

# WESTERN BALKANS, SALAFIST NETWORKS AND TERRORISM IN ALBANIA: AN INTERDISCIPLINARY ANALYSIS

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**Abstract:** This interdisciplinary paper undertakes an in-depth analysis of the intricate dynamics characterizing Salafist networks and their nexus with terrorism in Albania, positioned within the tumultuous milieu of the Western Balkans. The resurgence of Salafist ideologies in the Western Balkans region has engendered apprehensions regarding its conceivable repercussions on regional security and stability. This study concentrates on Albania as a specific case, presenting a meticulous exploration of the diverse factors that underpin the proliferation of Salafist networks and their subsequent engagement in terrorist activities.

Through a systematic examination, this research aims to provide a thorough understanding of the complex interplay of elements contributing to the emergence and operationalization of Salafist networks in Albania, contributing to a nuanced comprehension of the broader implications for regional security within the Western Balkans context.

**Keywords:** Western Balkans, Terrorism, Salafist Networks, Albania, Bektashi Order

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## ***Introduction***

The Western Balkans region has emerged as a complex and multifaceted arena where the nexus between Salafist networks, terrorism, and socio-political dynamics presents significant challenges to regional stability and global security (Byman, 2013; Muthuswamy, 2022). In this interdisciplinary analysis, we delve into the intricate web of factors that converge in Albania, one of the Western Balkans' pivotal countries, to explore the interplay between Salafism, terrorism, and the broader socio-political landscape (Karagiannis, 2014).. Albania, viewed through the lens of Salafi Sunni radicalization and extremism culminating in acts of terrorism, stands as an instructive case study. It encapsulates the intersection of historical legacies and contemporary vulnerabilities, collectively contributing to the intricate dynamics characterizing extremism and terrorism within the region.

Historical factors, such as Ottoman rule and the subsequent religious suppression during the communist era, have left indelible imprints on Albania's socio-religious fabric. The transition from communism to democracy has paved the way for religious revival, but it has also ushered in socio-economic challenges and vulnerabilities that extremist ideologies exploit.

Salafist networks have taken root, employing sophisticated recruitment strategies that transcend traditional methods. They adeptly leverage the power of the internet, utilizing social media platforms to disseminate their ideologies globally. Through compelling online content, including videos, articles, and interactive forums, they reach a vast audience, particularly targeting individuals who may be susceptible to their radical interpretations of Sunni Islam. These networks capitalize on the anonymity and accessibility provided by the digital realm, fostering a sense of community among like-minded individuals. Beyond the virtual sphere, Salafist networks employ charismatic leaders who engage in direct outreach within communities. They conduct lectures, seminars, and workshops, utilizing persuasive oratory

skills to attract followers. Importantly, these leaders often intertwine their ideological teachings with social initiatives, addressing practical needs within communities. This comprehensive approach goes beyond theological discourse, offering a holistic package that includes social support, educational programs, and even financial assistance. Additionally, Salafist networks exploit local grievances and socio-economic disparities, tailoring their recruitment strategies to capitalize on discontent. By presenting themselves as champions of justice and advocates for change, they tap into latent frustrations, further solidifying their appeal. This multifaceted recruitment strategy, blending online and offline methods while addressing diverse aspects of individuals' lives, contributes to the resilience and effectiveness of Salafist networks in expanding their influence. At the same time, regional dynamics and porous borders have facilitated the movement of individuals and the spread of extremist ideologies across the Western Balkans (Karagiannis, 2014).

This paper employs an interdisciplinary approach, encompassing elements of political science, security, and religious studies, to illuminate the intricate dynamics of Salafist networks and terrorism in Albania. By thoroughly examining the historical, cultural, socio-economic, and geopolitical factors in play, our goal is to offer a comprehensive understanding of the current challenges in this critical region. This understanding will contribute to fostering regional stability and advancing global security.

### ***Albania's Historical Background***

Western Balkan's historical background is marked by rich influences and events that have shaped its socio-cultural landscape. Situated at the crossroads of Europe and the area of Levante, bears the legacy of centuries of interactions with various civilizations. The Ottoman era, lasting for over four centuries, left an ineffaceable imprint on the area's religious composition, with a significant Muslim population coexisting alongside Christian communities. However, its path to nationhood was marked by upheaval and turbulence, characterized by resistance to Ottoman

rule and subsequent periods of foreign domination, including occupation during World War II.

Furthermore, the post-war era saw the establishment of a communist regime in the newly formed Albanian state under Enver Hoxha, which marked a prolonged period of isolation, religious repression, and strict atheism for the Albanians and other ethnic minorities. The dissolution of communism in the early 1990s heralded a new epoch of political and social metamorphosis, culminating in the resurgence of religious practices and the reintegration of Albania into the global community. This historical context provides a crucial foundation for understanding contemporary dynamics in Albania, including its approach to religion, identity, and engagement with the wider world.

