# Kosovo Violent Extremism Risk Assessment
## April-May 2015

**Rise of Violent Extremism/Foreign Fighters in Kosovo**

Concern about the risk of violent extremism persists in Kosovo, largely due to Kosovo's significant number of foreign terrorist fighters. Kosovo's 232 confirmed cases (through mid-January 2015) of foreign fighters suspected to have joined militant organizations in Syria and Iraq placed Kosovo eighth among Western states who have contributed fighters. However, foreign fighters are recruited from Kosovo at proportionally high levels. According to the April 2015 Kosovar Center for Security Studies (KCSS) report, Kosovo is, on a per capita basis the highest-ranking source country of foreign fighters. In the regional context, the Combating Terrorism Center estimates that approximately 500 ethnic Albanians from the Western Balkans have traveled to Syria and Iraq since 2012. Research suggests that these fighters have travelled through a well-integrated regional network of extremist entities that have expanded across the region over the past two decades. The extremist entities are primarily composed of local radical clerics trained in the Middle East and closely affiliated with a number of foreign-funded Islamic charities and cultural associations.[1]

For Kosovo, the emergence of radical clerics and extremist entities is striking. The central issue in Kosovo's struggle for independence is ethnicity rather than religion, with mainstream interpretations of Islam predominating both historically and currently. Many interviewees referred to what has been documented elsewhere: the increased presence of "Arab NGOs," or foreign organizations with links to conservative or extremist ideologies that established themselves in Kosovo during the post-war period. "Agencies and groups such as The World Assembly of Muslim Youth made available hundreds of scholarships to Middle Eastern Islamic education institutions."[2] While not in itself problematic, interviewees expressed concern that these entities created space for recruitment by violent extremist organizations.

> "Tellingly, eight of the 11 Kosovo imams arrested between August and September 2014 on charges of preaching extremism and helping to recruit jihadists were relatively young and educated in the Middle East…These imams were closely affiliated with a chain of 14 Islamic charities and cultural associations whose leaders were also educated in the Middle East and which the authorities in Kosovo shut down recently because of their alleged ties to Islamist organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhood ."[3]

However, the fact that many of these imams have subsequently been released and organizations like the Muslim Brotherhood are not viewed as extremist organizations by the US or international community also points to significant deficiencies in the Government of Kosovo's approach and potential understanding of the problem.

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[1] https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/ethnic-albanian-foreign-fighters-in-iraq-and-syria
[2] Ibid,
[3] ibid

The majority of fighters from Kosovo joined the conflict in Syria during 2013, in line with increased recruitment and consolidation of territory by the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).[4] Many interviewees pointed to the rise in foreign fighters as a "shock" to the country: "It caught us off guard" (PM advisor). However, other interviewees, such as the head of the Counter Terrorism Department for Kosovo Police, stated that they had been tracking a rise in extremism since 2006 and saw the situation in Syria as a trigger for recruitment to support extremist activities.

During this period, the Government of Kosovo was perceived as taking little action against the extremist threat. As a result, radicals operated freely. The Government of Kosovo conducted arrests in autumn 2014 that significantly impacted this dynamic, but the underlying risk factors remain. It was for this reason that the USAID Kosovo approached USAID's Steering Committee on Violent Extremism and Insurgency to conduct an assessment of the drivers of extremism and provide recommendations on next steps.

**Assessment Overview**

The CVE Assessment Team included David Hunsicker (DCHA/CMM), Angela Martin (AFR/SD/CPG), Dara Katz (ME/TS), Timothy Holmsley (EUCOM), and Molly Byrne (DCHA/OTI). The team was graciously and well supported by Embassy Pristina/USAID Kosovo staff who also took part in several of the meetings. The team would particularly like to thank Victoria Mitchell, Melita Cacaj, Mimoza Jupa, Amy Hirschauer, and Dijana Lang for all of their support and guidance.

The team began fieldwork in Kosovo on April 22, 2015 and spent seven days interviewing a wide range of GOK officials, civil society representatives, local government officials, police administrators, USAID and US Embassy officials, multilateral agencies, and donor representatives. The Team traveled within Pristina and to Gjilan, Ferizaj/Uroševac, Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, Vushtrri/Vučitrn, Kaçanik/Kačanik, and Pejë/Peć. While the assessment allowed for geographic breadth, the team identified gaps in data to triangulate our findings such as detailed profiles of those who have chosen to participate in conflicts in the Middle East, accurate survey information on attitudes toward religion, access to religiously conservative youth for key informant interviews, and extensive information about broader regional dynamics impacting foreign fighter flows out of Kosovo.

This assessment looks at the context and drivers of Violent Extremism (VE) in Kosovo, using the methodology developed by USAID to identify the causes of VE and recommend policies and programs to prevent and mitigate VE.[5]

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[4] KCSS Report, April 2015.

