



Norwegian Institute  
of International  
Affairs

# Radicalization and foreign fighters in the Kosovo context

An analysis of international media  
coverage of the phenomena

Rita Augestad Knudsen



NUPI Working Paper 875

---

Publisher: Norwegian Institute of International Affairs  
Copyright: © Norwegian Institute of International Affairs 2017  
ISBN: 978-82-7002-337-0

Any views expressed in this publication are those of the author. They should not be interpreted as reflecting the views of the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs. The text may not be printed in part or in full without the permission of the author.

Visiting address: C.J. Hambros plass 2d  
Address: P.O. Box 8159 Dep.  
NO-0033 Oslo, Norway  
Internet: [www.nupi.no](http://www.nupi.no)  
E-mail: [info@nupi.no](mailto:info@nupi.no)  
Fax: [+ 47] 22 99 40 50  
Tel: [+ 47] 22 99 40 00

---

# Radicalization and foreign fighters in the Kosovo context

An analysis of international  
media coverage of the  
phenomena

Rita Augestad Knudsen

Supported by:



Published by the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs

# Contents

<b>Introduction*</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>Numbers</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>Why all the media attention?</b> .....	<b>9</b>
<b>Explanations?</b> .....	<b>12</b>
<b>An effective response?</b> .....	<b>18</b>
<b>Conclusions</b> .....	<b>20</b>

# Introduction\*

Since 2014, the high proportion of foreign fighters from Kosovo<sup>1</sup> and challenges related to radicalization have been extensively covered by international English-language print and online media. In May 2016, a much-discussed New York Times article summed up the situation in dramatic terms: Kosovo, it claimed, had been ‘turned into fertile ground for ISIS’.<sup>2</sup> Both before and after this high point in international media attention, many articles have offered their interpretations of violent Islamist/jihadi radicalization and foreign fighters in the Kosovo context. These media versions have sparked domestic debate and begun to impact international policy towards the country. Despite taking up issues that are real and serious, much of the reporting seems to have been guided by skewed assumptions and superficial understandings.

This working paper takes a critical look at the written coverage of issues of jihadi radicalization and foreign fighters from Kosovo, identifying key themes, assumptions, and areas where the press seems to have missed certain points. The paper is based on an extensive survey of written English-language media coverage retrieved online, secondary NGO/grey and academic literature, as well as some 50 original interviews with experts, frontline practitioners, policymakers and donors conducted in Prishtina, Brussels, or via Skype. While not attempting to provide a full picture, the paper identifies points on which the international media coverage seems to have got matters wrong, and areas where the evidence calls for greater nuancing. These include the

---

\* This paper is part of a research project where Besa Shahini is a contributing project researcher and Rudinë Jakupi a project research assistant, both from the Kosovar Centre for Security Studies (KCSS). I am grateful to Petter Nesser, Charlie Winter, Alexis Flynn, Shpend Kursani and Tore Bjørgo for comments on earlier versions of this paper.

<sup>1</sup> With the reasons for caution explained below, ‘foreign fighter’ is in the following used primarily to refer to those who travel to participate in the conflict in Syria and Iraq. Most of those coming from Kosovo have travelled to Syria – although some of these have subsequently travelled to Iraq.

<sup>2</sup> Carlotta Gall: ‘How Kosovo was turned into fertile ground for ISIS’, New York Times, 21 May 2016, (print title ‘Making Kosovo fertile ground for ISIS’, 22 May), [www.nytimes.com/2016/05/22/world/europe/how-the-saudis-turned-kosovo-into-fertile-ground-for-isis.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/22/world/europe/how-the-saudis-turned-kosovo-into-fertile-ground-for-isis.html?_r=1).

number of foreign fighters, the reasons for radicalization and why people have travelled to Syria, as well as the government's response.

## Numbers

A core theme in the international media coverage concerning radicalization and foreign fighters in the Kosovo context has been that the country is a ‘hotbed for radical Islamists’<sup>3</sup> and a ‘pipeline for jihadists’.<sup>4</sup> Such narratives are frequent, and seem to be a driver for the news value of Kosovo’s radicalization and foreign-fighter challenges. It is true that Kosovo has a high proportion of citizens who have travelled to IS-dominated territories – measured in per capita terms and compared to other countries in Europe.<sup>5</sup> As of March 2017 the official figure is 316; of these, 59 have died, 118 have returned, and 139 remain in the conflict zone.<sup>6</sup>

However, these numbers and proportions need to be put into context. For instance, many of those who have travelled to IS-controlled areas cannot be described as ‘fighters’. Of the 139 still in the conflict zone, 38 are women and 28 are children, and these two groups are unlikely to have taken up combat roles.<sup>7</sup> In addition, some of the men might not accurately be described as ‘fighters’, a point to which I return below. In some cases, ‘Syria traveller’ could be a more appropriate label than ‘foreign fighter’, which is the term generally used by the media.