### ***Uprising of Islam in Balkans area***

The Ottoman conquest of the Balkans in the late 14<sup>th</sup> and early 15<sup>th</sup> centuries brought a new era for the ancient Illyrian tribes that used to live in the Western Balkans area and their relationship with Islam-historical period, marked by significant political and cultural changes, witnessed the gradual introduction and spread of Islam among the predominantly Christian local population (Vickers, 2008). The Ottoman Empire, a major Islamic power, extended its rule over the Balkans, including present-day Albania and the consequences of this conquest were profound (Fischer, & Schmitt, 2022). The Ottomans introduced Islam as a unifying factor within their diverse empire and over time, many people from the Balkans embraced this faith (Sadriu, 2017). The process of conversion was multifaceted, influenced by a variety of factors, including economic incentives, political pressures, and social dynamics (Gawrych, 1983). In addition, the impact of Ottoman religious policies, led to the establishment of Islamic institutions, that had a crucial role in influencing and shaping religion, like the Bektashi Sufi order (Vickers, 2008; Kërçuku, 2018).

## ***Communist era and religious suppression***

The communist era in Albania, under the leadership of Enver Hoxha from 1944 to 1985, was marked by a draconian policy of religious suppression, resulting in one of the most stringent and repressive atheist campaigns in modern history. Hoxha's regime aimed to establish a completely secular state by systematically eradicating religious practices and institutions (Vickers, 2008). Mosques, churches, and religious monuments were desecrated, destroyed, or repurposed for secular use, effectively isolating Albania from the wider religious world. Religious leaders and clergy faced persecution, imprisonment, and execution. Plus, religious gatherings or expressions of faith were vehemently discouraged (Tokrri et al., 2021). The state controlled every aspect of public and private life, propagating atheistic ideology through propaganda and censorship. This religious suppression had profound and enduring consequences on the religious landscape of Albania, with an entire generation growing up under the dogmatic views of the state-imposed atheism (Sadriu, 2017).

However, despite the harsh repression, religious beliefs and practices did not disappear entirely. Many Albanians maintained their faith in secret, often practicing their religion within the confines of their homes or in clandestine gatherings (Vickers, 2008). This underground religiosity represented a testament to the resilience of religious identity and the enduring power of faith in the face of adversity. The communist era's legacy of religious suppression has had a lasting impact on Albania's religious landscape, contributing to a unique form of secularism characterized by a degree of religious apathy among some segments of the population and a deep-seated suspicion of religious institutions (Norris, 1993). The end of communism in the early 1990s heralded a period of religious revival and reawakening, as Albanians began to openly practice their faith once again, rebuilding places of worship and reconnecting with their religious heritage (Tokrri et al., 2021).

## ***Post-communist transition and religious revival: Emergence of Salafist Networks***

The post-communist transition in Albania, following the fall of the totalitarian regime of Enver Hoxha in the early 1990s, marked a pivotal period in the country's history. As Albania transitioned from a repressive communist state to a fledgling democracy, it also witnessed a remarkable religious revival (Sadriu, 2017). After decades of religious suppression, Albanians were free to openly practice their faith and this newfound freedom saw a resurgence of religious activity and the reconstruction of religious institutions, including mosques and churches. A sense of identity rediscovery marked this religious revival, as Albanians reconnected with their religious heritage, sometimes even adopting more conservative and orthodox interpretations of their faith (Norris, 1993).

However, this period of religious revival also saw the emergence of Salafist networks in Albania. Its strict interpretation of Islam, gained some traction among segments of the population who sought a return to what they perceived as a purer and more authentic form of Islam (Muthuswamy, 2022). These networks, often influenced by external extremist ideologies, found fertile ground in the socio-political and economic instability of post-communist Albania. The appeal of Salafism was not only religious but also offered a sense of identity and belonging to disillusioned individuals in the wake of the communist era's collapse (Norris, 1993; Karagiannis, 2014).

The emergence of Salafist networks posed significant challenges to the newly democratic Albania. The government had to balance the preservation of religious freedom with the need to counteract extremist ideologies that threatened social cohesion and security. It required a delicate approach to address the root causes of radicalization while upholding democratic values and individual freedoms (Sadriu, 2017). The post-communist transition and religious revival, combined with the rise of Salafist networks, underscore the complexities of Albania's journey from communism to democracy and its ongoing efforts to navigate the challenges

of religious diversity and extremism in the 21st century (Norris, 1993).

## ***Terrorism in Albania***

### **Socio-economic factors contributing to terrorism in Albania**

Socio-economic factors have played a significant role in contributing to terrorism in Albania, particularly in the context of the Western Balkans region. The complex interplay of economic challenges, social disparities, and political dynamics has created fertile ground for radicalization and recruitment by extremist groups, including Salafist networks (Karagiannis, 2014).