[5] USAID, "Conducting an Extremism or Terrorims Assessment: An Analytical Framework for Strategy and Program Development", June 2008: http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/pa00hr46.pdf. USAID, "Guide to the Drivers of Violent Extremism," February, 2009: http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/pnadt978.pdf
USAID, "Development Assistance and Counter-Extremism: A Guide to Programming,", October 2009: http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/pnadt977.pdf

## LEVEL OF RISK

The VE risk in Kosovo remains very low for a number of reasons. First, the scale of the threat is small, even prior to the government response. Second, the Government of Kosovo's response was measured, balanced, and generally viewed positively. This acknowledgement and response appear to have helped empower or place pressure on key stakeholders, such as community leaders and the Islamic community, to address the issues in their community. Third, there is a relatively open discussion of the VE risk which has demanded a collective response from Kosovo's citizens, even though a recent poll indicated corruption, economic insecurity, and resultant economic migration are the pressing concerns of the day. However, virtually all of the assessment respondents viewed VE as a potentially existential threat in the long-run, be it as an impediment to full membership of the EU to casting a light on the infiltration of religion as a guiding principle in a fundamentally secular society. Finally, there are a number of resiliencies present in Kosovo that help mitigate this risk: a strong sense of shared community and narrative of religious tolerance, a desire to be viewed as secular, a sense of inclusion as a member of Europe, and a society without significant potential fault lines.

## DRIVERS

Although Kosovo's current risk for violent extremism remains low, several drivers have been identified. Both push factors, the greater conditions that make someone vulnerable to violent extremism, and pull factors, people, places, and events that attract individuals to extremism, are present in Kosovo. Following the arrests in August-September 2014, many of the visible pull factors were removed, such as dismantling a recruitment network and discrediting the economic incentives. However, some pull factors remain including a proactive ideological agenda and offers of a sense of belonging. While recruiters may have gone quiet in the wake of the arrests, it is unlikely that their networks have been completely disrupted. In addition, many of the push factors that made Kosovars so vulnerable to recruitment remain: frustrated expectations, endemic corruption, and the enabling environment.

An apparent trend emerged throughout the assessment in which individuals were recruited due to either the promise of economic rewards or a system based on ideology. It is difficult to validate those claims without access to the individuals themselves, but the anecdotal evidence is probably enough to conclude that both claims are playing important roles alongside simple adventure- and honor- seeking people.

## PUSH FACTORS:

### Frustrated expectations

Despite being recognized by approximately 100 countries, Kosovo still lacks full integration into the international community; travel is severely restricted within the region and slow economic development. This is felt keenly by many Kosovars. One interviewee even referred to Kosovo as a

"ghetto". Part of the fear expressed by some people interviewed about the association of Kosovo with foreign fighters traveling to Syria and Iraq had to do with the negative impact on the country's image and the damage that could occur in relation to its hopes for greater European integration.

As stated in the background section above, the majority of Kosovars are not satisfied with the current political and economic direction of their country. Those interviewed by the assessment team repeatedly pointed to issues of corruption in government and dissatisfaction with government elites in Pristina. The perceived promise of a more dignified life as citizens of an independent Kosovo has not materialized for most people. For this reason, the recent move of Kosovars over the Hungarian border into the EU demonstrates that many seek to break out of their ghettoized existence to seek employment and a better life in Europe.[6] For those unable or not yet willing to migrate elsewhere, there sometimes arises a need to search for solace, opportunity and identity elsewhere. Those following the utopian promises of ISIL and al-Nusra seek their fortunes in Syria and Iraq, albeit on a significantly smaller scale. The choice certainly rests at least in part on opportunity, but ideology and identity likely play a role for those opting for the path to violent extremism.

There also seems to be a center-periphery split as well. Those in some outlying communities where opportunities are particularly limited feel isolated from the fruits of independence. The economy is still struggling and mediocre services, including education, create aggravating feelings of isolation and frustration.

**Education**

Several interviewees viewed the current education system as weak and perhaps weakening. The curriculum reportedly lacks both critical thinking skills and components that promote pluralism and tolerance. The latter issue is striking given efforts to address ethnic tensions in the education system, but not entirely surprising given Kosovo's recent history of conflict to achieve its independence. Nationalist narratives are strong and do not necessarily lend themselves to promoting more inclusive perceptions of the other, but the links to violent extremism are of a secondary nature and seem less pronounced than basic critical thinking skills. Education that favors simple and uncritical acceptance of "facts" when presented by a perceived authority would seem to make individuals vulnerable to falling prey to slick propaganda of a black and white worldview of groups like ISIL. However, the latter is difficult to measure. In addition, a few interviewees noted they had observed a decline in teaching of English language and Serbo-Croatian language, as a factor aggravating isolation, both in being able to communicate with a larger community and limited access to information both by traditional means and on the internet. A couple of interviewees noted that extremist Muslim groups were much more savvy and aggressive than the Islamic community in Kosovo at providing Albanian language content on the internet.

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[6] Alison Smaile, "Kosovars Who Fought for Land Are Now Eager to Leave", New York Times, March 7, 2015: http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/08/world/europe/kosovars-who-fought-for-land-are-now-eager-to-leave-it.html?_r=0 [accessed May 28, 2015]; FATOS BYTYCI AND KRISZTINA THAN, "Dramatic surge in Kosovars crossing illegally into EU", Reuters, February 4, 2015: http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/02/04/us-kosovo-eu-migrants-idUSKBN0L811120150204 [accessed May 28, 2015]; Alan Taylor, "Asylum Seekers Flood Into Hungary", The Atlantic, February 11, 2015: http://www.theatlantic.com/photo/2015/02/asylum-seekers-flood-into-hungary/385398/ [accessed May 28, 2015].

