Understanding Push and Pull Factors in Kosovo:

Primary Interviews with Returned Foreign Fighters and their Families

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November 2017

The opinions expressed here do not represent the views of UNDP.

Table of Contents

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Abbreviations

CVE – Countering Violent Extremism

BIK – Islamic Community of Kosovo

ISIS – Islamic State of Iraq and Syria

KCSS – Kosovar Centre for Security Studies

KP – Kosovo Police

PVE – Prevention of Violent Extremism

UNDP – United Nations Development Programme

Executive summary

In March 2017, UNDP commissioned an assessment of returned foreign terrorist fighters, currently serving their sentences in Kosovo[1], either in prison or under house arrest, as well as their families. The objective of this research assessment is to understand better the pull and push factors that make Kosovars join foreign terrorist groups, and support Kosovo institutions and international stakeholders in developing better policies and programmes for the prevention of violent extremism, as well as rehabilitation and reintegration programmes for returned foreign fighters.[2]

Through analysis of the interviews and a literature review, the researchers have identified a series of push and pull factors that drove Kosovars to travel to conflict zones in Syria and Iraq. However, this does not mean that there is one specific path to radicalization or one particular profile of a radicalized individual. Such generalizations are impossible to make and could lead to ineffective policies.

Through cooperation with various Kosovo institutions, an unusual and complex piece of research was undertaken to better understand pathways and factors driving radicalization among Kosovars. The authors **conducted 13 semi-structured primary interviews with returned fighters (8) and their families (3), as well as those who supported extremist groups domestically (2).**

In total, researchers conducted 13 semi-structured interviews:
- ➢ **Six** with people who were **serving prison sentences** on charges related to terrorism;
- ➢ **Three** with people in the **process of appealing** against the sentences of lower level courts on charges of terrorism;
- ➢ **One** with **a person who had travelled to Syria** and is not facing any charge; and
- ➢ **Three** with **family members** of returned foreign fighters.

These interviews were conducted in various municipalities across Kosovo, including in prisons, at the homes of convicted foreign fighters, and in public spaces. To conduct these interviews, the researchers based their approach on life story methodology, which is a qualitative method of data collection in which people are asked to document their life over a period of time and place, social ties to others, individual agency or control, and variations in the timing of key life events.

The flow of foreign fighters from Kosovo to the conflicts in Syria and Iraq from 2012 to 2017 has been alarming. A total of 335[3] Kosovars – men, women and children – are known to have travelled to or been born in the conflict-ridden region. Of these, 253 are men who joined violent extremist groups such as ISIS, Jabhat Al Nusra, an offshoot of Al Qaeda, and Islamist group Ansar al Sham. This number amounts to approximately 140 fighters per one million inhabitants. However, the number of fighters from Kosovo ranks

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1 - References to Kosovo shall be understood to be in the context of Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999).

2 - While the most widely used and academically accepted term is foreign terrorist fighter (FTF), this research has used the term foreign fighter, since not everyone interviewed had received a final verdict by the court stating that they had joined a terrorist organization in Syria.

3 - A narrative report by the Kosovo Police on the numbers of Kosovars – shared on 25 September 2017 – suggests a total of 360 Kosovars have travelled to Syria. Of these, 255 were men, 48 were women, and 57 were children. An additional 36 children were born in the conflict zone. The numbers differ slightly from the 21 March 2017 database that the Kosovo Police shared with the researchers, with the largest change being the number of children. The newly updated report includes 20 additional children, and a further 36 born in Syria or Iraq (93 children in total). The report also includes two additional men (255 in total), and seven fewer women (48 in total). Since researchers did not have access to the recently updated database, but only aggregate results, the analysis in the report is based on the database that was shared with the researchers on 21 March 2017. While researchers acknowledge that the analysis in this report is based on findings from six months ago, it still provides a relevant basis for analysis.

moderately low in terms of the proportion of the population that identify as Muslim.[4]

About 37 percent (or 123) of those that left have returned to their communities in Kosovo. Only a fraction of the estimated 55 women have returned (6 women). An estimated 72 men have died in the conflict, and two women and a child have passed away from natural causes.[5] Kosovo institutions have arrested over 200 individuals for terrorist activity.

Radicalization among individuals in Kosovo is not specific to one geographic area, though **southeast Kosovo, near the border with the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, appears to have a higher number of violent extremist group** recruits per capita, overall. Five municipalities that are considered most prone to recruitment relative to their population (foreign fighters per 10,000 population) include: Hani i Elezit/Elez Han, Kaçanik/Kačanik, Gjilan/Gnjilane, Viti/Vitina and Obiliq/Obilić.

Key findings from interviews:

Socio-economic challenges – understood in this case as a lack of opportunities and a poor standard of education – may have contributed to a creating an environment in which Kosovars are more vulnerable to propaganda from extremist groups. The unemployment rate reported among the interview sample, with 70 percent reporting some sort of employment, did not correspond to the Kosovo Police database that indicates about 76 percent of the adults that left to Syria and Iraq were unemployed prior to travel. **However, many interviewees had at one point sought asylum or worked abroad in Western Europe, indicating that they were possibly looking for more opportunities and a better life elsewhere.**

Perception of Islamophobia in Kosovo has added to a narrative of Islam under threat, which appears to have been tapped into by extremist groups and recruiters who have a more fundamentalist form of Islam than the one traditionally practiced by the majority of Kosovars. This narrative appears to have caused some individuals to feel alienated from society and thus made them more vulnerable to radicalization. Such a perception also appears to have created a sense of indignation among the interviewees, who at times feel they are portrayed as something other than Albanians and Kosovars.

Enablers and means of travel: Research and interviews with returned fighters point to a **well-developed and organized recruitment network** active throughout Kosovo, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, and Albania. The network has consisted of charismatic imams, grassroots-level coordinators, financiers and foreign fighters currently in Syria and Iraq who have contributed to the process of radicalization in local communities, facilitated travel to Syria, organized basic military training, and consolidated an active community of ethnic Albanians in the conflict zone.

Identity, cause and ideology: empathy for the victims and a feeling of belonging: The liter-

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4 - Richard Florida, "The Geography of Foreign ISIS Fighters," CityLab, 10 August 2016, https://www.citylab.com/equity/2016/08/foreign-fighters-isis/493622/; and Kursani, Shpend. Report Inquiring into the Causes and Consequences of Kosovars' Involvement as Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq. Kosovar Center for Security Studies, 2015. http://www.qkss.org/repository/docs/Report_inquiring_into_the_causes_and_consequences_of_Kosovo_citizens%27_involvement_as_foreign_fighters_in_Syria_and_Iraq_307708.pdf.

5 - Information from the Kosovo Police, 25 September 2017.

ature suggests that radicalization is a social process and that identity plays a key role in individuals joining the ranks of violent extremist organizations. Recruiters use the collective grievances of particular groups to enable narratives of victimization, while also exploiting political ideologies, religious beliefs and ethnic sentiments to recruit followers and legitimize their actions. All eight interviewees described their reasons for travelling to fight in Syria as largely moral and religious in character. Their religious perspective appeared inherent to their identity and was key to their interpretations of different aspects of their lives, their actions, sense of purpose and the very socialization process by which they claimed to have been radicalized.

The internet and social media facilitated communication and helped amplify radical views. The internet and social media have been identified as some of the main sources of information and socialization for recruitment and radicalization, and one of the main risk factors by the *Kosovo Strategy on Prevention of Violent Extremism and Radicalization Leading to Terrorism 2015-2020*[6]. Subjects interviewed noted that the radicalization and recruitment process took place through engagement and communication both in physical and virtual spaces. The internet and social media facilitated access to information that created more opportunities for individuals to become radicalized, and in some instances served as an 'echo chamber': a place where individuals find their ideas supported and echoed by other like-minded individuals.

Reasons why women join the violent extremist movement: In Kosovo, as in many other places, it is widely believed that women do not decide to join violent extremist movements on their own, but that they are forced to do so. While some women might have travelled to conflict zones due to pressure from their partners or families, many others made this decision for themselves. The drivers that influenced women to make this decision appear more or less the same as for men. However, our interviews – with a small sample of two women – suggest that women often feel more alienated than men due to perceived Islamophobia in society, and that they are in a more vulnerable economic position. It also appears that the driver to find a better life and enjoy more religious freedoms was a strong motivation among women.

Policy Implications

This study is limited by a small sample size, particularly when compared with the number of Kosovars who have travelled to the conflict zone. The sample size also limits any sophisticated quantitative analysis, and while the number of interviews was sufficient to helping establish a set of patterns and insights into some of the main push and pull factors driving radicalization in Kosovo, the researchers attempted to reach out to more subjects. The 13 individuals that ultimately participated in this study are, in a way, a 'self-selected' group of those that were willing to share their stories and experiences.

Nevertheless, this research provides important and novel information to academics, researchers and policy makers studying this topic. Based on this research, it is evident that the motivations, or pull and push factors which contribute to individuals deciding to join a foreign conflict and to return, are diverse and distinct. These should be considered cautiously, since generalizations could easily lead to ineffective and discriminatory policies.

The aim of this research was to assist those working in this field in the development of better programming for the prevention of violent extremism. This research shows there is a strong

6 - http://www.kryeministri-ks.net/repository/docs/STRATEGY_parandalim_-_ENG.pdf

need for an increased focus on the prevention of violent extremism. Such strategies should aim to expose, evaluate and improve the situations that inspire individuals to turn to violent extremism.

Introduction

UNDP undertook this research with the goal of examining further the phenomenon of Kosovars who joined foreign wars, their motivations for travelling to Syria and Iraq, and the push and pull factors that drew them into radicalization.

Since 2014, UNDP has been working to develop a deeper and more nuanced understanding of violent extremism. We aim to address two interlinked challenges: (1) the rise of violent extremism, using a development and peacebuilding approach firmly grounded within human rights principles, and (2) the need to govern increasingly diverse and multi-cultural societies, which requires attention to institutions, political and religious ideologies and people and promotion of human rights based approaches.

UNDP's efforts at preventing violent extremism are ultimately about strengthening vertical and horizontal cohesion in society as well as helping local actors reinforce their resilience to conflict and division. UNDP's approach looks at the relationship between conflict prevention and economic opportunities, rule of law and human rights and inclusion in governance and civic processes, particularly focusing on women and youth participation in building social cohesion.

Based on the Secretary-General's Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism and SDG 16—UNDP has developed a comprehensive strategic framework, 'Preventing Violent Extremism through Inclusive Development and the Promotion of Tolerance and Respect for Diversity'. We launched our first four year (2017-2020) Global Programme, "Development Solutions for the Prevention of Violent Extremism", which translates UNDP's strategic framework into programmatic outputs.

The results of this research will help those studying these issues to understand better the drivers of violent extremism and pathways to radicalization in Kosovo, and to explore programming for the disengagement, de-radicalization and reintegration of Kosovars who joined foreign conflicts.

Existing academic literature, policy papers and policies have put emphasis on both push and pull factors as elements that have driven Kosovars to radicalization. Media reports and research by governmental and nongovernmental organizations have emphasized Kosovo's structural challenges – such as poverty and high unemployment, a weak education system and governance failures – as vulnerability factors that have created a conducive environment for radicalization. Other significant research points to social processes and identity – religious identity and the influence of charismatic imams educated in Middle Eastern countries – as key factors driving individuals to radicalize and join foreign wars.

In this context, the interviews conducted for this research examined why around 335 Kosovars travelled to Syria and Iraq, and why some returned. Answers to these questions will help explore the underlying push and pull factors that impacted their decisions and the process of radicalization.

To address these questions, this paper begins by evaluating the phenomenon of radicalization by considering the societal factors and motivations, as well as the internal factors that contribute to the radicalization process. To do so, the study reviews academic literature that has focused on the phenomenon both globally and in the context of Kosovo, in an attempt

to determine the set of factors that drove individuals and/or groups to radicalize. First, this study provides an overview of demographic information and a brief analysis of Kosovars who have travelled to Syria and Iraq, based on an anonymous database from the Kosovo Police, Second, it presents and discusses definitions of the push and the pull factors that impact the radicalization process. It then combines the literature review with primary interviews to provide a more holistic overview of the main factors that impacted Kosovars' decisions to travel to foreign conflicts. Third, it discusses reintegration challenges and provides recommendations.

Methodology

This research relied on a three-pronged methodology for the collection and analysis of data:

1

Desk Review

Thorough review of available published materials and consultations with stakeholders

2

Fieldwork

One-on-one primary interviews with Kosovars who have traveled to Syria and/or Iraq, and are imprisoned on terrorism charges, and their families

3

Analysis

Analysis of the results of the interviews based on the parameters of the desk review
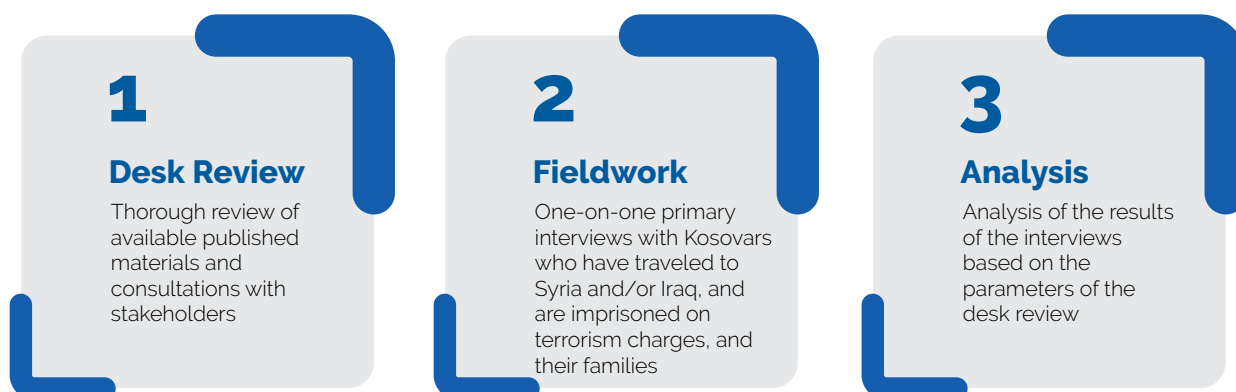
Desk Review. This study examined institutional strategies and policies, reports, journal articles and policy papers regarding the drivers of violent extremism in general, and in Kosovo in particular. Researchers also relied on media coverage from various Kosovo-based and international media organizations to provide complementary insights from secondary sources. The study also referred to social media photographic evidence and demographic data collected by the Kosovo Police on 335 individuals who are known to have travelled to the conflict zones. The goal was to establish preliminary parameters to understand better the context of returned foreign fighters, their motivations for travelling to the conflict zone and the factors that drew them into radicalization. This research also served to identify a list of people from institutions, civil society and international actors to interview and to inform the methodology which was employed for the interviewing process (see Annex 3).

The desk review helped develop a set of 15 initial hypotheses for the push and pull factors that may have impacted the radicalization of some Kosovars and their ultimate decision to travel to and fight in foreign conflicts (see Annex 1). The study used this set of hypotheses to develop questions that were used in one-on-one primary interviews. These were used only as guidelines, with the researchers ensuring that the interviews flowed in a natural, conversational manner. The team later analysed interviewees' answers in conjunction with the hypotheses, and used their statements to validate or refute these hypotheses.

Fieldwork. The fieldwork was conducted during March 2017. Researchers spoke to various stakeholders in the CVE and PVE field to complement the background information. Stakeholders included institution officials, law enforcement officials, representatives of international organizations and foreign diplomatic missions, members of civil society, researchers and Islamic scholars and leaders. Researchers then conducted primary research through interviews with 1) individuals convicted of, pending trial for, and/or indicted on charges relating to terrorism, most of whom were returned fighters; and 2) their family members.

In order to secure the interviews, researchers sent 23 formal requests for interviews (in the form of a letter) through the Kosovo Correctional Service to each returned foreign fighter currently in custody on terrorism charges either at the High Security Prison in Gërdoc/Grdovce, the Dubrava Correctional Facility or the Lipjan/Lipljan Correctional Facility. The letter introduced the researchers, described the goal of the report and ensured the privacy and confidentiality of the subject. Of the 23 inmates who were contacted, eight agreed to be interviewed, although two of these inmates would later change their minds and ultimately decline to be interviewed.

Additionally, three returned foreign fighters, currently in the appeals process, agreed to be interviewed, and interviews with them were arranged informally, through researchers' networks. Some of the aforementioned stakeholders also facilitated contact between the researchers and interviewees.

In total, researchers conducted 13 semi-structured interviews:
> ➤ Six with people who were serving prison sentences on charges related to terrorism;
> ➤ Three with people in the process of appealing against the sentences of lower-level courts for charges of terrorism;
> ➤ One with a person who had travelled to Syria and is not facing any indictment; and
> ➤ Three with family members of returned foreign fighters.

Two of the people who had travelled to Syria and who were interviewed in prisons also offered information about family members who were, or still are, in Syria. In total, researchers interviewed four women and nine men. Two of those who were interviewed in prisons had not travelled to Syria or Iraq, but were sentenced for other terrorism charges. One person who was interviewed in prison was intercepted while en route to Syria. Seven interviewees had travelled to and returned from Syria.

Overview of the interview methodology

The team conducted semi-structured interviews:
> ➤ The structured portion of the interviews included questions that aimed to determine demographic information of the primary interviewees (age, marital status, educational background, socio-economic wellbeing, family background, etc.).
> ➤ The non-structured portion of the interviews included open-ended questions about their lives, their process of radicalization, motivations for travelling to Syria, their decision to return to Kosovo and life since their return. This way, the interviewees themselves set the terms of reference for describing what happened to them and why.

The team based their approach on life story methodology, which is a qualitative method of data collection in which people are asked to document their life over a period of time and place, social ties to others, individual agency or control, and variations in the timing of key life events. Analysis of the interviews focused mostly on descriptive and phenomenological aspects. Researchers looked for ways to understand and then "present real-life experiences through the stories" told by interviewees.[7] Though not all stories can be neatly organized or uniformly presented, this approach allows researchers to gain rich descriptions of the subjects' experiences and to explore the meanings that subjects derive from their experiences.[8] Through the life story approach, the researchers were able to determine varying trajectories or pathways, transitions and turning points in the subjects' lives.

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7 - Carol Chunfeng Wang, Sara Kathleen Geale, "The power of story: Narrative inquiry as a methodology in nursing research," School of Nursing and Midwifery, 14 May 2015, http://ac.els-cdn.com/S2352013215000496/1-s2.0-S2352013215000496-main.pdf?_tid=229d-f3e8-fd28-11e6-8954-00000aacb35d&acdnat=1488226130_8e79d24cc5828eda8678abf74866c1ab;

8 - Jaber F. Gubrium and James A. Holstein, "Handbook of Interview Research, Context and Methods," Sage Publications 2002, http://www.history.ucsb.edu/faculty/marcuse/projects/oralhistory/2002AtkinsonLifeStoryInterview.pdf; and Joan Miquel Verd andMartí López, "The Rewards of a Qualitative Approach to Life Course Research. The Example of the Effects of Social Protection Policies on Career Paths, Volume 12, No 3, Art/E 15 September 2011; UK Data Services, "Life Story Interviews," https://www.ukdataservice.ac.uk/teaching-resources/interview/life-story; and Carol Chunfeng Wang et al.

The research follows the principles of confidentiality and the 'do no harm' approach.

As such:
- ➢ The identities of the interviewees were not revealed to anyone outside the research team and will be kept private throughout the report.
- ➢ To avoid any possible identification of the interviewees in the report, multiple codes were used for each interviewee.
- ➢ None of the interviews were recorded. Instead, the researchers relied on their notes taken during the interviews.
- ➢ Both researchers were present during all the interviews with male interviewees, and both engaged in asking questions and taking notes.
- ➢ The female researcher conducted the interviews with female interviewees and family members on her own.

Interview length varied, with the shortest interview lasting 1.5 hours and the longest interview lasting 4.5 hours. Except for one interview that was conducted over a period of two days, all other interviews took place in one sitting. Some of the interviews held in prisons had to follow time frames based on prison regulations. Researchers asked interviewees to refrain from naming people, organizations or networks and to focus on more general phenomena and trends instead. This reflected researchers' focus on describing each category through demographics, roles or in terms of phenomena. The interviewees were also asked not to detail their actions in Syria and informed that in the event that they mentioned something that could incriminate them, the researchers would ask them to not discuss this further.

The Kosovo landscape: joining foreign conflicts

What do numbers tell us in terms of demographics and geographic footprint?

The Counterterrorism Directorate at the Kosovo Police gave researchers access to an official database containing information on Kosovars who have travelled to Syria and Iraq since 2012 and joined opposing factions, including violent extremist groups such as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and Jabhat Fateh Al-Sham front (formerly known as Jabhat Al Nusrah).[9] The database presents a detailed breakdown of the demographic information of all Kosovars, including men, women and children who have travelled to the conflict zones, such as their age, place of origin, timeline of travel, and whether they were killed in battle, returned to Kosovo, or still remain in the theatre of conflict. The database does not include personally identifiable information in order to protect the privacy of the individuals.

According to the Kosovo Police database:

➢ The total number of Kosovars known to have travelled to, or who have been caught in attempt to travel to, the conflict zones in Syria and Iraq since 2012 is 335.

➢ 253 (or 75 percent) of those who travelled to Syria and Iraq were men and 55 (18 percent) were women. The database lists an additional 27 individuals (or 8 percent) as children. In addition to these 27, another nine people were between 14 and 17 years old in the year they travelled but were listed as adult men or women in the database. The analysis below was conducted following the categorization of adults and children used by the Kosovo Police in the database.

➢ Those who travelled are predominantly Kosovo Albanians, but also include four Gorani and two Kosovo Bosniak men.

➢ About 60 percent of Kosovars listed in the database were adults (men and women), who travelled to Syria and Iraq between 2012 – 2015 and were born between 1986 and 1996. This statistic indicates that the most vulnerable age group at the time of travel was between 18 and 28 years old.

➢ The number of ISIS fighters from Kosovo ranks moderately low in terms of the proportion to the population that identify as Muslim.[10] In comparison to Belgium, which has 699.4 ISIS fighters for 1 million population identified as Muslim, Kosovo comes in at a moderately low number to 150 fighters per 1 million Muslim population.[11] The number of ISIS fighters from Kosovo is 140 per 1 million population, making Kosovo one of the largest exporters of foreign fighters per capita basis in Europe.[12]

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9 - The official Kosovo Police database was shared with the researchers on 20 March 2017. The database does not include information between 21 March 2017 and the date of the publication. However, A narrative report by the Kosovo Police on the numbers of Kosovars – shared on 25 September 2017 – suggests a total of 360 Kosovars have travelled to Syria. Of these, 255 were men, 48 were women, and 57 were children. An additional 36 children were born in the conflict zone. The numbers differ slightly from the 21 March 2017 database that the Kosovo Police shared with the researchers, with the largest change being the number of children. The newly updated report includes 20 additional children, and a further 36 born in Syria or Iraq (93 children in total). The report also includes two additional men (255 in total), and seven fewer women (48 in total). Since researchers did not have access to the recently updated database, but only aggregate results, the analysis in the report is based on the database that was shared with the researchers on 21 March 2017. While researchers acknowledge that the analysis in this report is based on findings from six months ago, they still provide a relevant basis for analysis of trends, especially when it comes to the number of adults, which is very similar in the two different sources.

10 - Data on religion comes from the Kosovo Agency for Statistics and can be found here: http://askdata.rks-gov.net/PXWeb/pxweb/sq/askdata/askdata__14%20Census%20population__Census%202011__3%20By%20Municipalities/population%20by%20religion,%20sex%20and%20age%20mnicipality.px/?rxid=fefe7eb3-9305-442c-95e4-2e6d5795d67d

11 - Richard Florida, "The Geography of Foreign ISIS Fighters," CityLab, 10 August 2016, https://www.citylab.com/equity/2016/08/foreign-fighters-isis/493622/; and Kursani, Shpend. Report Inquiring into the Causes and Consequences of Kosovars' Involvement as Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq. Kosovar Center for Security Studies, 2015. http://www.qkss.org/repository/docs/Report_inquiring_into_the_causes_and_consequences_of_Kosovo_citizens%27_involvement_as_foreign_fighters_in_Syria_and_Iraq_307708.pdf.

12 - Based on data from anonymous KP database.

> ➤ Forty individuals were intercepted while attempting to travel to Syria between 2012 and 2017. Of these, 30 were men, eight were women and two were children. A further 79 men were intercepted and/or convicted for spreading and promoting radical views, supporting, recruiting and planning activities related to terrorism in Kosovo. Eighteen other individuals (14 men and 4 women) were held for secondary support to foreign fighters, described as facilitating studies, business, or accompanying foreign fighters in their travel to Syria.[13]
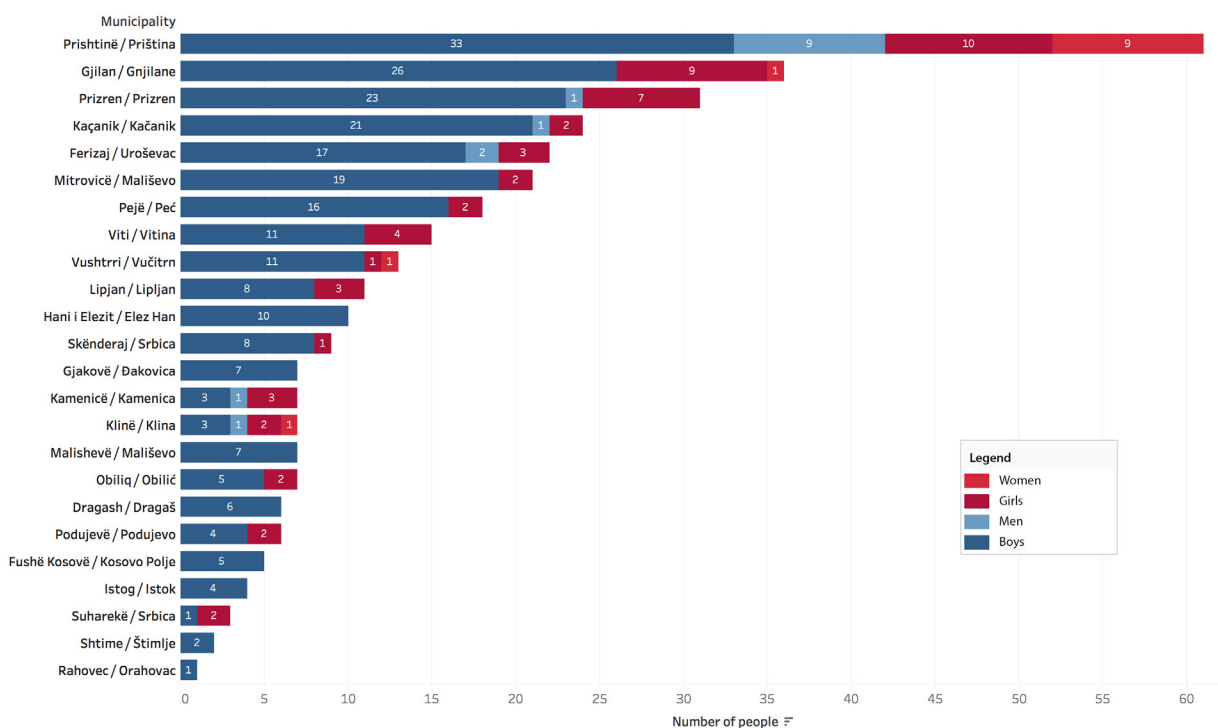

Figure 1: Number of Kosovars who travelled to Syria and Iraq by gender and age group

Previous criminal records, educational attainment and employment status. Roughly half the men who travelled to Syria and Iraq were married and had a criminal record. Most of the men, around 85 percent, had finished secondary school. About 10 percent, or 25 men, had received tertiary education. The average secondary school level among men in Kosovo is 54 percent, whereas the tertiary education level is 7.8 percent. The educational level among women was lower, with 69 percent having finished secondary school and 24 percent having finished primary school. None of the women had received tertiary education. Kosovo-wide, an estimated 46.3 percent of women have finished primary school, 43.7 percent have finished secondary school and about 6.1 percent hold degrees from tertiary education.[14] About 182 of them, or 72 percent, were unemployed prior to leaving Kosovo (see Annex 2 for a visual description). This statistic is even direr for the women, who had a 96 percent unemployment rate before travel. The average rate of unemployment among men in Kosovo is 31.8 percent and 36.6 percent among women.[15] This statistic may suggest a potential grievance held by unemployed individuals and which may have impacted their decision to travel to Syria and Iraq.

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13 - Narrative report by the Kosovo Police on the numbers of Kosovars – shared on 25 September 2017.

