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Kolë Krasniqi

Islamist Extremism in Kosovo and the Countries of the Region



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Foreword

The esteemed Professor Dr. Kole Krasniqi has prepared an enlightening text that comprehensively examines the development and existence of Islamic extremism in Kosovo and nearby regions of the Balkans. It is interesting to note that where East meets West and where Islam meets Christianity, regardless if across the Balkans, Saharan Africa or central Asia, there has been the potential for geopolitical instability and conflict. This volatile environment, often coupled with ethnic, religious, and political differences, and a corresponding security vacuum, creates the perfect atmosphere for fostering religious and political extremism. Dr. Krasniqi has taken extreme measures to make this point clear.

In the case of Kosovo, which lies at the heart of the Balkans, many of these conflicts between Christian Europe, supported by the Roman Catholic Pope, and Islamic Asia, led by the Ottoman Turkish Sultan, created a clash of cultures that transformed the Balkans into a multi-ethnic and multi-religious bridge that continues to connect Europe and Asia. For many centuries, most of the populations across the Balkan Peninsula have co-existed peacefully, but when political instability developed, inter-ethnic differences, normally supported by conflicting religious beliefs, routinely evolved into armed conflict. When the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia met their demise in the early 1990s, the political volatility and absence of credible security mechanisms across those areas led to the drive for regional independence that often used ethnicity and religious belief as dividing principles. In the case of Yugoslavia, Orthodox Christian Serbia faced off against Roman Catholic Slovenia and Croatia to the north and west, against Muslim Bosnia in Yugoslavia's former heartland, and later against Muslim Albanians in Kosovo and Macedonia to the south. Although labeled "inter-ethnic conflict," it was clear that most of the front lines in these skirmishes had been based upon religious divisions. It did not take long for competing sides to gain support in the form of supplies, weapons, mercenaries, and military reinforcements from other nations. As a result, illegal small arms and more lethal weapons were smuggled in from all directions. Most notably, Serbia received considerable support from Russian compatriots, while Muslims in Bosnia and Kosovo received significant reinforcement from Saudi Arabia and other

Arabic nations, and Slovenia and Croatia obtained the backing of many European nations that were sympathetic to their plight.

As Dr. Krasniqi clearly highlights, in the case of Kosovo, when the conflict had been stabilized, predominantly through the military and political interdiction of the United States and allied European nations, there was a need for financial and political support. Kosovo had been an impoverished region and in the post-conflict period was in need of democratic reform, economic assistance, and substantial reconstruction. The predominant actors that continue to promote political and democratic reform within Kosovo are the European Union and the United States. However, given the religious background of the majority of the population across most of Kosovo, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and other entities that support the Islamic faith often took the lead in financial assistance and rebuilding infrastructure. As a result, many of these Middle Eastern-based entities spearheaded these reconstruction efforts through the building of mosques and community residences, but the streams of financial assistance were often funneled through religious establishments or related aid organizations. This created stronger community ties, but more emphasis on religious indoctrination. One could also conclude that this was a *quid pro quo* arrangement, as local and familial financial assistance was intertwined with a call for stronger religious affiliation. In the case of Kosovo, this was often exhibited through a strengthened movement toward the Salafist Islamic faith and Wahhabism. These ultra-conservative versions of Sunni Islam unfortunately at times promote the need to engage in “jihad” (or physical conflict) in the name of one’s faith. Thus, the conversion of many ethnic Albanian Muslims across Kosovo from a tolerant and moderate form of Islam to a version that supports conflict with the West and Christianity-at-large has created an ideal environment for the development of extreme religious beliefs.

While one can conclude that Kosovo is primarily a secular nation with strong ties to the West, the political effort for international recognition for the nation’s declaration of independence has led Kosovo to seek stronger ties with nations across the globe and specifically with those nations that can provide the needed financial and political support. As such, the leadership in Kosovo over the last decade has proactively directed delegations to predominantly Arabic and other religiously Muslim nations to obtain this support. In addition, many of those in Kosovo who have been attracted to the radical forms of Islam have heeded the call for “jihad,” particularly when there is the promise of financial reward through remuneration as an Islamic mercenary, even if this involves support for such questionable organizations as the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. These ideological conflicts have caused great strain on the legitimate political efforts of Kosovo’s leadership, as Kosovo is viewed as an important regional ally of the United States and the European Union, while the radicalized religious efforts of this “jihad” can be said to target the “despised enemy” to the West, which consists of nations that have continued to support Kosovo’s existence.