In addition, there appears to be a relative dearth of after-school or youth-oriented activities for which young people can benefit by building life skills, expanding horizons, and building bridges across communities. While some youth-serving organizations and initiatives do exist, they are either limited in scope or appeared to be politicized and replicating the barriers to opportunity in other parts of society.

**State capacity and corruption**

The state was often described by many interviewed as corrupt and still having significant capacity deficits. The notable exception was the police force which generally received consistent praise (as confirmed by polling). For many Kosovars, the promise of independence has proven illusory, particularly for those in areas outside the capital. National level structures were not described favorably, with politicians being seen as the "haves" and most ordinary Kosovars as "have nots". Government was more often seen as serving politicians' interests than that of the average citizen. This crosscutting attitude is not unique to those being recruited by extremist organizations and the perception/existence of generalized corruption is not necessarily a driver in the short-term. However, this can change if certain groups are more affected by the systemic corruption and/or corruption erodes core state functions especially in justice and security. Moreover, in Kosovo's case, the perception of corruption is intertwined with frustrated expectations regarding independence and the opportunities it promised to create a potentially acute feeling of disaffection, making state capacity and corruption a factor to track.

**Perception that the international system is fundamentally unfair and hostile to Muslim societies and sympathies for suffering Muslims elsewhere, particularly Syria**

Some interlocutors referred to a natural motivation on the part of some Kosovars to want to help Syrian Muslims who they saw as under attack and needing intervention to help protect them. Having experienced similar suffering at the hands of the Milosevic regime, many Kosovars are sympathetic to the plight of the Syrians. This support for the victims of the Syrian conflict was cited as the motivation for some of the FTF, including those who went over initially as non-combatants. This came out in the general sense of sympathy expressed by most interviewees towards many of those who were detained after returning from Syria as well intention but misguided individuals.

Kosovars are generally less inclined to view the international system or the West unfavorably due to the prominent role international actors played in securing Kosovo's independence. However, there is nonetheless a trend within society which believes narratives about perceived double standards in the West's dealings with Muslim societies. These narratives can be compelling, particularly when heard repeatedly in an environment where reliable information is not readily and consistently available. Another narrative claims that the international community, while grateful for the intervention, has created many of the woes Kosovo faces. They claim that Kosovo's politicians and bureaucrats, inherited a dysfunctional system built by internationals. Such a narrative can be easily linked to perceived double standards in the West's dealing with Muslim societies.

**Alienation due to religious views**

While religious ideology may be a pull factor, the relative intolerance of Kosovo society to more observant strains of Islam can be a push factor as well. Several interviewees expressed dismay at the visible rise of conservative, not just extremist interpretations of Islam, particularly those who covered themselves or adjusted their appearance to those religious norms. Conservative Islam often was equated with extremist interpretations and violent extremism, with all being rejected as unacceptable. Several interviewees described incidents where young adults who displayed more observant tendencies were ostracized from not just their community, but their immediate family. This dynamic can lead to further isolation that leaves individuals particularly susceptible to recruitment.

## PULL FACTORS

**Active Recruitment Networks**

The most significant pull factor is the active recruitment network that is specifically targeting Kosovars to join the fight in Syria and Iraq. The precise reasons for this are unclear. Some theorize that it is the result of "Arab NGOs" that took root following the war for independence. Certainly, the presence of Gulf-influenced charity organizations following the war should not be denied. However, they also should not all be uniformly painted with a negative brush. There were several anecdotes shared about the proselytizing efforts of these groups, with an implicit assumption that they had nefarious agendas. Those reports likely contained a fair amount of urban myth, making it difficult to ascertain their true influence. Some Kosovars have also studied abroad in the Middle East and have connections that could be the source of recruitment networks. Also as noted below, the motivation for joining is only ideologically based for a fraction of the recruits. Several key informants suggested a changing typology of recruits that progressed from followers of certain religious leaders to those with criminal ties to ignorant/bored rural youth. However, this was anecdotal information, and those linked with law enforcement indicated that there were no links between recruitment networks and organized criminal networks at this time. It was outside the ability of this team to examine these networks closely. However, the presence and success of these recruitment networks in drawing Kosovars to join ISIL and others is demonstrated by facts on the ground in Syria and Iraq. Recent arrests have yet to demonstrate the degree to which these networks may in fact have been disrupted.

**Identity-seeking and rewards**

Alongside the active recruitment by extremist networks, there are factors at play which may make some Kosovars susceptible to recruitment. As the next generation to follow those who fought for Kosovo's independence from Serbia, there may be a desire to be part of a similar cause. Kosovar Albanian identity is still one that has been shaped by war and resistance to oppression as well as a traditional code: the Kanun, which glorifies honor killings and fighting. Warfare is closely tied to Kosovar Albanian masculine identity. The humdrum of daily life is lackluster in comparison to the exploits of the previous generation, stories which are familiar to every Kosovar, and the stories making up Albanian folklore. So identity and reward/adventure-seeking behavior is perhaps more common among young Kosovars than others.

Layered on top of this is a more general "identity-seeking" not uncommon among citizens of newly independent states. As they enter the world stage, the reality of independence can be anti-climactic and individuals seek new ways to define their identity. One way this manifests is through closer identification with religious identities and exploring ties with co-religionists beyond the nation-state's borders. Particularly as some feel that independent Kosovo has become isolated or "ghettoized" in Europe, some look to the Muslim world to connect with a community larger than their own. But when this otherwise natural inclination to find a community to belong to intersects with the recruitment networks set up by extremist groups, it presents a dangerous dynamic.