14 - The World Bank. Kosovo: Gender Gaps in Education, Health and Economic Opportunities. July 2012. Accessed July 2017. http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/371251468030245833/pdf/759300WP0ENGLI0Box0379792B00PUBLIC0.pdf

15 - Kosovo Agency of Statistics. Results of the Kosovo 2015 Labour Force Survey. June 2016. Available here: http://ask.rks-gov.net/media/1687/results-of-the-kosovo-2015-labour-force-survey.pdf
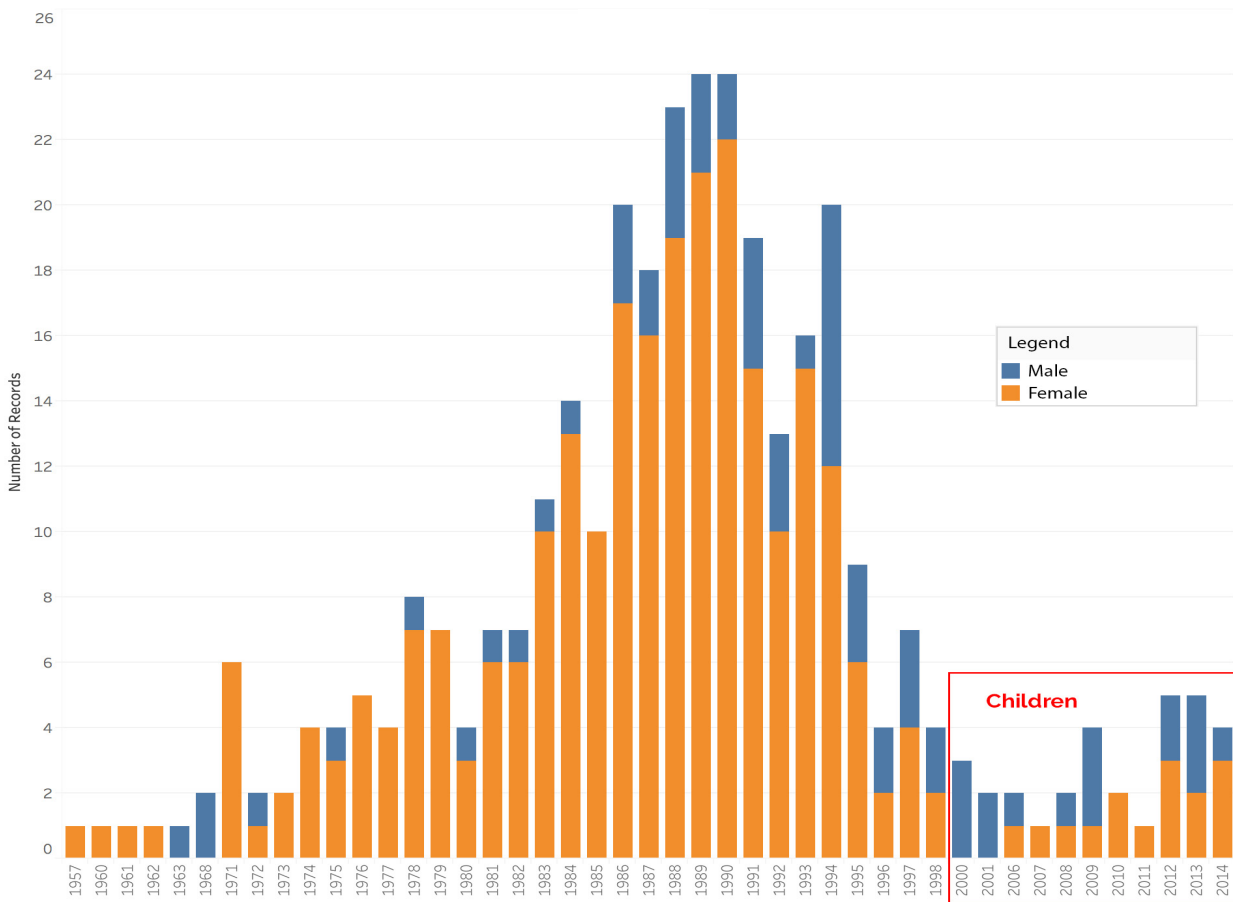
Fig 2. Age distribution of Kosovars who travelled to Syria by gender

Gender perspective. The percentage of women from Kosovo who have travelled is comparable to those of the region, with Kosovo ranking first for the number of women per capita, followed by Bosnia and Herzegovina, and second in the region for the number of women per Muslim population, after Bosnia and Herzegovina.[16] About 45 (or 85 percent) of women in the records were married. It is not clear from the database whether these women travelled to the Middle East with their spouses, or whether they travelled alone. Nor is it clear whether the ten women who were single prior to travelling to Syria and Iraq are now married.

Based on the available information, it is apparent that the trend in women's departure dates differs significantly from that among men: almost two thirds of the men from Kosovo who travelled to Syria and Iraq did so in 2012 and 2013, while more than half of the women (28 of them) travelled in 2014 and another 20 women travelled in 2015. Most women from Kosovo may have travelled to Syria and Iraq after ISIS proclaimed its caliphate, possibly due to an increase in the importance of the pull factor of the urge to defend Islam (discussed below). The marked difference in departure date among genders might also be reflective of the change in ISIS recruitment tactics, as at first it discouraged women from joining and started urging women to join only when it came close to establishing the caliphate.[17] The average age of women is 25.9 (slightly lower than the average age for men: 28.3). Only six women (about 11 percent) have returned, while 49 others remain either in Syria or Iraq.

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16 - Rudinë Jakupi and Vesë Kelmendi, Women in Violent Extremism: Lessons Learned from Kosovo, (Prishtina, Kosovo: Kosovar Center for Security Studies, 2017), http://www.qkss.org/repository/docs/women-in-ve-eng_(2)_986018.pdf, p. 12.

17 - Baker, Aryn, "How ISIS Is Recruiting Women From Around the World." Time, 6 September 2014. Available at http://time.com/3276567/how-isis-is-recruiting-women-from-around-the-world/; and Kursani, Shpend. Report Inquiring into the Causes and Consequences of Kosovars' Involvement as Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq. Kosovar Center for Security Studies, 2015.
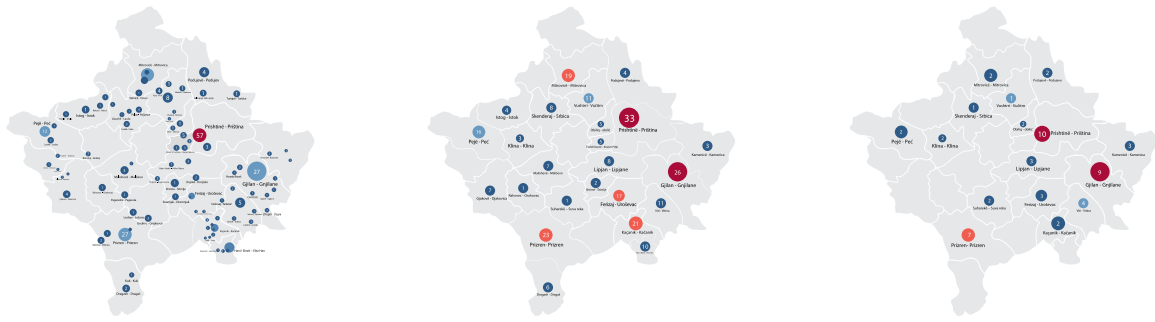
Figure 3: Location of residence of Kosovars prior to travel (left), municipality of origin for men (middle) and women (right) who travelled to Syria and Iraq [see high resolution maps in annex 2]. Maps are for illustration purpose only.

Geographic location. Radicalization among individuals in Kosovo is not specific to one geographic area, although southeast Kosovo, near the border with the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, appears to have a higher number of violent extremist group recruits per capita. The municipalities with the highest number of men who travelled to Syria and Iraq are Prishtinë/Priština (33), followed by Gjilan/Gnjilane (26), Prizren (23), Kaçanik/Kačanik (21), Mitrovicë/Mitrovica (19), Ferizaj/Uroševac (17) and Pejë/Peć (16). Men from Prishtinë/Priština and Prizren constitute 25 percent of the total, but these cities are also the most populous municipalities in Kosovo. Municipalities in southeast Kosovo, namely Gjilan/Gnjilane, Ferizaj/Uroševac, Kaçanik/Kačanik, Hani i Elezit/Elez Han, Viti/Vitina and Kamenicë/Kamenica, account for about 35 percent of those who travelled to the conflict zone in the Middle East, suggesting the region is more vulnerable to radicalization. Five municipalities that are considered most prone to recruitment relative to their population (in terms of foreign fighters per 10,000 population) are: Hani i Elezit/Elez HanHani i Elezit/Elez Han/Elez Han, Kaçanik/Kačanik, Gjilan/Gnjilane, Viti/Vitina,and Obiliq/Obilić. Villages with the highest number of Kosovars who travelled to the conflict zone, including men, women and children, are: Bokshiq/Bokshić, Klinë/Klina (7); Krojmir, Lipjan/Lipljan (5); Polac, Skënderaj/Srbica (4); Kqiq/Kćić, Mitrovicë/Mitrovica (4); and Zheger/Žeger, Gjilan/Gnjilane (3). [See more visualizations in annex 2].
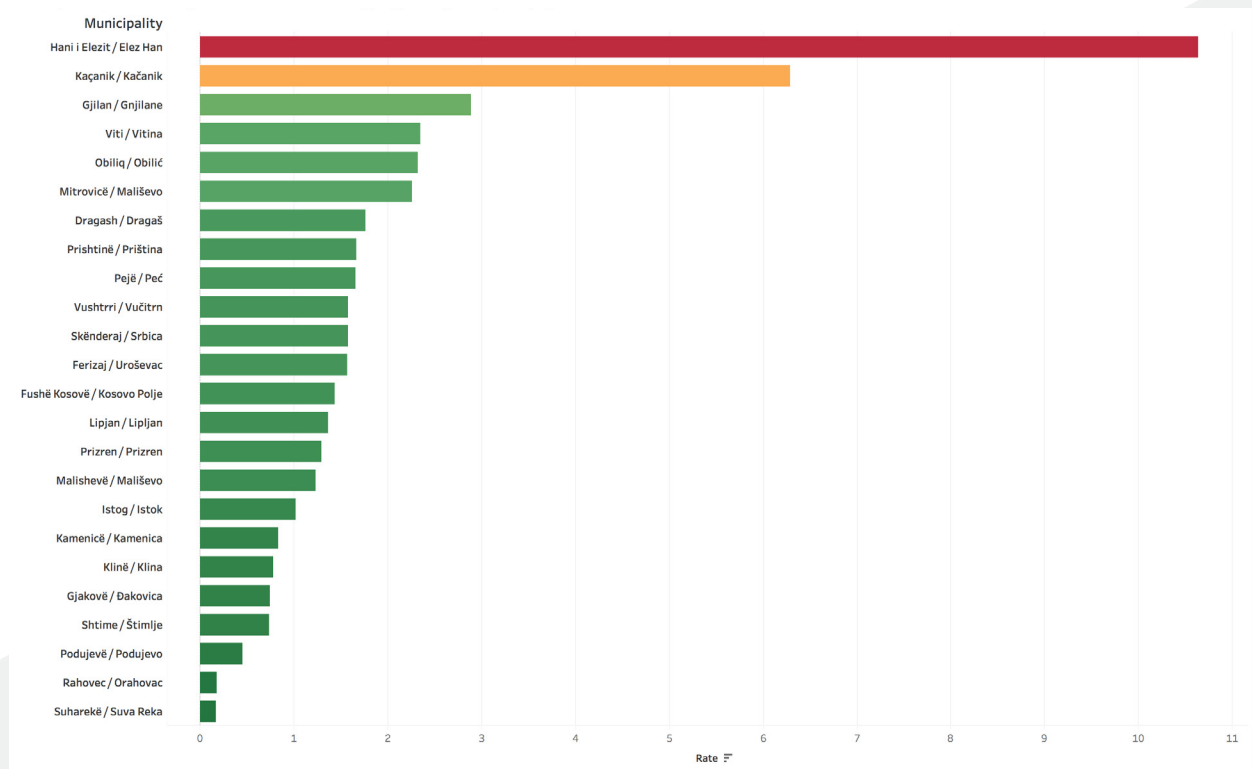

Figure 4: Municipalities that have produced the most foreign fighters per 10,000 population

Timeline of travel: A total of 19 men are known to have travelled to Syria and Iraq in 2012, a third of them from Prishtinë/Priština. There was a sharp increase in the flow of Kosovars into the conflict zone in 2013, with 140 travellers in total, six of them women and five of them children. Kaçanik/Kačanik was the municipality with the highest number of fighters (18), followed by Prishtinë/Priština (17) and Prizren (15) in 2013. A total of 47 men, all of whom were resident in south-eastern Kosovo – Kaçanik/Kačanik, Hani i Elezit/Elez Han, Viti/Vitina, Gjilan/Gnjilane and Ferizaj/Uroševac – left in 2013; another 38 men from these municipalities left in the following two years, alongside 20 women and 5 children. A total of 114 Kosovars left in 2014 and 60 in 2015.

Municipality	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Prishtinë / Priština	6	17	27	7	3
Ferizaj / Uroševac		5	15	2	
Gjilan / Gnjilane		8	14	14	
Pejë / Peć	1	10	7		
Klinë / Klina		1	6		
Prizren / Prizren	2	15	6	8	
Lipjan / Lipljan		5	5	1	
Viti / Vitina		7	5	3	
Mitrovicë / Mališevo	3	10	4	4	
Vushtrri / Vučitrn		6	4	3	
Gjakovë / Đakovica	1	2	3	1	
Kaçanik / Kačanik	1	18	3		1
Kamenicë / Kamenica		1	3	3	
Dragash / Dragaš	1	3	2		
Malishevë / Mališevo	2	2	2	1	
Obiliq / Obilić		4	2	1	
Skënderaj / Srbica	1	5	2	1	
Istog / Istok	1	2	1		
Podujevë / Podujevo		2	1	2	1
Suharekë / Srbica			1	2	
Fushë Kosovë / Kosovo Polje		4		1	
Hani i Elezit / Elez Han		10			
Rahovec / Orahovac		1			
Shtime / Štimlje		1		1	

Figure 5: Number of Kosovars (335) who travelled to Syria by municipality and year

Deaths in conflict zones. The total number of Kosovars known to have been killed in the conflict zones in Syria and Iraq since 2012 is estimated to be between 56 and 60. All of them are men, at least two of whom were killed in separate suicide missions. These two were reportedly the first foreign fighters from the Balkans to be involved in suicide attacks on behalf of ISIS in Iraq.[18] None of the women that travelled to Syria and Iraq have been reported killed in the conflict zone. Of the men who were killed, 39 percent were married prior to travel to Syria.

Rate of return. About 37 percent of Kosovars who travelled to the conflict zones in Syria and Iraq, or 123 individuals, have returned to their communities in Kosovo. Of these individuals, 114 were men. The total rate of Kosovo returnees is slightly higher than the reported average rate of returnees from Western countries, which is around 20-30 percent.[19] An estimated 180 men and women are considered to remain in the conflict zone.

Three of those who have returned to Kosovo are children, suggesting that at least 24 children remain in the conflict zone. Of the 27 children who travelled with their parents to Syria and Iraq, 18 are from Prishtinë/Priština. The children who remain in the conflict zone were born between 2011 and 2017,

18 - Gall, Carlotta. "How Kosovo Was Turned Into Fertile Ground for ISIS". The New York Times, 21 May 2016. Accessed July 2017. Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/22/world/europe/how-the-saudis-turned-kosovo-into-fertile-ground-for-isis.html

19 - The Soufan Group. Foreign fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq, December 2015. Available at: http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TSG_ForeignFightersUpdate3.pdf;

with the oldest having been born in 2008. A recent report by the Kosovo Police on travellers to Syria suggests that 36 children were born in the conflict zone to Kosovar parents, or to a Kosovar mother or father.

The rate of return among Kosovars who were married and those who were not differs significantly by gender. Of 118 men who were married, 60 returned to Kosovo and 58 remained in Syria or Iraq. However, of the 150 men who are not married only 55 (roughly one third) have returned and 95 have not. Among married women, only six returned to Kosovo, while 39 remain in Syria or Iraq. The number of Kosovo men and women who are married and remained in the theatre of conflict is almost the same (36-39), suggesting they are probably married to each other. Although it remains unclear, it is possible that families may have a stronger commitment to the caliphate and thus continue to reside there and support the movement.

Kosovo institutional actions and local initiatives

Since mid-April 2015, Kosovo has a law that prohibits participation in foreign wars as part of foreign armies, police, paramilitary or parapolice groups, organized groups or individually. Under the law, persons found guilty of these crimes can be imprisoned for up to fifteen years.[20] Subsequently, Kosovo institutions drafted and approved *the Kosovo Strategy on Prevention of Violent Extremism and Radicalization Leading to Terrorism 2015-2020*.[21] The authorities have also drafted Action Plans for the implementation of this Strategy: the first Action Plan for the period 2015-2018, which was revised, and the second Action Plan that covers the period 2017-2020.

Over the past few years, Kosovo Police has cracked down on alleged recruitment and extremist cells across Kosovo. Police arrested 40 men in August 2014 on suspicion of having fought as or supported Islamist insurgents in Syria and Iraq. Among those arrested were imams, foreign fighters who had returned from Syria and Iraq, as well as local grassroots recruiters. A further 17 persons were arrested a month later, among them several prominent imams. This crackdown was reportedly aimed at deterring recruitment of new foreign fighters.[22] To date, the Kosovo Police have reportedly detained or investigated at least 200 people.[23] The prosecutor's office has reportedly instituted legal proceedings against over 190 individuals, including some in absentia.[24] Dozens of organizations and cultural and charity associations have also been shut down for their alleged links to radical imams and foreign fighters.[25]

Additionally, the Kosovo Police informs that since 2013 they have run surveillance on 292 individuals who are suspected of having committed acts of terrorism or are involved in promoting religious extremism in Kosovo. Furthermore, speaking on condition of anonymity, police officials told the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network in Kosovo at the end of 2012 that a number of suspected extremists

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20 - Kosovo, Law No 05/L-002 On Prohibition of Joining the Armed Conflicts Outside State Territory, of 12 March 2015, Accessed July 2017, https://www.mpb-ks.org/repository/docs/LAW_NO._05_L__002_ON_PROHIBITION_OF_JOINING_THE_ARMED_CONFLICTS_OUTSIDE_STATE_TERRITORYEMLJE.pdf; and Treatment of Foreign Fighters in Selected Jurisdictions: Country Surveys. Accessed July 2017. https://www.loc.gov/law/help/foreign-fighters/country-surveys.php#Kosovo

21 - http://www.kryeministriks.net/repository/docs/STRATEGJIA_PER_PARANDALIMIN_E_EKSTREMIZMIT_TE_DHUNSHEM_DHE_RADIKALIZIMIT_QE_SHPIE_NE_TERRORIZEM_2015-2020.pdf.

22 - Norman, Laurence. "Kosovo Arrests 40 Suspected Islamist Militants". The Wall Street Journal, 11 August 2014. Accessed July 2017. Available at: https://www.wsj.com/articles/kosovo-arrest-40-suspected-islamist-militants-1407754434; and BBC News, "Kosovo 'imams held' in raids on Islamic State recruitment," 17 September 2014, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-29239534

23 - REUTERS. "Kosovo arrests 19 ISIS-linked suspects planning attack on Israeli soccer team". The Jerusalem Post, 17 November 2016. Accessed July 2017. Available at: http://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Sports/Kosovo-arrests-19-ISIS-linked-suspects-planning-attack-on-Israeli-soccer-team-472842

24 - Bislimi, Bekim "Deradikalizimi mision i (pa)mundshëm". RFEL, 10 September 2016. Accessed July 2017. http://www.evropaelire.org/a/27979187.html

25 - http://www.npr.org/2016/10/20/498653484/kosovos-government-cracks-down-on-extremist-recruiting

were under surveillance at 30 of the 650 estimated mosques in Kosovo.[26]

Exploring motivations: push and pull factors

There is no authoritative statistical data on the pathways towards individual radicalization despite wide research on the topic. The Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism Report of the United Nations Secretary General states "while there are some recognizable trends and patterns, there are only a few areas of consensus that exist among researchers."[27] An emerging consensus among academics and development organizations is that at-risk individuals do not fit one specific profile and that there is no single pathway to radicalization, but each pathway in itself is affected by a confluence of factors – individual, group and environmental – and that these factors vary from individual to individual, context to context, and according to their surroundings.[28]

Additionally, qualitative research defines these two main categories of drivers in the following way:
1) 'Push factors' - or the conditions conducive to violent extremism and the structural context from which it emerges; and
2) 'Pull factors'- or the individual motivations and processes, which play a key role in transforming ideas and grievances into violent extremist action."[29]

Push factors are the negative social, cultural and political features of one's societal environment that aid in "pushing" vulnerable individuals onto the path of violent extremism.[30] They are commonly known as "underlying/root causes" such as poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, discrimination and political/economic marginalization.

In this context, radicalization is "not a product of one single decision, but the end result of a dialectical process that gradually pushes an individual toward a commitment to violence over time."[31] Push factors by themselves are insufficient to explain the process of radicalization. Moreover, the UNDP framework highlights, "people get pulled into radical and ultimately violent movements through considered manipulation and accompanying socialization processes."[32] These so-called "root causes" may also be accompanied by certain group dynamics and relationships which take these grievances and "give extremism coherence, force, shape and

26 - Arbana Xharra, "Fissures in the Faith: Rise of Conservative Islamists Alarms Kosovans," Balkan Insight, 24 December 2012, http://www.balkaninsight.com/sr/article/fissures-in-the-faith-rise-of-conservative-islamists-alarms-kosovans

27 - "Preventing Violent Extremism through Inclusive Development and the Promotion of Tolerance and Respect for Diversity: A Development Response to Addressing Radicalization and Violent Extremism," Discussion Paper (New York City: United Nations Development Programme, March 2016)

28 - Allan, H., Glazzard, A., Jesperson, S., Reddy-Tumu, S., Winterbotham, W., 2015, Drivers of Violent Extremism: Hypotheses and Literature Review, Royal United Services Institute, London, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/57a0899d40f0b64974000192/Drivers_of_Radicalisation_Literature_Review.pdf; Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Australia; http://dfat.gov.au/about-us/publications/Pages/development-approaches-to-countering-violent-extremism.aspx

29 - Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism – Report of the Secretary-General, A/70/674 (2015). http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/70/674

30 - Hassan, Muhsin. "Understanding drivers of violent extremism: the case of Al-Shabab and Somali youth". Combating Terrorism Center, 23 August 2012. Accessed July 2017. https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/understanding-drivers-of-violent-extremism-the-case-of-al-shabab-and-somali-youth

31 - Borum, Randy. "Radicalization into Violent Extremism I: A Review of Social Science Theories." Journal of Strategic Security 4, no. 4 (2012): 7-36. Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.5038/1944-0472.4.4.1

32 - "Preventing Violent Extremism through Inclusive Development and the Promotion of Tolerance and Respect for Diversity: A Development Response to Addressing Radicalization and Violent Extremism," Discussion Paper (New York City: United Nations Development Programme, March 2016).

appeal."[33]

Pull factors are those that show "positive characteristics and benefits of [a] [violent] extremist organization that 'pull' vulnerable individuals to join." These include the group's ideology (e.g., emphasis on changing one's condition through violence rather than "apathetic" and "passive" democratic means), strong bonds of brotherhood and sense of belonging, reputation building, prospect of fame or glory, and other socialization benefits.[34]

When discussing push and pull factors that drive violent extremism, many scholars advocate the use of different levels of analysis. The three-level model of analysis (micro, meso and macro) is as follows:

- Macro-level drivers are situational in nature, based on broad socio-economic or political contexts (push factors) which affect a large number of people (large communities or even whole countries) and are manifested through governance failures, political and economic grievances, and marginalization;

- Meso-level drivers are social and cultural in nature, based on identity group socialization and influences – religious, ethnic or cultural (pull or enabling factors). Research in the area suggests that appeals to identity and collective grievances are crucial in enabling narratives of victimization, motivating, legitimizing and sustaining involvement in violent extremist groups;

- Micro-level drivers are individual in nature, (pull factors) that relate to individual vulnerabilities and may include cognitive constraints; identity problems, feelings of alienation, marginalization, discrimination, stigmatization and rejection, a disposition to violence, or susceptibility to messaging narratives through social media or person-to-person channels.[35]

33 - Michael Driessen, "Religion and Extremism," in Fostering Social Resilience Against Extremism: Leaders for Interreligious Understanding & Counter Extremism Toolkit, ed. Fadi Daou (Leaders for Interreligious Understanding, 2015), p. 8.

34 - Hassan, Muhsin. "Understanding drivers of violent extremism: the case of Al-Shabab and Somali youth". Combating Terrorism Center, 23 August 2012. Accessed July 2017. https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/understanding-drivers-of-violent-extremism-the-case-of-al-shabab-and-somali-youth

35 - Allan, H., Glazzard, A., Jesperson, S., Reddy-Tumu, S., Winterbotham, W., 2015, Drivers of Violent Extremism: Hypotheses and Literature Review, Royal United Services Institute, London, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/57a0899d40f0b64974000192/Drivers_of_Radicalisation_Literature_Review.pdf; and Schmidt, https://www.icct.nl/download/file/ICCT-Schmid-Radicalisation-De-Radicalisation-Counter-Radicalisation-March-2013.pdf; Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Australia; http://dfat.gov.au/about-us/publications/Pages/development-approaches-to-countering-violent-extremism.aspx

Push factors

This section complements the findings of the desk review with the results of the interviews conducted.

Based on existing research on the pathways to radicalization in Kosovo and the interviews with returned fighters, two broad themes consisting of a confluence of elements stood out as the main vulnerability factors that may have impacted individuals or groups of people in becoming radicalized in Kosovo. They are: 1) structural factors – understood as vulnerability factors related to lack of opportunity, low quality of education, poor institutional capacity and integrity; and 2) increase in perceived Islamophobia, which may have impacted the alienation of individuals or groups within society, and might have been used as a tool by violent extremist groups to radicalize and recruit Kosovars to join foreign wars.

Structural factors: economic challenges, education system, institutional capacity and integrity

Research suggests that socio-economic challenges – understood as lack of opportunity and a low standard of education – may have impacted radicalization or the decision by Kosovars to join foreign wars. While there is no direct correlation between poverty, unemployment and radicalization, the feeling of limited opportunities and a low standard of education may have made Kosovars more vulnerable to propaganda by extremist groups. Furthermore, endemic corruption and, in general, weak institutional capacities, contribute towards creating an environment conducive to radicalization.

"If things were good here, people would not leave to go somewhere else. We left [for Syria] because we thought there would be something better there."[36]

"If I had had a job, I wouldn't have had time to watch videos and all that stuff [with extremist ideology and propaganda]."[37]

"In general, economic wellbeing was never a problem for our family. I worked together with my father in his business practice. We were able to live a normal life with what we had."[38]

"I believe that not reading or thinking critically leads one to terrorism. Before I did not read much. When you don't read, or reflect during readings, you really can't understand concepts well. An imam who has studied will be able to look at different ways of understanding. As such, Islam has not changed; it's always been the same. Only [we have changed], and we've put layers and perspectives onto it."[39]

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36 - AA 010
37 - AA 039
38 - AA 008
39 - AA 006

The context:

The United Nations Secretary General's report *Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism* indicates that a lack of socio-economic opportunities makes individuals more prone to violent extremism. In other words, the report suggests that "countries that fail to generate high and sustainable levels of growth, to create decent jobs for their youth, to reduce poverty and unemployment, to improve equality, to control corruption and to manage relationships among different communities in line with their human rights obligations, are more prone to violent extremism and tend to witness a greater number of incidents linked to violent extremism."[40] the *Kosovo Strategy on Prevention of Violent Extremism and Radicalization Leading to Terrorism 2015 – 2020* describes essential and structural factors such as economic and social challenges as the main driving factors for radicalization.[41]

Kosovo is one of the poorest places in Europe, with an overall unemployment rate of 33 percent and a youth (25 and under) unemployment rate of 57 percent.[42] The quality of public education is low, as recently confirmed by the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment PISA, which suggests that 77 percent of 15-year old students in Kosovo are functionally illiterate.[43] This means that they can read and write but will not be able to apply these skills meaningfully at work or at school.[44] It also limits their opportunities to find a job, as they do not have skills demanded in the labour market.

In terms of empirical research focusing on education and radicalization, the findings are mixed. Some empirical research suggests the level of education of radicalized youngsters and adults does not have a strong impact on the radicalization process.[45] It is often demonstrated that among radicalized persons, there are a mix of well-educated persons as well as those with lower educational attainment. However, other scholars have argued that the education youth receive from their parents and in schools includes more than just the level of academic training. As such, an argument can be made that the content of the education received, as well as the style with which parents and teachers raise and educate children and youth, might be more salient in the radicalization process.[46]

The same case applies with respect to economic conditions and radicalization. Some researchers have suggested that groups with limited access to opportunity rationally engage in terrorist activities.[47] Others have found that poverty does not have a direct, causal impact on terrorism, and have argued that the link between unemployment and radicalization is just a myth.[48]

A 2015 USAID Assessment on violent extremism in Kosovo notes that corruption in Kosovo

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40 - Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism – Report of the Secretary-General, A/70/674 (2015). http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/70/674

41 - Office of the Prime Minister. Strategy on the Prevention of Violent Extremism and Radicalization Leading to Terrorism 2015-2020.