Moreover, the total number of Syria travellers should be understood in light of the relevant context. Shpend Kursani of the Kosovar Center for Security Studies (KCSS) has argued that, to understand the Kosovo figures as compared with other European countries, one should rank a country’s proportion of travellers in terms of its *Muslim* population,

---

3 Jack Moore: ‘Kosovo arrests 19 in Isis plot to attack Israel World Cup qualifier against Albania’, Newsweek, 17 November 2016, <http://europe.newsweek.com/kosovo-arrests-19-isis-plot-attack-israel-world-cup-football-against-albania-522222?rm=eu>.

4 Beside the NYT article, several other outlets have presented similar interpretations, including Voice of America, Huffington Post, The Daily Mail, The Telegraph, the BBC, EU Observer, The Sun, Radio Free Europe, and Russia Today.

5 A good, albeit by now somewhat outdated, overview is found in Kosovar Center for Security Studies (KCSS)/Shpend Kursani: Report Inquiring into the Causes and Consequences of Kosovo citizens’ involvement as foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq, Prishtina, April 2015, p.25.

6 Interview with Kosovo Security Council official, Prishtina, 9 March 2017.

7 See KCSS/Rudine Jakupi and Vese Kelmendi: *Women in Violent Extremism: Lessons learned from Kosovo*, Prishtina, January 2017, which covers the experiences of four women connected to violent extremism in Kosovo.

rather than by the population as a whole. As some 95% of Kosovo's population self-identify as Muslim,<sup>8</sup> this places Kosovo quite far down on such a ranking, whereas Finland would top this second list, with the Scandinavian countries, Belgium, and Ireland appearing next. Against this, the researcher Adrian Shtuni has argued that the per capita and not per Muslim measurement is the proper framing of the issue, as 'a considerable proportion of foreign fighters originating from EU countries are recent converts to Islam'.<sup>9</sup>

The best approach may lie somewhere in between these two positions. While it is true that the vast majority of the Kosovo population nominally identify as Muslim, Kosovo's Muslims have a history of secularism and are generally non-practising. Moreover, the great majority of Kosovars who are more religiously observant adhere to a very different strand of Islam than the version IS claims to represent. A recent report from the Kosovar Institute for Policy Research and Development (KIPRED) underlines Kosovo's strong secular traditions, and leans towards presenting it as a country with Islamic roots not much stronger than in other European regions like Scandinavia. Such a viewpoint would warrant considering most if not all religiously observant people in Kosovo as converts of sorts – and most of those who nominally identify as Muslim as in fact non-religious.<sup>10</sup>

That being said, however, Kosovo's 95% 'Muslim' population is not altogether unfamiliar with religious matters, even if their familiarity may lie primarily at the cultural level. Without entering into the tension-ridden issue of the role of ideology in radicalization, it seems reasonable to assume that this familiarity could have contributed to a greater receptivity towards some parts of IS propaganda (however selective the religious references might be), especially those that focus on the suffering of 'fellow Muslims'.<sup>11</sup> Examined in this context, the number of

---

8 Kosovo Statistical Agency, <http://ask.rks-gov.net>.

9 Adrian Shtuni: '*Islamic State Influence threatens the Western Balkans*', *Jane's Intelligence Review*, 12 January, 2016. According to International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT)/Bibi Van Ginkel and Eva Entenmann: *The Foreign Fighters Phenomenon in the European Union*, ICCT, The Hague, April 2016, between 6% and 23% of foreign fighters from the EU are converts – a higher proportion than that of converts among the general Muslim population in these countries. However, the picture is more complex than what can be covered here, and solid data are still largely lacking; see ICCT/Bart Schuurman, Peter Grol and Scott Flower: '*Converts and Islamic Terrorism: An introduction*', ICCT, The Hague, June 2016.

10 KIPRED/Agon Demjaha and Lulzim Peci: *What Happened to Kosovo Albanians: The Impact of Religion on the Ethnic Identity in the State Building-Period*, Prishtina, June 2016.

11 A frequent theme, especially in early Albanian-language IS propaganda.

Syria travellers from Kosovo is noteworthy, but not as high as the many media reports would indicate.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> As pointed out by Lydia Wilson: '*Is Kosovo the new European hotbed of Jihadi extremism?*', The Nation, 14 July 2016, [www.thenation.com/article/is-kosovo-the-new-european-hotbed-of-jihadi-extremism/](http://www.thenation.com/article/is-kosovo-the-new-european-hotbed-of-jihadi-extremism/) This is probably the least alarmist of all the longer pieces of international media coverage to date.