**Media and Social Media**

Overall, 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 scared into thinking that the VE threat is greater than it is. Conservative Muslims that the team spoke with were particularly upset with the portrayal of the problem. On the other side, more secular Kosovars tended to point to Peace TV as a proselytizing influence that did not support or directly result in individuals traveling to join the conflict in Iraq and Syria. It was seen as a gateway to more conservative religious orientation and practice that made some individuals vulnerable if not properly guided.

Social media, of course, also tends towards the sensational in pursuit of ever more "clicks". But there are additional problems with social media in the Kosovar context due to the paucity of Albanian language content. Specifically, some pointed to the fact that the only Albanian language videos on YouTube tended to be religious or centered on life issues. The videos are produced by religious organizations promoting their values. The fact that many of the posts are religious in nature is not a problem, but they also include extremist propaganda videos. More generally, videos that are available tend to be those of conservative, albeit not necessarily extremist, preachers without much else available to balance them. Elsewhere in Europe the internet and social media are serving as crucial conduits for messaging by extremist groups in the Middle East, including in Albanian groups. Therefore, the videos are an important recruitment tool for these organizations, and they need to be addressed.

**OTHER FACTORS TO TRACK**

One dynamic that the team was not able to delve into sufficiently was the gender dynamic of recruitment and radicalization. A few interviewees speculated that both the traditional cultural morays defining manhood – for example, honor being achieved by fighting – and the perceived erosion of them in the post-Communist, post-conflict transitions – such as women playing more prominent political and economic role and dressing more freely -- could be contributing to recruitment and radicalization.

## CURRENT THREAT AND RESPONSE TO VIOLENT EXTREMISM

**GOK Response**

The online video of Kosovo Foreign Terrorist Fighter (FTF) Lavdrim Muhaxheri beheading a prisoner in Syria in July 2014 provided the impetus for the first large-scale counterterrorism (CT) effort by the Government of Kosovo (GOK). The operation resulted in nearly 60 arrests in August-September 2014 and the closure of over a dozen mosques and NGOs suspected of illegal activity. Two major waves of arrests of individuals suspected of fighting in Syria or Iraq occurred. The reaction to the arrests was reportedly 90% supportive, and many interviewees noted a reduction in recruitment and movement of FTF since the arrests. Only one of the interviewees voiced any negative opinions related to the operations—calling them "unhelpful" and politically motivated. There, moreover, was not any perception that the security services were conducting measures outside of the public view.

The actions in 2014 are considered a turning point, noting a substantial decrease in extremism activity and reporting following the arrests. However, recruitment has not abated completely and individuals continue to travel to Syria at a reduced rate. The Special Prosecutor on Terrorism stated that recruitment had decreased by 50%. Of the 57 individuals who were supposed to be arrested, 40 were arrested and 9-10 are still at large. The Deputy Foreign Minister (Petrit Selimi) noted that 50-60 remained in Syria. In early May 2015, Kosovo police caught two girls suspected of trying to join ISIL and a Kosovar citizen reportedly conducted a suicide bomb in Iraq. On May 4, a citizen of Kosovo also conducted a suicide bombing attack for ISIL in Salahuddin province in northern Iraq. It is apparent that the threat continues.

While Kosovo's response to extremism and recruitment has seemingly slowed recruitment efforts, as one interviewee stated, "when the kids are quiet, that's when you should be worried." Not only are vigilance and further collaborative efforts required to continue to prevent violent extremism, but outcomes of the trials of those arrested may impact future extremism activity and recruitment flows. Acquittals or dropped charges could signal that law enforcement is toothless in its attempts to crack down on recruiters and potential foreign fighters. In addition, there was concern that if indictments were not handed down soon and trials started promptly, the positive impacts of the 2014 actions would dissipate.

Many interviewees also commented that since the arrests there has been increase in panic and fear of violent extremism. Additionally, one interviewee (FOL) raised concerns that the arrests also decreased dialogue around the issue, speculating that individuals are afraid of taking a more conservative stance for fear of being arrested.

While it is somewhat difficult to identify specific "hot spots" for recruitment and radicalization in Kosovo with great accuracy, media and academic reports about the flow of foreign fighters suggested that Kaçanik/Kačanik, Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, Vushtrri/Vučitrn, Gjilan/Gnjilane, Hani i Elezit/Elez Han, and Ferizaj/ Uroševac topped the list. Kosovo's three largest cities, Pristina, Prizren, and Pejë/Peć, were not cited as hot spots in interviews. In fact, many Pejë/Peć interviewees claimed that Pejë/Peć's history of tolerance offered an effective buffer to extremism but still others recounted attempts by

imams in rural communities to recruit young men. Still, this would seem to point to differences between areas in Kosovo where there is greater economic and social opportunity with more peripheral areas.

Obviously several of these "hot spots" are in border areas adjacent to Macedonia. So it is important to look at connections across the border, in addition to the internal dynamics.