42 - http://www.ks.undp.org/content/kosovo/en/home/countryinfo.html

43 - Education GPS, OECD. http://gpseducation.oecd.org

44 - Shahini, Besa. Functionally Illiterate: Why did Kosovo perform so poorly in PISA? Prishtina Insight, 7 December 2016. Accessed July 2017. Available at: http://prishtinainsight.com/functionally-illiterate-kosovo-perform-poorly-pisa/

45 - Silke, A. (2008). Holy warriors: Exploring the psychological processes of Jihadi radicalization. European Journal of Criminology, 5(1), 99–123; and Krueger, A. B., & Malečková, J. (2003). Education, poverty and terrorism: Is there a causal connection?. The Journal of Economic Perspectives, 17(4), 119-144.

46 - Pels, T., & de Ruyter, D. J. (June 2012). The influence of education and socialization on radicalization: An exploration of theoretical presumptions and empirical research. In Child & Youth Care Forum (Vol. 41, No. 3, pp. 311-325). Springer US.

47 - Blomberg, S. Brock, Gregory D. Hess, and Akila Weerapana. "Economic conditions and terrorism." European Journal of Political Economy 20, no. 2 (2004): 463-478.

48 - Krueger, A. B., & Malečková, J. (2003). Education, poverty and terrorism: Is there a causal connection?. The Journal of Economic Perspectives, 17(4), 119-144; Mercy Corps, "Youth & Consequences: Unemployment, Injustice and Violence," 2015, pp. 14-23.

is systemic and may impact certain groups of people who may feel it limits their opportunities, potentially leading them toward disenfranchisement and feeling of dissatisfaction.[49] The Kosovo Strategy also indicates that low institutional capacity and integrity, including corruption, may have the potential to negatively impact youth, with some of them opting to realize their goals and objectives abroad.[50] It has also been found that pervasive misconduct, especially in the public sector, provides a hook for extremists to frame anti-secular ideology and radicalization.[51]

Findings from interviews:

Limited opportunities as a vulnerability factor

Researchers did not find a clear connection between economic status and radicalization. Most of the interviewees (seven) had some sort of employment prior to engaging in terrorist related activities. While a handful of them claimed to have been satisfied with their work, many held jobs that were either unstable, not in their desired field and/or sector, or unrelated to the subject of their study. Only three out of 13 individuals interviewed said they had been in a dire financial situation. Some did not consider their economic conditions to have been good, but they still characterized them as solid, saying that they had what they described as normal lives in this respect. "Economic wellbeing was never a problem for our family. I worked together with my father in his business practice. We could live a normal life with what we had," said one interviewee.[52]

It should be noted that the employment statistics within the interviewed sample are not reflective of the employment statistics in the Kosovo Police database of the 308 adult men and women who have travelled or attempted to travel to Syria and Iraq. In the Kosovo Police database, 76 percent of the people are listed as unemployed. This could hint that the link between unemployment and radicalization is stronger than observed in the sample interviewed. Alternatively, some of the discrepancy could also be a reflection of how people reported their employment status to the Kosovo Police, and whether holding various short-term, informal jobs in the private sector was considered as employment.

However, two interviewees report feeling a sense of hopelessness and disappointment due to not finding work in their field of study, and identified it as one of the reasons why they travelled to Syria. One of them had held various part-time jobs in the private and the non-profit sector, but he said he had continuously failed to get a job in the public sector despite a high-grade point average at bachelor level. One interviewee noted, "I studied one thing, yet I was working on something else. That hurts."[53] Other personal factors often compounded this sense of hopelessness. One interviewee linked the sadness and depression he felt after losing a parent as one of the two reasons that drove him to travel to Syria.[54]

49 - USAID. Kosovo Violent Extremism Risk Assessment April-May 2015. Accessed in July 2017. http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00M3P6.pdf

50 - Office of the Prime Minister. Strategy on the Prevention of Violent Extremism and Radicalization Leading to Terrorism 2015-2020.

51 - Onuoha, F. C. (2014). Why Do Youth Join Boko Haram? The United States Institute of Peace Special Report. Accessed July 2017. https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/SR348-Why_do_Youth_Join_Boko_Haram.pdf

52 - AA 008

53 - AA 021

54 - AA 006

> **Excerpt from an interview on limited opportunities:**
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> "My father and mother became sick at some point, and I began to lose hope for them. My mother has had a lot of health complications including stomach, heart and kidney problems. My father has back problems. I also began losing hope for my life since I was not getting many opportunities to pursue my dreams. I was becoming depressed. I borrowed money in order to help my parents get healthier. I worked several part time jobs, but nothing very sustainable, no more than three months at a time. The worst for me was when I did not get a job at a large manufacturing company in our town – it was a hard hit. The state did not provide proper opportunities for employment. On the other hand, many people with just four years of schooling got jobs, just because they knew someone."[1]

It is also important to note that half of the interviewees had at one point prior to travelling to Syria sought asylum or worked abroad in Western Europe, possibly indicating that they were looking for more opportunities and a better life elsewhere. This statistic is in line with trends of migration among Kosovars, where at least 380,000 (or 21.4 percent of Kosovo's population) are estimated to live abroad, with some sources suggesting this number is as high as 800,000 (or 44.4 percent). Between 2010 and 2016, around 180,000 Kosovars sought asylum in Western European countries.[55] One interviewee made it clear that the search for a better life was a driver for travelling to Syria. "If things were good here, people would not leave to go somewhere else. We left [for Syria] because we thought there would be something better there."[56] In one particular case, the promise of basic welfare provided by ISIS appears to have attracted an individual to join the organization. The interviewee spoke about not being able "to create a life in Kosovo," and how ISIS offered fighters and their families housing, subsistence, a basic income of US$55 monthly and a promise to take care of their families if the fighter died in combat.[57]

One interviewee inferred that the institutions and political elites favour clientelism rather than meritocracy, whereby they only advance their political cronies, creating an environment that inhibits growth and opportunities for others, causing depression or pushing people to choose paths that are not healthy for themselves and the community. He noted: "A lot of my university peers got jobs with the public sector. I helped write essays and exams for a couple of them when we were at university. Some are in advisory roles in ministries. I was never given the opportunity to get a job there. It is an unfair system. It is not based on meritocracy. Such a situation really affects one's fate in life and the choices one makes."[58]

A couple of interviewees maintained that the Kosovo authorities' weak capacities to tackle high unemployment and provide opportunities led to the radicalization of Kosovars. One parent interviewed said, "It's the fault of the government that he [my son] went there [Syria]. If he had been employed, he wouldn't have gone there."[59] One interviewee who had travelled to Syria said that the authorities "should have found us jobs, so as to create a life here. We wouldn't have gone [to Syria] in that case."[60]

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55 - Kosovo Agency of Statistics. Kosovan Migration. Prishtina: April, 2014. Accessed 20 July 2017. Available here: http://ask.rks-gov.net/media/1380/kosovan-migration-2014.pdf

Migration Policy Institute. "Asylum Applications in the EU/EFTA by Country, 2008-2016" Accessed in July 2017. Available here: http://www.migrationpolicy.org/programs/data-hub/charts/asylum-applications-eueftca-country-2008-2016; and Brenner, Yermi. "Balkan asylum seekers fear deportation from Germany" Al Jazeera. 5 November 2015. Accessed July 2017. Available here: http://www.aljazeera.com/news/europe/2015/11/balkan-asylum-seekers-fear-deportation-germany-151105102613974.html

56 - AA 010

57 - AA 020

58 - AA 022

59 - AA 012

60 - AA 020

While unemployment and poverty do not seem to be direct causes of radicalization in these cases, they can be factors conducive to individuals being vulnerable to manipulation by violent extremist ideologies. Unemployment also means individuals have more time to be exposed to these ideologies. As one of the returned fighters said, "If I had had a job, I wouldn't have had time to watch videos and all that stuff [extremist ideology and propaganda]."[61] Lack of opportunities can lead to further isolation and make the individual more vulnerable to the promise of opportunities from violent extremist groups. A more correct way of considering socio-economic factors as possible drivers of radicalization would be to phrase them in terms of a lack of opportunities, which in turn lead to a sense of hopelessness. This sense of hopelessness might also influence individuals to feel that there is no meaning in their lives, a meaning and purpose that they might seek elsewhere, such as in a battlefield. Researchers do not argue that unemployment and poverty are direct causes of radicalization. Rather they suggest that these factors create environments that are conducive to radicalization, making individuals more vulnerable to manipulation by violent extremist ideologies.

Low standard of education as a vulnerability factor

Regarding educational attainment levels, the researchers found that the level of education of interviewees did not appear to have a strong impact on the radicalization process. While seven percent of all those that have travelled to Syria and Iraq have completed only primary education, 84 percent have graduated from high school and eight percent have completed higher education. Trends in educational attainment are relatively similar between both genders, with the exception that no women in the Kosovo Police database have completed tertiary education. A similar mix was apparent in the sample interviewed for this research.

However, researchers were not able to ascertain in detail neither the content nor the type of education that the interviewees received from their parents or teachers. Relatively poor critical thinking skills were observable among some of the interviewees. A low educational attainment level and a low standard of education can lead to "uncritical acceptance of 'facts' [which] would seem to make individuals vulnerable to falling prey to slick propaganda of a black and white worldview of groups like ISIL" according to a USAID assessment.[62] One interviewee, who holds a bachelor's degree from a Kosovo university, spoke of his own one-sided view of the world. "Before I left for Syria, I was very hard-headed and believed only my convictions were right. I saw the world as black and white, and did not accept much other people's views that much. For example, for me Cristiano Ronaldo was the best soccer player in the world, and if anyone suggested Messi was better, I would just go livid. For me, there was only one way. It was the same in terms of religious beliefs."[63]

It is the researchers' perspective that the education system in Kosovo may be a vulnerability factor. Having not provided students with well-developed critical thinking skills, it is possible that the education system is making Kosovars more likely to fall victim to extremist propaganda. Moreover, a recent labour force survey suggests the unemployment rate among Kosovars is significantly higher for those that have lower educational attainment than those with tertiary education, thus adding to the vulnerability of those with a low level of education. The same labour force survey indicates that about 59.5 percent of Kosovars with secondary level education are unemployed. [64]

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61 - AA 039

62 - USAID. Kosovo Violent Extremism Risk Assessment April-May 2015 available at: http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00M3P6.pdf

63 - AA 021

64 - Kosovo Agency of Statistics. Results of the Kosovo 2015 labor force survey. June 2016. Available at: http://ask.rks-gov.net/media/1687/results-of-the-kosovo-2015-labour-force-survey.pdf

ISIS recruiters seem to have attempted to tap into this vulnerability. One interviewee spoke about how a Kosovo Albanian high-ranking member of ISIS had specifically asked recruiters in Kosovo not to send educated people to ISIS.[65] Another one directly acknowledged this vulnerability. He said, "I believe that not reading or thinking critically leads one to terrorism. Before I did not read much. When you don't read, or reflect during readings, you really can't understand concepts well. An imam who has studied will be able to look at different ways of understanding. As such, Islam has not changed; it's always been the same. Only [we have changed], and we've put layers and perspectives onto it."[66]

Alienation due to religious views: misconceptions in public discourse

The perception of widespread Islamophobia in Kosovo appears to have added to the narrative of Islam under threat, a narrative that seems to have been tapped into by recruiters in Kosovo.[67] Perceived Islamophobia appears to have caused some individuals and groups to feel more alienated from the larger society, thus becoming more vulnerable to radicalization.

"I applied to become a member of the Kosovo Police and of the Kosovo Security Force but wasn't accepted by either institution. I was discriminated against because I had grown a beard. A policeman told me I did not get the job precisely because of my appearance – my short trousers and my beard."[68]

"I need to take off my niqab[69] everywhere I go.[70] I don't know that there is any greater discrimination. [This is an] infringement of my human rights."[71]

"Civil society and media have hurt us the most. Journalists have labelled us with the worst names you can hear. One journalist apparently said 'that we [returned fighters] shouldn't even be left in prisons.' But where do they suggest we go? This is our home. What the media and civil society say has a big impact on people and public discourse, because we are a bit naive, we believe what others say, but they also carry weight among the public."[72]

"Journalists and analysts and other public figures on Facebook express Islamophobic sentiments all the time. This is basically racism, calling Muslims 'Arab blood and Turkish leftovers.'"[73]

"The media are against Islam and they [are] trying to make people hate Islam."[74]

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65 - AA 002

66 - AA 006

67 - Increasingly, the issue of Islamophobia is alleged to have become a part of the public discourse in the Balkans, and Kosovo, in particular. This research has touched on this discussion, based on the findings from the interviews with the subjects of this study.

68 - AA 004

69 - Niqab is a veil worn by Muslim women that leaves only the area around the eyes clear, although it may sometimes be worn with a separate eye veil.

70 - The interviewee does not refer to a legal prohibition in this case. The only legal ban in Kosovo is that on wearing of "religious uniforms" in public schools. However, she did mention a couple of cases where civil servants had made her take off the niqab in order for her to obtain a particular public service.

71 - AA 024

72 - AA 040

73 - AA 002

74 - AA 007

The context:
There is a perception among some Kosovo Muslims that they are being stigmatized by the media and public figures for being devout or following conservative Islamic norms. These conservative Islamic norms are often considered to manifest in public through adjustment of appearance to conservative religious norms (i.e. men growing beards and wearing trousers that go down to above their ankles, and women wearing headscarves/hijabs[75] or niqabs). This type of devotion to Islam is seen by some as being equated in the public sphere with extremist interpretations and violent extremism.[76] Moreover, in a recent public perception survey, adjustments in individuals' appearance following certain Islamic norms were cited as one of the traits associated with radicalized individuals.[77]

Some imams and public figures that practice Islam have publicly noted that they often feel alienated by the public and the media, which often accuse them of having of connections to violent extremism.[78] The USAID Violent Extremism Assessment report suggests, "The role of the media and social media around the issue of violent extremism has been a negative one. Rather than providing a source for accurate information, it has tended towards sensationalism. This has served to perhaps exacerbate the problem, by wrongly vilifying some and painting with too broad a brush. This results in the general population being scared into thinking that the violent extremist threat is greater than it is." [79]

The same assessment also suggests that some young adults who displayed more observant tendencies faced similar sentiments and were ostracized by their community, as well as their immediate family.[80] Such a dynamic can lead to further isolation that leaves individuals particularly susceptible to recruitment.[81] With regard to women in Kosovo, this sense of isolation might be exacerbated further by the administrative ban on religious uniforms in public elementary and high schools,[82] which has usually been interpreted as a ban on the headscarf and its variations.[83]

Findings from interviews:
The perception of Islamophobia in Kosovo appears to have added to the concept of Islam under threat, a narrative that has been tapped into by recruiters (see below under pull factors). One interviewee characterized Islamophobia in Kosovo as "an unreasonable hatred towards Islam, a tendency to see it as something foreign, to see Muslims as foreign and as something that is keeping the country stagnant."[84] Interviewees placed responsibility on the media and public officials for fuelling Islamophobia and allegedly creating a discourse that is demean-

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75 - Hijab is the Arabic word for veil used to describe headscarves worn by Muslim women, usually to cover their head, hair, and neck.

76 - USAID. Kosovo Violent Extremism Risk Assessment April-May 2015 available at: http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00M3P6.pdf; and Rodolfoe Toe. Islamophobia set to Grow in the Balkans, Experts Warn. BalkanInsight.com. 27 June 2016. Accessed 21 July 2017. http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/islamophobia-set-to-rise-in-the-balkans-experts-warn-06-26-2016

77 - UNDP. "Community Level Recommendations for Preventing Violent Extremism in Kosovo," pg. 22. Available at: http://www.ks.undp.org/content/dam/kosovo/docs/PVE/PVE_Summary.pdf

78 - Arbana Xharra. Carjet ne fe alarjmojne kosovaret. Kallxo.com. 24 December 2012. Accessed,15 March 2017. Available at: http://kallxo.com/gjnk/carjet-ne-fe-alarmojne-kosovaret/

79 - USAID. Kosovo Violent Extremism Risk Assessment.

80 - USAID. Kosovo Violent Extremism Risk Assessment.

81 - Vurmo and Lamallari. Religious Radicalism and Violent Extremism in Albania.

82 - Administrative Instruction No. 6/2014 for the Code of Conduct and Disciplinary Measures for Students of Secondary High Schools, article 3, paragraph 1, point 1.13, prohibits students from wearing "religious uniforms." The ban was first enacted through an administrative instruction in 2009, which was later amended in 2010 and lastly in 2014, but the wording of this specific ban has remained the same. There has been some public discussion on what constitutes a religious uniform, but no further legislation nor any court decisions have properly defined it. Many municipalities and public schools have used the original Administrative Instruction No. 07/2009 and the ones that replaced it as a legal basis for barring students with a headscarf (or variations upon it) from attending public schools.

83 - Akbar, Asifa, "The media and the headscarf: Kosovo public schools edition (not the final episode)." Muslimah Media Watch, 21 February 2013. Available at http://www.muslimahmediawatch.org/2013/02/21/the-media-and-the-headscarf-kosovo-public-schools-edition-not-the-final-episode/

84 - AA 033

ing and discriminatory towards pious Muslims in Kosovo. "The media are against Islam and they try to make people hate Islam,"[85] said one interviewee. Another one elaborated that the "media has played a role in fuelling anti-Islam sentiment in Kosovo, they have sensationalized such stories for clicks [readership]."[86]

Perceived Islamophobia appears to have created a sense of indignation among the interviewees, who at times feel that they are being portrayed as something other than Albanians and Kosovars. "Journalists and analysts and other public figures on Facebook expressed Islamophobic sentiments, which was basically racism, calling Muslims 'Arab blood and Turkish leftovers,'"[87] said one interviewee. This could in turn lead to further alienation of individuals who feel that a main pillar of their identity is being rejected by the society in which they live, with the individuals therefore becoming more vulnerable to radicalization.

Many perceived themselves as victims of Islamophobia, and indicated that they or members of their family have faced discrimination because of their religious beliefs. An interviewee claimed he "applied to become a member of the Kosovo Police and of the Kosovo Security Force but wasn't accepted by either institution. I was discriminated against because I had grown a beard. A policeman told me I did not get the job precisely because of my appearance – my short trousers and my beard."[88]

Excerpt from an interview on Islamophobia towards women:

"Women wearing headscarves, and especially those wearing niqabs, are very discriminated against. It's a bit easier for men. My wife, who wears the niqab, had to go to the municipality for a certificate and was harassed by the staff there, who told her 'are you cold, why did you cover up like that?' … She was harassed on the streets many times. When they saw her with the niqab, people shouted 'run away because ISIS is coming'…The prison staff told my wife that she couldn't enter the prison and visit me if she does not take off her niqab. She doesn't like it but then again I am here [in prison] for a long time and she needs to see me."[2]

Perceived Islamophobia appears to affect women even more than men due to the authorities' policy of banning religious attire in public elementary and high schools. The sister of one of the interviewees, who at the time of the interview was still in Syria, was expelled from high school for wearing the headscarf.[89] Both of the interviewed women spoke about being harassed on the streets due to their headscarves. One woman blamed the pressures from larger society for the fact that she had not completed her bachelor degree. A professor at the university allegedly told her she could only pass his exam if she removed her headscarf. She refused to do so, and instead dropped out of university.[90] As explained in more detail in the sections below on women, the perceived Islamophobia in Kosovo played a particularly significant role in pushing women to travel to Syria, in search of a place where they could follow freely the prescribed dress code of their religion.

85 - AA 007

86 - AA 006

87 - AA 002

88 - AA 004

89 - AA 009

90 - AA 010

Pull factors

Based on existing research on the pathways to radicalization in Kosovo and primary interviews, the following elements may have pulled individuals or groups of people into becoming radicalized over a period of time. The life story approach applied helps the reader understand the path that interviewees followed in their radicalization processes. To facilitate reading and because the interconnection between different pull factors is difficult to untangle, the authors present the information aggregated in the following sections:

- The section "Enablers and means of travel" focuses on the internal and external enablers who are making travel possible for these individuals. Using life story methodology, this section also highlights how travel to Syria takes place in general.
- The section "Identity, cause and ideology: empathy and a feeling of belonging" discusses the justifications for travelling or deciding to travel to Syria or Iraq based on religious motivations, empathy with the Muslim cause around the world, connection with the conflict in Kosovo, and other reasons that can create a sense of belonging among the fighters.
- The section "Communication channels: the internet and social media amplifying radical views" discusses the impact communication tools and social media channels have had in amplifying violent extremist narratives, and how they have facilitated communication with foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq.
- The section "Women and Violent Extremism" focuses on elements that may have facilitated the recruitment and radicalization of women in Kosovo.

Enablers and means of travel

Active recruitment networks: imams, foreign fighters and tight-knit kinships

Research and interviews with returned fighters point to a well-developed and organized recruitment network that seems to have been instrumental in laying the ground for radicalization in Kosovo. This network consists of charismatic imams, grassroots-level coordinators, and foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq who have contributed to the process of radicalization in local communities, facilitated travel to Syria, organized military trainings and also consolidated an active community of ethnic Albanians in the conflict area.

Zekerija Qazimi, an ideologue and imam from Gjilan/Gnjilane, was convicted to 10 years in prison for inciting hatred and recruiting for ISIS. Qazimi reportedly ran summer camps for youth in a mountainous area in Viti/Vitina, where he indoctrinated youth about jihad and laid the ground for recruitment.[91] A video circulated on YouTube depicts Qazimi saying the "blood of infidels is the best drink for us."[92] Local media reported that Qazimi was responsible for recruiting 11 Kosovar fighters to ISIS; three were said to have been killed in Syria or Iraq.[93] Ac-

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91 - Gjergjaj, Mentor. "Ekskluzive | Rrëfimi i plotë i dëshmitarit për kampin e xhihadistëve në Debëllde të Vitisë". Gazeta Express. 10 May 2016. Accessed July 2017. Available here: http://www.gazetaexpress.com/lajme/ekskluzive-rrefimi-i-plote-i-deshmitarit-per-kampin-e-xhihad-isteve-ne-debellde-te-vitise-video-198423/?archive=1

92 - "Denohet Zekerija Qazimi me 10 vjet burg per terrorizem," 20 Maj 2016, Klan Kosova, Available at: http://klankosova.tv/denohet-zekerija-qaz-imi-me-10-vjet-burg-per-terrorizem/

93 - Bezhan, Frud. Inside Kosovo's Islamist Cauldron. RFERL, June 2016. Accessed July 2017. http://www.rferl.org/a/inside-kosovos-islamic-caul-dron/27825148.html;
Gashi, Bleta; Gjergjaj, Mentor. "Ekskluzive: Si i çonte të rinjtë kosovarë në ISIS Imami i arrestuar Zekria Qazimi (SMS-Dëshmi)". Gazeta Express, 24 December 2015. Accessed July 2017. Available here: http://www.gazetaexpress.com/lajme/ekskluzive-si-i-conte-te-rinjte-kosovare-ne-isis-ima-mi-i-arrestuar-zekria-qazimi-sms-deshmi-154381/?archive=1
Gazeta Express. Xhihadisti i vrarë, Patriot Matoshi ishte nxënës i Medresesë dhe i imamit kontrovers, Zekirja Qazimi. 10 August 2014. Accessed July

cording to media reports, two other Kosovo-based imams, Bedri Robaj and Idriz Bilibani are also suspected of having influenced Kosovars to join foreign wars.[94]

Rexhep Memishi, an imam from the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, was reportedly arrested by former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia authorities in August 2015 on suspicion of being the head of a terrorist recruitment cell in that country.[95] Other imams from the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia who are suspected of having been involved in the recruitment of ethnic Albanians from the region for violent extremist organizations in Syria and Iraq include Omer Bajrami and Abdyl Fuga.[96] An imam from Albania, Xhezair Fishti, was reportedly arrested alongside 18 other associates by the Albanian authorities in November 2016 for allegedly planning to attack the Israeli football team, which was travelling to Albania to play for World Cup qualifiers.[97] Two of Fishti's associates, who were also arrested in November 2016, frequented the lectures of Genci Balla and Bujar Hysa, self-appointed imams at an illegal mosque on the outskirts of Tirana. The latter were found guilty of terrorist acts, funding terrorism, encouraging and making public appeals and propaganda for terrorist acts, and promoting religious hatred.[98]

Media reports and hundreds of video lectures on YouTube suggest that these imams have associated with one another in the past. Memishi, Fishti, Fuga, and even Bobaj and Bilibani appear to have lectured at Qazimi's mosque, El Kudus in Gjilan/Gnjilane, but also in a number of local cultural associations linked to terrorism in eastern Kosovo, including Association Realiteti in Gjilan/Gnjilane, Association Rinia Islame in Kaçanik/Kačanik, Association Nektari H.E. in Hani i Elezit/Elez Han and Association Këshilla in Viti/Vitina.[99] These associations served as gathering places and spaces for learning about Islam, but also outreach and support to vulnerable communities. The media reported that the institutional authorities in Kosovo raided and shut down several cultural associations and organizations with links to radical imams and foreign fighters from Kosovo in August 2014.[100] Considering the associations' links to this network of influencers and recruiters, they have reportedly served to build communities of young men and helped radicalize them, ultimately paving the way for them to travel to Syria and Iraq and fight alongside ISIS and other violent groups.

2017. Available here: http://www.gazetaexpress.com/lajme/xhihadisti-i-vrare-patriot-matoshi-ishte-nxenes-i-medresese-dhe-i-imamit-kontrovers-zekirja-qazimi-35213/?archive=1

94 - "Keta jane pese hoxhallaret qe akuzohen per terrorizem," Insajderi, 15 September 2016, Available at: http://www.insajderi.com/keta-jane-pese-hoxhallaret-qe-akuzohen-per-terrorizem/

95 - Jakov Marusic, Sinisa/BIRN. Macedonia Arrests Nine ISIS Suspects. Balkan Insight, 7 August 2015. Accessed July 2017. Available here: http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/macedonia-arrests-nine-isis-suspects-08-07-2015#sthash.IbyeNAZo.dpuf

96 - Zaimi, Gerta. NATO Center of Excellence Defence Against Terrorism. Selected Papers – Terrorism Experts Conference, TEC 2016, Accessed 12 March 2017. Available at http://www.coedat.nato.int/publication/conference/TEC2016conference_papers.pdf; and Zaimi, Gerta. "Religious radicalization and violent Islamist extremism in Albania, Macedonia and Kosovo". February 2017. Accessed July 2017. Available here: http://www.cssii.unifi.it/upload/sub/zaimi-religious-radicalization-and-violent-islamist.pdf

97 - "Urdheri i Lavderim Muhaxherit: Qelloni izraelitet ne stadium, hakmarrje ndaj te pafeve ne Shqiperi," 11 November 2016, Panorama, Available at: http://www.panorama.com.al/pergjimi-urdhri-i-lavderim-muhaxherit-qelloni-izraelitet-ne-stadium-hakmarrje-ndaj-te-pafeve-ne-shqiperi/; Koha Jone. "Imami i vetëshpallur në Dibër, Xhezair Fishti i arrestuar edhe në Egjipt për terrorizëm," 28 November 2016. Accessed July 2017. Available here: http://www.kohajone.com/2016/11/28/imami-i-veteshpallur-ne-diber-xhezair-fishti-i-arrestuar-edhe-ne-egjipt-per-terrorizem/

98 - "Akte terroriste ne Shqiperi-Izrael? Ja perse u arrestuan kater besimtaret ne Shkoder," Panorama, 8 November 2016, http://www.panorama.com.al/informacioni-sekret-besimtaret-e-arrestuar-do-vendosnin-bombe-ne-ndeshjen-me-izraelin/; and also "Imams accused of terrorism," 25 February 2015, Available at http://top-channel.tv/english/artikull.php?id=13676

99 - Zaimi, Gerta. "Religious radicalization and violent Islamist extremism in Albania, Macedonia and Kosovo". February 2017. Accessed July 2017. Available here: http://www.cssii.unifi.it/upload/sub/zaimi-religious-radicalization-and-violent-islamist.pdf; Hajdari, Una/BIRN "Kosovo Charges Seven With Islamist Terrorism". Balkan Insight, 3 March 2015. Accessed July 2017. Available at:
http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/kosovo-charges-seven-for-islamic-state-involvement;
"Hoxhë Rexhep Memishi-Kuptimi i fesë sipas Selefit," Shoqata Keshilla, https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCZ8LOqEqIv35_vsw6hZug7w; and Duriqi, Visar. "Kaçaniku, kryeqyteti i muxhahedinëve". 16 April 2014. Accessed in July 2017. Available here: http://www.gazetaexpress.com/lajme/kacaniku-kryeqyteti-i-muxhahedineve-8582/?archive=1

100 - Gashi, Bleta. "Ekskluzive| Këto janë organizatat e dyshimta islamike që i mbylli shteti" Gazeta Express. 25 November 2015. Accessed July 2017. Available here: http://www.gazetaexpress.com/lajme/ekskluzive-keto-jane-organizatat-e-dyshimta-islamike-qe-i-mbylli-shteti-147267/?archive=1
Duriqi, Visar. "Kaçaniku, kryeqyteti i muxhahedinëve". 16 April 2014. Accessed July 2017. Available here: http://www.gazetaexpress.com/lajme/kacaniku-kryeqyteti-i-muxhahedineve-8582/?archive=1

The arrests of imams by the authorities of Kosovo, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Albania point to the significance of the role of inspirational and charismatic religious leaders in facilitating the radicalization process, recruitment and mobilization of Kosovars to join violent extremist groups in the Middle East.