As such, Kosovo and her Balkan neighbors can be described as a bridge between West and East and will continue to create a clear example of the positive potential of a secular nation, predominantly Muslim, that can attain democratic success and

retain strong connection with nations with a plethora of religious beliefs. However, the struggles to achieve political stability, global recognition, and economic independence in a post-conflict environment provide the local conditions that ultimately support the potential for the genesis of religious extremism. Dr. Krasniqi has outlined in extreme detail how these phenomena have developed within Kosovo, both recently and over decades, which have permitted religious extremism to fester and predominantly contradict the best political and economical interests of the population and national leadership of their homeland. This book is therefore required reading for government officials, academics, military personnel, students, researchers, and other interested parties who desire to better understand the bases for the genesis of religious extremism and, in this specific case, the evolution of Muslim fundamentalist beliefs. Unfortunately, this phenomenon continues to plague the modern world across the globe. By understanding these foundations, perhaps a credible solution can be developed to make the world a better, safer, and more peaceful place for persons of all religious faiths and ethnicities.

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James F. Albrecht

Foreword

The book entitled “Islamist Extremism in Kosovo and the Countries of the Region,” by the author Prof. Dr. Kolë Krasniqi, comes at a time when the world is under the rule of globalization, a process of long-term change that carries the peaks, challenges, dangers, crises, and uncertainties across the whole world, where “uncertainty will be a permanent reality, while the national security endeavor is a constant concern.” This book also comes at a time when today is a bow that stretches from the Far East through the Middle East, to the streets of cities in Europe and the USA, we face a threat that is constantly evolving, and there is a real danger that religious conflict replaces war, based on the ideology of the last century, in an equally devastating shape.

From the beginning, I want to emphasize that this work is an effort of high professional and scientific dimensions, through which the author has dealt with the most complex and sensitive aspects of national security, such as religious radicalism, especially “Islamist Extremism.”

The questions submitted in various public opinions and the dilemmas raised about the existence of “Islamist Extremism” in Kosovo seem to have influenced the author, who has a doctorate in the field of “international terrorism” from the Faculty of Law of the University of Vienna. Through the publication of this book, he provides factual information and scientific arguments about social and historical circumstances that have influenced the appearance of Islamic Extremism and the forms of manifestation of this phenomenon, which is attacking the national unity and security in Kosovo in different ways.

Undoubtedly, this book is a unique study, owing to both the elaborate theme and the methodological approach. As such, it is also the result of serious and courageous research by the author, who is equipped with a high degree of national sensitivity and academic responsibility. He argues that after the end of the war in Kosovo, many individuals and charities from the Near East, later identified as terrorist funding organizations, have invested hundreds of millions of dollars in building a propaganda infrastructure to indoctrinate Kosovo’s moderate and tolerant youth with a radical ideology, which has resulted in the creation of a number of extremist Islamic groups in Kosovo.

The author, through this work, has explained and analyzed the meaning of the reports that exist of various manifestations of radicalism, extremism, and Islamist terrorism. Here, it is important to emphasize the author's request for dogmatic clarification and the unique definition of these phenomena in both Kosovo and Albania, with the justification that we have a similar national identity in addition to similar political systems.

In fact, the unambiguous clarification and definition of these notions is also conditioned by the constitutional obligations that preserve the most sublime values of the Albanian people, because an act cannot be considered an extremist act in Kosovo, while at the same time in Albania, it is regarded as a theological act, or vice versa. Of course, Albania and Kosovo are small countries. Meanwhile, a terrorist action with strategic effects, under the conditions of globalization, can influence both large and small states equally. Moreover, for the shortcomings they may have in monitoring and controlling capacities, these risks can find a "safe haven" in small states. Therefore, the responsibility of small states is not as narrow as their population or territory, but much greater. On the other hand, small states need to realize that their security starts at home, despite the lack of capacity to manage and cope with threats. They have to realize that they are the ones who need to identify gaps in their security.

The value of the work increases as the security debate often focuses on the consequences when sustainable change depends on examining the root that causes extremism. Of course, politics plays its part. But the land in which they sow the seeds of hatred is "fertilized" by ignorance. Globalization is intensifying and multiplying this extremism. Meanwhile, the author is aware that this is not just about Islamic extremism. Extremist acts are committed against Muslims because of their religion. Today there are Christian fanatics, Jews, Hindus, and Buddhists who transfigure the true nature of their faith.

Bright and enlightened minds have claimed that the Albanian areas approach the experience of the system created thereby, which should be reflected in order to understand how religious peace and coexistence in diversity can be ensured so that the Albanian model for relations between the state and religious communities can be cause for reflection and meditation for those who want to peacefully resolve interfaith conflicts between different groups, especially when religious clashes are accompanied by ethnic conflicts. This is an essential element of the Albanian tradition, which influences the better fulfillment of the necessary parameters in guaranteeing security.