**Macedonia and the region**

Both familial and historic networks exist between ethnic Albanians in Kosovo and Macedonia. According to several interviewees, extremism threats have come from Macedonia. Individuals stated that both radical imams and recruiters came from or had links to networks in areas of Macedonia in which ethnic Albanians reside. The recent KCSS report also points to Macedonia's important role in recruitment. Obviously Kosovo's foreign fighter problem is ultimately a reflection of the situation at home, but these regional links also cannot be ignored, particularly given the strong ethno-linguistic and historic ties. It is important to bear in mind that until recently these Albanians in Kosovo and Macedonia lived in the same country, and intermingled freely. Albanian Macedonians also sheltered Kosovar Albanians during the conflict with the Serbs. In addition, both have struggled for recognition with Albanian Macedonians attempting its own separatist movement in the early 2000s. Within Kosovo, there is a perception that Albanians in Macedonia are more religious, although that is difficult to gauge accurately and is also not an accurate measure of extremism. The involvement of Kosovars in recent attacks on the border post near Kumonovo demonstrates the strong ties between the two populations. But as these events highlight, to place blame for violent extremist recruitment on either, is a bit of a chicken or the egg phenomenon. Despite the fact that the Macedonian government has labeled those killed and arrested in relation to the recent arrests in Kumonovo as "terrorists," a link between Islamist groups and ethnic Albanian militants has not been established. If evidence of those links were to emerge, it would constitute a potentially significant evolution of these groups.

There are of course also links to ethnic Albanians in Albania, Europe (particularly Germany and Austria), and Turkey, including network that recruit Kosovar Albanians that also require monitoring.

**USG, GOK, and international donor engagement**

The international community, and the GOK, remain concerned with the high rate of foreign fighters per capita in Kosovo, and as a result have taken steps to organize and assess the threat of violent extremism. The US Government has implemented several small grants aimed to counter violent extremism, including the aforementioned KCSS report. In addition, the UNDP recently conducted an assessment to counter violent radicalization in Kosovo for the GOK from April-May 2015. The results will be utilized by the GOK CVE Working Group. The GOK working group is made up of a cross section of ministries, civil society and donors.  This inclusive process is laudable and remains the principle mechanism for coordinating the GOK's response to Violent Extremism and leads coordination with the international community. This platform gives Kosovo an advantage to integrate information from multinational forum such as the White House Summit on Countering Violent Extremism (February 2015) and the Albanian Regional CVE Summit (May 2015).  A long term

strategy would build on the initial proactive security response to VE.

## POLICY AND PROGRAMMATIC IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The VE risk in Kosovo remains very low, both due to the small scale of the threat prior to the government response and the generally positive views of the response within their society. However, virtually all of the assessment respondents viewed VE as a potentially existential threat in the long run, be it as an impediment to full membership of the EU or casting a light on the infiltration of religion as a guiding principle in a fundamentally secular society.

As a prevention program, the recommendations are building upon the positive foundation of the relatively transparent response by the police and judiciary. The police enjoy a comparatively trusted role in Kosovar society, which certainly helped keep the public perception of their reasonable response to the FTF threat. There is some skepticism that any of the detainees will ever go to trial and instead get released after a limited amount of detention. Whatever the outcome of the arrests is, it presents an opportunity for credible vs inflammatory press coverage. The end state of this process would also necessitate development of reintegration program for those that are released.

While a recent poll indicated corruption, economic insecurity and resultant economic migration are the pressing concerns of the day, there is also a real interest across the government to address even the limited threat of VE. One interviewee noted "Kosovo is more reactive by nature, not so great with prevention of issues," so this forward planning should be encouraged. In late 2014, GOK security officials began initial efforts to reach out to non-security ministries, independent media, NGOs, and religious organizations to enlist their support in a more comprehensive strategy. The new strategy focused on countering extremism, preventing radicalization, and reintegrating FTFs. Future programming should continue to support the GOK efforts to create whole of government approach to VE. It could also be an opportunity to motivate government action on the larger underlying issues that contributed to the VE risk such as corruption and lack of economic development. Other risks such as establishing protocol or processes to deal with the evolving attitudes towards the role of religion are essential as well.

The participation of society outside of government structures, from civil society organizations to local leader to families, especially the youth themselves, is another area where Kosovo offers an interesting opportunity. The family remains a central influence on the youth and should be brought to reinforce messaging and outreach campaign. Youth organizations are nascent and offer another opportunity to provide outreach, offer venues for youth to discuss issue and find positive outlets for free time.

### Counter-narratives

**Formers.** Several people interviewed mentioned the potential role that disillusioned returned fighters could have in providing a credible voice opposing the call to Kosovars to join the conflict in Syria and Iraq. This is certainly in line with experiences elsewhere in the world, where former militants have been able to provide unvarnished accounts of their experiences. Their accounts stand in stark contrast to the glorified picture of life in extremist organizations found in recruitment propaganda. There is

also a sentiment that face-to-face encounters are still seen as the most trusted and persuasive interactions for many Kosovars. As there are a small number of militants who have returned to Kosovo, opportunities based on international practices should be explored on how to leverage these numbers for maximum effect. However, the security and appropriateness of the individuals involved must be the primary importance.