Another layer of the same network appears to have included foreign fighters connected to each other through kinship ties and to the aforementioned imams. Media reports indicated that the key facilitators of recruitment and coordinators of travel and accommodation in Syria were Kosovo ISIS commanders Lavdrim Muhaxheri and Ridvan Haqifi, who were reportedly killed in the theatre of conflict in 2017.[101] Muhaxheri was the founder of the Cultural Association Rinia Islame in Kaçanik/Kačanik, and Haqifi was an associate of Qazimi and a frequent lecturer at Cultural Association Realiteti in Gjilan/Gnjilane, as well as at the El Kudus Mosque, run by Qazimi, prior to leaving for Syria.[102] Media reports brought to light details of communications between ISIS commanders Muhaxheri and Haqifi with associates in Kosovo, who reportedly facilitated information and travel for Kosovars to Syria. Qazimi and Fishti were among these associates in direct contact with the fighters via SMS and other online channels.[103]

The networks in which social ties are characterized by strong emotional bonds can provide particularly effective channels for recruitment; informal kinship or close friendship networks are often prominent in accounts of entry into radical political activism.[104] Existing research appears to suggest that the presence of one radicalized family member increases the likelihood of other family members becoming radicalized as well. There have been numerous cases when family members – including siblings, cousins and other relatives – travelled together to Syria and Iraq. In one case, ten members of the same family – three brothers with their two wives and five children – left for Syria in late 2014.[105] Preliminary research also suggests that in many cases known fighters were neighbours or friends who followed the same clerics or belonged to the same faith-based grassroots organizations.[106] Radicalization occurring through an already radicalized family member appears to have been particularly true in the case of women. The majority of the women who travelled to Syria and Iraq were married, suggesting that they most likely followed their husbands, although this radicalisation pattern remains further unclear. Nonetheless, the possibility that they became radicalized on their own, or even influenced the radicalization of their husbands should not be dismissed.

Existing research points to the presence of Gulf-influenced support, and dubious local organizations with links to conservative and potentially radical circles in Kosovo have helped create an environment conducive to radicalization among communities in Kosovo since 1999. A senior Kosovo official indicated that "many individuals [from Kosovo] were radicalized and

101 - Bezhan, Frud. Inside Kosovo's Islamist Cauldron. RFERL, June 2016. Accessed July 2017. http://www.rferl.org/a/inside-kosovos-islamic-cauldron/27825148.html; Eros Klaqi and Agan Kosumi, "Kryeshnosh per Terroristin," Insajderi.com, 9 February 2017, http://www.insajderi.com/kryeshnosh-per-terroristin/

102 - Eros Klaqi and Agan Kosumi, "Kryeshnosh per Terroristin," Insajderi.com, 9 February 2017. Accessed July 2017. Available here: http://www.insajderi.com/kryeshnosh-per-terroristin/
Duriqi, Visar. "Kaçaniku, kryeqyteti i muxhahedinëve". Gazeta Express. 16 April 2014. Accessed July 2017. http://www.gazetaexpress.com/lajme/kacaniku-kryeqyteti-i-muxhahedineve-8582/?archive=1; and "Association Realtiteti Islam," YouTube, Accessed 7 August 2017. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/user/shoqatarealiteti

103 - Rrokum. "Urdhni i Lavdrim Muhaxherit dhe Ridvan Haqifi: Sulmoni izraelitët në stadium". 10 November 2016. Accessed July 2017. Available here: http://www.rrokum.tv/lajme/urdhni-i-lavdrim-muhaxherit-dhe-ridvan-haqifit-sulmoni-izraelitet-ne-stadium/
Gashi, Bleta; Gjergjaj, Mentor. "Ekskluzive: Si i çonte të rinjtë kosovarë në ISIS Imami i arrestuar Zekria Qazimi (SMS-Dëshmi)". Gazeta Express, 24 December 2015. Accessed July 2017. Available here: http://www.gazetaexpress.com/lajme/ekskluzive-si-i-conte-te-rinjte-kosovare-ne-isis-imami-i-arrestuar-zekria-qazimi-sms-deshmi-154381/?archive=1

104 - Busher, Joel. "What part do social networks play in radicalisation?". Radicalisation Research, 6 July 2015. Available here: http://www.radicalisationresearch.org/debate/busher-social-networks/

105 - Kosovalive360, "Familja dhjetanëtarëshe në ISIS", 29 January 2015. Accessed July 2017. Available here: http://www.kosovalive360.com/familja-dhjetanetareshe-nga-klina-ka-shkuar-ne-siri.html

106 - Adrian Shtuni, "Dynamics of Radicalization and Violent Extremism in Kosovo," United States Institute of Peace, 19 December 2016, http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/SR397-Dynamics-of-Radicalization-and-Violent-Extremism-in-Kosovo.pdf; http://telegrafi.com/pamje-te-familjes-hasani-nga-kosova-qe-gjenden-ne-isis-fotovideo/

Illustration 6: Qazimi and Memishi at a lecture published by the cultural association Këshilla (top left); Qazimi and Fishti at a lecture published by the cultural association Relatiteti (second top); Fuga and Fishti lecturing at an unknown location in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (top right); Qazimi and Ridvan Haqifi, an ISIS Albanian Unit commander and lecturer at Qazimi's El Kudus Mosque who is now deceased (centre left); Qazimi and Fishti purportedly lecturing at the cultural association Rinia Islame (centre middle); Bilibani and Qazimi lecturing at an unknown location (centre right); Bajrami, Fuga and Qazimi at a joint lecture at an unknown location (bottom left); Robaj lecturing at a joint event of associations Realiteti Islam and Keshilla (bottom centre); Haqifi lecturing at association Realiteti. (Source: YouTube, Gazeta Express)

recruited by a corps of extremist clerics and secretive associations funded by Saudi Arabia and other conservative Arab gulf states, using an obscure, labyrinthine network of donations from charities, private individuals and government ministries… They promoted political Islam… They spent a lot of money to promote it through different programmes mainly with young, vulnerable people, and they brought in a lot of Wahhabi and Salafi literature. They brought these people closer to radical political Islam, which resulted in their radicalization."[107]

Most of the imams mentioned previously on pages 31-32 have studied abroad on scholarships in Gulf countries and Egypt. Rexhep Memishi studied in Saudi Arabia and Egypt in the early 2000s.[108] Zekerija Qazimi and Xhazair Fishti are also reported to have studied in Egypt on sponsored scholarships.[109] Fishti was allegedly arrested on terrorism charges by Egyptian authorities in the past.[110] Upon returning to the Balkans, they reportedly took it upon themselves to spread an ideology that promoted radical views in their communities.[111]

While research by the Kosovo Centre for Security Studies (KCSS) indicates that influences from Saudi Arabia may have helped spread more conservative Islamic ideas and practices around Kosovo, it does not find them to be a cause of extremism among Kosovars. Instead,

107 - Gall, Carlotta. How Kosovo Was Turned Into Fertile Ground for ISIS. The New York Times, 21 May 2016. Accessed July 2017. Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/22/world/europe/how-the-saudis-turned-kosovo-into-fertile-ground-for-isis.html

108 - Kursani, Shpend. Report Inquiring into the Causes and Consequences of Kosovars' Involvement as Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq. Kosovar Center for Security Studies, 2015.

109 - Leposhtica, Labinot "Xhihadi i Imam Qazimit", Gazeta JNK. 20 May 2016. Accessed July 2017. Available at: http://kallxo.com/gjnk/xhihadi-imam-qazimit/;

110 - Koha Jone. "Imami i vetëshpallur në Dibër, Xhezair Fishti i arrestuar edhe në Egjipt për terrorizëm," 28 November 2016. Accessed July 2017. Available at: http://www.kohajone.com/2016/11/28/imami-i-veteshpallur-ne-diber-xhezair-fishti-i-arrestuar-edhe-ne-egjipt-per-terrorizem/

111 - Kristof, Nicholas. "The Terrorists the Saudis Cultivate in Peaceful Countries". The New York Times, July 2, 2016. Accessed July 2017. Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/03/opinion/sunday/the-terrorists-the-saudis-cultivate-in-peaceful-countries.html?_r=0

it suggests imams from the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia played a larger role in spreading extremist ideology in Kosovo.[112]

It appears that imams, foreign fighters and other close associates on the ground engaged with one another as a tight-knit organized network in the process of indoctrination of their community members and coordination of travel to the theatre of conflict. This is in line with the theory of group dynamics and socialization as factors that aid the process of radicalizing people.[113]

Findings from our research:

With one exception, all interviewees briefly discussed their process of radicalization, engagement with certain networks of imams and foreign fighters, the individuals that impacted them and/or the types of narratives they consumed. In general, when describing their process of radicalization, most interviewees would provide vague descriptions and limited insights. They would generally acknowledge that the path they had taken was not positive and then quickly move on to other topics.

Researchers had asked interviewees to refrain from naming people, organizations or networks, and instead to describe their main defining features (i.e. the unit leader instead of the name of the leader, and so on). However, the descriptions provided of individuals' paths to Syria helped build several patterns and processes that suggest corroboration with the findings from existing literature that at least one highly organized active recruitment network was operating in Kosovo. This network was made up of imams, foreign fighters and their associates, who supported the process of radicalization, gave guarantees for loyalty, facilitated travel to Syria and accommodation within the ranks of extremist organizations, as well as managing operational and social life in the theatre of conflict. The network appears to have had a set of defined processes and an established chain of command, from the starting point in Kosovo to the end destination in Syria.

Local religious leaders as charismatic influencers

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"A prominent imam from the northern part of Kosovo confirmed to a close family relative that there is jihad in Syria because Muslims are being widely persecuted, killed and violated. In some way, he was confirming that we [Muslims] ought to follow our religious obligation."[114]

"Kosovo institutions jailed Imam Zekerija Qazimi on so-called terrorism charges. He is not only innocent, but has also supported the state. He told us not to protest or make scenes [an uprising] against the state or the people of Kosovo… he also told us that 'it is not an Islamic war [jihad] in Syria, otherwise he would have gone himself." [115]

"I no longer want to be associated with that Imam [Qazimi]. I want to restart my life and leave behind this part [travel to Syria and Iraq] of my past."[116]

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112 - Kursani, Shpend. Report Inquiring into the Causes and Consequences of Kosovars' Involvement as Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq. Kosovar Center for Security Studies, 2015; and Hopkins,Valerie; Triest, Vincent. "EXCLUSIVE: Macedonia's ISIS recruits linked to top leaders" Prishtina Insight. 28 March 2016. Accessed July 2017. Available at: http://prishtinainsight.com/exclusive-details-macedonias-isis-recruits/.

113 - Randy Borum, "Radicalization into Violent Extremism I: A Review of Social Science Theories," Journal of Strategic Security, http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1139&context=jss

114 - AA 002

115 - AA 001

116 - AA 021

One interviewee mentioned having made the acquaintance of at least seven fighters prior to travelling to Syria, including two Albanian ISIS field commanders and alleged key recruiters from Western Kosovo. He also mentioned having met imam Zekerija Qazimi in Gjilan/Gnjilane several times, attending his lectures and participating a few times in gatherings in nearby mountains and surrounding areas. He paid respect to Qazimi's persona, quoted his lectures and repeatedly defended his actions. The interviewee said, "Kosovo institutions jailed Imam Zekerija Qazimi for so-called terrorism charges. He is not only innocent but has also supported the state. He told us not to protest or make scenes [an uprising] against the state or the people of Kosovo… he also told us that 'it is not an Islamic war [jihad] in Syria, otherwise he would have gone himself." [117]

Another interviewee claimed that leaders of the Albanian fighter unit in Syria held Qazimi in high regard, and that he had once sought Qazimi's support to influence unit commanders in Syria to grant him permission to return to Kosovo. He noted: "One of the commanders refused my request to leave Syria, and the other one was eventually convinced, maybe because I had asked the imam [Zekerija Qazimi] to influence their decision on my behalf."[118] An interviewee mentioned how an imam from the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia had provided shelter, food, a job and spiritual guidance for three months after his return from Syria.[119]

Religious leaders from other parts of Kosovo may have also played a role in reinforcing radical narratives and encouraging local religious communities to engage with violent extremist organizations. One interviewee noted that "a prominent imam from northern part of Kosovo confirmed to a close family relative that there is jihad in Syria because Muslims are being widely prosecuted, killed and violated. In some way, he was confirming that we [Muslims] ought to follow our religious obligation."[120] The interviewee added that another imam from Prishtinë/Priština had suggested during a lecture that in today's circumstances, "You do not need to ask for permission from parents [to travel to Syria] to join jihad, even though we ought to do so based on Islamic teachings."[121]

Another interviewee described how he had visited an imam in his town in eastern Kosovo, who helped introduce him to Islam, taught him to read the Qur'an and often shared advice on different aspects of life. He said he did not travel to Syria because of one particular imam, a lecture he had heard, or a video he had seen; rather it was a process, where several factors played a role, especially the suffering of the Syrian children whom he saw on the news and social media on a daily basis. He said, "I was not influenced by an imam's lecture to go to Syria, but maybe someone else was."[122]

117 - AA 001
118 - AA 006
119 - AA 001
120 - AA 002
121 - AA 022
122 - AA 008

Analysis of means of travel to Syria: organized by a consistent network

> *"I knew one of the main ethnic Albanian commanders in ISIS. We were from near-by towns in western Kosovo. I saw him at a mosque and at Iftar [breaking the fast] dinners during Ramadan… I asked about life in Syria and how I could go there. He asked me to coordinate my travel with someone he knew in the region."[123]*

> *"To make sure I did not get apprehended, I decided to travel to Syria through a neighbouring country. The Albanian unit commander sent an SMS wishing 'Allah to protect me on my travels and inshallah we will reunite in Syria.'"[124]*

> *"When I arrived in Istanbul, I realized the group had not waited for me. I called one of the leaders of the Albanian unit in Syria, and he provided guidance how I could go all the way to a town near the Turkey-Syria border, and suggested that upon arrival I would get picked up by someone."[125]*

According to research and the information provided by the individuals interviewed, a person interested in planning to travel to Syria would take the following steps: 1) connect to one of the main foreign fighters' coordinators in Syria via social media or through a personal confidant in Kosovo; 2) find someone the foreign fighters' coordinator trusts to vouch for the individual wanting to travel to Syria; 3) follow guidance from the coordinator about travel dates, routes and pick-up points in Istanbul or bordering areas between Turkey and Syria; 4) fly from Pr-ishtinë/Priština or an airport in the Western Balkans to Istanbul or another city in Turkey; 5) convene in Istanbul and travel as a group to Hatay or other Turkey-Syria border area by bus for about 20 hours; 6) cross the border illegally into Syria at night, either alone or in a group, in the company of chaperones; 7) connect with the ethnic Albanian unit in Syria or Iraq or temporarily settle with another host unit; 8) attend training and learning camps; 9) engage in battle action or support activities; 10) retreat and rest periodically, including time with family; and 11) return to Kosovo within 90 days before the Turkish visa exemption expires.[126]

Once convinced to travel to Syria, many interviewees suggested that the process of making their way into the theatre of conflict was relatively straightforward. Descriptions of the travel process appeared similar for most of them, even if not in exactly the same order.

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123 - AA 026

124 - AA 005

125 - AA 002

126 - The 90-day return period is applicable only to those Kosovars who travelled to Syria and Iraq and agreed to be interviewed for the purpose of this study. In total, 123 individuals have returned to Kosovo from the conflict zones in Syria and Iraq, and an estimated 212 have not.
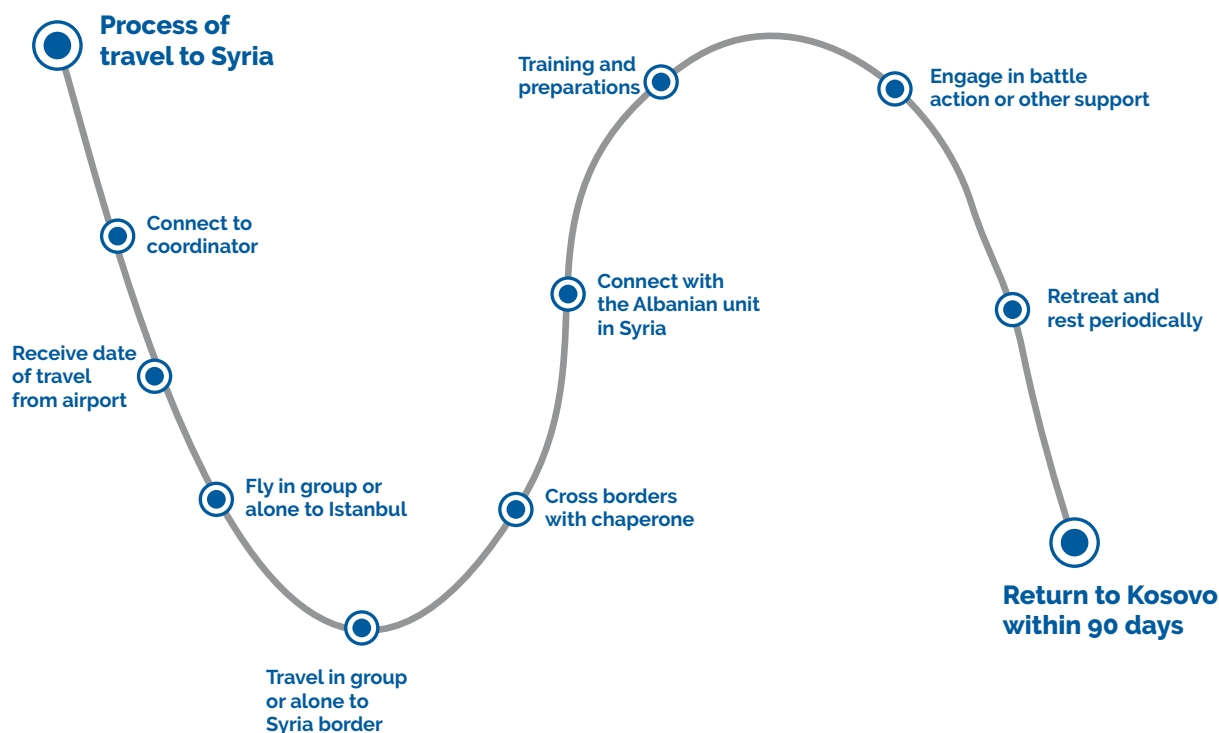
Illustration 7: Process Diagram - Travel to Syria

Connections between foreign fighters through kinship ties. Most interviewees suggested they found out about the opportunity to travel to Syria and Iraq through friends, family members or close relatives, including from associating directly with foreign fighters. One interviewee described how he travelled to Syria with his childhood friends from the same village. A local imam, known for associations with Qazimi, and another childhood friend from the village who was already in Syria, helped convince them to travel. The village friends prepared for over six months for the trip, and had encouraged and reinforced each other's convictions for the trip to the theatre of conflict. "We wanted to reconnect with our other close childhood friend [already in Syria]. We were very close to each other and we missed him."[127] Another interviewee suggested that he was encouraged to travel by an immediate family member, who had already been in Syria for at least three years. The interviewee said: "I wanted to be close to family members whom I had not seen for over three years."[128]

One of the interviewees characterized the process of connecting with the recruitment network in Kosovo as easy, only requiring a referral or some form of guarantee from someone trusted by the network. He said, "To go to Syria, all someone needed was to find the phone number of a contact person locally, and have some type of clearance or guarantee from an imam or someone trustworthy on the ground… the rest of the process went smoothly."[129]

Arrangements for Travel: Travel from Kosovo to Turkey is relatively cheap and easy. Turkey is one of the few countries that does not have a visa regime for Kosovo passport holders. A one-way flight ticket from Prishtinë/Priština International Airport (or an airport in the region, in Skopje, Podgorica or Tirana) to an airport in Istanbul ranges in price between €40 and 150,

127 - AA 006
128 - AA 010
129 - AA 033

depending on the time of purchase.[130] Moreover, one-way flight tickets from Istanbul to Hatay or another border area between Turkey and Syria costs as little as €35. The cost of a bus ticket from Istanbul to a border area ranges from €15 to 30.[131]

About half of the interviewees who travelled to Syria claimed to have done so with their own resources. Others either did not provide information on resources, or mentioned financing their trip by borrowing money or having others pay for their travel. Most of them were vague, or refused to divulge any details about the financing of their trip. In one case, an interviewee claimed: "to evade any potential disruption, I went to an airport in the neighbouring country and purchased two last-minute flight tickets to Istanbul at the airport kiosk for €500 each… I had found the money somehow."[132] Only one interviewee spoke openly about receiving financial support for his trip from a recruiter on the ground.[133]

Interviewees described travelling to Syria in an organized manner, where people travelled in groups of two or more, sometime up to ten. In most cases, they claimed to have been made aware of the main stops they would make and the time of arrival. They were also told about meeting points in Istanbul and border areas. Interviewees described how they met other Kosovars at the airport or at meeting points in Istanbul or Turkish areas near the Syrian border, although they did not know them previously. One of them said, "I thought I was going alone to Syria. At the airport, I encountered six brothers [a term used to refer to other pious Muslims], two covered women and two kids. I approached them to pay my respects… Turns out we were all going to the same destination."[134]

Interviewees described their experiences crossing borders through airports as nerve-racking but relatively easy, without major disruptions. Customs officers did not appear to flag issues with any of their one-way flight tickets to Turkey in late 2013 and early 2014. However, one interviewee said his name had been flagged by customs officers while traveling in the region due to his prior travel to Syria, but he was able to convince them to let him cross, eventually flying to Turkey. In most cases, interviewees crossed the border from Turkey to Syria with the help of someone, usually at night. The process for border crossing was organized by foreign fighters in Syria or coordinators on the ground in Kosovo.

> "Border police flagged my name crossing the border to a neighbouring country since I had been in Syria once before, but I convinced them to let me go. I told them precisely because of Syria, I can no longer find a job in Kosovo. I am going to my mother's uncle to work for his local business. They let me go. We flew to Istanbul."[3]

Of the ten interviewees who travelled or attempted to travel to Syria, only one claimed to have followed a route that was different to the rest. He claimed to have made the decision to travel to Syria to fight the Assad regime on his own, after hearing horrific war stories from Syrian refugees while he was in an asylum camp in a European country for nearly three months. The interviewee had been caught by police forces in the European country while he was attempting to cross the border illegally. While awaiting resolution for his asylum case, he was sent to a camp which also housed Syrian refugees. There, according to him, "some refugees

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130 - Pegasus Airlines, a low-cost carrier, flies from Pristina, Skopje and Tirana to Istanbul at least three times a week for as little as €40 one way. Turkish Airlines flies from all three capitals as well as from Podgorica, for as little as €100 and, in many cases, twice a day.

131 - Prices accessed from flights.rumbo.com and busbud.com on 17 June 2017. Interviewees did not mention travel costs within Turkey during the interviews.

132 - AA 020

133 - AA 002

134 - AA 039

I befriended gave me names whom I should contact should I wish to go to support the war against Assad's regime. I travelled to the Turkish-Syrian border via Ankara. I joined the Free Syrian Army. I was looking for Albanians, but did not find any of them, only Bosniaks. I spent my time with an Arab group instead."[135]

Training and Accommodation: Most interviewees, with the exception of one who had prior experience in battle during the Balkan conflict, undertook some type of training on the use of arms. One interviewee described two training sessions upon arriving in Syria, "The first training took place for three days on physical conditioning, the use of weapons and getting comfortable with the pressures of war, so I could be comfortable with weapons and not fear them. The second training was supposed to be a more advanced training in bomb-making and the use of heavy artillery. I could not go through the second training, unfortunately, because we got attacked by Assad forces prior to that." [136] Women also went through similar trainings to ensure they could protect themselves from other armed groups in the conflict area. Other types of trainings included religious teachings and adaptation of doctrines by the violent extremist organizations.

Management of Operational and Social Life: Interviewees allegedly observed a number of rules that were in place among the units, and said that higher-ranking fighters from their unit would often ensure their obedience. In several instances, interviewees described how their superiors would manage their social and economic life such as distribution of resources for living, accommodation and housing. These superiors were the ones to review and decide on any requests made by the members of the unit, such as retreating from battle or returning to Kosovo, even administering the time for access to social media. Three interviewees claimed to have had difficulties obtaining permission from their fellow Albanian unit commanders to return to Kosovo. Interviewees either ran away or sought the help of associates in Kosovo who could influence the unit commanders to ensure their release.

Kosovo women there lived similar lives to other women who have joined ISIS. Their lives were restricted to the domestic sphere, mainly taking care of children and the home. Just as Kosovar men socialized with Albanian speakers due to language barriers, Kosovar women socialized with other Albanian-speaking women.[137]

Kosovo women were allegedly not involved in combat, though they appear to have had weapons for protection. According to one of the interviewees, in the early stages of many Albanians moving from al-Nusrah to ISIS, al-Nusrah kidnapped many of the Albanian and Chechen women affiliated with ISIS.[138] Following this, the Albanian and Chechen fighters in ISIS attacked al-Nusrah and freed the women. The interviewee said that al-Nusrah fighters raped some of the women, but was quick to add that those were not Albanian women.[139] Especially after this incident, men taught their wives how to use weapons for protection.[140]

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135 - AA 015

136 - AA 042

137 - AA 010, AA 039, AA 008

138 - AA 039

139 - There was no way, nor any reason, for the researchers to dig into this and prove or disprove this claim. However, his quickness to assert that none of the raped women were Albanian is a reflection of how closely women's perceived 'purity' is related to the sense of honor in Kosovar society.

140 - ISIS has established an all-women militia force, the al-Khanssaa Brigade, a sort of morality police whose role is to ensure that women are following the rules established by ISIS. These rules have been codified in the manifesto published in early 2015. The document gives a detailed guide on how girls and women should live their lives and encourages early marriage. The manifesto supports some education for women, mainly religious, so as to enable them to become good homemakers and mothers. It also includes rules on how women should dress – only in black, covering their entire body. The manifesto further states that women should remain at home to serve their husbands and children, and can leave the house only if necessary to wage jihad when no men are available, or to study religion. The only women allowed to leave the house are doctors, nurses and teachers, and the manifesto regulates their working hours and days. Women are not allowed to travel alone, unless for the

Albanian fighter units in Syria and Iraq as the end destination: Interviewees identified four different groups that they had joined while in Syria and Iraq: ISIS, Jabhat Al Nusrah, Ahrar Al Sham and the Free Syrian Army. Four interviewees admitted to have joined ISIS for part or all the time they were in the theatre of conflict, with one of them having spent time in three other groups during his stay in Syria. Three said that they joined Ahrar Al Sham and two said that they were with the Free Syrian Army brigades. Two interviewees who had not travelled to the theatre of conflict declined to admit support for any of the groups, although a Kosovo court found both guilty for supporting and aiding ISIS in Kosovo.[141]

> *"Two people picked me up and helped me cross the border. They initially took me to Jabhat al-Nusra… I asked to be sent to the ethnic Albanian unit instead."*[142]
>
> *"I was there before the establishment of the Caliphate, when ISIS did not exist."*[143]

Four interviewees suggested they were not certain what group they would end up joining when in Syria, though the last destination sought by all of them was to join the unit made of Albanian fighters in Syria. Four of the interviewees claimed to have settled with other groups, namely Ahrar Al Sham,[144] after facing difficulties connecting with the Albanian unit.[145]

Three interviewees described how at the time they travelled to Syria, the ethnic Albanian fighter unit was not part of ISIS, but was part of Jabhat Al Nusrah. This claim may be in line with a published propaganda video featuring Lavdrim Muhaxheri and numerous masked ethnic Albanians in the battlefield, suggesting a consolidated and structured ethnic Albanian unit in Syria and Iraq has existed since at least early 2013.[146] The video portrays ethnic Albanians fighting alongside each other, led by Muhaxheri, reported to have been the unit commander at the time.

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purpose of migration to the caliphate. Source: Mah-Rukh Ali, ISIS and Propaganda: How ISIS Exploits Women, (n.p.: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, University of Oxford, 2015), https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/Isis%20and%20Propaganda-%20How%20Isis%20Exploits%20Women.pdf, pp. 13-14; and Rafiq and Malik, Caliphettes: Women and the Appeal of Islamic State, p. 35.

141 - Source omitted to protect the identify of the interviewees.

142 - AA 022

143 - AA02

144 - According to Stanford University's Mapping Militant Organizations initiative, Ahrar Al Sham (long name - Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya) has sought to establish a Sunni Islamic state in Syria. It claims its campaign is limited to Syria only, and that it does not pursue global jihad. Ahrar al-Sham cooperated with ISIS until January 2014, and since then has been openly at war with ISIS. Ahrar al-Sham is not designated a terrorist organization by the U.S. State Department, the United Nations, or the European Union, despite attempts by the UN Security Council to classify it as such. The Free Syrian Army brigades have received support from the United States, Turkey, Qatar and other countries.

145 - Stanford University. Mapping Militant Organizations. Available at: http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/523#cite26. Accessed July 2017.