## Why all the media attention?

Before moving on to examining how the international media has explained the radicalization and 'foreign fighter' phenomena in Kosovo, it is worth taking a step back and inquiring into the reason for all the international attention to the Kosovo situation in the first place.<sup>13</sup> Certainly, the presence of Kosovo Albanian fighters and some families in Syria is worrying, as is the risk of their return with the intention and capability to carry out attacks. Moreover, from research on the profiles of European jihadis, Kosovo's demographics appear to present opportunities for extremist recruiters.<sup>14</sup> Simply put, the country has many young men in poor socioeconomic conditions not engaged in organized activities: almost 43% of the population is below the age of 25;<sup>15</sup> in 2015, the unemployment rate was at least 32.9% (probably much higher) and at least 57.7% among youth, while the economic participation rate was 42.8% or less.<sup>16</sup> The existence of extremist

---

<sup>13</sup> Some international media have been more sensationalist than others. Of the most dramatic examples is the reporting of the unconfirmed claim (apparently originating in the Italian media) that the best-known Kosovo jihadist Lavdrim Muhaxheri had returned to Kosovo with an 'army' of 400. See: Hannah Crouch: '*Terror Chief's army in Europe*', The Sun, 29 December 2016, [www.thesun.co.uk/news/2496806/isis-general-who-decapitated-man-and-blew-another-up-with-a-rocket-sneaks-into-europe-along-with-400-soldiers-hell-bent-on-waging-war/](http://www.thesun.co.uk/news/2496806/isis-general-who-decapitated-man-and-blew-another-up-with-a-rocket-sneaks-into-europe-along-with-400-soldiers-hell-bent-on-waging-war/); Julian Robinson: '*Disguised as refugees*', Daily Mail, 29 December 2016, [www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-4073408/ISIS-general-blew-hostage-rocket-decapitated-prisoner-Europe-400-trusted-soldiers-fleeing-Syria.html](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-4073408/ISIS-general-blew-hostage-rocket-decapitated-prisoner-Europe-400-trusted-soldiers-fleeing-Syria.html). Another example is the also unconfirmed claim that there are 'at least five' 'ISIS-Daesh' training camps in Kosovo; see '*ISIS-Daesh Training Camps in Kosovo, Recruitment of Terrorists by NGOs*', Global Research/Sputnik News, 24 July 2016, <http://www.globalresearch.ca/isis-daesh-training-camps-in-kosovo-recruitment-of-terrorists-by-ngos/5537652>.

<sup>14</sup> See e.g. Thomas Hegghammer: '*The Future of Jihadism in Europe: A Pessimistic View*', *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 10(6), 2016, including note 19, at [www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/566/html](http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/566/html); Edwin Bakker: '*Characteristics of Jihadi Terrorists in Europe (2001–2009)*', in: Rik Coolsaet (ed.): *Jihadi Terrorism and the Radicalization Challenge*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2011, pp.131–144; Politiets Sikkerhetstjeneste: '*Temarapport: Hvilken bakgrunn har personer som frekventerer ekstreme islamistiske miljøer i Norge før de blir radikalisert?*', Oslo, 12 September 2016.

<sup>15</sup> CIA World Factbook: Kosovo, January 2016, at

[www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/kv.html](http://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/kv.html)

<sup>16</sup> European Commission: Kosovo 2016 Report, Brussels, 9.11.2016, p.39, although it is noted that statistics on this field are 'inadequate and outdated'.

individuals and groups with recruiting intentions, along with country's very high Internet penetration rate,<sup>17</sup> and the continuing production of Albanian-language extremist propaganda further darkens the picture.<sup>18</sup> With this in mind, we should perhaps wonder as why *so few* among Kosovo's population have been radicalized or travelled to Syria.

On the other hand, the overall picture in Kosovo is not so dramatically different from that of other European countries, or other countries in the region. Measured against the other Western Balkan countries, one area that sets Kosovo apart has been the country's relative openness regarding the numbers of Syria travellers and its terrorism-related arrests, at least in the early stages of attention to the phenomenon.<sup>19</sup> This in itself may have attracted some international media attention. The situation of Kosovo certainly seems to have received a disproportionate amount of English-language media coverage compared to the rest of the region and in light of the absence of jihadi terrorist attacks in Kosovo and the apparently low level of plotting activity.

Besides the general issue of a pressured media with an increasing need to ramp up stories to have them clicked on and read, part of the explanation for the international attention and the alarmism that characterizes much of it is sensationalism on the part of some domestic media in Kosovo. While not all international journalists will be able to read such reports at first hand, they are likely to rely on local journalists, especially those based in Prishtina, among their sources. In doing so, they may well have missed the fact that religion and its role in society have been matters of fierce disagreement in Kosovo for several years now. Religious headscarves, for instance, have become an intensely disputed issue of domestic policy. Some Kosovo reporters, especially those from outlets that English-language journalists are likely to seek out, see what they describe as increased religiosity as a great threat to Kosovo's secular and European traditions. Meanwhile, many practising Muslims feel under attack. This polarized situation has led to exaggerated claims on all sides; and failing to take this wider setting into

---

17 See e.g. KCSS/Kursani 2015, pp.81–82.

18 On the role of online propaganda in Balkan jihadi environments and recruitment, see BIRN team: '*Balkan jihadi warriors remain safe on the net*', Balkan Insight, 2 February 2017, [www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/balkan-jihadi-warriors-remain-safe-on-the-netj-01-27-2017](http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/balkan-jihadi-warriors-remain-safe-on-the-netj-01-27-2017); on the current decline in IS-produced propaganda, see ICSR/Charlie Winter: '*The ISIS Propaganda Decline*', ICSR, London, 2017.