**Religious rebuttals.** Shaykh Mohammed Yaqoubi has recently published a refutation of ISIL's ideology which could be translated into Albanian.[7] A high profile regional visit of Shaykh Yaqoubi could also have a significant counter-messaging impact. However these activities would ***best be supported by non-USG sources*** in order to ensure that the credibility of Shaykh Yaqoubi or his interlocutors are not impacted as well as to ensure there are no Establishment Clause issues. However, as a former teacher in the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus and early supporter of demonstrations against Bashir al-Assad, his credibility as an anti-ISIL voice is probably unmatched. Therefore, the potential for his voice to stand as a counter to the flow of fighters to that conflict would likely be quite powerful.

Overall, the perception of going to Syria has changed, and is not viewed as positively as it had been previously. As the conflict has evolved there, along with international perceptions of it, there is increased feeling that those going are misguided at best and largely only harming their own country. Therefore more narratives reinforcing this from multiple perspectives, including by recruits that had returned and telling them the realities of Syria, can be powerful tools to stem future recruitment.

**Media and Social Media**

**Social media training.** As mentioned above, the team repeatedly heard about the role of media and social media. Therefore, it is recommended that those working on counter-narratives, including government, religious leaders, civil society, and even youth groups be provided with social media training. This training could leverage or perhaps be provided by the State Department's Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications (CSCC) or a similar body.

**Media training.** Training is needed to ensure that journalists reporting on violent extremism are doing so in professional manner that does not exacerbate the polarization around religion in Kosovar society. Balanced reporting that does not confuse religiosity with extremism and respectful debates about the role of religion facilitated by the media is vital to minimize tensions around these issues. Part of the training may be to familiarize journalists with religious communities and their issues as well as provide skills to manage sensitive debates.

**Expand Albanian language information.** More generally, the lack of reliable information on the internet or elsewhere in the Albanian language is a chronic problem that should also be addressed. Market-driven approaches to providing Albanian-language media should be explored.

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[7] The Obligation to Fight ISIS: A Detailed Fatwa Proving That ISIS Have Strayed from Islam, Opposed Sharīʿah and That Fighting Them is Obligatory. (إنقاذُ الأُمَّة: وتفىٰ مفصّلة يفأ تابث نأ شعاد جراوخ نأو مهلاتق بجاو):
http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/wp-content/uploads/%D8%A5%D9%86%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%B0-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D9%85%D8%A9.pdf

**Addressing the Role of the Religious Community and Addressing Secular-Religious Polarization**
The Kosovo Islamic Community (BIK), which has a key role to play in countering the promotion of Islamic extremism, made preliminary attempts to distance itself publicly from those who preach extremism and encourage young people to fight in Syria and Iraq. However, the BIK has yet to eliminate some extremist voices from within its own ranks and mount a large scale public campaign to counter their influence. This is made difficult by the large numbers and following that some imams were able to attract due to their Arabic fluency and credibility gained from having studied in the Middle East.

There stark differences of opinion about the role that the Islamic Community of Kosovo (BIK) has played in relation to the problem of radicalization and foreign fighters. One the one hand, BIK officials felt that they were not being engaged by government, and in some particular cases individuals unfairly targeted in last year's arrests. Others also fault BIK for not doing enough or for sheltering those who are viewed as serving as radicalizers, even if they are not involved in actual recruitment. This is all further complicated by the fact that BIK lacks legal status, further hampering their efforts and collaboration with others in an official capacity.

However, BIK representatives with whom the team met were unanimous in expressing their willingness to do more to speak out against extremism. They pointed to their statements condemning travel to join the conflict in Syria and Iraq, as well as specific interventions they made to turn some individuals away. They also cited their lack of legal status and an uneasy relationship with government as limiting their ability to do more.

BIK's work to date has been confined largely to preparing Friday sermons and other statements condemning ISIL for distribution among imams. They have also reined in some of the more firebrand imams. And the orientation of some of the imams has changed as the conflict in the Middle East has morphed from being viewed as popular resistance to the Assad regime to one where ISIL figures prominently.

**Expand engagement of Kosovo's religious leaders.** Given the high levels of legitimacy that religious leaders have among at least a segment of Kosovar society, the capacity of religious leaders to respond and proactively address the issue of extremist recruitment must be enhanced.

**Legal framework needed.** The key to this is establishing a legal framework in which they can operate. While the BIK itself desires to be the sole officially recognized Islamic administrative structure, there are pitfalls in that kind of arrangement. Rather, it is recommended that a legal framework be established under which religious organizations can be registered and recognized by the state, without designating an "official" representative of any particular faith. This reduces the tensions that could arise over competition to control that single institution and allows for alternate voices to be heard should there be disagreements over policies or approaches. It can also serve to prevent corruption that arises from funds being funneled into a single hierarchically organized institution.

**Secular cannot equate with intolerance.** Not designating an official representative body for specific faith communities also means that the "secular" nature of the Kosovar state is not impinged. Many of those interviewed stressed Kosovo's secular nature as a state and reinforced their desire that it remain that way. Unfortunately, this has also translated into a degree of intolerance for the conservative religious practice chosen by some and conflation of it with extremism. So while it is important to protect the state from excessive entanglement with religion, it is also important to protect religious practice and ensure tolerance at the societal level.

**Facilitate dialogues on the role of religion.** A first step in this direction should be to begin facilitating citizen dialogues within society about the role of religion in Kosovo. This could come out of steps aimed at arriving at a consensus around how to best define the legal status of religious organizations. This dialogue also should evolve from the work discussed above to support media skills in a religious conversation. But addressing the polarization of Kosovar society around religion should take high priority.