146 - "Mediat Italiane: Lavdrim Muhaxheri ne Kosove – Top Channel, Albania – News – Lajme," YouTube Top Channel Albania, Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lZ017XWuSMc

Descriptions of alleged experiences joining other warring groups in Syria:

➤ An interviewee, who claimed to have been radicalized online through communication with an Arab man, said he joined Ahrar Al Sham in Syria. He described his unit as made up mainly of Arabs. The unit also included a Bosniak, who helped him communicate with the unit members by translating from Serbo-Croatian to Arabic. However, at some point during the interview, he claimed to have very limited knowledge of Serbo-Croatian, which he mixed with some English words and body language to get around and communicate with his unit. He mentioned that he had failed to connect with the Albanian unit despite looking for it for some time.[4]

➤ Another interviewee claimed to have joined the Free Syrian Army, a name he used interchangeably with Ahrar Al Sham. He once hinted to having been with Jabhat Al Nusrah, but later corrected himself by emphasizing that it was a Free Syrian Army brigade, only to then switch again to Ahrar Al Sham. He too described his unit as mostly Arab, with a Bosnian in the team, who helped translate from Serbo-Croatian to Arabic.

➤ Another claimed to have served as a paramedic in the conflict for three months in 2013 and to have tried to find the Albanian unit in Syria. He said that when he failed to locate it, he settled with a Free Syrian Army brigade instead. He spoke English with his unit members and commander.[5]

➤ One interviewee described how within a very short period of time in late 2013 he encountered four different organizations in Syria: ISIS, Jabhat Al Nusrah, Ahrar Al Sham and a Free Syrian Army brigade – and was able to leave all of them within this short period of time. He said, "I had no extensive prior knowledge about the groups there, I thought they were all fighting the Assad regime. I only knew I didn't want to be with an organization that was affiliated with Al Qaeda, due to its terrorist past. There was no law in Kosovo proscribing ISIS as terrorists at the time."[6]

All but two interviewees who travelled to Syria in the last quarter of 2013 and early 2014 claimed ISIS did not exist at the time as an entity, and only came to existence in July 2014 with the declaration of the caliphate, after they had returned to Kosovo. Their claims about ISIS's non-existence at the time of their participation in the conflict zone appeared almost identical, often presented in the first few minutes of the interview. It is not evident whether interviewees did not in fact know of the group's existence or were deliberately downplaying their knowledge of the organization they had joined, hinting that their goal and end-destination was to support Muslims against the Assad forces, rather than to support any particular groups' goals. However, based on media reports covering court proceedings, all but one of the interviewees had some type of affiliation with ISIS, either directly participating in the conflict, or supporting and aiding the organization in Kosovo. As for the women interviewed, they had travelled or attempted to travel to Syria and Iraq after the official declaration of the establishment of the caliphate. The idea of living in the caliphate appears to be one of the main reasons for their journey.

At least half the interviewees were in Syria before or just as fitnas (civil strife and conflict) began between different groups such as ISIS, Ahrar al Sham, Jabhat Al Nusrah and others. One interviewee noted, "There was a fitna among groups in Aleppo, in which Albanians also got

caught up. Kjani Mjaku [a former KLA member and one of the first Kosovans to be reported killed in Syria], was killed during a fitna by one of the warring groups."[147] The inconsistency in terms of membership of different groups among interviewees may arise because the conflict dynamics and alliances among warring factions in Syria and Iraq were constantly changing, and that groups themselves were not very consistent for long periods of time, at least until the declaration of the caliphate in which ISIS established a pseudo-state of its own.

Return to Kosovo: Interviewees typically stayed in Syria no more than three months. Kosovars can travel to Turkey visa-free; however, they cannot exceed 90 days as tourists. According to Turkish Law, the government can impose a fine and an entry ban on foreigners overstaying visa exemption of between three months and five years.[148]

One interviewee mentioned he had told his wife he would go to Syria for three months only, a period he had set to fulfil what he described as his religious obligation. He offered no justification as to why he had committed to this timeline. Two other interviewees, however, suggested they were told of this time limit by their unit superiors, and may have been allowed to return to Kosovo in order to maintain authorization to travel through Turkey again in the future. "I told people in the camp that I wanted to go back to Kosovo after being there for one month. They told me to stay for two more months, so that I would get the total of three months in Syria as required," said one of them.[149] Another interviewee returned to Kosovo having spent three months in Syria or Iraq. He later travelled back to the conflict zone. The three-month period may have been strategically utilized by the network to ensure the flow of movement of its members or ensure there was an exit strategy from the conflict, if and when needed.

It should be noted, however, that the media has reported that many individuals and their families settled for an indefinite period of time in the conflict area, and did not return to Kosovo after the prescribed 90-day cut-off period. The Kosovo Police database also notes that around 150 Kosovo men alongside 59 members of their families have not returned to Kosovo. In an ISIS propaganda video published in 2014, members of the Albanian fighter unit in Syria or Iraq burned their passports as a way of revoking citizenship of their country, while expressing their life-time commitment to the caliphate and the war.[150]

While the existence of a highly-organized, active recruitment network seems apparent, it is not clear whether all 335 Kosovars, including children and women, travelled to Syria and Iraq through the same network. The interview subjects were mainly from southeast and central Kosovo where the network of foreign fighters, several extremist imams and now-defunct local cultural associations existed for some time. It is not clear how 50 or more individuals from other regions in western Kosovo were recruited and or travelled to Syria, even though the media has reported that individuals from all regions ended up fighting alongside each other in most cases, suggesting that the network's outreach may have extended beyond the confines of south-eastern Kosovo.

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147 - AA 042

148 - Republic of Turkey. "Law on Foreigners and International Protection" available at: http://www.goc.gov.tr/files/files/eng_minikanun_5_son.pdf. Accessed July 2017.

149 - AA 045

150 - Live Leak, "Kosovo Albanian Beheading Solider," Posted on an unkonwn date in 2014, https://www.liveleak.com/view?i=9c-b_1406722122&comments=1.

Identity, cause and ideology: empathy for the victims and a feeling of belonging.

Academic research suggests that radicalization is a social process and that identity plays a key role in individuals joining the ranks of violent extremist organizations. Recruiters use the collective grievances of particular groups to enable narratives of victimization, but also exploit political ideologies, religious beliefs and ethnic sentiments to recruit followers and legitimize their actions.[7] Most of the interviewees justified their reasons for travelling to fight in Syria as largely moral and religious in character. Their religious frame appeared inherent to their identity, and was paramount to interpreting different aspects of their lives, their actions, sense of purpose and the very socialization process by which they claimed to have been radicalized.

> *"I travelled to Syria for humanitarian reasons, but also for a religious obligation. The first time I went there was because of the situation and the tortures of Muslims there, and due to the call of other Muslims to go and help. The second time, I got the idea of the Islamic State, and wanted to move there to build a life and defend the Caliphate."[151]*

> *"War against Islam is at its worst. Muslims are being widely persecuted, tortured, always living in war. They are always victims. Tell me one war that Muslims started. The answer is none!"[152]*

> *"There are different jihads, and one of them is war. Jihad means to help come to the aid of other Muslims in need. Jihad also means to fight yourself in becoming better. I only took the one for war seriously…but if someone kills you, you don't wait for them with flowers and bread [inferring the need to fight back]. I do not deny that I went there for jihad."[153]*

A dominant narrative discerned from the interviews is linked to the notion of Islam under threat and the oppression of Muslims around the world. Interviewees were motivated to join the fight in Syria and Iraq primarily by the desire to defend Islam and Muslims under threat. Returned fighters seemed to have nurtured a sense of responsibility for Muslim victims in Syria, and felt a calling to travel back to join the fight. An interviewee said, "Shias are nasty. They kill [Sunni] Muslims all the time. Even in Kosovo, Shias have started to set foot, getting hundreds of thousands of euros of support. Shias have deviated and they will be wiped out of the face of the earth."[154]

They mainly communicated with their close circle of friends and relatives, which helped reinforce each other's religious and ethical convictions. Five interviewees claimed that one of their main motivations to travel to Syria and Iraq was to defend Muslims and Islam, which they described as a religious obligation and a moral act. "My wife was against me going [to fight in Syria], but she understood my calling and determination to go in support of Muslim victims, and [she] agreed that I could leave… However, it was one of the most difficult things for me to tell them [wife, child and parents] that I was leaving, so I didn't say goodbye. I just left," explained an interviewee. [155]

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151 - AA 005
152 - AA 001
153 - AA 027
154 - AA 045
155 - AA 026

Three interviewees noted an additional narrative of Islam and Muslims as victims of the West. They considered the United States and Western European countries as perpetrators of crimes and violence against [Sunni] Muslims. During interviews, such a narrative often equated to the intervention of the United States in Iraq and its wider role in the Middle East. An interviewee said, "claims of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq were proven unfounded. It turned out that they [Americans] went to Iraq to kill Muslims and rape women… they themselves have posted videos of massacres, of torturing Muslim women and corpses."[156] Another interviewee mentioned how "big powers intervened in Kosovo only to minimize Russia's influence, not to protect Muslims. [Do you] see how they [the West] went to Ukraine immediately because they are Christian? They did not do the same for Muslims in Bosnia and Herzegovina."[157]

One suggested a similar pattern of discrimination and oppression against [Sunni] Muslims applied not only to the Kosovo context, but also in Saudi Arabia. He noted, the "war against Islam is amongst the worst in Saudi Arabia and Kosovo. There are 100,000 - 150,000 Muslims in Kosovo. I have personally met more than 5,000 of them. Muslims in both places are widely discriminated against."[158] Such views appear to present a narrative curated to manifest Kosovars' grievances and struggles as analogues to the greater global trend of oppression against Muslims.

Religion and ideology appeared to have been at the centre of interviewees' decisions to become fighters. They seem to have the understanding that Muslims in Syria and Iraq were fighting jihad, and that they could play a role in it, alongside other Kosovars who had previously joined the ranks of ISIS, Jabhat Al Nusrah and other groups. Fighting in the name of jihad gave them a cause and a sense of belonging. An interviewee noted, "I thought it was important to die while standing on the right path."[159] Two other interviewees explicitly suggested that they were highly determined and were seeking the status of a Shaheed (martyr). One of them said, "I went to Syria to reach the status of a Shaheed in the name of Allah. It is the highest status one could attain. It just wasn't Allah's will for me to reach that status yet."[160]

One interviewee described how religious beliefs and convictions were at the centre of his socialization processes within tight-knit groups. During the discussion, he noted, "my friends and I would talk about the topic of jihad with a local imam; we spent a lot of time together and envisioned ourselves fighting alongside opposition forces in Syria. We spent six or more months preparing to go to the theatre of conflict."[161]

Only one interviewee expressed his support for the caliphate, saying he returned to Syria for the second time to help consolidate the territorial jurisdiction of the caliphate and enforce Sharia Law[162] as the ultimate law for Muslims. "I joined Jabhat al-Nusrah in 2013. [The organization] was a branch of ISIS and Al Qaeda, and the most powerful at the time. I joined it and not the Free Syrian Army because its ultimate goal was to create an Islamic State. Later I moved to ISIS because they wanted an Islamic State and to institute Sharia Law. Jabhat al-Nusrah also wants an Islamic State but wants to put it in place more gradually, while ISIS wants to do it right

156 - AA 007

157 - AA 033

158 - AA 042

159 - AA 022

160 - AA 005

161 - AA 021

162 - Islamic canonical law based on the teachings of the Koran and the traditions of the Prophet (Hadith and Sunna), prescribing both religious and secular duties and sometimes retributive penalties for lawbreaking.

away."[163] Other interviewees did not express any direct support for the caliphate; however, they generally accepted that their trip resulted from their desire to wage jihad in the region.

Academic research and comments from the interviewees suggest that the crisis in Syria has created a perception that Muslims should unite to defend Islam and the caliphate, in an interpretation that the armed conflicts in Syria and Iraq are defensive jihad. Radicalization, therefore, allegedly speaks to Muslims' empathy with the victims in Syria and addresses their duty to be in solidarity with other Muslim brothers. This invitation to jihad from ISIS and al-Qaeda recruiters claims that joining them to defend fellow Muslims is a personal religious obligation of every Muslim. The Kosovo-Wide Assessment of Radicalisation at the Community Level Research Project frames this as a way of branding support for Sharia Law and the caliphate as the ultimate protector of Muslims.[164] The media has reported cases of radicalization whereby recruiters and ideologues have tapped into the sense of victimhood of the Muslim people in Syria, creating a cause and a calling for Kosovars to go to their defence.

In terms of religious upbringing, all but one interviewee appeared to have nurtured their practice and devotion to Islam for at least four years and, for some, since childhood. Four of them were introduced to religion by family, while the rest had begun practicing with friends and community members independently of their families. One interviewee was influenced by his wife, with whom he eventually travelled to Syria. Those who were recent devotees generally highlighted the importance of religion for spiritual purposes, and credited it for taking them away from negative aspects of their lives. One interviewee said, "I started to become devoted to Islam in 2010-2011. Practicing religion is a spiritual matter for me… I found solace, calmness and gradually became more grounded. Islam helped me develop a moral compass. For me it was a spiritual awakening."[165] Another added, "Devotion to Islam helped me in life… I wasn't on a good path before. I consumed alcohol, stayed up late, etc. I felt better when I moved away from these habits [because of Islam]."[166]

Family played a role in religious upbringing for half the interviewees, but did not seem to be the rule across the board. The tradition of practicing Islam was mainly passed down to the interviewees by family elders, namely grandparents or parents. In contrast, for some of the interviewees, their families, especially parents and in some cases siblings, appeared to be areligious or even atheist. One interviewee presented his family and personal past and recent history as quite secular. However, he claimed to have become more devoted after his return from Syria. "My parents don't pray the namaz,[167] but they do not tell me what to do. My brother and wife do. I advised my wife, and she started praying namaz as well. My sister doesn't practise Islam frequently; she is seasonal with it [laughingly]…she's an adult, she decides for herself, and I do not push her."[168] Another returned fighter noted, "I come from a religiously devout family. My siblings and I have been praying namaz since 8th grade [13 or 14 years of age]. My mother practised Islam. Her father was an imam …. I was very close to her."[169]

Most interviewees commented that they believed they became more informed about Islam after their return to Kosovo. They appear to continue to nurture their religious convictions, and

163 - AA 039

164 - UNDP. "Community Level Recommendations for Preventing Violent Extremism in Kosovo." Available at: http://www.ks.undp.org/content/dam/kosovo/docs/PVE/PVE_Summary.pdf

165 - AA 008

166 - AA 001

167 - The ritual prayers prescribed by Islam to be observed five times a day.

168 - AA 008

169 - AA 021

most of them described reading, questioning and reflecting more about the religion after their Syria experiences, claiming they take concepts said by imams with reservation, and instead turn to scriptures to look at concepts critically and find answers. An interview noted, "After Syria, I paid more attention to lectures, since before I had less time. I wanted to prepare myself as there's peace here [in Kosovo] and there was war there [in Syria]; the two are different… Now I read and reflect more; I no longer take concepts as they are said by an imam or a post in Facebook. I question them."[170] Three of the interviewees suggested that they now see another dimension of jihad, the one on self-fulfilment, noting that their thinking has diverged from one of violence to that of internalization. One said "Jihad is not only war, but also war with yourself, to break away from your own bad things."[171]

Humanitarian support to victims of Syria as solidarity with the war in Kosovo

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"Kosovo's enemies – Russia but it's also heard of Serbs – are supporting the Assad regime. I wasn't part of the war in Kosovo, and then I wanted to face Shkijet [derogatory term for Serbs] there, there in the battlefield."[172]

"My thinking at the time was like the following: I am a bit hot-blooded, a bit of a soldier type, I didn't have a way to move abroad. In the meantime, many people were getting killed out there [in Syria] …The refugees I met at the asylum camp told me horrific war stories. I was moved and felt compelled to help. I asked myself - what am I doing? What is my purpose?… I borrowed some money, and immediately after being refused entry to the European Schengen zone, I decided to go to Syria to fight [the] Assad [regime]… I went there [to Syria] for purely humanitarian reasons. I wanted to help people there and contribute with my warfare experience. That's not a crime…"[173]

The Syrian conflict has been a motivating factor in driving violent extremism in Kosovo, and a cause reportedly tapped into and augmented by a network of recruiters across the region. Lack of a consistent identity among Kosovars, as well as the legacy of the conflict in 1999 may have created an environment conducive for radicalization. This is also interlinked with individuals' belief that Muslims have been persecuted worldwide throughout history and that this persecution continues, including by the Assad regime in Syria.[174] This is compounded by the feeling of anger and frustration over what is perceived as a lack of international response to this perceived Muslim persecution.[175] Responding to the inaction of the international community to the situation in Syria has also been mentioned as a reason by returned foreign fighters in Kosovo, especially those who left during the first years of the conflict in Syria.[176]

The legacy of the Kosovo conflict in 1999 may have made it easier to recruit people from Kosovo because they relate to a war that happened to them, and empathize with the plight of

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170 - AA 040

171 - AA 040

172 - AA 002

173 - AA 015

174 - Saltman and Smith, "Till martyrdom do us part" Gender and the ISIS Phenomenon, p 11.

175 - Saltman and Smith, "Till martyrdom do us part" Gender and the ISIS Phenomenon, pp 12-13.

176 - Lydia Wilson, "Is Kosovo the New European Hotbed of Jihadi Extremism?," The Nation, 16 July 2016, accessed 29 January 2017, https://www.thenation.com/article/is-kosovo-the-new-european-hotbed-of-jihadi-extremism/; and Shpend Kursani, Report Inquiring into the Causes and Consequences of Kosovars' Involvement as Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq, (Kosovo: Kosovar Center for Security Studies, 2015), http://www.qkss.org/repository/docs/Report_inquiring_into_the_causes_and_consequences_of_Kosovo_citizens%27_involvement_as_foreign_fighters_in_Syria_and_Iraq_307708.pdf, p. 83.

the persecuted.

All interviewees appeared inclined to note readily humanitarian reasons and moral outrage as motivations for travelling to Syria. This type of justification was one of the few reasons they would initially list when asked about their motivation for travel to Syria. They stated that they wished to help the Syrian people and to prevent Syrians' from experiencing oppression by the Assad regime, which they likened to life under the Yugoslav regime in the 1990s.

Two interviewees described the war in Syria as more horrific and destructive than the one in Kosovo in 1999, but noted that seeing the imagery of war in Syria prompted them to draw parallels to their experiences.[177] The aim of preventing Syrians from experiencing oppression by the Assad regime, similar to that which they witnessed in Kosovo in late 1990s, was a driver for some to travel to Syria. One interviewee considered the war in Syria as an opportunity to be part of the "foreign powers" to protect civilians, a role similar to that of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in Kosovo in 1999.

All but one interviewee highlighted their desire to help the Syrian people as the main reason for their trip. Interviewees described their humanitarian effort as genuine and moral, not a crime. Two of them claimed not to regret having travelled and participated in the conflict in Syria. One interviewee said, "I do not regret it [having participated in the conflict in Syria]. I did not commit a crime; I was there for humanitarian reasons. Now I use religion to make sense of all that and keep me intact."[178] The other interviewee claimed, "I can't say I regret going. Islam doesn't allow someone to regret his past actions; only to improve upon them."[179]

One of the interviewees, who was the father of a toddler when he travelled, claimed images of children being killed in the war in Syria had a big impact on his decision to travel to the theatre of conflict. He wanted to support those victims, providing first aid. He claimed the vocational training he received in a medicine-related subject helped him in his role as a paramedic in Syria. "Seeing images [of the killings] online and putting my kid in that context were the main reasons why I left… My goal, my mission in life, was to go, fulfil a humanitarian duty, and that's it… and today I think I fulfilled it. I saved the life of at least one kid…"[180]

Another interviewee claimed his motivations for travelling to Syria were humanitarian in nature, inspired by Syrian refugees. He also claimed to have previously engaged in the theatre of conflict, having participated in guerrilla warfare from 1999 to 2001 in the civil conflicts in Kosovo, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, and Serbia.[181] He described his past with a sense of pride and patriotism. On several occasions, he drew parallels between the conflicts in the Balkans and that in Syria and Iraq, and suggested it was natural for him use his warfare experience to support the efforts of Syrian rebels to topple the Assad regime. The interviewee described his personal situation prior to his travel as difficult. He was caught crossing the Serbia-Hungary border illegally while he was trying to reach France, also illegally, to reunite with his wife and children.

One returned fighter spoke fondly of a woman from the International Red Cross, whose name he remembered clearly, who had organized buses for the transfer of civilians from his village

177 - AA 005

178 - AA 040

179 - AA 006

180 - AA 008

181 - AA 007 claimed to have been a member of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), the National Liberation Army (NLA) in Macedonia, and the Liberation Army of Presevo, Medveda and Bujanovac (LAPMB) in south Serbia.

to an urban area in 1998. He credited her for the safe transfer of the civilians, including his family, from the battle zone.[182] One of the mothers interviewed said her son believed that the war in Kosovo and the one in Syria were similar, and that the main reason he travelled to Syria was to support victims.

Public institutions' support for the Syrian people may have played a role in the decision of some of the interviewees to travel to Syria. Four returned fighters mentioned public statements by Enver Hoxhaj, the then Foreign Minister of Kosovo, who voiced strong support for the Syrian opposition and hosted its representatives in Kosovo in 2012. Hoxhaj also made an appeal to the international community to intervene in Syria in August 2013. His support for the Syrian opposition arose primarily by drawing parallels with Kosovo's struggles in the late 1990s.[183] Most of the returned fighters admitted that they did not follow what Hoxhaj had said. Nonetheless, they mentioned his call as a justification for their decision to travel to Syria. One said that he took it as a political 'green light' for Kosovars to travel, and as a guarantee that there would be no consequences. He added, "I trusted in the Syrian revolution, and supported Albanians travelling there to fight alongside the rebels."[184]

Interviewees also assigned responsibility to the Islamic Community of Kosovo for encouraging Kosovars to travel to Syria. Four interviewees recalled that Naim Ternava, the Grand Mufti, issued a statement for imams to read to their congregations across Kosovo expressing sympathy with the Syrian victims, and calling on Kosovo Muslims to express solidarity with them and come to their aid. An interviewee suggested this statement had been interpreted by pious Muslims as a call to travel to Syria and take up arms. However, one interviewee who fought with the ethnic Albanian unit as part of ISIS claimed his unit commanders and associates distanced themselves from the Islamic Community of Kosovo because of its "cooperation with non-believers, and for its public statements made against Albanians going to fight in Syria, suggesting that what we were fighting for was not jihad."[185]

Contextualized narratives curated to highlight Albanian national identity and struggles

"Albanians are known to be among the strongest fighters in Syria. They come only second to Chechens, who are considered the fiercest of them all. Bashar Al Assad has a bounty of US$150,000 for each Chechen caught alive and US$100,000 for each Albanian caught alive."[186]

"Underground imams [defined by the subject as ideologues and recruiters as well as supporters of violent extremist groups in Kosovo] used to say that Albanians were among the biggest contributors to Islam during the Ottoman Caliphate under the Ottoman Empire… that we, the Albanians, have an obligation to help all Muslims in need."[187]

"The war in Kosovo against Serbia was bad. Fighting Serbs was equivalent to jihad.

182 - AA 021

183 - Hoxhaj, Enver "It's 1999 in Syria" in Foreign Affairs. 23 August 2013. Accessed July 2017. Available at http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/08/23/its-1999-in-syria/
Charbonneau, Louis "Kosovo voices strong support for Syria opposition" REUTERS, 14 May 2012. Accessed July 2017. Available at http://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-kosovo-idUSBRE84D1EI20120514

184 - AA 002

185 - AA 005

186 - AA 027

187 - AA 002

Adem Jashari [a national hero who founded the Kosovo Liberation Army] was a martyr, and the war fought [by the KLA] was defensive jihad."[188]

"Naman Demolli [the first ethnic Albanian reported killed in Syria in 2012] is a hero. He is considered the embodiment of a brave martyr in the Arab world. He was [brave] like a Chechen [considered the fiercest of the fighters by the subject]. He was also in the KLA. This is who we, the Albanians, are."[189]

"The original text of the Declaration of the Caliphate was published in several languages such as English, French and German, and including Albanian. This reflects the importance of Albanians in the Caliphate."[190]

Researchers observed a unique pattern of narratives that violent extremist groups seem to have curated for the local context around a romantic notion of the Albanian identity and the Albanian peoples' struggles, and a cohesive link between these two and a religious discourse that aims to legitimize the use of force in the pursuit of the ideological goals of extremist groups. These narratives appear to point to the importance of the legacy of the Kosovo conflict as a unique environment for recruitment. This might have been further compounded by the fact that a few of the first people known publicly to have joined the fighting in Syria, and killed in battle, were former Kosovo Liberation Army members, such as Naman Demolli, Hetem Dema and Kjani Mjaku.[191] For others who were too young in 1998-1999, it was an opportunity to pick up arms in what they perceived as a very similar conflict. One even spoke about how Kosovo's "enemies" were supporting the Assad regime, namely Russia, and how he had heard that there were Serbs among the ranks of Assad's military forces.

It is not clear whether such narratives have been nurtured by violent extremist groups in Kosovo among different networks, or whether interviewees may have embraced them while in Syria and Iraq. Most of them suggested having consumed radical information and narratives via social media, but also through their peers and in religious lectures prior to travelling to the theatre of conflict. Three of the returnees suggested they had gone through some type of psychological preparation, training and education when on the ground in Syria, with one having spent his first month in the province of Aleppo studying at a camp, learning about Islam and reflecting about jihad. Nevertheless, such narrative layers that are curated with the local context in mind may have been effective in shaping the value framework of some Kosovars, tied to violent extremist organizations.

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188 - AA 001

189 - AA 042

190 - AA 033. Verification of the Declaration of the Caliphate in Albanian, can be found at: Al Jazeera. Iraq's Baghdadi Calls for 'holy war.' 2 July 2014. Accessed 8 October 2017. Available at http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/07/iraqi-rebel-leader-calls-holy-war-201471202429388292.html

191 - Ayya Harraz, "Who are the Kosovar fighters in Syria?" 11 February 2016, Available at http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2016/02/kosovar-fighters-syria-isil-iraq-kosovo-160211060736871.html; and Ebi Spahiu. "Ethnic Albanian Foreign Fighters and the Islamic State" in Terrorism Monitor Volume: 13 Issue: 10. 15 May 2015. Available at https://jamestown.org/program/ethnic-albanian-foreign-fighters-and-the-islamic-state/#sthash.ev2QepH5.dpuf; and "Ne Siri vritet edhe nje luftetar nga Kacaniku," Telegrafi, 8 January 2014, http://telegrafi.com/ne-siri-vritet-edhe-nje-luftetar-nga-kacaniku/, and Vedat Xhymshyti, "Si vdic Naman Demolli ne Siri," Kallxo.com, http://kallxo.com/gjnk/si-vdiq-naman-demolli-ne-siri/

Fighting for a cause provides glamour, adventure and empowerment

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"ISIS ideology is functioning now, in social media and such. ISIS has set foot in Kosovo and spread its wings across it. Forty countries support the Caliphate but they have not made it official. The Free Syrian Army was very weak. ISIS are much braver, they are determined, like kamikazes."[192]

"I respect the Kosovo Liberation Army, but their [former KLA fighters'] courage cannot be compared to that of ISIS. Nobody can compare with ISIS's courage, maybe only the Japanese kamikazes."[193]

"Everyone fights ISIS and can't defeat it, because it has supporters all around the world….You should expect there will be war in Hatay Province in Turkey very soon... and in many other countries around the world. ISIS has very smart people… the Caliphate will be the ultimate liberator of Syria. ISIS will take over the world. Oppression [of Muslims] creates fighters for ISIS."[194]

Romanticism of the conflict – the notions of the adventure of leaving home, travelling and fighting or supporting the fight, and foreign fighters' mission to defend a people and a community – may have been another pull factor for young Kosovars to travel to Syria. Fighting for a cause provides glamour, empowerment and purpose. This was especially evident through photographic evidence that foreign fighters themselves posted across social media to promote their cause. Ethnic Albanians fighting for extremist groups, including Lavdrim Muhaxheri, Ridvan Haqifi and others, presented photographic evidence that portrayed a sense of pride, freedom, empowerment and, ultimately, happiness.

Illustration 8: Pictures posted on social media by ethnic Albanian fighters in Syria and Iraq, 2012 – 2014

The romanticism of the conflict but also the sense of purpose were evident with one interviewee in particular. Travelling to Syria seemed to have provided him with a sense of meaning, but also with empowerment. He described how he felt when he was finally given a chance to contribute to a cause: being there gave him an adrenaline high, and receiving training on the use of arms was something he seemed to value. He mentioned the likes of Mother Teresa and Barack Obama as individuals who came from modest backgrounds but were able to achieve greatness, inferring his personal objective. Further he noted that, "Lavdrim Muhaxheri once told me I was not made for war because I chase women a lot. I told him 'You will hear

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192 - AA 035

193 - AA 026

194 - AA 042

about me, soon'. I went [to Syria] so I could be someone, be valuable for something and leave a legacy."[195]

The interviewee appeared to be captivated with the use of arms, having spoken about the subject several times on different occasions during the interview. The use of arms may have given him a sense of empowerment. "Right after I joined, I received training on the use of guns and also on how to withhold the pressure of war. I did well with the basics. I was about to get training on the use of Gulinovs [Russian heavy machine guns] but we started to get bombed… I wish I had got to use it."[196] Four of the interviewees claimed to have previously sought employment in one of Kosovo's law enforcement agencies (the Police, the Kosovo Security Force and the Kosovo Agency of Intelligence), but all of them had been rejected. Being part of an institution that equipped them with skills and tools to confront the use of violence may have felt empowering.