19 According to Shpend Kursani, this is one reason for Kosovo's later hesitance to release updated figures.

account may result in slanted understandings, not to mention more capital letters and exclamation marks than the situation calls for.

The role of Islam is an issue of polarization elsewhere in the world as well. The very fact that Kosovo is the European country, bar Turkey, with the largest proportion of its population identifying as Muslim may in itself have added to its news value and ‘exoticism’ for some English-language outlets. The heavy international involvement in the country’s governance over a period of 18 years has further added to its international news value. Another important factor is the international engagement and debate on issues surrounding Kosovo’s 2008 independence and the 1999 NATO bombing of Serbia, Kosovo and Montenegro. Interestingly, it seems that those who opposed the NATO bombing campaign and Kosovo’s independence present the radicalization and foreign fighters phenomena as greater issues and threats than those who supported these developments.<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> Among the most striking examples of this is Russia Today, Sputnik, and Serbian English-language media outlet B92, all presenting particularly gloomy versions of the story.

## Explanations?

As to the explanatory factors that the international media indicate as being behind Kosovo's radicalization and foreign fighters, the role of foreign Islamic charity organizations operating in the country after the 1998/1999 war is frequently mentioned. The earlier-mentioned 2016 *New York Times* article that received so much domestic and international attention cited the presence of Gulf charities, especially organizations from Saudi Arabia, as a key reason for the challenges facing Kosovo. As the article puts it in a central passage, those who have gone from Kosovo to join IS

were radicalized and recruited, Kosovo investigators say, 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.<sup>21</sup>

---

21 NYT/Gall 2016; see also Sara Malm: *'The lost generation: Desperate parents reveal hundreds of young men and women have left Kosovo to fight for ISIS in Syria'*, 1 February 2016, [www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3426369/The-lost-generation-Desperate-parents-reveal-hundreds-young-men-women-left-Kosovo-fight-ISIS-Syria.html](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3426369/The-lost-generation-Desperate-parents-reveal-hundreds-young-men-women-left-Kosovo-fight-ISIS-Syria.html); Stringer/Reuters: *'Gulf money "turned Kosovo into ISIS hotbed" while EU and US turned a blind eye'*, Russia Today, 27 May 2016, [www.rt.com/news/344561-kosovo-isis-hotbed-saudi-money/](http://www.rt.com/news/344561-kosovo-isis-hotbed-saudi-money/); Al Jazeera: *'Who are the Kosovar fighters in Syria?'* 11 February 2016, [www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2016/02/kosovar-fighters-syria-isil-iraq-kosovo-160211060736871.html](http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2016/02/kosovar-fighters-syria-isil-iraq-kosovo-160211060736871.html); Fox News/Associated Press: *'Extremism "exported" to Kosovo from other regions'*, 26 September 2016, <http://www.foxnews.com/world/2016/09/26/minister-extremism-exported-to-kosovo-from-other-regions.html>; Ari Shapiro, *'After Kosovo Emerged From War, Foreign Extremists Radicalized Youth'*, NPR, 24 June 2015, <http://www.npr.org/2015/06/24/417192078/after-kosovo-emerged-from-war-foreign-extremists-radicalized-youth>; Hiam Nawas: *'Kosovo: The Collateral Damage of Saudi's Funding Extremist Ideology'*, Huffington Post, 31 May 2016, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/hiam-nawas-/kosovo-the-collateral-dam\\_b\\_10156972.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/hiam-nawas-/kosovo-the-collateral-dam_b_10156972.html); Nina Teggarty: *'Kosovo Looks to ISIS Wives in Order to Fight Extremism'*, News Deeply, 27 February 2017, [www.newsdeeply.com/womenandgirls/kosovo-looks-isis-wives-order-fight-extremism/](http://www.newsdeeply.com/womenandgirls/kosovo-looks-isis-wives-order-fight-extremism/).

Other media reports have added Turkey to the list of sponsors of possibly suspect religious organizations contributing to radicalization in Kosovo.<sup>22</sup>

Most observers and analysts seem to agree that charities of this kind have contributed to increasing levels of religious adherence in Kosovo and helped introduce a conservative, Wahabi/Salafi form of Islam previously little known there, a form that contrasts with Kosovo's primarily Hanafi orientation.<sup>23</sup> Interviews conducted for this paper indicate that some of those supported by such charities through cheap or free courses in language or computers, or through educational scholarships in Kosovo and abroad, did in fact become 'radicalized' – but also that many did not. And the degree of deliberate targeting on the part of these organizations and their countries of origin is an area where the available evidence does not warrant firm conclusions.