**Increase access to education.** Springing from this could also be increased access to religious education. Currently, there are extremely few places where formal religious education is provided. There are only four registered religious schools. But in fact they are all considered branches of the same Pristina based Faculty of Islamic Law. In other contexts, religious literacy has been shown to mitigate recruitment by transnational violent extremist groups. Efforts should be made to expand religious education beyond cities.

**Youth, Civil Society and Community Engagement:**
The economic and social grievances for young people were a consistent refrain throughout the assessment. However, this is a generalized problem affecting all youth. The structural changes needed to make a discernable improvement in this sector are beyond the scope of a CVE program, especially in a county with a low VE risk. While the government is genuinely concerned about the threat and should be encouraged to include economic development in a long term strategy, this would not be primary focus in the short-term.

In a similar vein, the eroded quality of education was also mentioned by a several interviewees along with lack of extracurricular activities, and poor correlation between available disciplines and the current job market. As with lack of economic opportunity, these are long-term structural challenged that only have a generalized link to VE risk.

One exception could be incorporating targeted economic and social activities as part of a messaging campaigns and community engagement. Youth need a sense of purpose and hope, and messaging alone is less effective than when anchored with development gains. This holistic approach has improved effectiveness in CVE programming in other countries.

In this vein, another recommendation would be to encourage the expansion of youth-serving entities in Kosovo. One approach would be to engage youth through the Community Security Action Teams (CSATs), encouraging youth representatives or subsidiary committees.
Another aspect of community engagement is the role of local civil society and the family to help

monitor and influence youth and other that are vulnerable to recruitment. Civil society, particularly women's groups, appears to be relatively limited in its engagement in this arena. The continued central influence of the family within Kosovar society makes them an important component of any messaging or engagement program focused on youth.

**Kosovo response as a model in the Balkans**

The strong partnership Kosovo shares with the United States and the rest of the international community offers an opportunity to build a proactive and integrated CVE response that could be a model for other countries in the region as they face a low but persistent FTF threat. The GOK has demonstrated its ability to incorporate technical support into a measured and effective security response to dampen the initial threat.

The inclusive process to develop a national CVE strategy is also a positive step that should be supported. However, the real test will be where the strategy is put into action, especially at the community level where any reintegration program of FTF would be implemented. The CVE summit process, including the Leaders Summit at the UN General Assembly, as well as the Global Counter Terrorism Forum could be leveraged to highlight the efforts of the GOK and connect the GOK with other countries facing similar challenges

**Analysis and Understanding Recruitment Pathways**

A detailed understanding of the nature of recruitment and the durable effectiveness of any response is still not well known for a variety of reasons, including recent and ongoing security response (no prosecutions have occurred) to the lack of access by "mainstream groups" from youth associations, to the BIK to educators, to reach and understand those most drawn to terrorist organizations and their message. Any program in Kosovo should have learning and trying to understand the phenomenon as part of the core approach.

**ANNEX 1: CVE Assessment Final Schedule**

**Wednesday April 22, 2015**
| | |
|---|---|
| 09:00 | In-brief with USAID |
| 10:30 | Meeting with Ambassador and DCM |
| | |
| 14:00 | Training on CVE @ USAID conference room |
| 16:00 | Meeting with Sabri Bajgora, Head Imam – Kosovo Islamic Community |
| | Venue: Kosovo Islamic Community HQ |

**Thursday April 23, 2015**
| | |
|---|---|
| 08:00 | USAID offices |
| 09:00 | Meeting with Arbana Xhara, Editor in Chief '*Zeri*' daily newspaper |
| | Team: Timothy, David |
| 09:00 | Meeting with Remzije Istrefi, Professor at Law Faculty |
| | Team: Dara, Angela |
| 11:00 | Meeting with Xhabir Hamiti, Faculty of Islamic Studies Professor |
| | Team: Tim, David |
| 11:00 | Meeting with Besa Ismaili |
| | Team: Angela, Dara |
| 13:00 | Meeting with Hamdi Ibrahimi (President of Basic Court Pristina) |
| | Team: Angela, Dara |
| 14:30 | Meeting with Florian Qehaja and Shpend Kursani, (Kosovo Center for Security Studies |
| | Venue: KCSS offices |
| | Team: All members |

**Friday April 24, 2015**
| | |
|---|---|
| 08:00 | USAID offices |
| 09:00 | Meeting with Fatos Makolli, Conter-Terrorism Department Kosovo Police |
| | Venue: Kosovo Police HQ |
| | Team: Tim, Angela, Molly |
| 09:00 | Meeting with Shqipe Mjekiqi, Advisor to Minsiter of Internal Affairs |
| | Venue: Ministry of Internal Affairs |
| | Team: Dara, David |
| 10:30 | Meeting with Garentina Kraja (Advisor to President of Kosovo) |
| | Venue: Office of the President |
| | Team: Tim, Angela |
| 10:30 | Meeting with Edon Myftari (National Security Advisor, Office of PM) |
| | Team: Dara, David, Tim, Angela, Molly |
| 13:00 | Meeting with Lulzim Fushtica (National Advisor ICITAP) |
| | Team: Tim |
| 13:00 | Meeting with Fisnik Rexhepi (Senior Political Advisor, Ministry of European |