Furthermore, three interviewees highlighted a romantic notion of ISIS's power and prowess. They seem to believe not only that the caliphate will endure, but also that it will grow stronger and more resilient in its struggles.

In discussing the romanticism of the conflict as a pull factor for women, the literature often mentions that women have travelled to Syria and Iraq in the hope of finding a spouse.[197] However, based on the Kosovo Police database, only 18 percent of women who left Kosovo were unmarried. At the same time, the media reported the case of a young woman who was arrested while trying to leave with her boyfriend. She confessed that they had planned to marry once in Syria, since her family in Kosovo did not approve of her marriage to the man, who already had two wives.[198]

Communication channels: the internet and social media amplifying radical views

The internet and social media facilitated communication, helping some Kosovars access radical narratives. Subjects interviewed noted that the radicalization and recruitment process took place through engagement and communication both in physical and virtual spaces.

"YouTube was my go-to place to learn about the war in Syria. I saw a lot of videos about Assad's regime's crimes against innocent people. I watched many videos and began to hate Assad for what he was doing."[199]

"I would post on social media both war photos and positive photos, those showing myself eating cherries or playing with cats to incite others to come [to Syria]."[200]

"I was in direct contact with Lavdrim [Muhaxheri] via Facebook and SMS. I followed his posts. I also coordinated my trip there directly with him [Muhaxheri]."[201]

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195 - AA 001

196 - AA 027

197 - Saltman and Smith, "Till martyrdom do us part" Gender and the ISIS Phenomenon, pp. 16-17.

198 - Selvije Bajrami, "Në ISIS Për T'U Martuar [In ISIS to get married]." Zëri, 19 November 2015, http://zeri.info/aktuale/62789/ne-isis-per-t-u-martuar/.

199 - AA 039

200 - AA 008

201 - AA 05

The context:

The internet and social media have been identified as some of the main sources of information and socialization for recruitment and radicalization, and one of the main risk factors, by the *Kosovo Strategy on Prevention of Violent Extremism and Radicalization Leading to Terrorism 2015-2020.*[202] The internet and social media create more opportunities to become radicalized, and in many instances serve as 'echo chambers': a place where individuals find their ideas supported and echoed by other like-minded individuals.

Communication channels have a role in accelerating the process of radicalization, allowing radicalization to occur without physical contact and increasing opportunities for self-radicalization.[203] Social media offers prospective radicals an opportunity to develop social ties and find validation through others, thus providing the critical element of social interaction at relatively low cost.[204] Furthermore, according to academic Peter Neumann, "social networks provide an avenue through which prospective participants can come into contact with information about 'the cause' and the groups mobilizing around this cause. Importantly, the informality and often private nature of these communication channels means that they are not controlled by mainstream media, political elites or the state."[205]

Internet penetration and usage in Kosovo is considered among the highest in the region, amounting to 84 percent of the population.[206] The use of Facebook, YouTube and other online media to promote extremist views, amplify narratives and publicize activities in Syria and Iraq was quite frequent among foreign fighters, imams and others in related circles. Lavdrim Muhaxheri and other individuals fighting in Syria and Iraq frequently promoted, mainly through Facebook, their activities in the theatre of conflict during 2012 – 2014. They often called on Albanians to join them in jihad. For some time, Muhaxheri had his Facebook account open to the public and used it to communicate with wider audiences, even responding to media allegations about his motivations and persona. There are many YouTube channels carrying video lectures by imams such as Zekerija Qazimi, Rexhep Memishi, Xhezair Fishti and Abdyl Fuga. A quick search for these imams' names on YouTube yields hundreds of videos, equivalent to thousands of hours of lectures.

Kosovo's Security Council (KSC), an agency within the Prime Minister's Office, has identified that radical religious propaganda is being disseminated primarily online. This includes Albanian translations of radical books, other literature and YouTube videos propagating violent extremism through teuhid.net, www.scribd.com, hilafeti-wordpress.com and dozens of similar portals. Other sources in foreign languages that spread both Islamic and non-Islamic extremist propaganda – from which Kosovar radicals draw inspiration and influence – include links, blogs, various social media accounts, and communication and dissemination apps in English, Arabic and Turkish.[207]

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202 - http://www.kryeministri-ks.net/repository/docs/STRATEGY_parandalim_-_ENG.pdf

203 - Ines von Behr, Anaïs Reding, Charlie Edwards, Luke Gribbon, "Radicalization in the Digital Era," RAND Corporation, http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR400/RR453/RAND_RR453.pdf

204 - http://www.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a556711.pdf

205 - Peter Numan, "Options and Strategies for Countering Online Radicalization in the United States." http://www.radicalisationresearch.org/research/options-and-strategies-for-countering-online-radicalization-in-the-united-states/

206 - Comparatively, regional internet penetration statistics are as follows: Albania (66.4 percent), Serbia (67.1 percent), Macedonia (72.2 percent), Montenegro (69.7 percent) – according to the Internet World Stats. Internet Stats and Facebook Usage in Europe, June 2017 Statistics. Accessed 4 October 2017. http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats4.htm; and STIKK. Internet Penetration and Usage in Kosovo," Kosovo Association and Information Communication Technology, August 2013, http://stikk.org/fileadmin/user_upload/Internet_penetration_and_usage_in_Kosovo.pdf

207 - Kosovo Security Council, Annual Report on Implementation for the Strategy on Prevention of Violent Extremism and Radicalization Leading to Terrorism 2015-2020.
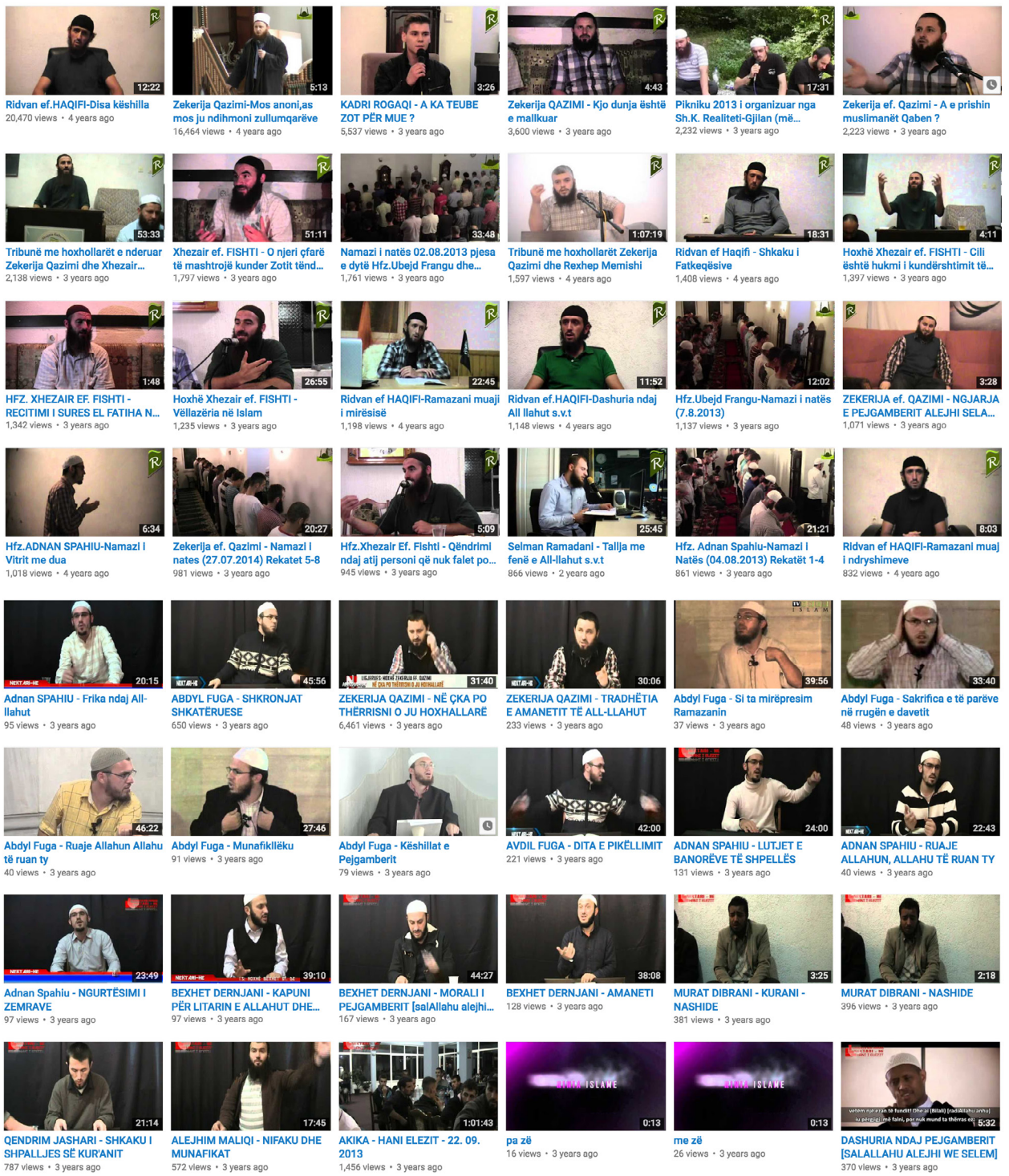
Illustration 9: Search on YouTube for the names of one or two imams

One of the most recent means of communication and information-sharing among ISIS fighters, including those from Kosovo, is through Telegram, a heavily encrypted messaging application, which is considered difficult to intercept.[208] SMS-based communications appear to have been a means of communication between individuals recruited to travel to Syria and their alleged facilitators in Kosovo, as intercepted by the police and the intelligence commu-

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208 - CNN, An App called Telegram is the 'hot new thing among jihadists,' http://money.cnn.com/2015/11/17/technology/isis-telegram/; Gazeta Express, "Antaret Shiptare te ISIS po komunikojne me nje aplikacion ne pronesi ruse," http://www.gazetaexpress.com/lajme/anetaret-shqiptare-te-isis-it-po-komunikojne-me-nje-aplikacion-ne-pronesi-ruse-231490/?archive=1

nity and presented in indictment cases against several individuals suspected of involvement in terrorism.[209] Other instances of SMS-based communications involved Muhaxheri, Haqifi and their network in Kaçanik/Kačanik and Hani i Elezit/Elez Han.[210]

Findings from interviews:
Foreign fighters' access to information was concentrated on a particular interpretation of religion and the conflict, consisting of propaganda from violent extremist elements disseminated through the internet and social media. All interviewees highlighted social media networks, particularly Facebook, as the main means of connecting and communicating with Albanian fighters in Syria and Iraq, but also as a key source of access to violent extremist information. One interviewee claimed, "Facebook was a place where I connected with friends, even when in Syria. I was also in touch with Lavdrim Muhaxheri through Facebook for some time and followed his activities in Syria and Iraq."[211]

Some of the interviewees claimed to have befriended other Kosovo fighters in person through local activities, as well as through social media. Five interviewees mentioned they communicated directly with two known leaders of the ethnic Albanian unit in ISIS via SMS, social media, or in-person prior to travelling to Syria, or as they were reaching the conflict zone. Communication between returned fighters and facilitators was mostly carried out through SMS. Two of them mentioned using the Kosovo Telecom (Vala 900) company, which allegedly offered roaming services for sim card holders while they were in Turkey and even in Syria. When communicating through social media, interviewees mostly used Facebook.

One interviewee claimed to have connected via Facebook with an Arab man who was part of the Free Syrian Army. This person, he claimed, radicalized him over time through discussions and content related to the victimization of the Syrian people under the Assad regime. The same person also organized his travel to Syria.[212] One of the interviewees said, "I travelled with two other people to Syria, one of whom I befriended on Facebook."[213]

Interviewees spoke of watching online videos, mainly on YouTube and Facebook, of civilians getting killed, one of them characterizing these as "al-Assad's inhumane massacres. I saw so many videos of horrific crimes. The online videos of crimes committed against Syrians influenced my way of thinking, and reinforced my reasons for travelling there to support them."[214] Another interviewee described how he used Facebook to promote his activities in the theatre of conflict, including pictures with arms. "I would post on social media both war photos and photos [of people] eating cherries or playing with cats to incite others to come [to Syria]."[215] Another said, "YouTube was my go-to place to learn about the war in Syria. I saw a lot of videos of Assad regime's crimes against innocent people. I watched many videos and began to hate Assad for what he was doing."[216]

Social media and internet communication tools played a significant role in enabling returned fighters to access, promote and disseminate radical narratives of extremist formations quick-

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209 - Bleta Gashi, Gazeta Express, http://www.gazetaexpress.com/lajme/sms-et-zbulojne-aferen-seksuale-te-imamit-kosovar-qe-rekrutonte-xhihadiste-sms-deshmi-173140/?archive=1

210 - Bleta Gashi, Mentor Gjergjaj, "Ekskluzive: Si u kthye I plagosur Lavdrim Muhaxheri ne Kosove ne 2013 (Pjesa Dyte)," http://www.gazetaex-press.com/lajme/ekskluzive-si-u-kthye-i-plagosur-lavdrim-muhaxheri-ne-kosove-ne-vitin-2013-sms-deshmi-pjesa-2-159908/?archive=1

211 - AA 042

212 - AA 001

213 - AA 037

214 - AA 022

215 - AA 008

216 - AA 005

ly and effectively, but also enabled foreign fighters to bring their experiences closer to their audiences in Kosovo who were susceptible to radicalization. During one of the interviews, the subject openly checked Facebook on his phone at least three times, in one instance showcasing a post he had made against perceived Islamophobia in Kosovo. Primary interviewees seem to have made great use of social media and the internet to connect with their recruitment facilitators in Syria and Iraq, and with their families back in Kosovo.

Challenges upon return: reintegration and stigma

The section below is primarily based on information collected through interviews. It gives an overview of what the interviewees identified as challenges that they faced on their return to Kosovo. It also lists several measures that they mentioned as potentially useful for their future resocialization, and ends with a discussion of the issue of stigma faced by the returned fighters and their families.

> "ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusrah sent out a signed letter calling me a traitor and threatening me, my wife and children with death."[217]
>
> "It is not good for the government to hand you a jail term. That is literally to kill off the life of our children, who will grow up without parents (stigmatized with a few opportunities). This is how the government creates [new internal] enemies."[218]
>
> "I have lost contact with aunts and uncles whom I used to bring together in the past. They distanced from me after the media covered my story [facilitation of terrorist activities in Kosovo]continuously for five straight days. They say I brought shame to the family."[219]
>
> "What I feared the most has already happened – public arrest, public pressure, public humiliation."[220]
>
> "I don't know how I will be able to remove this dark spot in my personal history, so that my children will not grow up to think their father is bad and that they are too by default. I don't want them to suffer because of me."[221]

Consequences of return and reintegration possibilities

A few of the returned fighters spoke about the consequences of their travel to Syria and of coming back. One was the fear of retaliation from ISIS and other terrorist groups. It is a well-known fact that defecting from terrorist groups is not easy, and there are many stories of groups like ISIS taking passports away from recruits, threatening defectors, or attempting to hinder defection. One interviewee explained that he and his family had to seek permission from recruiters in Kosovo and influence ethnic Albanian commanders in ISIS so that he would be able to leave Syria.[222] A few interviewees mentioned receiving threats upon their return to Kosovo. One said he was aware of a letter signed by ISIS and/or Jabhat al-Nusrah calling him a traitor and threatening him and his family with death.[223] Another one said that upon his return to Kosovo, another prominent Kosovo Albanian within ISIS structures had ordered his execution.[224] In one of the prisons, guards commented to the researchers that the court sentenced one returned fighter to prison mainly as a security measure, to protect him from potential revenge from ISIS.

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217 - AA 007
218 - AA 008
219 - AA 003
220 - AA 002
221 - AA 003
222 - AA 021
223 - AA 015
224 - AA 020

The other immediate consequence was prison sentences. The majority of those interviewed for this study were either currently serving a prison sentence or will very likely serve one after the final verdicts from the courts of appeal.[225] Only one of the interviewees appeared to accept his prison sentence, saying, "We got what we deserved, because it [travelling to Syria] is unlawful."[226] The others either attempted to convince the researchers that they were innocent and blamed the justice system for being unjust, or believed that their actions should not be punished by imprisonment. This latter group admitted to having travelled to Syria, but insisted that they did not (knowingly) join any terrorist groups there or commit any terrorist acts. One of them said, "If I'm accused of terrorism, then the government supports Bashar al-Assad. And if I declared that I was going to protect people from al-Assad, then I am a terrorist because I saved a kid."[227]

The Kosovo Strategy on Prevention of Violent Extremism and Radicalization Leading to Terrorism 2015–2020 includes de-radicalization and reintegration of radicalized persons as one of its strategic objectives, noting that the focus of these policies and programmes should be persons in Kosovo who have been identified as radicalized. The Kosovo Strategy also recognizes the possibility of "alternatives to detention where appropriate,"[228]

Many interviewees, including family members, complained that imprisonment does not contribute towards reintegration and resocialization. Three returned fighters alleged that the legal process harmed their process of resocialization and reintegration. They were arrested one year after they had returned from Syria. Two of them claimed to have been employed at the time and living what they described as a normal life. One interviewee said detention had disrupted his process of reintegration into the labour market and his community. One interviewee noted that he had been in a state of limbo for the past three years, during the trial process. He said he did not know whether he should pursue employment, for fear of being imprisoned any day.

" *"My former boss re-hired me when I came back [from Syria]. I was detained for some time. He re-hired me after my release. My trials began and I went through the appeals process. I was rehired for a third time. Now that I am in prison, I no longer have a place to work. I don't think this [being in prison] helps reintegration."229*

"How come the government considers me a threat? If I wanted to do something [a potential attack in Kosovo], I would have done it already. But I didn't – I was back with my family. That's what I call reintegration, not this [imprisonment]."230

"Prison is not a solution. It might only have a positive impact during the first month, after that it just worsens the situation," said one interviewee.231 Another one said, "Here you meet criminals who do drugs. I have to share the space with four of them, and they can affect me negatively. This way, with these people, I have no opportunity to reintegrate."232

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225 - It should be noted here that the situation for returned women appears to be different in this regard. By and large, the few who have returned have not been imprisoned and court cases have not been initiated against them. For a more detailed discussion of this, please see the section on women.

226 - AA 018

227 - AA 008

228 - Office of the Prime Minister. Strategy on the Prevention of Violent Extremism and Radicalization Leading to Terrorism 2015-2020.

229 - AA 06

230 - AA08

231 - AA 04

232 - AA 04

Interviewees also spoke about what they perceived as a lack of consistency in prosecution and sentencing. One interviewee cited this perceived inconsistency as an example of the authorities treating Muslims unjustly, claiming that they had gone after him while ignoring high-ranking politicians involved in public corruption scandals. The same interviewee, who was convicted for a domestic terrorism charge not related to travel to Syria, claimed his sentence was higher than that of Slobodan Gavric, a Serbian national, who has been convicted for an attempted terrorist act when he was caught with 12 kg of explosive in Pristina.[233] He said, "Gavric was given a shorter sentence than me. This was another example of discrimination against Muslims, and myself specifically."[234] However, when researchers corroborated this information, Gavric was reportedly handed a sentence of 13 years in jail, a few years more than that of the interviewee. Other interviewees too spoke of inconsistencies in sentencing, with people under similar charges receiving varying prison sentences. "I got a longer sentence than the person I travelled with who had organized our travel," said one interviewee.[235]

Furthermore, interviewees complained that the institutions were prosecuting them because of pressure from the international community. This narrative added to their inability to accept or recognize their responsibility and could potentially hinder their reintegration. They alleged their prosecutions were an example of Kosovo's servitude towards foreigners, linking it to supposed attempts by the authorities to get funding from foreign governments or to make progress towards attaining a visa-free regime with the Schengen zone.[236] Some supported this argument by speaking of their arrests, or arrests of their sons, as a "big show," talking about what they considered an excessive display of force and unnecessarily large numbers of police officers during the arrest.[237] They further criticized these measures, saying they "could be a double-edged sword,"[238] leading to further violence and inciting further terrorist activity within Kosovo.[239] "It is not good for the government to hand you a jail term. That is literally to kill off the life of our children, who will grow up without parents (stigmatized, with few opportunities). This is how the government creates [new internal] enemies," said one interviewee.[240] Another interviewee spoke at length about how the Muslim community sees these arrests as an injustice towards and an attack on Muslims in Kosovo, and how this could lead to a revolt by the Muslim community.[241]

Many of the interviewees spoke about the ability to work and to be close to family as a means to aid their reintegration into society. One mother interviewed said, "If they had allowed him to be employed, there would have never been any problems."[242] She used the example of her son to make the case that other measures, outside of prison, might be better suited to ensure the reintegration of returned fighters. Other interviewees also spoke about being able to work upon return from Syria, or about their desire to find gainful employment after prison, as something that would support their resocialization.[243]

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233 - Reuters, "Serb national jailed for 13 years in Kosovo terrorism charges." 29 June 2016. Accessed 20 March 2017, http://ca.reuters.com/article/topNews/idCAKCN0ZF1H0

234 - AA 04

235 - AA 009

236 - AA 001, AA 007, AA 008, AA 012, AA 013

237 - AA 022, AA 012

238 - AA 012

239 - AA 022, AA 004, AA 040, AA 023

240 - AA 008

241 - AA 001

242 - AA 025

243 - AA 009, AA 020, AA 011, AA 021

Dealing with stigma

Recent public perception studies have shown that many Kosovars "worry about the potential risks and vulnerabilities due to returned fighters in their neighbourhoods. Safety for themselves and particularly for their families and children is the primary concern."[244] This makes it potentially difficult for some that have returned from Syria and Iraq to reintegrate into their communities, as they have to deal with considerable stigma around their status as suspected or convicted terrorists.

One imprisoned interviewee said that his arrest has led to alienation from some family members and friends. While his close family, namely his wife and parents, still support him, the wider family and some neighbours and friends have kept their distance since the media reported on his arrest. "They say I brought shame to the family," he said. His father-in-law wanted him to separate from his wife, and it took interventions from a respected member of the community to avoid a divorce. However, he did add that he still has friends and neighbours who respect and support him, some even offering his wife a job to improve their financial situation.[245] Another interviewee said that his neighbours in the village have shunned him, but his situation is rather unusual, as he had travelled together with a couple of other people from the village who are still in Syria or have died there. He said the neighbours do not talk to him, although they do to his family, because they see him as a traitor, as the only one who has come back alive from that group.[246] Even when not alienated from their families, a couple of interviewees spoke about feeling that they have disappointed their families and brought shame on them.[247]

Another imprisoned interviewee said that he experienced some stigma upon his return, especially after his arrest. However, he was quick to add that since he comes from a small place, stigma was not much of an issue. He said that people in the community know him, his past and his family, and that he had no problems. Moreover, people from the community frequently send him their regards through his family and someone has anonymously sent money to him for use in the prison's canteen.[248] This seems to be a common theme for those that come from smaller communities, where neighbours have known them since childhood and know their families. The families interviewed shared similar views, saying that they did not face any problems or stigmatization from their immediate communities.[249]

Considering that the majority of the interviewees travelled to Syria in 2013, it might mean that their communities accept the argument that these returned fighters travelled to Syria for humanitarian reasons. This in turn could point to wider communities seeing a parallel between the Kosovo conflict and the Syrian conflict, at least in the early years of the conflict. In addition, it might mean that these communities do not consider these persons as people who have embraced dangerous radical ideas. Conversely, this acceptance might result from the fact that the smaller communities where most of the interviewees come from are usually considered more religious than the average community in Kosovo. As such, they might be more sympathetic to the members of their communities who travel to the theatres of conflict in Syria and/or Iraq.

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244 - UNDP. "Community Level Recommendations for Preventing Violent Extremism in Kosovo." Available at: http://www.ks.undp.org/content/dam/kosovo/docs/PVE/PVE_Summary.pdf

245 - AA 003

246 - AA 006

247 - AA 022, AA 041

248 - AA 040

249 - AA 011, AA 034, AA 038

These claims, though, do not necessarily correspond with the public perception surveys, where only 4.5 percent of respondents said they would give their neighbours who returned from Syria and Iraq a second chance.[250] As such, it might be an indication that interviewees presented to the researcher a picture that is more positive than reality. A further indication of this is the fact that one interviewee claimed to be accepted very well in his community and not to have faced any stigma, while at the same time he took a lot of precautions to not be seen in his community with the researchers. He had agreed to meet the researchers on the outskirts of his hometown, but then suggested moving the interview to a neighbouring town and insisted on taking a taxi back to his hometown instead of being dropped off by the researchers in the UNDP car.[251]

For many interviewees, stigma from the broader community appears to be more of an issue, especially as it can lead to diminished job prospects. "What I feared the most has already happened – public arrest, public pressure, public humiliation," said one returned fighter.[252] Interviewees spoke of ruined career and job prospects due to their imprisonment and media coverage of their indictments and court cases. One spoke of subsistence agriculture as his only work option after prison, and some spoke of seeing no prospects for themselves in Kosovo and wanting to move to live abroad.[253] Some also spoke about the stigma that their children might face, in school and in their communities, and appeared quite distressed about this possibility of intergenerational stigma.[254] "I don't know how I will be able to remove this dark spot in my personal history, , so that my children will not grow up to think their father is bad and that

they are too by default," said one interviewee. "I don't want them to suffer because of me."[255]

250 - UNDP. "Community Level Recommendations for Preventing Violent Extremism in Kosovo." Available at: http://www.ks.undp.org/content/dam/kosovo/docs/PVE/PVE_Summary.pdf

251 - AA 001

252 - AA 002

253 - AA 002, AA 040, AA 043, AA 036, AA 035, AA 042

254 - AA 008, AA 019

255 - AA 003

Families, PVE and disengagement

In addition to being recruited themselves into violent extremist movements, women have also played important roles in dissuading and preventing radicalization and recruitment. Their full inclusion at all stages and in various roles is therefore essential to any measures that aim to prevent violent extremism (PVE).[256] This was also recognized in the 2015 UN Security Council Resolution 2242. Moreover, women can play an important role as wives and mothers and have a powerful voice in "[de-mystifying] the life of a terrorist by speaking about the hardships involved such as those of separation, insecurity, loss of income and anxiety about a covert life."[257] This role of de-mystification is extended to the entire family, and can function as a powerful factor in encouraging violent extremists to disengage, and later in supporting their rehabilitation.[258]

Families can also play a role early on, in prevention, as "some research has found family to be more important than other kinds of social networks in shaping individual perspectives on nonviolence."[259] One of the mothers interviewed spoke of how she and her husband kept a close eye on their son once they noticed that he was becoming more radicalized. She said the family had also looked into moving to a different city, to remove their son from what they saw as a community that was becoming more and more religious.[260] Making this even more relevant for Kosovo is the fact that research identifies the distancing of families from their children after they start following a more radical form of Islam as an important factor facilitating the radicalization of young Kosovars.[261] It should be noted, though, that this does not appear to have been the case in the sample interviewed for this research. One interviewee spoke fondly of how his mother accepted him after he started embracing a more radical form of Islam and changing his outer appearance. "Mum always loved me, even with the beard and the short trousers," he said.[262]

The importance of the role of families is possibly even greater in relation to radicalized Muslims, as the mother is revered in Islam, and jihadists should ask her for permission to go to jihad and should bid her farewell.[263] However, almost none of the primary interviewees who had travelled to Syria had done so; instead, they hid their intentions from their families. Some told their families that they were travelling to seek asylum, for work or for their studies, or just going to visit friends elsewhere in Kosovo. Most families claimed that had they known, they would have tried to stop them. Two interviewees spoke about how, while they were in Syria, their families sent them messages asking them to return to Kosovo, and one mentioned concrete measures his family took to enable his return, from contacting the Embassy of Kosovo in Turkey to contacting known recruiters in Kosovo to get 'permission' for their child's return.[264] One of the parents interviewed corroborated this. With a lot of determination, she said, "I

256 - OSCE, Women and Terrorist Radicalization. Final Report, (Vienna: Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, 2013), http://www.osce.org/secretariat/99919?download=true, p. 2.

257 - Carter, Women and Violent Extremism, p. 4.

258 - GCTF, The Role of Families in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism: Strategic Recommendations and Programming Options, (n.p.: Global Counterterrorism Forum, 2016), http://www.hedayahcenter.org/Admin/Content/File-299201612596.pdf, p. 3; and Rafia Barakat Bhulai, Naureen Chowdhury Fink, and Sara Zeiger, The Roles of Families and Communities in Strengthening Community Resilience Against Violent Extremism, (n.p.: Hedayah and Global Center on Cooperative Security, 2014), http://www.hedayahcenter.org/Admin/Content/File-34201674140.pdf, p. 6; and Jakupi and Kelmendi, Women in Violent Extremism, p. 27.

259 - GCTF. The Role of Families in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism, p. 2.