Besides the role of these religious charities, English-language media have pointed to Kosovo's dire socioeconomic conditions such as poverty, unemployment and poor levels of education as a cause of the country's radicalization and foreign fighter issues.<sup>24</sup> Although it is well understood that European jihadis, as a group, underperform on various

---

22 E.g. Colin Freeman: '*Inside Kacanik, Kosovo's jihadist capital*', The Telegraph, 23 August 2015, [www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/kosovo/11818659/Inside-Kacanik-Kosovos-jihadist-capital.html](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/kosovo/11818659/Inside-Kacanik-Kosovos-jihadist-capital.html),

23 Various – and diverging – analytical approaches to these themes may be found in the 2016 KIPRED and 2015 KSCC reports cited above, as well as in the work of Adrian Shtuni, op.cit; '*Ethnic Albanian Foreign Fighters in Iraq and Syria*', CTC Sentinel, 8(49), April 2015, pp.11–14; Adrian Shtuni: '*Dynamics of Radicalization and Violent Extremism in Kosovo*', USIP Special Report, Washington, December 2016, pp.7–8.

24 This is mentioned with varying degree of emphasis by the NYT, Al Jazeera, RFE, as well as e.g. Ismet Hajdari: '*Sour mood among youth as Kosovo turns nine*' Gulf Times, 20 February 2017, [www.gulf-times.com/story/533631/Sour-mood-among-youth-as-Kosovo-turns-nine](http://www.gulf-times.com/story/533631/Sour-mood-among-youth-as-Kosovo-turns-nine); Leonat Shehu: '*Husbands, Social factors, drive Kosovar women to join IS militants*', VOA, 28 January 2017, [www.voanews.com/a/husbands-social-factors-drive-kosovar-women-islamic-state/3696817.html](http://www.voanews.com/a/husbands-social-factors-drive-kosovar-women-islamic-state/3696817.html); see also David L. Phillips and Florian Qehaja: '*Countering Islamic Radicalization and Violent Extremism in Kosovo*', Huffington Post, 14 March 2016, [www.huffingtonpost.com/david-l-phillips/countering-islamic-radica\\_b\\_9463300.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-l-phillips/countering-islamic-radica_b_9463300.html). For poverty levels (29.7%), see World Bank Data: [data.worldbank.org/country/kosovo](http://data.worldbank.org/country/kosovo); for education and Kosovo's recent low PISA ranking, see e.g. Rron Gjinojci: '*Kosovo's education system amongst worst in the world*', Prishtina Insight, 6 December 2016, [prishtinainsight.com/kosovos-education-system-amongst-worst-world/](http://prishtinainsight.com/kosovos-education-system-amongst-worst-world/).

socioeconomic indicators, no *causal* link between socioeconomic conditions and ‘radicalization’ or terrorism has been established.<sup>25</sup> And there are clearly ‘well-performing’ individuals among jihadists and Syria travellers, in Kosovo as well as elsewhere.<sup>26</sup> However, the English-language media reports on Kosovo present their own variant of the link between socioeconomic conditions and radicalization, apparently indicating that many people in Kosovo are poor, uneducated or both, and *as such* have been particularly vulnerable to the seductive religious ideology of foreign ultraconservatives and home-grown radicals.<sup>27</sup> By emphasizing the role of suspect organizations and/or evil individuals, or focusing exclusively on the consumption of online propaganda, such reporting typically ignores the agency of the passively ‘radicalized’ Kosovars.<sup>28</sup>

This type of ‘brainwashing’ theory, however, seems both unconvincing and patronizing. Despite claims as to the alleged power of online propaganda, current evidence shows that people generally do not become extremists solely because they consume online material; researchers highlight the role of personal interaction with groups and individuals when individuals embrace extreme ideas.<sup>29</sup> I return briefly to the probable reasons for radicalization in Kosovo; here let it be noted that first-hand practitioners even question whether all of those who travelled to Syria, especially early in the conflict, ever really embraced extreme ideas, or used violence at all: in other words, whether it makes sense to describe them as either ‘cognitively’ or ‘behaviourally’

---

25 See Hegghammer 2016.

26 Shtuni 2016 stresses this point, and is the most dismissive of anyone in the grey literature of socioeconomic factors as a cause of radicalization in Kosovo. KCSS’s 2015 and 2016 reports, however, puts socioeconomic explanations at the forefront.

27 Malm/Daily Mail 2016.

28 Numerous reports highlight the role of online propaganda, with several mentioning this as one possible explanatory feature while ignoring others: see, e.g., Tim Lister and Ioannis Mantzikos: ‘Add this to Greece’s list of problems: It’s an emerging hub for Terrorists’, CNN, 26 January 2015, [edition.cnn.com/2015/01/25/europe/greece-terrorism-hub/#](http://edition.cnn.com/2015/01/25/europe/greece-terrorism-hub/#).