Integration)

|  | Team: Dara, Angela |
| 14:30 | Meeting with Petrit Selimi Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs |
| 15:00 | Meeting with KFOR |

**Monday April 27, 2015**

| 08:00 | USAID offices |
| 09:00 | Meeting with Blerim Isufaj, Special Prosecutor on Terrorism cases |
|  | Venue:  Prosecutors Office |

| | Team 1 (Tim, David) | | Team 2 (Angela, Dara) |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Gjilan | | |
| 09:00 | Dr. Sylejman Osmani (044/178-325), Head of Council, Islamic Community Gjilan (text him)<br>Venue: Islamic Community Gjilan | | |
| 10:30 | Arben Neziri (044/135-108), Coordinator of the Madrassa  Gjilan (text him)<br>Venue: Madrassa Gjilan | | |
| | | | Ferizaj |
| | | 11:30 | Toger Emrush Lalinovci will meet with the team<br>Qazim Reka, KP Station Commander Ferizaj<br>Xhavit Gjoki – deputy  (044 381 100 he said that Emrush will meet us)<br>Venue: Ferizaj Police Station |
| 13:00 | Remzi Azemi (044 132 544), KP Station Commander Gjilane<br>Venue: Main Police Station | | |
| | | 13:30 | Fehmi Mehmeti (044/113-512), Head of the Council, Islamic Community Ferizaj<br>Venue: Islamic Community Ferizaj |
| 14:30 | Shqipe Kastrati(044/656-892/ 049/108-101), CSAT Coordinator<br>Venue: kompleksi I shkollave te mesme, ndertesa e konviktit mbrapa stadionit te qyteti | | |

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|---|---|---|---|
| Drejtoria e Arsimit | | | |
| | | 15:00 | Alban Haliti NGO INPO (044 538 870)(youth programs) Venue INPO offices, same bulding as restaurant Orhideja in Ferizaj, 5 floor *Will also have around 10 young people (debate club) to talk to the team* |

19:00            Dinner with UNDP

## Tuesday April 28, 2015

08:00            USAID offices

10:00            Training to Government Working group on CVE

| | Team 1 (Tim, Dara and David USAID: Victoria | Team 2 (Angela, Molly) USAID: Melita |
|---|---|---|
| | Mitrovica | |
| 09:30 | Jetish Berisha (044 148 003) Head of Council, Islamic Community Venue: Islamic Community Mitrovica | |
| 11:00 | Aferdita Syla (044 198 965), Director of Cmmunity Building Netwrork (NGO) *Will also have aghroup of young people to talk to the team* | |
| | | Vushtrri |
| 13:30 | | Tafil Hyseni (044/330-213), CSAT Coordinator Venue: Municipality of Vushtrri |
| 14:00 | Valon Hetemi (049-230-301), CSAT Coordinator Venue: Municipality of Mitrovica *Note:He will bring other municipality and KP officials to the meeting,* | |

| | | Fazli Muharremi, "Pasioni Rinor" NGO<br>Venue: To be decided<br>Note: Few organizations (NGO) will join this meetig and share their perspective |
|---|---|---|
| 15:00 | | |
| 16:30 | Meeting with Abdullah Ferizi (045300166) in Prishtina<br>Director D4D works currently on conflict transformation in Mitrovica | |

19:00                 Dinner with OSCE
                            Venue: Basilico

## Wednesday April 29, 2015

| | Team 1 (Angela, Tim and David) + translator | Team 2 (Dara, Molly) + translator |
|---|---|---|
| | Kacanik | Peja |
| 10:00 | Florim Neziraj(044/235-715), Head of Council, Islamic Community Kacanik<br>Venue: Islamic Community Offices | Veton Mujaj 044 111 408, "Syri I Vizionit" NGO<br>Venue: Near center of Peja, st Isa Demaj, across Hotel Dukagjin |
| 11:30 | Fatmir Qaka (044/346-157), CSAT Coordinator<br>Venue: Shtepia e Kultures, Xheladin Kurtaj | |
| 13:00 | | Kamber Boqolli CAST coordinator (044 221-386)  Municipality of Peja his office is by the assembly room |
| 14:00 | Fatlume Guri (044 371 937)<br>"Ambietalistet e rinj"<br>Venue: Shtepia e kultures<br>*NOTE: Youth will be joined this meeting and also an additional NGO might join in.* | |
| 14:30 | | OSCE |

| | | Venue: OSCE |
|---|---|---|
| | Hani Elezit | |
| 16:00 | Isa Shkreta CAST coordinator Hani i Elezit<br>Venue: Restaurant "Oslo", in the beginning of Hani i Elezit | |

**Thursday April 30, 2015**

10:00                 Outbrief with Ambassador, DCM, James Hope, Chris Edwards, Victoria and Amy (30 min)
                      Venue: Embassy

15:00                 Outbrief in the USAID Mission

**Monday, May 4, 2015**

10:00                 Meeting with Phil Drewry, Department of State Information Officer
                      Team: Molly

**Wednesday, May 6, 2015**

10:00                 Meeting with Sibel Halimi, an NGO activist and lecturer at the UP who covers the gender perspective on CVE
                      Team: Molly

15:30                 Meeting with Petrit Zogaj, youth organization FOL
                      Team: Molly