260 - AA 012

261 - Kursani, Report Inquiring into the Causes and Consequences of Kosovars' Involvement as Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq, pp. 75-76.

262 - AA 006

263 - Julia Ioffe, "The Mothers of ISIS," Huffington Post Highline, accessed 29 January 2017, http://highline.huffingtonpost.com/articles/en/mothers-of-isis/.

264 - AA 027 and AA 021

would have stopped him. I would have told him 'I'll come with you' until he stopped, I would convince him."[265] Nonetheless, it should be noted that families might also act as enablers and factors that lead to radicalization.[266] One primary interviewee said he had his mother's blessing to travel (though his mother later contradicted this, saying she had no knowledge he was travelling to Syria). He said she did not attempt to stop him, because of the parallels she drew between the 1999 conflict in Kosovo and the war in Syria.[267] The mother who claimed she would have stopped her son had she known he was travelling to Syria added "But maybe he would have convinced me too, because I have also been through war."[268]

In addition to preventing violent extremism, families can also play an important role in disengagement. A few of the interviewees cited their families as the reason why they returned from Syria. One said it was his mother's voice over the phone that made an impression on him, "I cursed myself and asked myself 'what am I doing here'? It pushed me to come back, together with other factors."[269] Another claimed he returned because of his family, "I did not want to worry them. I missed them while I was in Syria."[270] The woman interviewed who had travelled to Syria with her husband said that one of the reasons they returned was because "[My husband] had half his heart here, because when you leave your mother it's not easy."[271]

Moreover, parents and families can be crucial in the reintegration of returned fighters and others imprisoned on terrorism charges. Several of the interviewees highlighted the importance of their families' support, and spoke of a sense of relief that their families continued to support them despite the indictments and/or arrests.[272]

Interviewees, in particular those in prison, spoke about being a burden to their families. A few of them were the main breadwinners in the family, or at least made an important contribution to the families' finances. To ease this burden, many of the imprisoned interviewees are working within the prison system. Based on prison regulations and law, prisoners get paid €1 for a day's work. Interviewees were quick to note that imprisonment worsened their families' financial situation. However, none of them said that their departure to Syria might have had the same impact on their families' financial situation.

In relation to being a burden on their families, the imprisoned interviewees mentioned the need for more institutional support for their families, with one imprisoned interviewee saying, "If you want to help with my reintegration, support my family."[273] Most of the interviewees noted that their families were either denied social welfare (although they did not clarify on what basis), had not asked for it, or did not know whether they would be eligible.

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265 - AA 025

266 - UN Women. Preventing Conflict, Transforming Justice Securing Peace, p. 225; and Barakat Bhulai, et al., The Roles of Families and Communities in Strengthening Community Resilience Against Violent Extremism, p. 3.

267 - AA 005

268 - AA 034

269 - AA 033

270 - AA 027

271 - AA 010

272 - AA 003, AA 006, AA 018

273 - AA 004

Reasons why women join violent extremist movements

Women's agency in deciding to travel to the conflict zones in Syria and Iraq should not be denied. While a few might have travelled under pressure from their partners, many had a say in this decision. Most of the drivers that influenced women's travel are more or less the same as they are for men. However, researchers suggests they usually feel more alienated than men due to perceived Islamophobia in society, and they are in a more vulnerable economic position. It also appears that the driver to live a life in accordance with a strict interpretation of Islam was a stronger motivation among women than among men.

When talking about radicalization of women, people very often portray the ones who join violent extremist movements as brainwashed, duped to join, or as victims of aggression, much more often than men who join the same movements.[274] This stereotypical portrayal of women holds particularly for Muslim women, who are seen as "lacking agency outside the private sphere of their homes," according to researchers Rebecca Dougherty and Kathleen Frier."[275] It feeds into the binary view of the 'good/peacemaker' woman who is defined through a maternal lens and is inherently non-violent and peaceful, and the 'deviant/violent' woman who is defined as different from non-terrorist women and from terrorist men, who operates outside of her prescribed gender role and as such is stripped of agency and rationality.[276]

This approach of taking away women's agency is evident in Kosovo as well. Law enforcement authorities in Kosovo speak of women's participation mainly in terms of them joining their husbands.[277] Furthermore, one of the imprisoned interviewees, who had travelled to and returned from Syria with his wife, said that the Kosovo Police had not taken a formal statement from his wife.[278]

However, even when women joined violent extremist movements together with their male partners or find partners after joining the movement, research by Corcoran-Nantes shows that "what brought them together were their similar backgrounds, experiences and most especially political views and beliefs."[279] Moreover, to dismiss women's agency would mean to ignore everything that research into women's political involvement has already found.[280] It was evident from the interviews with women for this report that they did not travel because they were brainwashed or duped by their partners. One woman, who had travelled to Syria together with her husband, said clearly that she travelled for religious reasons and in search of a "better" life. Moreover, it appears she was the one who influenced her husband's religious

274 - Chantal de Jonge Oudraat and Michael E Brown, "Women, Gender, and Terrorism: The Missing Links," in WIIS policybrief (n.p.: Women in International Security, 2016), http://wiisglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/WIIS-Policy-Brief_Women-Gender-and-Terrorism-The-Missing-Links.pdf, p. 3; Yvonne Corcoran-Nantes, "Unnatural Beings: Gender and Terrorism," Outskirts 24 (May 2011), accessed 26 January 2017, http://www.outskirts.arts.uwa.edu.au/volumes/volume-24/corcoran-nantes; and Becky Carter, Women and Violent Extremism, GSDRC Helpdesk Research Report 898 (Birmingham, UK: GSDRC University of Birmingham, 2013), http://www.gsdrc.org/docs/open/hdq898.pdf, p. 7.

275 - Rebecca Dougherty and Kathleen P. Frier, "Gender and Violent Extremism: Examining the Psychology of Women Participating in Non-State Armed Groups (Master's Thesis)," (n.p., 2016), http://wiisglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/Gender_and_Violent_Extremism_Examining_t.pdf, p. 10.

276 - Katherine Brown, "Gender and Counter-Radicalization: Women and Emerging Counter-Terrorism Measures," in Gender, national security and counter-terrorism: Human rights perspectives, ed. Margaret L. Satterthwaite and Jayne Huckerby (London, United Kingdom: Routledge, 2012); Corcoran-Nantes, "Unnatural Beings: Gender and Terrorism"; and Carter, Women and Violent Extremism, p. 7.

277 - Interview with Kosovo Police Anti-Terrorism Unit, 2 March and 28 March 2017.

278 - AA 005

279 - Corcoran-Nantes, "Unnatural Beings: Gender and Terrorism."

280 - Corcoran-Nantes, "Unnatural Beings: Gender and Terrorism."

views.[281] Another woman travelled together with a man she was in a relationship with. However, it appears that she had made up her mind to travel and join her sibling in Syria, independent of this relationship. The man, who had planned to travel himself, simply helped her achieve this goal.[282] The media in Kosovo reported another example of woman's agency. This woman had travelled to join her husband in Syria, and decided to remain there after his death. According to sources from the Kosovo Police, the media have reported that she is now leading a women's camp in Syria and is an online ISIS recruiter of Albanian women.[283]

ISIS recognizes that having women in its ranks has many advantages, since women can play supportive roles, strengthen the group's cohesion, and could also be useful operational agents who can pass unnoticed by gender-blind security forces.[284] From the moment when it was close to establishing the caliphate, ISIS propaganda started targeting women specifically.[285] However, the limited research on women and violent extremism in Kosovo has not yet found any specific propaganda targeting Kosovo women.[286] This does not mean that women in Kosovo are not being recruited through other means, such as propaganda that other researchers have not unearthed, or through face-to-face contact or private online messaging. Additionally, ISIS's recruitment messaging and process is strongly rooted in gender norms. The appeal to men is often based on hyper-masculine ideals, while for women the traditional domestic and maternal roles are glorified.[287] These gender stereotypes of men as protectors of women and as fighters are also clear in Lavdrim Muhaxheri's call to Albanian-speaking Muslims to join ISIS: "They [pro-Assad forces and other ISIS enemies] are raping our Muslim sisters, they are beheading our children in their cradles, they are burning our houses, and you are sleeping and still listening to imams who are saying that they [ISIS] need only finances. Wallah,[288] they [ISIS] need men."[289] Moreover, women recruits are also sometimes used to "shame men into participating."[290] Another gender aspect of the way ISIS functions is the use of sexual gender-based violence as an explicit tactic, and forcing women to marry foreign fighters.[291]

In appealing to women, ISIS's propaganda emphasizes that by joining ISIS, women participate in the building and growth of the caliphate. They do this by providing, caring for and educating the new generations of fighters, supporting the men, and participating as teachers, nurses and doctors (who, because of the gender segregation in public life, need to be of both genders).[292] Moreover, ISIS also states that by joining the organization and contributing to its cause, women become empowered, they have the opportunity to be in charge of their own lives and fates, have the power to change things and reverse the ills imposed on them by a kufr (disbeliever)

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281 - AA 005 and AA 010

282 - AA 009

283 - Arbana Xharra, "Few but Fanatical – the Kosovo Women Who Go over to ISIS," Balkan Insight, 26 January 2016, http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/few-but-fanatical-the-kosovo-women-who-go-over-to-isis-01-22-2016

284 - de Jonge Oudraat and Brown, "Women, Gender, and Terrorism: The Missing Links," p 3.

285 - Saltman and Smith, "Till martyrdom do us part" Gender and the ISIS Phenomenon, pp. 17-18, and Aryn, "How ISIS Is Recruiting Women From Around the World."

286 - Jakupi and Kelmendi, Women in Violent Extremism, p 19.

287 - Gaudry Haynie, "Women, Gender and Terrorism: Gendered Aspects of Radicalization and Recruitment," pp. 2-3; and USAID, Kosovo Violent Extremism Risk Assessment April-May 2015, (n.p.: United States Agency for International Development, 2015), http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00M3P6.pdf, pp. 6-7.

288 - Arabic word meaning "I swear by God"

289 - "Lufta ne Siri – Indeksonline" [War in Syria – Indeksonline], YouTube video, 9:22, posted by "IndeksOnline.net," 14 January 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zhbWhgS6svc

290 - Carter, Women and Violent Extremism, p 7, and Rubin, Alissa J. and Aurelien Breeden, "Women's Emergence as Terrorists in France Points to Shift in ISIS Gender Roles." The New York Times, 1 October 2016. https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/02/world/europe/womens-emergence-as-terrorists-in-france-points-to-shift-in-isis-gender-roles.html?_r=0.

291 - UN Women. Preventing Conflict, Transforming Justice Securing Peace, p. 223.

292 - Haras Rafiq and Nikita Malik, Caliphettes: Women and the Appeal of Islamic State, (n.p.: Quilliam Foundation, 2015), https://www.quilliam-foundation.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/publications/free/caliphettes-women-and-the-appeal-of-is.pdf, pp. 9, 25-29; and Saltman and Smith, "Till martyrdom do us part" Gender and the ISIS Phenomenon, pp. 13-15.

society.[293] ISIS promises that the grievances women face outside of the caliphate will be completely resolved in the caliphate, so that women will be able to return to their "true nature."[294] This appears to have been the main reason for one of the women interviewed, who spoke about feeling free in Syria, being able to practice her religion and finding an inner calm. "As a religious person, life in Syria was much better, you were free to do everything, nobody denied your rights there. The only thing was that it was a war," she said.[295]

Most of the drivers that influenced the women's decision to travel to Syria appear to be more or less the same as they are for men. However, while the economic factors appear to have played a small role, if any, for men, an argument can be made that they could be a bigger push factor for women. Data showing that 96 percent of women who travelled were unemployed, coupled with the reality in Kosovo where many women are dependent economically on their husbands, supports the claim that women might have felt pressured to join their husbands in the conflicts in Syria and Iraq. Within the sample interviewed, it also appears that the driver to find a better life and enjoy more religious freedoms was a stronger motivation among women than among men.

Low rate of return of women

Compared to men, the rate of return to Kosovo of women who have travelled to Syria and/or Iraq is much lower (11 percent of women have returned compared to 45 percent of men). A few factors could explain this. While leaving ISIS is difficult for everyone, it is even more so for women. If their husbands are killed, the women are often forced to remarry other fighters.[296] Some Albanians in ISIS have also apparently instructed their families that should they die, their families should not return to Kosovo. Others have told their wives that should they die, their wives can choose whether they will stay and live in the caliphate and follow the rules of the Islamic state, or return to Kosovo.[297] Even if women choose to return to Kosovo, though, the manifesto of the al-Khanssaa Brigade states that women cannot travel alone. Moreover, their husbands probably had control over their financial resources, and ISIS has been reported to confiscate the passports of its recruits, making it logistically difficult for women to leave ISIS.

One noticeable trend in the data is that most of the women left Kosovo after the caliphate was established, mainly travelling together with their husbands and children, if they had any. This could mean that for this group the idea of contributing to the building of and living in the caliphate, as part of their religious duties, was a crucial pull factor. While the caliphate still exists they might therefore choose to continue living there. In this regard, it is worth noting that one interviewee said she would have continued living in Syria, even if her husband had been killed.[298] However, she has in fact returned to Kosovo together with her husband, indicating that it might have been her husband, not her, who influenced the family's return. This further reinforces the question of how much 'choice' women have in a very patriarchal society.

293 - Rafiq and Malik, Caliphettes: Women and the Appeal of Islamic State, p 8; and Jeannette Gaudry Haynie, "Women, Gender and Terrorism: Gendered Aspects of Radicalization and Recruitment," in WIIS policybrief (n.p.: Women in International Security, 2016), http://wiisglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/2ND-WIIS-Policy-Brief-v3.pdf, p. 2.

294 - Rafiq and Malik, Caliphettes: Women and the Appeal of Islamic State, pp. 22-24.

295 - AA 010

296 - Jakupi and Kelmendi, Women in Violent Extremism, p. 16. Spechkard and Shajkovci, Drivers of Radicalization and Violent Extremism in Kosovo, p. 26.

297 - AA 005

298 - AA 024

Limitations of the Research

Common definitions. Researchers worked on the understanding that there are no globally agreed upon definitions of terms such as extremism, violent extremism and/or radicalization. The definitions referred to in the *Kosovo Strategy on Prevention of Violent Extremism and Radicalization Leading to Terrorism 2015-2020* provide a set of guidelines, but judging from consultations with institutional stakeholders, they do not seem to be accepted consistently across institutions. The research was set up and the report written taking into account the multitude of definitional attempts laid out in the UNHCR "Report on best practices and lessons learned on how protecting and promoting human rights contribute to preventing and countering violent extremism."[299] It is not the intention of this report to revisit any definitional and legal clarity surrounding terrorism, violent extremism and radicalization, but rather to acknowledge the absence of precision in the use of these terms.

Sample size and diversity. While the number of interviews was sufficient to help build a set of patterns and insights into some of the main push and pull factors driving radicalization in Kosovo, researchers had hoped for and attempted to reach out to more subjects. Three subjects cancelled scheduled interviews at the last minute. Two of these were with prisoners who had agreed to the interviews, but when the researchers came to the prison they refused to be interviewed. The researchers had already interviewed two other prisoners by then, and it is possible that the prisoners had discussed amongst themselves the nature of the interview, influencing the two to change their minds. The third subject who cancelled the interview was a person in the process of appealing against the sentence of lower-level courts on charges of terrorism. He cancelled the interview an hour before the researchers were supposed to arrive in his hometown, citing advice from his lawyer not to talk to researchers while his case was still in court. One prisoner had initially declined to be interviewed, but when the researchers showed up at the prison for the second time and the guards approached him, he agreed to the interview. He told the researchers that the first time he was asked for an interview, he was being kept in solitary confinement due to breaking a prison rule and so had refused the interview initially.

The 13 individuals who spoke to the researchers are in a way a 'self-selected' group: those who were willing to share their stories and experiences. Of the interviewees who had travelled to Syria, almost all had done so in the earlier stages of the conflict, in 2013 and early 2014. In this sample, the earliest travel date to Syria was March 2013, and the latest return date to Kosovo was October 2014, with the majority of interviewees having travelled in 2013 and returned to Kosovo by early 2014. Only one person in the sample attempted to travel to Syria in 2015, but was intercepted and arrested at the attempt. Four interviewees admitted having joined the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), with one of them having spent time in more than one formation. The fifth interviewee was arrested on the way to Syria to join ISIS.

Three interviewees said they had been affiliated with Ahrar Al Sham. Two interviewees who had not travelled to the conflict zone denied having supported any violent extremist groups, though both had been found guilty of supporting and aiding ISIS in Kosovo. Despite numerous

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299 - UNCHR. Report on best practices and lessons learned on how protecting and promoting human rights contribute to countering violent extremism. Presented in the 33rd session of the Human Rights Council, July 2016. The report mentions the lack of clear definitions and lists the various definitions that States have used for violent extremism, extremism and radicalization, in particular in paragraphs 17, 18 and 19. Available at: https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G16/162/55/PDF/G1616255.pdf?OpenElement

attempts made by contacting community leaders and others, researchers were not able to speak to anyone who had travelled to Syria from the Western part of Kosovo. Most of those interviewed are from pockets and areas in the eastern, south-eastern and central regions of Kosovo, which at the same time are also the regions with the largest number of people who have travelled to Syria and Iraq. This may also have skewed the findings, as it appeared that most, if not all, were recruited through the same recruitment network. This is not to say that other recruitment networks might not have been active, or still are active, in Kosovo, just that due to the sample, the researchers were mainly privy to information about one network.

Veracity of statements. During the interviews, and later during the analysis, the research team did not judge the sincerity of the claims by the interviewees. Rather, the team aimed to draw conclusions regarding patterns and repetition of statements. Nonetheless, researchers cross-checked interviewees' statements with other available material or interviews where possible, and in several instances observed inconsistencies in the answers. For example, many of the interviewees minimized the crimes that they were accused of, while a simple online search found publicly available information about their indictments, which often listed more accusations that they acknowledged in the interview.

Nature of the crime. Another limitation was inherent in the setup of the research: the focus on violent extremism as it relates to Kosovars' support for and/or travel to the conflict zones in Syria and Iraq to join proscribed violent extremist organizations, in line with the law on joining foreign conflicts. The researchers did not attempt to interview people indicted or convicted on terrorism charges that did not centre on the person's travel or attempt to travel to the conflict zone in Syria and/or Iraq. Rather, the entire report and the research for it have been focused on understanding the factors that lead to the radicalization of Kosovars who joined Islamic extremist groups.

Considering these limitations, the researchers are aware that the collected stories are only a small sample of those who travelled to Syria and/or Iraq, and do not necessarily reflect the details of the life stories of all Kosovars who participated in the conflict or have been accused of supporting violent extremist organizations. Nonetheless, based on the information collected through these interviews, and the information analysed from secondary sources, the researchers consider that the findings and conclusions from this report could have a wide application.

Conclusions and recommendations

This report has sought to help bridge the current knowledge gap regarding the phenomenon of foreign fighters. Based on a relatively small sample, it has focused on the characteristics of foreign fighters in Kosovo and their motivation for going to Syria and/or Iraq. While there is no single pathway to radicalization, some findings in this report are consistent with and confirm results found in other regional and global studies. While socio-economic challenges have created vulnerabilities affecting specific individuals and may have aided their process of radicalization, it was apparent that socialization processes and identity factors had a key role in charting the course for some of the Kosovars who have travelled to Syria and/or Iraq to join violent extremist organizations.

By way of conclusion, this report offers guiding policy and actionable recommendations aimed at improving programming for the disengagement, de-radicalization and reintegration of Kosovars who joined foreign conflicts.

➢ Public arrests and trials of terrorist suspects linked to violent extremist groups that have Islamic ideologies are a possible deterrent to dissuade more Kosovars from joining violent extremist movements. However, they could also continue to fuel indignation among communities that already perceive the institutional authorities as Islamophobic. The institutions require a clear communication strategy with respect to these arrests, emphasizing that they are carried out as part of implementing the rule of law and not due to perceived targeting of members of one religious community.

➢ The visible and highly organized recruitment network made up of influential imams and foreign fighters – a network which became apparent through interviews with returned fighters – has been largely understood and contained by law enforcement agencies in Kosovo. The main ideologues of this network and some returned fighters have been given prison sentences; the main Kosovo foreign fighter leaders have been reported killed. It was not clear from the interviews, however, whether other potential smaller networks are operating in western Kosovo or other regions and have managed to remain unknown to the authorities. Further research is required to fully understand the penetration of other networks, their depth and dynamics across Kosovo.

➢ The perception of inconsistencies and arbitrary measures on the part of judicial institutions in sentencing for similar crimes further alienates some of those who have returned from the conflict in Syria and Iraq. Such alienation could hamper the process of reintegration of returned fighters into society. Development of clear sentencing guidelines for judges and appropriate institutional standards that communicate consistency for all cases linked to terrorism could lead to the reduction of such perceptions and of potential negative consequences of the incarceration process.

➢ Lack of employment opportunities and a low standard of education have created an environment conducive to radicalization, by making Kosovars more vulnerable to propaganda by extremist groups. Moreover, most returned fighters interviewed consider opportunities to work as an important pathway towards their disengagement and reintegration into society. As such, investing in increasing employment opportunities and improving the employ-

ability of Kosovo's workforce through better quality education that offers skills sought after in the labour market could be both a measure to prevent violent extremism and aid the disengagement and reintegration of those who have previously joined extremist groups.

➢ Interviewees currently incarcerated consider their imprisonment to impact their families' financial stability. They consider prison-related expenses – travel to and from the correctional services for family visits, costs for communications, food aside from the meals provided by the prison and occasional refreshments – as a burden to their families. In some cases, they also consider themselves unable to support their children who remain deprived of opportunities due to their fathers' actions. Interviewees also consider their salary of €1 per day for conducting prison duties insufficient to support their families, who already face shame within their communities. Increased opportunities for higher-paying jobs for all prisoners in the correctional services system could potentially provide a sense of empowerment and ease this apparent burden on families, and help them feel empowered to provide to their children. Such a scheme could ease any type of deprivation they may feel the authorities have imposed upon them, and mitigate the risk of potential recidivism after their prison sentences. This would be a benefit for all those incarcerated, easing their reintegration into society upon release. Targeted outreach of welfare services to the families of those imprisoned on terrorism charges would also ease the alienation from the authorities that many of them feel, as well as decrease the likelihood of future recidivism.

➢ In the case of Kosovo, all violent extremist prisoners will at some point be released back into the community. Several returned fighters are expected to finish their sentences within the next one or two years. They require more skills training, education and employment opportunities while in the prison system in order to be more competitive for the labour market and be better prepared to reintegrate into economic life in their communities. Kosovo correctional services offer skills-building modules in their facilities, but they are usually basic, and not targeted to the level and needs of each person, including two interviewees who had university degrees. They also lack the resources to fully turn existing workshops into production sites that would offer on-the-job training and gainful employment to prisoners.

➢ Interviewees said that they are free to practice their religion in prisons, but they would appreciate having more opportunities to receive proper religious education to nurture their knowledge and devotion to Islam. Access to programmes that allow religious leaders vetted by the Islamic Community of Kosovo to visit prisons on a regular basis, lead the prayer times, hold lectures and answer questions that prisoners might have could help with the reintegration process. Such a programme would also be a preventive measure to halt radicalization in prisons and would be in line with Kosovo law allowing for spiritual counselling in prisons.[300]

➢ None of the primary interviewees had received any sort of psychological/psychosocial support, and said that their families have not either. While this kind of support is provided for those in prison, none of the interviewees had made use of them. This seemed to be because of a combination of the stigma that is still associated with seeking psychological/ psychosocial support in Kosovo, and of their lack of confidence in the professionalism and abilities of the individuals offering this support. As noted in the Kosovo Strategy, psychological/psychosocial support could play an important role in helping radicalized persons disengage and reintegrate into society. As such, a specific psychological/psychosocial

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300 - Kosovo, Law No 02/L-31 On Freedom of Religion in Kosovo, of 13 July 2006, article 11.

support programme targeting foreign fighters and their families should be developed and offered widely. Combined with a disengagement programme and in combination with a religious (re)education programme, it would ease the reintegration of these individuals and their families in societies.

➢ *The Kosovo Strategy on Prevention of Violent Extremism and Radicalization Leading to Terrorism 2015-2020* includes no recognition of gender dynamics or women's roles. In order for any PVE or CVE strategy to be successful, however, it should acknowledge gender dynamics and consider that women act of their own accord too, and not only under pressure from their partners. As such, measures should be taken to empower women and address specific vulnerabilities observed among them, i.e. the fact that they might feel more alienated due to perceived Islamophobia in society, and that they are in a worse position than men when it comes to their participation in the economy and the labour market.

➢ *The Kosovo Strategy on Prevention of Violent Extremism and Radicalization Leading to Terrorism 2015-2020* has only sporadic mentions of the role families do and can play. The Kosovo Strategy states that families can identify and prevent violent extremism, and mentions the importance of the institution of the family in Kosovo's society as a significant strength.[301] Families should be empowered to act as resilience points in a community. However, any such measures should be careful not to reinforce gender stereotypes by seeing women only as mothers in a community. They should also be careful not to lead to women and families being seen only as tools of PVE and CVE and national security, which might result in them being at further risk from violent extremist movements.

➢ Families, teachers and others in the community should be educated to identify signs of radicalization, but should also have resources that they could turn to in these cases. More local mechanisms should be established around Kosovo, and in particular in municipalities which have seen more inhabitants travel to the conflict zone in Syria and Iraq.[302]

➢ Many of the interviewees, especially those who came from relatively small communities, spoke about being accepted by their communities upon their return from Syria and Iraq. This does not correspond with the latest public perception surveys, which indicated that very few Kosovo residents would welcome returned fighters in their neighbourhoods[303]. While it might mean that interviewees presented the researchers with a picture that is more positive than reality, it could also mean that public perception in certain small communities is different to that presented in the perception surveys conducted with respondents from all over Kosovo. Additional research should be conducted into the acceptance of returned fighters, in certain communities considered 'hotspots'.

➢ Many people in Kosovo have ample free time due to unemployment, and even while they are students, the school schedule usually lasts only half a day, leaving ample free time after completion of homework and household duties. This is compounded in smaller communities where there are few, if any, opportunities to be engaged in extracurricular, sports or cultural activities. While having free time in no way leads to radicalization, such gaps in opportunities for socialization create a favourable environment for extremist groups to influence youth and create bonding opportunities around identity and radical ideologies

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301 - Office of the Prime Minister. Strategy on the Prevention of Violent Extremism and Radicalization Leading to Terrorism 2015-2020.

302 - UNDP's Referral Mechanism is addressing this issue and more information can be found at: http://www.ks.undp.org/content/kosovo/en/home/operations/projects/democratic_governance/kosovo-safety-and-security-project.html

303 - UNDP. "Community Level Recommendations for Preventing Violent Extremism in Kosovo," pg.34. Available at: http://www.ks.undp.org/content/dam/kosovo/docs/PVE/PVE_Summary.pdf

through various complementary activities and lectures. There should be more investment in building and equipping education, community, sports and cultural facilities that could provide after-school programmes and opportunities for youth activities.

➤ Returned fighters' reintegration into society requires a two-way effort, one that entails them speaking openly and honestly about their experiences and their responsibilities, and another that involves communities and the public in listening to their experiences. There is a need to share their stories and experiences, to have the rest of society know and learn from their mistakes. The authors of this study observed first-hand the impact of humanization of returned fighters' stories: at the end of most interviews subjects generally expressed appreciation for having had the opportunity to tell their story and considered it therapeutic. Four interviewees have either already began speaking publicly about their experiences or said that they are willing to do so. One of them said that he wanted to tell his story because he does not want Lavdrim Muhaxheri to represent him.

➤ Engaging disengaged returned fighters to speak out in the media and speak to others would be a powerful source for counter-narratives. Their stories and experiences could serve to dissuade others who might be contemplating joining violent extremist groups. Three of the returned fighters said that they have spoken to people upon their return about their experiences in Syria and about the reality there, and that they believed this has dissuaded at least some people from travelling there.[304] Counter-narrative campaigns can be effective through direct engagement, person to person, with small groups alongside online and offline campaigns aiming to reach large segments of the population, as a means of general education and public awareness for building resilient communities.

➤ Issues of identity, belonging and purpose are well established in the personal accounts of most interviewees. As such, social identity mechanisms linked with the radicalization process may also serve as key elements for peaceful reintegration and disengagement. Narrative layers pertaining to religious and national identity surrounding a romantic notion of historic Albanian struggles, including resonation with the Kosovo conflict in 1999, seemed critical in the process of radicalization of returned fighters. Institutional approaches to define counter-narratives should have at their core the demystification of such targeted national and religious accounts, as a way to prevent vulnerable groups falling prey to extremist groups.

➤ KP's Directorate of Community Policing should be further empowered and become more involved, especially in areas that are considered 'hotspots' for radicalization. The numbers of these police officers should increase, and they should be provided with adequate training. Community policing in particular should be strengthened in communities to which currently imprisoned returned fighters will be returning, or if a monitored amnesty programme is implemented, where returned fighters in the programme might be living. Community policing would serve not only as a monitoring tool, but also importantly lower stigma and increase cooperation between the authorities and affected local communities.