29 For a few examples from this burgeoning scholarly field, see e.g. Cristina Archetti: ‘Terrorism, Communication and New Media: Explaining Radicalization in the Digital Age’, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 9(1), 2015, [www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/401/html](http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/401/html); Cristina Archetti, *Understanding Terrorism in the Age of Global Media: A Communication Approach*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013; Petter Nesser: *Islamist Terrorism in Europe: A History*, London: Hurst, 2015; Peter R. Neumann: *Radicalized: New Jihadists and the Threat to the West*, London: IB Tauris, 2016.

radicalized.<sup>30</sup> Although disentangling human motivations is notoriously difficult, many of the early travellers say that they were driven by the desire for a better life, or by ‘humanitarian’ concerns for civilians, fellow Muslims, and/or for the descendants of the Albanians who moved to Syria in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>31</sup> As a further complicating point, it is likely that a significant proportion of those who travelled had previous criminal records.<sup>32</sup>

Most of Kosovo’s Syria travellers left for the conflict back in 2012 and 2013.<sup>33</sup> This was a time when much of the international community, including the Kosovo government, strongly condemned the conduct of the Assad regime in Syria.<sup>34</sup> Exemplifying the mood at the time, US President Barack Obama issued his ‘red line’ statement about the use of chemical and biological weapons in August 2012, and was criticized for not acting when Syrian forces crossed it a year later. Condemnation of the Assad regime’s brutality against civilians is likely to have had particular resonance in Kosovo, given its own recent history of oppression and war under the Milosevic regime. Not only are several issues from the 1998/1999 Kosovo war still unresolved (including hundreds of people missing, resources disputed, and innumerable other transitional justice issues open), the war remains alive in the popular consciousness through monuments, commemorative events and daily references. In seeking to understand why people travelled from Kosovo

---

30 The work of John Horgan and Tore Bjørgo on disengagement – oriented towards behavioural rather than cognitive change – illustrates the difference between these two analytical categories; see e.g. their co-edited volume *Leaving Terrorism Behind: Individual and Collective Disengagement*, London: Routledge, 2009.

31 See e.g. Harry Thirlwall Norris: *Islam in the Balkans: Religion and Society between Europe and the Arab World*, Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1993, pp.244–245.

32 KCSS/Kursani, p.72; for the ‘crime–terror nexus’, see ICSR/Rajan Basra, Peter R. Neumann and Claudia Brunner: *Criminal Pasts, Terrorist Futures: European Jihadists and the New Crime–Terror Nexus*, International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, London, 2016.

33 84%, according to Shpend Kursani and Arbër Fetiu: *‘A contextual analysis of Kosovo’s foreign fighter phenomenon: covering a “blind spot”*’, forthcoming.

34 For instance, as summed up by then Foreign Minister Enver Hoxhaj in *‘It’s 1999 in Syria’*, Foreign Policy, 23 August 2013, [foreignpolicy.com/2013/08/23/its-1999-in-syria/](http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/08/23/its-1999-in-syria/). Possibly sparking nervousness about the implications of such a comparison in terms of international action, the piece seems to have provoked various reactions refuting the parallels; see e.g. James P. Rubin: *‘Kosovo is not Syria’*, New York Times, 4 September 2013, [www.nytimes.com/2013/09/05/opinion/syria-is-not-kosovo.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/05/opinion/syria-is-not-kosovo.html); Elias Groll: *‘Is Syria anything like Kosovo?’*, Foreign Policy, 28 August 2013, [foreignpolicy.com/2013/08/28/is-syria-anything-like-kosovo](http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/08/28/is-syria-anything-like-kosovo); Olga Khazan: *‘3 ways Kosovo was not like Syria’*, The Atlantic, 9 September 2013, [www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/09/3-ways-kosovo-was-not-like-syria/279473/](http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/09/3-ways-kosovo-was-not-like-syria/279473/).

to Syria in 2012/2013, it seems logical to take into account the many claims from Syria travellers and their families: that, in the international setting of the time, some went to Syria to help civilians, other Muslims, and descendants of Albanians. This aspect of the historical-cultural context is rarely mentioned in the English-language coverage.

To be sure, some Syria travellers went later, even after IS declared the ‘caliphate’ in 2014; and a small but troubling proportion of those who have returned with increased capabilities and ideological commitments seem to harbour ambitions of recruiting others, possibly also carrying out attacks.<sup>35</sup> These could certainly be termed ‘radicalized’ and dangerous.<sup>36</sup> The number of sentenced recruiters in Kosovo, as well as first-hand accounts of clandestine meetings centred around extreme ideologies, show that there have been jihadi networks operating in Kosovo, although their present role and strength are unclear.<sup>37</sup> An additional contributory reason for people travelling to Syria rarely mentioned in the media is *inactivity*, especially among the young.<sup>38</sup> This is linked to, but nonetheless slightly different from, socioeconomics: framing the problem in terms of inactivity rather than primarily poverty or lack of education retains the agency of those who choose an extremist path; it avoids patronizing or stigmatizing the vast majority of Kosovo’s poor and unemployed who have not become extremists, and it also allows for the fact that even the well-educated and better-off can become extremists, especially in the absence of wider opportunities.

