak-vengeance-on-balkans-in-new-threat-06-08-2017/>
15. Haris Fazliu, "Macedonia's Jailed Jihadists Try to Recruit Online." *Balkan Insight*, July 14, 2017, <https://balkaninsight.com/2017/07/14/macedonia-s-jailed-jihadists-try-to-recruit-online-07-05-2017/>.
16. "Another Macedonian citizen killed in Syria fighting," *B92*, May 14, 2018, https://www.b92.net/eng/news/region.php?yyyy=2018&mm=05&dd=14&nav_id=104153.
17. "Macedonia Detains Seven Suspected Jihadists," *Balkan Insight*, August 7, 2018, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/macedonia-busts-suspected-jihadists-08-07-2018>.
18. Islamic NGOs in Macedonia include both international franchises and local entities. Some belong to umbrella organizations, allowing them to participate in a variety of events internationally, and thereby network with likeminded ideologues from Islamic states.
19. Bojan Pancevski, "Saudis Fund Balkan Muslims Spreading Hate Of The West," *Sunday Times* (London), March 28, 2010, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/saudis-fund-balkan-muslims-spreading-hate-of-the-west-mdmz2lv8w0r>. Further factual details are cited in "Milijarda Evra Investirani Co Radikalniot Islam (Billion-euro Investment In Radical Islam)," *Nova Makedonija*, July 6, 2010.
20. According to a senior security official, as of May 2016 some 80 such Islamists were being kept under 24-hour surveillance, as they could not be arrested, but still posed a potential threat. Author's interview with Macedonian security official, May 2016.
21. Vlado Apostolov, "Turkish Pressure on North Macedonia Worries Gulen Supporters," *Balkan Insight*, April 17, 2019, <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/04/17/turkish-pres->

- [sure-on-north-macedonia-worries-gulen-supporters/](#).
22. Author's interview with Macedonian official, August 2016.
 23. "Davutoglu: Ahmeti vital for Macedonia's stability," MIA, September 27, 2017, <http://www.mia.mk/en/Inside/RenderSingleNews/61/133878717#>.
 24. For example, in the year 2010 alone, some 80 Islamic students from Turkey were known to be studying at the *madrassa* in the eastern town of Stip—with an announced plan for increasing this number in coming years to 500, and eventually to 1,500. "Turski Studenti Go Sardisaa Stip (Turkish Students Occupy Stip)," *Dnevnik* (Skopje), December 28, 2010.
 25. In one example, Turkish State Minister Faruk Celik visited Skopje in December 2010 to mark the TIKA's renovation of the magnificent 15th-century mosque of Mustafa Pasha. He also met with top leaders of the country's Islamic community. See "Turkey Says To Continue Repairing Ottoman Arts In Macedonia," *World Bulletin*, December 21, 2010, <http://www.worldbulletin.net/servisler/haberYazdir/67671/haber>.
 26. For more on the doctrine of "strategic depth" developed by then-Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmed Davutoglu, see Ioannis N. Grigoriadis, "The Davutoglu Doctrine and Turkish Foreign Policy," Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP), April 2010, http://www.eliamep.gr/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/KEIMENO-EPTASIAS-8_2010_IoGrigoriadis1.pdf.
 27. "3rd Bosphorus bridge inaugurated," *TRT World*, August 25, 2016, <http://www.trtworld.com/turkey/3rd-bosphorus-bridge-inaugurated-172455>.
 28. Sinisa Jakov Marucic, "Macedonians Divided Over President's Support for Erdogan," *Balkan Insight*, July 8, 2013, <https://balkaninsight.com/2013/07/08/macedonian-president-s-whole-hearted-support-for-erdogan-divides-critics/>.
 29. For an example of this prevailing hostile attitude, note the comments of Islamic NGO leader Bekir Halimi to a journalist: "We are fully entitled to receive funding from both governmental and non-governmental sources from Saudi Arabia." See Pancevski, "Saudis Fund Balkan Muslims Spreading Hate Of The West." The article also notes that Halimi "refuses to name the sources of his funding."