➤ The global fight against ISIS has progressively halted their operations and capabilities since 2014. With what appears to be the imminent fall of the caliphate, it is very likely that the number of Kosovars who return from Syria and Iraq will increase. Public institutions should have the necessary measures in place to facilitate the process of return of about 150 remaining individuals from the conflict areas. The returnees will require due process

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304 - AA 042, AA 002, AA 040

defined by law, and eventual reintegration during and after the periods of their trials.

➢ Of the original 27 children who travelled to Syria and Iraq with their families, only three have returned to Kosovo thus far. ISIS has reportedly instrumentalized the children of the fighters living in its territory to become the next generation of soldiers. Some of the Kosovars children may have participated in similar schemes, presenting a challenge for families, communities and public institutions who wish to help reintegrate them into society. The institutions require proper mechanisms in place tailored to children who face immense post-traumatic stress disorder and exposure to violence, both to help reintegrate them and also prevent their further radicalization.

➢ Based on the cases of those who have already returned, and the fact that women are usually portrayed as playing a limited role in ISIS, it is very probable that KP will not imprison these women and they will return to their previous communities. In addition, based on the primary interviews done for this research and interviews with other stakeholders, the returned women have so far been left alone, with no institutions approaching them or offering them significant support. This creates further pressure to develop fully-fledged reintegration programmes that take into consideration gender dynamics and focus on and work directly with families and communities, since these women will probably face considerable stigma and vulnerabilities. It also points to the need to ensure proper understanding and acknowledgement of women's agency by law enforcement agencies, including through strengthening their capacities.

➢ The media and public statements by officials have highlighted socialization in prisons as a new potential pathway to radicalization in Kosovo. Experience from some countries suggests that prisons can play a critical role in both triggering and reinforcing the radicalization process. The concern is that prisoners who are radicalized may spread extremist ideologies and influence the prison population, which poses a concern about radicalized detainees' potential engagement in extremist activities upon release. While interviews with six persons in prisons did not suggest that such radicalization is taking place, it is vital that relevant stakeholders conduct proper assessments and more research into this phenomenon.

ANNEXES

Annex 1: Hypotheses for the study

The desk review helped researchers develop a set of initial hypotheses for the push and pull factors that may have influenced some Kosovars to radicalize and eventually travel to fight in the conflict in Syria and Iraq. The team used these hypotheses as guidelines for interviews with returned foreign fighters and those found guilty on terrorism charges. The insights from interviewees helped validate or refute these hypotheses.

1. Lack of socio-economic opportunities - understood as low economic background, educational attainment and extracurricular activities after work/school – lead to radicalization.
2. Foreign fighters' access to information was concentrated on a particular interpretation of religion, consisting of violent extremist elements and propaganda through the internet and social media.
3. Legacy of the Kosovo Conflict: it is easier to recruit people from Kosovo because they relate to a conflict that happened to them and empathize.
4. Foreign fighters were actively approached and influenced by an organized network of recruiters which facilitated the process of radicalization and travel to Syria and Iraq.
5. Financial incentive was not a key factor for travel to Syria/Iraq or radicalization.
6. Individuals connected through kinship ties have strong in-group loyalty and more easily radicalize each other.
7. When aware, families would intervene to prevent the process of radicalization or travel to Syria and Iraq.
8. Fighters were motivated to join the fight by the desire to defend Islam and Muslims under threat.
9. Women travelled to Syria and Iraq driven by ideology and to support the caliphate.
10. Women travelled to Syria and Iraq to follow and accompany their husbands and not out of their own convictions.
11. Fighting for a cause provides glamour, adventure and empowerment.
12. Religion is the main cornerstone of identity and is a motivating factor that provides a frame for them to interpret life.
13. Since 1999, the presence of Gulf-influenced support and dubious local organizations with links to conservative and potential radical circles in Kosovo has helped create an environment conducive for radicalization among communities.
14. Former foreign fighters returned to Kosovo from Syria and Iraq because their initial expectations were not met.
15. Former fighters require a set of institutional support mechanisms for re-integration so as to avoid recidivism upon release.
16. The socialization of former foreign fighters with the general inmate population in prisons plays a critical role in both triggering and reinforcing the radicalization process of the latter group.

Annex 2: Visual analysis of the KP foreign fighter database

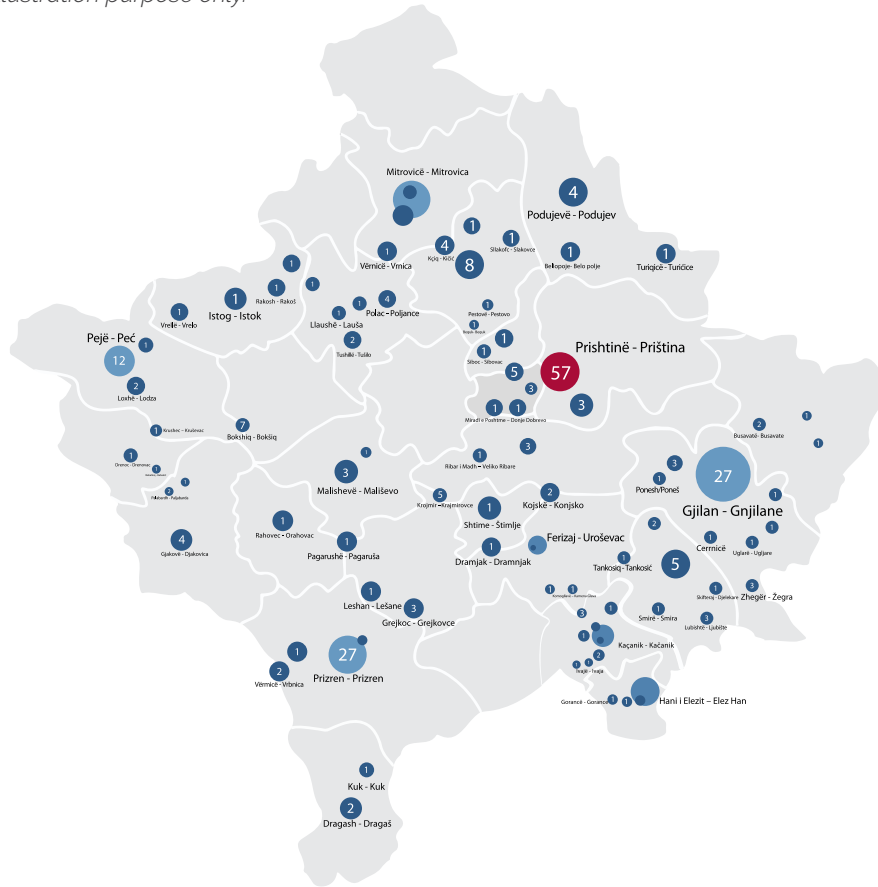*Maps are for illustration purpose only.*

Illustration 10: Number of Kosovars (335) who travelled to Syria and Iraq by location of residence
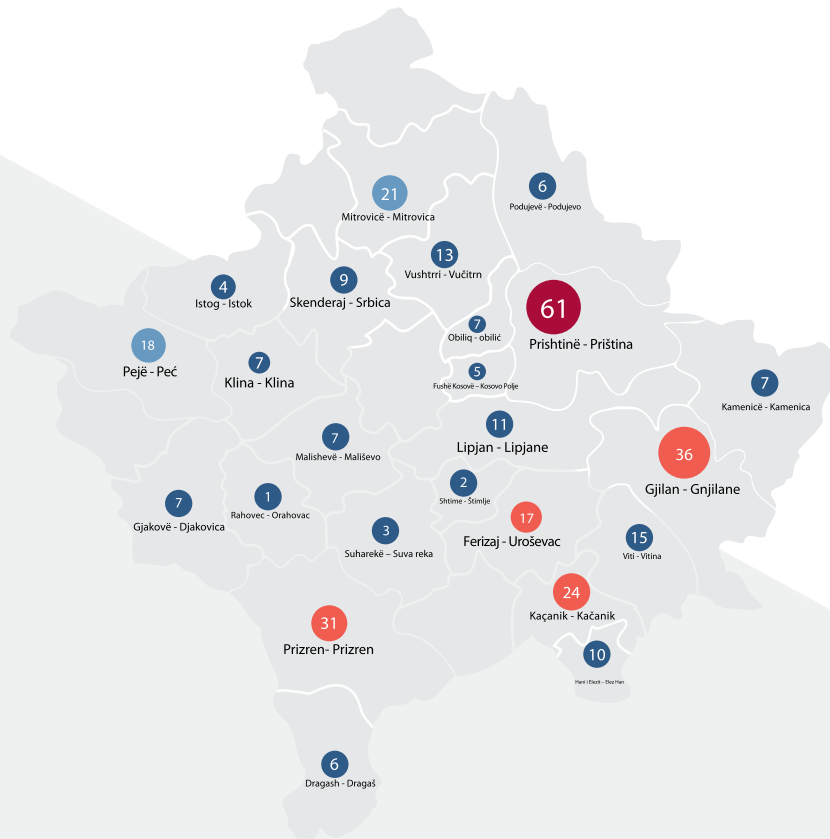

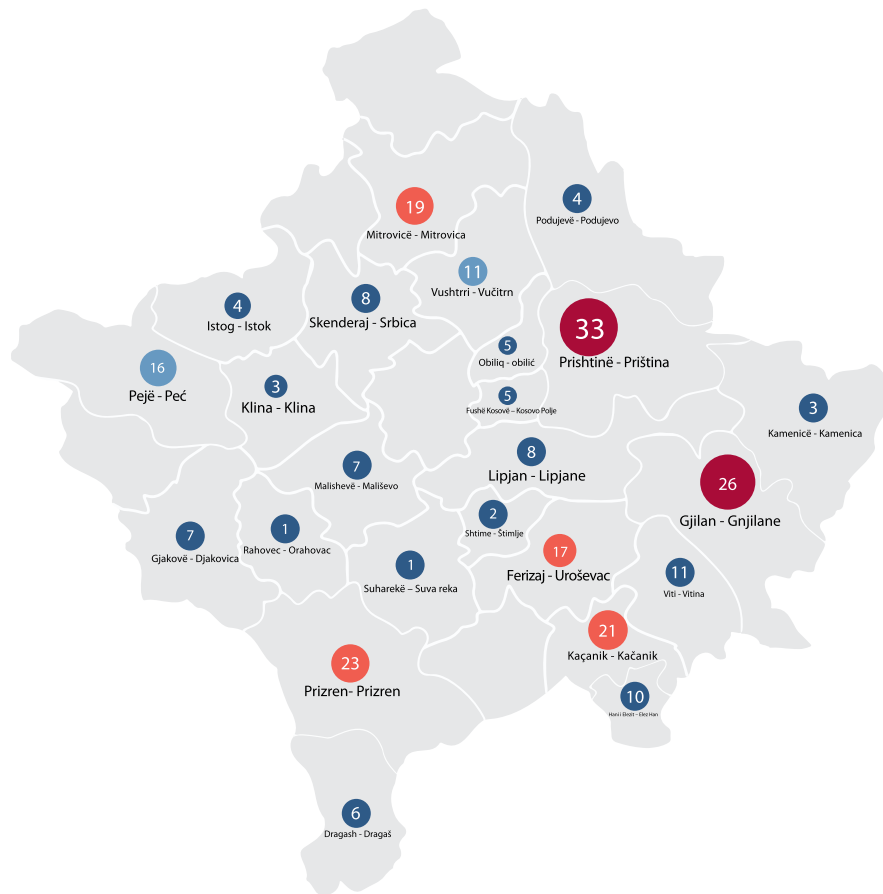*Illustration 11: Number of Kosovars who travelled to Syria and Iraq by municipality*

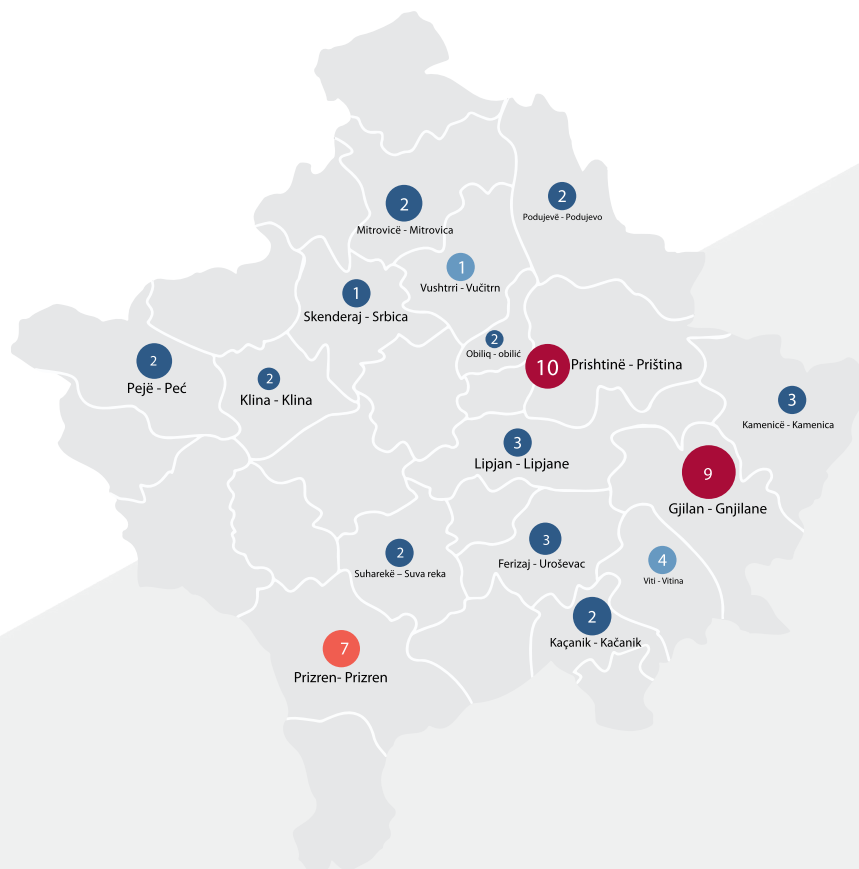*Illustration 12: Number of Kosovo men (253) who travelled to Syria and Iraq by municipality*

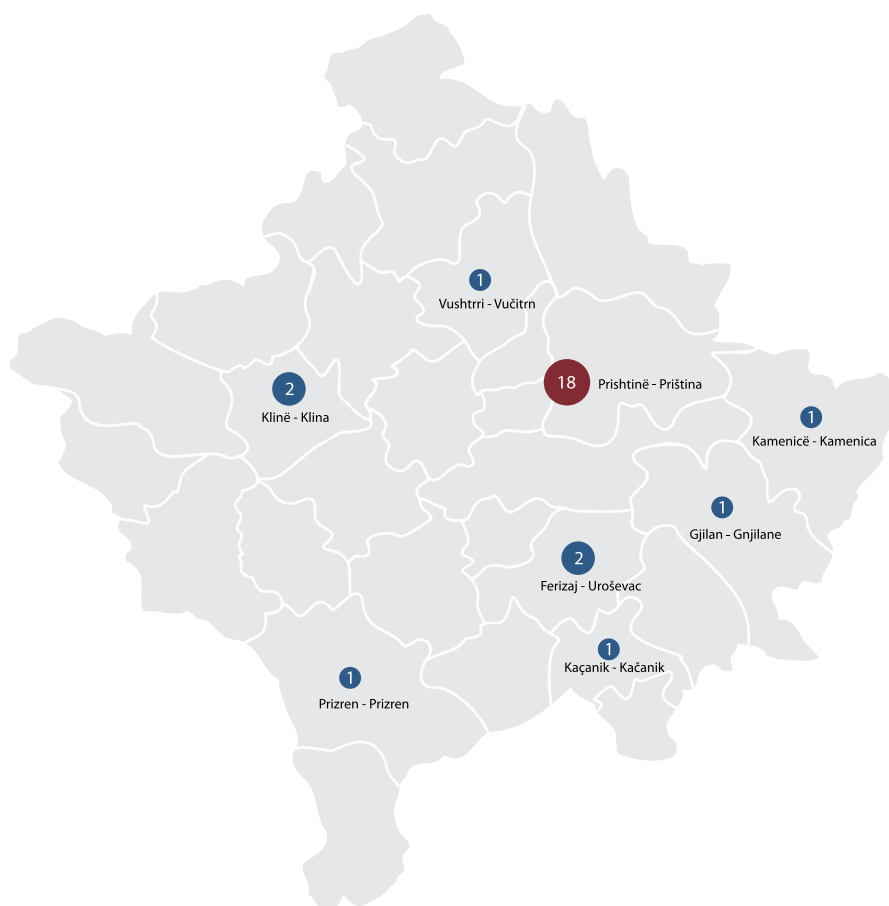*Illustration 13: Number of Kosovo women (55) who travelled to Syria and Iraq by municipality*

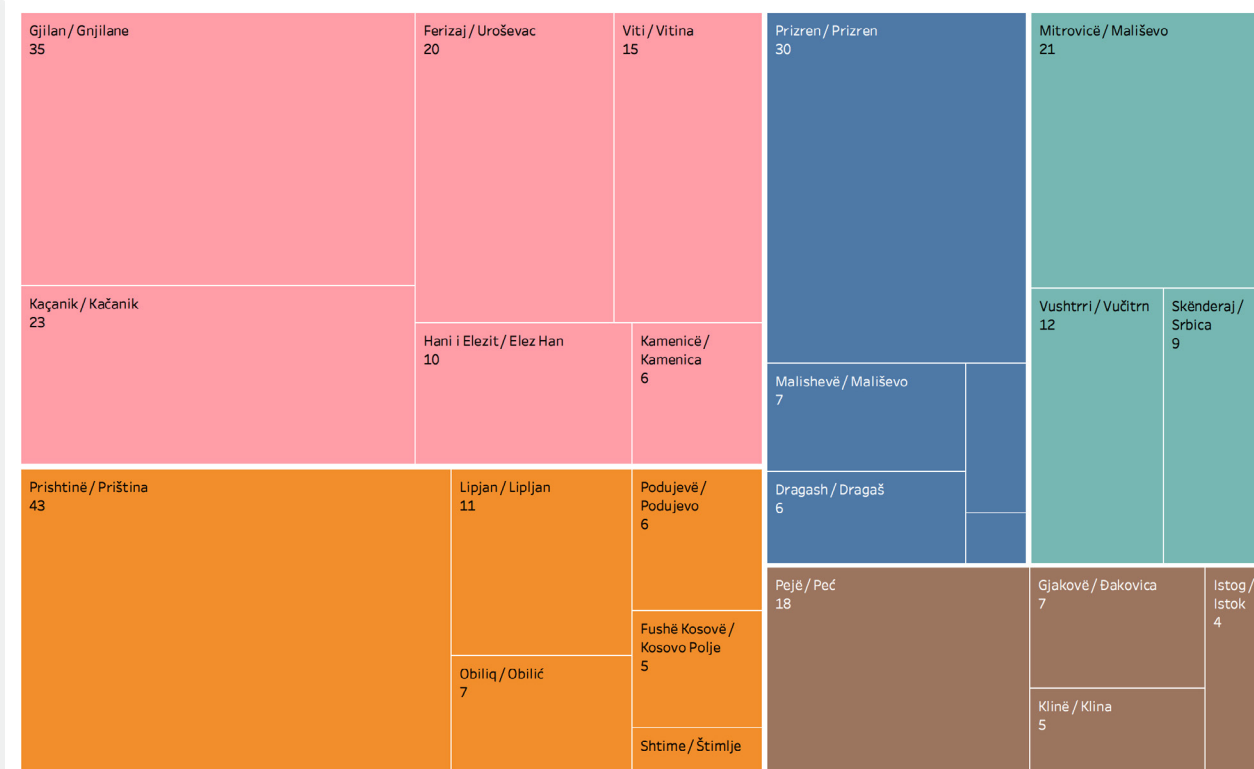*Illustration 14: Number of children (27) from Kosovo who travelled to Syria and Iraq by municipality*

Illustration 15: Number of adults (308) from Kosovo who travelled to Syria and Iraq clustered by five regions
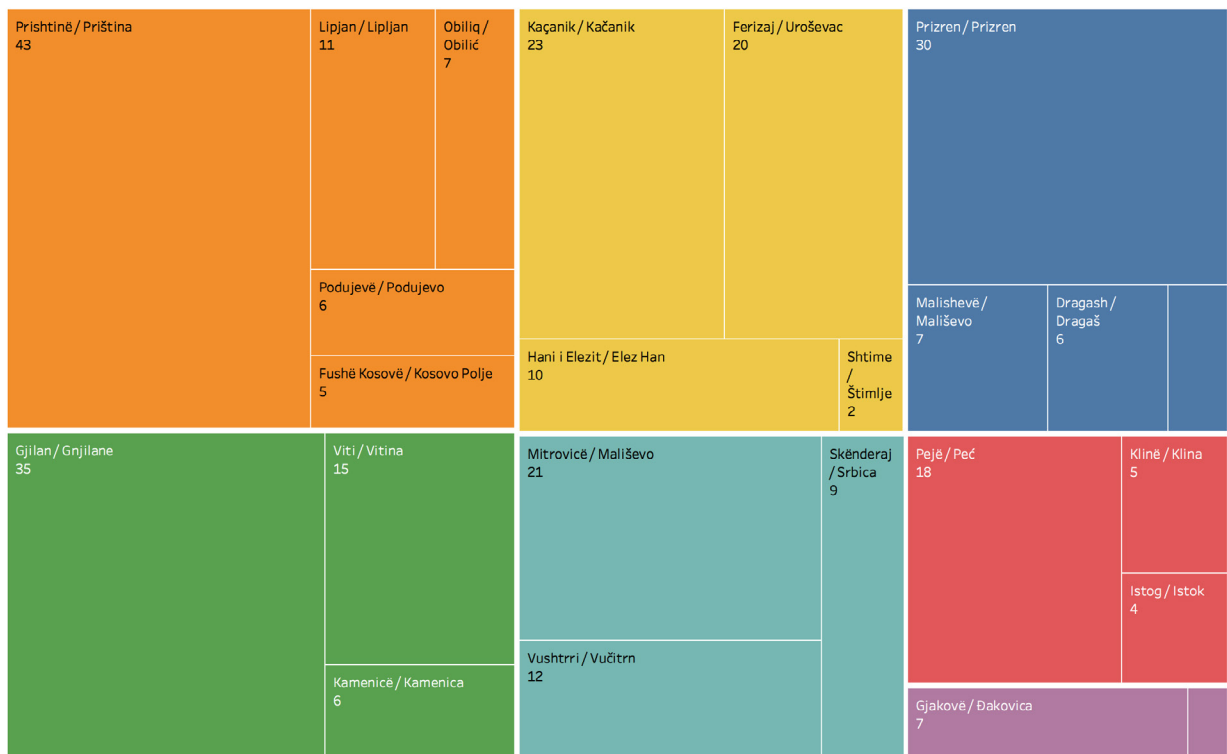
Illustration 16: Number of adults (308) from Kosovo who travelled to Syria and Iraq clustered by seven districts
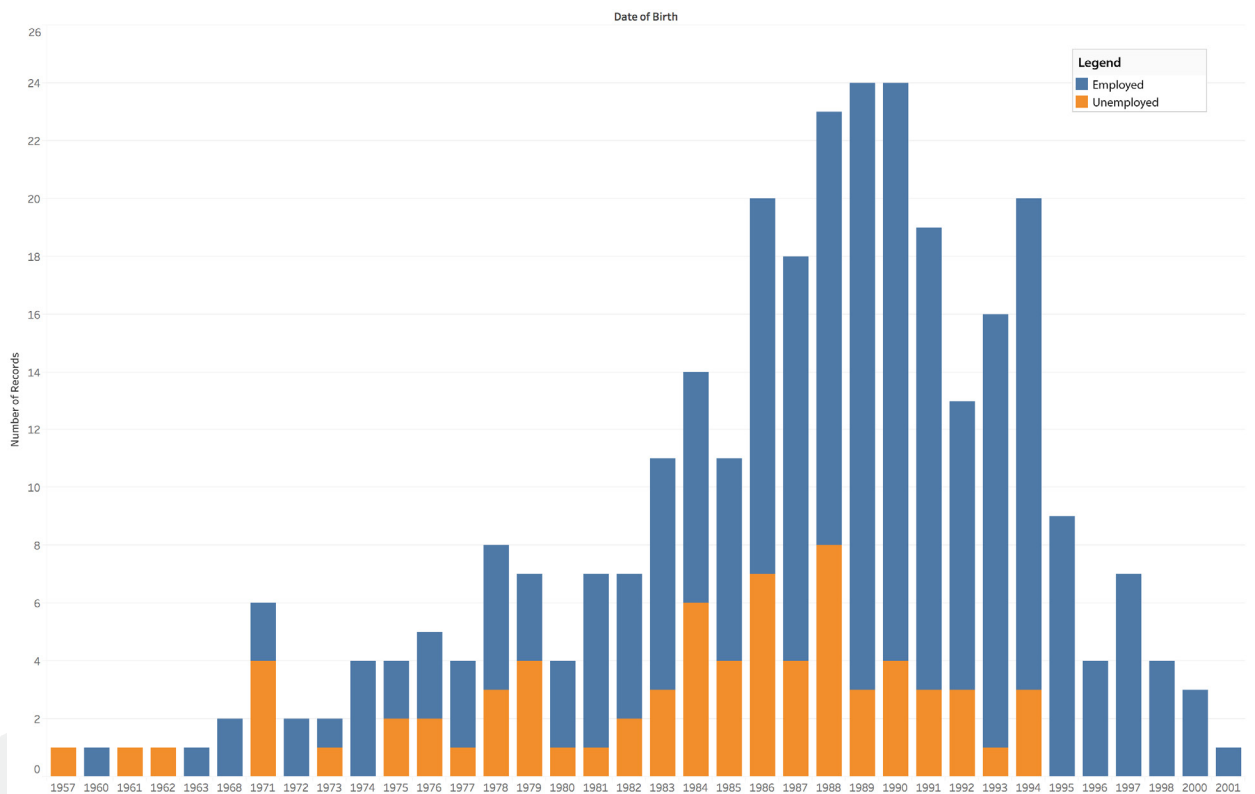

Illustration 17: Kosovo men and women (308) who travelled to Syria by employment status

Annex 3: List of all the interviewed stakeholders

Name	Institution/Civil Society Organization
Agron Metolli	Counter Terrorism Directorate of the Kosovo Police
Anne Speckhard	International Centre for the Study of Violent Extremism
Anneli Botha	Researcher
Arbana Xharra	Gazeta Zëri
Blerim Rama	Counter Terrorism Directorate of the Kosovo Police
Burim Buleshkaj	Kosovo Correctional Services
Drita Perezic	USDOJ-ICITAP-Kosovo
Elez Blakaj	Kosovo Special Prosecution
Fatos Makolli	Counter Terrorism Directorate of the Kosovo Police
Flora Macula	UN Women
Florian Qehaja	Kosovar Center for Security Studies
Jessica Farnham	U.S. Embassy Prishtinë/Priština
Jomart Ormonbekov	UNDP
Kujtim Bytyqi	Kosovo Security Council Secretariat
Leonora Berkani	USDOJ-ICITAP-Kosovo
Lindita Gashi	USDOJ-ICITAP-Kosovo
Luan Keka	Counter Terrorism Directorate of the Kosovo Police
Mike Pannek	USDOJ-ICITAP-Kosovo
Mimoza Jupa	U.S. Embassy Prishtinë/Priština
Rudinë Jakupi	Kosovar Centre for Security Studies
Sabine Freizer	UN Women
Shqipe Mjekiqi	Former Adviser to the Minister of Internal Affairs
Skënder Perteshi	Kosovar Centre for Security Studies
Sokol Zogaj	Kosovo Correctional Services
Vesë Kelmendi	Kosovar Centre for Security Studies

1 - AA 001

2 - AA 020

3 - AA 020

4 - AA 022

5 - AA 040

6 - AA 033

7 - Allan, H., Glazzard, A., Jesperson, S., Reddy-Tumu, S., Winterbotham, W., 2015, Drivers of Violent Extremism: Hypotheses and Literature Review, Royal United Services Institute, London; UN, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/57a0899d40f0b64974000192/Drivers_of_Radicalisation_Literature_Review.pdf; and Report of the Secretary General: The United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism, 24 December 2016, http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/70/674

About the contributing authors:

Behar Xharra is a political risk, security and governance specialist based in Washington D.C. He has led research, policy, and data driven programing for various governmental organizations, multilateral agencies, and private sector entities in Western Balkans, the United States, Bangladesh, Nigeria, and South Sudan. He has covered the flow and emergence of violent extremist groups in Western Balkans since 2012. A native of Kosovo, Xharra is also a founding member of Germin, an organization working with diasporas and civic technology in the Western Balkans. He is a graduate of the School of International and Public Affairs at Columbia University and Earlham College.

Nita Gojani is Award Manager at Save the Children Norway. She has also served as Project Manager for UN Women in Kosovo and has worked as an independent consultant on a range of issues including: research on violent extremism, transitional justice, training on gender equality, and communication. She is a graduate of the Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University and the American University in Bulgaria.

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Primary Interviews with Returned Foreign Fighters and their Families

November 2017