A final part of the explanation for Kosovo’s Syria travellers and radicalization issues, also largely overlooked by international media, is related to Kosovo’s ‘identity’. Several sources interviewed for this project stressed residual identity issues as key, as also summed up in the KCSS/Kursani report:

The West’s meddling and micromanagement in Kosovo, and their open support for the national elite that misrules, has created an identity crisis and a search for authenticity which people can find in religion. In addition, the unification and commitment of the Albanian citizens of

---

35 See KCSS/Kursani 2015 for an analytical breakdown of different categories of returnees.

36 For a useful summary of the disputes around this term, which nonetheless concludes that it is worth keeping, see Peter R. Neumann: ‘*The trouble with radicalisation*’, *International Affairs*, 89(4), 2013, pp.873–893.

37 Interviews conducted in Kosovo, December 2016–March 2017.

38 From a recent journalistic account of the disproportionately high number of foreign fighters from the Norwegian town of Fredrikstad, it is striking that most if not all of them left at a time of inactivity. See: Erlend Ofte Arntsen: *Fremmedkrigerne. Fra en norsk småby til den Islamske Stat*, Oslo: Kagge, 2016.

Kosovo to a national cause, faded after the liberation in 1999 (...) Imams in Kosovo (...) remain much closer to the citizens, compared to policymakers and the political elite of secular institutions in Kosovo.<sup>39</sup>

As already noted, 'radicalization' in Kosovo has tended to be chiefly a phenomenon of the young. Most of those who have travelled to Syria from Kosovo came to adolescence and adulthood after the Kosovo war, many after the 2008 declaration of independence. During these years, domestic and international attempts to de-emphasize the Albanian identity of 92.9% of the population at the expense of promoting of a new 'Kosovo identity' may have left some in a state of confusion, disappointment and/or anger.<sup>40</sup> Uncertainty as to the content of this 'Kosovo identity' may have contributed to the search for alternatives to fill the void. Further, the removal of much of Kosovo's internal and external agency through its post-1999 governance by international institutions may have led some in a similar direction.

---

<sup>39</sup> KCSS/Kursani 2015, p.61.

<sup>40</sup> CIA 2016. See also KIPRED 2016, e.g. p.6.

## An effective response?

Finally, the response of Kosovo's authorities to radicalization and foreign fighters is among the key issues addressed in English-language media coverage. Most have praised the government action as timely, harsh and effective.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, an eye-catching wave of arrests (more than 130 in total) for terrorism-related offences in 2014 appears to have been a trigger for some main international news outlets to start to cover these matters.<sup>42</sup> Kosovo's *Strategy on Prevention of Violent Extremism and Radicalization leading to Terrorism 2015–2020* was quickly formulated in 2015, and an Action Plan is currently being revised.<sup>43</sup> Later arrests of (self-described) imams and long prison sentences – like the case of the five people who in July 2016 were sentenced to 10 to 13 years in prison for planning to record an ISIS propaganda video – have also been cited.<sup>44</sup> With regard to foreign fighters, a 2015 change in the law has removed the necessity for Kosovo prosecutors to prove that someone has been participating in a terrorist group, and has made it a criminal offense 'simply' to participate in a(ny) conflict abroad.<sup>45</sup> The authorities now claim that, thanks to their actions, no people have travelled to Iraq or Syria since the spring of 2015.

---

41 See e.g. the reporting of the BBC, Daily Mail, Huffington Post, Reuters, and for a couple of concrete examples, Besim Abazi and Sirwan Kajjo: '*Kosovo sees drops in Foreign Fighters to Mideast*', Voice of America, 16 October 2016 [www.voanews.com/a/kosovo-foreign-fighters-to-mideast/3553579.html](http://www.voanews.com/a/kosovo-foreign-fighters-to-mideast/3553579.html); Sylvia Poggioli: '*Kosovo Government Cracks down on extremist recruiting*', NPR, 20 October 2016, [www.npr.org/2016/10/20/498653484/kosovos-government-cracks-down-on-extremist-recruiting](http://www.npr.org/2016/10/20/498653484/kosovos-government-cracks-down-on-extremist-recruiting).

42 For reporting from that time, see e.g. that of Fatos Bytyci at Reuters, starting with: '*Kosovo police arrest 40 for fighting in Iraq, Syria*', Reuters, 11 August 2014, [uk.reuters.com/article/syria-crisis-iraq-kosovo-idINKBN0GB0VW20140811](http://uk.reuters.com/article/syria-crisis-iraq-kosovo-idINKBN0GB0VW20140811) and subsequent reports; for numbers and an overview of actions, see e.g. Regional Cooperation Council (RCC)/Valery Perry: *Initiatives to Prevent/Counter Violent Extremism in South East Europe*, Sarajevo, July 2016, starting from p.36.