 30. Ibid.
 31. Deliso, *The Coming Balkan Caliphate*, 73-78.
 32. For example, a former Macedonian counterintelligence chief, Zoran Mitevski, recounted that in 1996 U.S. diplomats accused him of being "undemocratic" when he blocked several terror-linked Saudi charities from registering in the country. Deliso, *The Coming Balkan Caliphate*, 81.
 33. "Milijarda Evra Investirani Co Radikalniot Islam (Billion-Euro Investment In Radical Islam)."
 34. Ibid. These figures roughly correspond with those given in Pancevski, "Saudis Fund Balkan Muslims Spreading Hate Of The West," as well as with figures given to the author by Macedonian security officials.
 35. Three of the men involved in the plot, brothers born in the Albanian-majority town of Debar, were arrested for their role in the failed attacks on U.S. soldiers at Ft. Dix. Garentina Kraja and William J. Kole, "Brothers Behind Fort Dix Plot Were From Pro-U.S. Enclave," Associated Press, May 10, 2007, <https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/brothers-behind-fort-dix-plot-were-from-pro-us-enclave/>.
 36. Devorah Lauter, "Swiss Voters OK Ban On Minarets," *Los Angeles Times*, November 30, 2009, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2009-nov-30-la-fg-swiss-minaret30-2009nov30-story.html>.
 37. Pancevski, "Saudis Fund Balkan Muslims Spreading Hate Of The West"; See also "Vahabisti Vrvuvaat Borci Za Dzihad Vo Makedonija" ("Wahhabis Recruit Fighters For Jihad In Macedonia"), *Vecer*, March 29, 2010. These claims correspond with testimony made by different Macedonian security officials and local Muslims to the author since 2004.
 38. A summary of the foreign minister's statements are available on the website of the Israeli

Ministry of Foreign Affairs (www.mfa.gov.mk).

39. Goce Mihajloski, “Makedonskite Humanitarsi Se Vratija Od Israel” (“Macedonian Humanitarians Returned From Israel”), *AI Televizija* (Skopje), June 5, 2010.
40. This insight comes from the comments of a Macedonian Jewish Community leader to the author, who was also present at the event and can confirm the Israeli security delegation’s size.
41. See Chris Deliso, “After Macedonia’s Islamic Protests, Investigators Search for Significance amidst a Confusing Array of Motives and Clues,” www.balkananalysis.com, February 13, 2012, <http://www.balkananalysis.com/macedonia/2012/02/13/after-macedonias-islamist-protest-investigators-search-for-significance-amidst-confusing-array-of-motives-and-clues/>.
42. “Macedonia protests signal surge of radical Islam,” *Euractiv*, May 14, 2012, <http://www.euractiv.com/enlargement/protests-macedonia-signal-radica-news-512663>.
43. Author’s interview with Macedonian security official, June 2012.
44. Sinisa Marusic, “Macedonia Mass Murder Trial Witnesses ‘Saw Gunmen,’” *Balkan Insight*, January 18, 2013, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/witnesses-saw-armed-men-at-skopje-s-mass-murder-site>.
45. “Shukri Aliu Povikuval na Arapska Prolet vo Makedonijua,” (“Shukri Aliu Called for an Arab Spring in Macedonia”), *Sitel TV*, December 6, 2012, <http://www.sitel.com.mk/shukri-aliu-povikuval-na-arapska-prolet-vo-makedonija>.
46. Sinisa Jakov Marusic, “Macedonia Upholds Albanians’ ‘Terrorist Murder’ Sentences,” *Balkan Insight*, December 14, 2015, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/macedonia-court-confirms-terrorist-murders-sentence-12-14-2015>.