But the radicalization of religious beliefs turns into a serious threat even in countries with a strong tradition of religious tolerance. The essence of Albanian national identity and not that of religion, but of language, tradition, and culture, coupled with other values, are the factors that have preserved the traditional religious beliefs of Albanians from radicalism and extremism and transformed the religious tolerance of Albanians into a precious treasure of our national culture. But a nation's heritage treasures are always at risk if it does not take care of them, unless it identifies the risk factors and if it does not invest in neutralizing the effects of these factors. Therefore, religious tolerance, as a treasure of our national culture, although it has been created and resisted for centuries, must be secured and treated as constantly endangered and threatened by radicalism and violent extremism.

Thus, the author tries to raise awareness of the national risk of Islamist Extremism in Kosovo, which in various forms is attacking the religious harmony and national unity among Albanians.

At a time when the role of religion in the public sphere is growing, when religious institutions and organizations with their means of protection and social assistance are filling the state's financial gaps in some public services, when religious radicalism is emerging as a danger and when the geopolitics of religion is an uncharted study area, scientific papers focused on such topics are beneficial to sociological science and in the practical aspects of political decision-making. Such an exhaustive analysis motivates conclusions that make a contribution to the strategic culture and security perspective of Kosovo. In this regard, I wish this book, which has outlined one of the most challenging issues, not only to the national security, every success.

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Pajtim Ribaj

Foreword

Professor Kolë Krasniqi, in this book, aims to analyze the factors that have favored the birth of Islamic extremism in Kosovo and in the region. He deals with the ways and means of extremism, its actions so far, and its threats to national security. The author addresses many historical events, where manifestations of this extremism have been shown, but he focuses on the current era. He points out the fact that radicalism exists not only in Islam but also in other religions.

Extremism is a deviation from traditional and peaceful Islam, a deviation that is made by the interpretation of Islamic religious doctrine, in radical forms. Islam means peace, not violence, and imposing violence to spread it is unacceptable. Islam considers the murder of an innocent man equal to the killing of all mankind. The violation has nothing to do with true Islam or with true Muslims. The forms of extreme Islam are directed against real Muslims and then against all humanity. The greatest victims of this kind of extremism are Muslims, rather than Christians. Extremism and radicalism violate human rights, religious freedom, freedom of thought, women's and children's rights, and national security.

What has enabled the birth of Islamic extremism in Kosovo? The book by Professor Krasniqi gives the main causes as religious manipulation, lack of education, bad socio-economic conditions, in addition to the arrival of various Islamic religious sects from the Middle East after the war. Some Islamic sects are prohibited by law in many Islamic states, to overcome contradictions, whereas in Kosovo, after the war, all sects of Islam are present. This pluralism of sects is also one of the causes of conflicts inside Islam, and are particularly reflected in places like Kosovo that has allowed them all. Often, religious extremism and terrorism find a place to flourish in weak states and countries that are in transition. Many radical imams, in the name of freedom of expression, make severe attacks on other religious doctrines. Of course, freedom has limits and the limit is imposed when these attacks are used to promote religious conflicts and violence.

In essence, Islamic extremism and radicalism are of political nature, as certain groups aim to obtain political power. Therefore, behind the radicalization, economic and political interests are hidden. Historically, radicalism and ideology have served as tools to achieve the goals as quickly as possible and these methods have sometimes

been more efficient than the wars themselves. Under situations where the Albanian factor is concerned, any kind of religious extremism would cause national and religious divisions. By trying to identify Albanians by their religion and not by their nationality, the extremists are working to make them refuse their national identity, and this has been successful at times, despite the fact that Albanians have a high national awareness. The former Yugoslavia, using such a policy, had expelled from the Albanian lands, in the direction of Turkey during the twentieth century, thousands of Albanians, and to compare it with the rhythm of today's population increase, it has millions of people. The Albanians by nature are very tolerant toward religions; this tolerance is an extraordinary cultural asset, and it must be kept this way. This book serves to understand and fight against all extremist tendencies. It serves to identify them and their doctrines in addition to finding ways to avoid the damage that they can bring. It is very difficult to control all sects that support terrorism but when they openly predicate violence and religious and national hatred, then the state must not delay its response in declaring them illegal. Religious thoughts of a criminal nature have no place in any type of normal society.

I congratulate Professor Krasniqi for these contributions and I wish him success.

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Elena Kocaqi