43 Office of the Prime Minister, Prishtina, September 2015.

44 See Skender Govori: '*Kosovo terror suspects given stiff sentences*', Balkan Insight, 18 July 2016, [www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/record-prison-sentences-for-kosovo-terror-suspects-07-18-2016](http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/record-prison-sentences-for-kosovo-terror-suspects-07-18-2016)

45 Law No 05/L-002, 12 March 2015. This law, as well as similar laws from Balkan region, have been collected in Annex 3 of Atlantic Initiative/Vlado Azinovic and Muhamed Jusic: *The Lure of the Syrian War: The Foreign Fighters' Bosnian Contingent*, Sarajevo, 2015. See also RCC/Valery Perry 2016 for an overview of regional actions.

However, there may be reasons to approach such claims with caution. Regarding the drop in numbers, serious observers hold that some individuals have in fact been travelling from Kosovo to join IS since spring 2015 (through Macedonia or Montenegro rather than from Prishtina airport), although their numbers are uncertain and unconfirmed. Otherwise, throughout Europe, the numbers of foreign fighters have been decreasing – due not only to IS’s direct instructions and weakening on the ground, but also to tighter border controls especially by Turkey.

As to the timeliness of the authorities’ response, the first solid English-language media report of significant numbers of jihadi foreign fighters from Kosovo came at least as early as June 2013, more than a year before the much-publicized arrests.<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, the medium- to long-term success of harsh law enforcement action depends on correct follow-up of those sentenced, as well as on prison conditions. Reporting by *Balkan Insight* and interviews conducted for this project indicate that the threshold for terrorism-related sentences may now be very low in Kosovo, with some sentences possibly based on weak evidence.<sup>47</sup> If that is so, one consequence could be to leave people in prison who might have been more effectively directed towards rehabilitation programmes and health treatment, including for PTSD.

As a further concern, practitioners have for some time reported worries over prison radicalization, although the Ministry of Justice denies that this is an issue. It is too early to say whether recent initiatives to address this (e.g. by removing books from prison libraries) will work. While the best approach to prison radicalization is an issue that the whole of Europe (and beyond) is struggling with, the dangers of (further) radicalizing persons imprisoned for terrorism-related offences on the basis of possibly tenuous evidence should seem obvious.<sup>48</sup>

---

46 Muhamet Hajrullahu: ‘Kosovo Muslim Embraces Jihad’ in Syrian War’, *Balkan Insight*, 13 June 2013 [www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/kosovo-muslim-embraces-jihad-in-syrian-war](http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/kosovo-muslim-embraces-jihad-in-syrian-war);

47 See the reporting by Ervin Qafmolla for Prishtina Insight and *Balkan Insight*, e.g. Ervin Qafmolla: ‘Kosovo’s War on terror turns into court farce’, *Prishtina Insight*, 25 May 2016, [prishtinainsight.com/kosovos-war-terror-turns-court-farce-mag/](http://prishtinainsight.com/kosovos-war-terror-turns-court-farce-mag/).

48 For a useful compilation of perspectives, see: Andrew Silke (ed.): *Prisons, Terrorism and Extremism: Critical Issues in Management, Radicalisation and Reform*, London: Routledge, 2014; see also RAN/Ryan J. Williams: ‘Approaches to Violent Extremist Offenders and Countering Radicalisation in Prisons and Probation’, RAN Working Paper, 2nd edition, 2016.

## Conclusions

The high per capita figures on Syria travellers from Kosovo, along with the country's social, economic, and demographic factors possibly conducive to radicalization, should be taken seriously. The recent and continuing history of heavy international involvement in the country's governance and finances places part of the responsibility for addressing these worrying trends on other states and international actors, such as the EU.

However, effective responses will require a proper understanding of the problems. Reporting in the international media has succeeded in placing the issues on the international agenda. But it has failed to provide a fully accurate picture, instead presenting simplified versions of the number of fighters from Kosovo, one-dimensional explanations focusing on the role of foreign religious charities and the country's socioeconomic ills, and misunderstood praise for the government's actions. Approaching these issues with a critical eye will be important in formulating better-informed responses.



## Norwegian Institute of International Affairs

Established in 1959, the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs [NUPI] is a leading independent research institute on international politics and areas of relevance to Norwegian foreign policy. Formally under the Ministry of Education and Research, NUPI nevertheless operates as an independent, non-political instance in all its professional activities. Research undertaken at NUPI ranges from short-term applied research to more long-term basic research.

### **About the author:**

**Rita Augestad Knudsen** is a senior research fellow at NUPI working particularly on counter-terrorism and anti-radicalisation, attached to C-REX (Center for Research on Extremism) and the Terror Consortium.

### **NUPI**

Norwegian Institute of International Affairs  
C.J. Hambros plass 2D  
PO Box 8159 Dep. NO-0033 Oslo, Norway  
[www.nupi.no](http://www.nupi.no) | [info@nupi.no](mailto:info@nupi.no)