47. “Macedonian Parliament’s New Ethnic Albanian Speaker Enters Office,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, May 3, 2017, <https://www.rferl.org/a/macedonia-parliament-speaker-xhaferi-enters-office/28466113.html>
48. On November 15, 2017, the Macedonian parliament began debating the draft language law, a process that was expected to be contentious and last for several months. See, “Parliament to vote on draft law on the use of languages,” MIA, November 15, 2017, <https://english.republika.mk/parliament-to-vote-on-draft-law-on-the-use-of-languages/>
49. Anastas Vangeli, “North Macedonia Political Briefing: Macedonian Politics in 2020,” China-CEE Institute, May 15, 2020, <https://china-cee.eu/2020/05/15/north-macedonia-political-briefing-macedonian-politics-in-2020/>.
50. “North Macedonia’s Parliament Approves New Left-Wing Coalition Government,” *France 24*, August 31, 2020. <https://www.france24.com/en/20200831-north-macedonia-s-parliament-approves-new-left-wing-coalition-government>.
51. Ana Petrusheva, “Pandemic No Longer Silences North Macedonia’s Political Turmoil,” *Balkan Insight*, August 14, 2020, <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/08/12/pandemic-no-longer-silences-north-macedonias-political-turmoil/>.
52. These numbers derive from the 2002 national census. The data is available in several PDF files on the official website of the State Statistical Office of Republic of Macedonia, www.stat.gov.mk.
53. Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, *The Future of the Global Muslim Population: Projections for 2010-2030*, 2011, <http://www.pewforum.org/future-of-the-global-muslim-population-regional-europe.aspx>.
54. “Opasnost Od Radikalizam I U Macedonikija” (“Danger From Radicalism In Macedonia Too”), *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, September 11, 2010. In the author’s personal experience, the meme of “old Communists” (older, traditionalist Muslims) as being allegedly ignorant is a very pervasive one, and invoked frequently by Islamists in the country.
55. Some examples include: physical attacks against clerics deemed to be in the way of Islamists and their goals; pressure for females to wear conservative religious dress; orders for moderate Muslims not to associate with Christians; injunctions against shopkeepers against selling alcohol; perpetuation of the archaic custom of arranged marriages for teenage girls; threats against young Muslims seen to be engaging in Western “hedonism;” violence against Muslim

- journalists seeking to report on any such issues, and so on.
56. Skopje did not start registering migrants passing through the country on their way to Western Europe until June 2015. According to the UNHCR, From July 1, 2015 until 2016, 697,228 people migrated through Gevgelija, a southern town in Macedonia. According to the UN Resident Coordinator's office, in 2015 alone, 750,000 migrants entered Macedonia. See http://refeu.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/034_I_04_Domachowska.pdf
 57. See Chris Deliso, "Asymmetric Threats Challenge Macedonia before Easter and Elections," Balkananalysis.com, April 25, 2016, <http://www.balkananalysis.com/macedonia/2016/04/25/asymmetric-threats-challenge-macedonia-before-easter-and-elections/>.
 58. Sinisa Jakov Marusic, "Macedonian Police Targets ISIS Suspects," *Balkan Insight*, August 6, 2015, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/macedonia-launches-anti-terror-busts-08-06-2015>.
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 61. "Kelija 3: Five Jihadists from Macedonia, Members of ISIL, Arrested," *Vecer*, August 27, 2016, <http://vecer.mk/makedonija/kjelija-3-uapseni-5-dzihadisti-od-makedonija-chle-novi-na-isis>.
 62. Chris Deliso, "Mistrust and Different Priorities Vex EU-Macedonian Security Cooperation," Balkananalysis.com, May 27, 2016, <http://www.balkananalysis.com/blog/2016/05/27/mistrust-and-different-priorities-vex-eu-macedonian-security-cooperation/>.
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 66. Afrodita Musliu, "COVID-19 Has Worsened Hate Speech in North Macedonia," *Balkan Insight*, August 3, 2020, <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/08/03/covid-19-has-worsened-hate-speech-in-north-macedonia/>.
 67. OnAir Media Group, 'Димитар Апасиев и Стојанче Ангелов во „Само Вистина“ 1.7.2020 2 дел,' July 1, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bw9RvBKF4ac>