One of the key socio-economic factors contributing to terrorism in Albania is high unemployment and economic instability. The transition from communism to a market-oriented economy in the early 1990s was marked by economic turmoil and a sudden loss of state-supported jobs. This left a generation of Albanians facing limited job prospects and a lack of economic opportunities. High youth unemployment has made young people vulnerable to radicalization as they seek avenues for social mobility and economic betterment. Extremist groups may exploit these grievances by offering financial incentives or promising a sense of purpose and belonging (Spahiu, 2020).

Moreover, Albania's informal economy and widespread corruption have exacerbated economic disparities and social frustrations. A lack of trust in the state and its institutions, coupled with a perception of corruption, has eroded confidence in the political and economic systems. Extremist ideologies, often presented as an alternative to the status quo, can appear appealing to those who feel marginalized by the prevailing socio-economic order (Pokalova, 2019).

Another critical factor is the region's porous borders and organized crime networks. The Western Balkans' history of smuggling, coupled with its geographical proximity to conflict zones, has facilitated the movement of individuals and funds for extremist purposes (Stojarová and Stojar, 2018). Organized crime

groups, often intertwined with extremist networks, have exploited the vulnerabilities of the region's socio-economic landscape, facilitating recruitment, logistics, and funding for terrorist activities (Kudlenko, 2019).

Furthermore, the social and cultural dynamics in Albania play a role in the appeal of extremist ideologies. Albanian society is characterized by a deep sense of identity and pride, which can be manipulated by extremist groups to promote radical narratives and foster a sense of belonging among disaffected individuals. Cultural factors, such as clan and familial ties, can also be leveraged by extremist recruiters to build support networks (Kudlenko, 2019).

In addressing these socio-economic factors contributing to terrorism in Albania, policymakers and stakeholders must adopt a multidimensional approach (U.S. Department of State, 2020). This approach should encompass not only counterterrorism measures but also efforts to address the root causes of radicalization (Stojarová and Stojar, 2018). Investment in education and vocational training programs, particularly targeting youth, can provide alternative paths to economic stability and social integration. Additionally, addressing corruption and improving governance can enhance trust in state institutions and reduce the appeal of extremist ideologies (U.S. Department of State, 2020).

### **Radicalization pathways and recruitment strategies in Albania**

Radicalization pathways and recruitment strategies in Albania have evolved within a complex socio-political landscape, influenced by both internal and external factors. The process of radicalization often begins with individuals who may feel disaffected, marginalized, or disillusioned, seeking a sense of belonging, purpose, or identity (Abbas, 2007; Spahiu, 2016). In Albania, these individuals are exposed to a range of extremist ideologies, including Salafism, often disseminated through online platforms, social networks, and charismatic recruiters (Muthuswamy, 2022). These recruiters exploit personal grievances,



promising solutions to socio-economic challenges or perceived injustices (Spahiu, 2020). Importantly, they offer a sense of belonging to a global community of like-minded individuals (Porter, 2017).

Additionally, the legacy of Albania's communist past, which suppressed religious practices, has left a void in religious education and literacy. Some individuals may turn to radical interpretations of Islam as a means of reconnecting with their religious identity, especially in areas where traditional religious institutions have struggled to meet the demand for religious education (Porter, 2017). The interconnectedness of the Western Balkans further facilitates radicalization, as individuals and ideas flow across porous borders, allowing for cross-border recruitment and collaboration (Stojarová and Stojar, 2018). Albania's counterterrorism efforts have largely focused on law enforcement and intelligence measures, but addressing the root causes of radicalization, such as socio-economic disparities, education, and social inclusion, is equally crucial (Abbas, 2007; Spahiu, 2020).

### **Albanian Foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq: from Al-Qaeda to ISIS**

Albania's involvement in the phenomenon of foreign fighters joining extremist groups in Syria and Iraq, particularly those associated with Al-Qaeda and ISIS, has raised concerns within the country and the international community (Sadriu, 2017; Spahiu, 2020). A notable number of Albanian nationals have traveled to the conflict zones in the Middle East to join the ranks of these terrorist organizations (Abbas, 2007). While some Albanian foreign fighters may be driven by ideological alignment with the extremist narratives propagated by Al-Qaeda or ISIS, others are motivated by a search for meaning, adventure, or a sense of belonging, particularly in the context of economic challenges and disillusionment (Porter, 2017; Stojarová and Stojar, 2018; Spahiu, 2020).

## **Regional implications of Albanian-based terrorism**

The implications of Albanian-based terrorism extend beyond the country's borders, with regional consequences that warrant serious consideration. Albania's geographic location in the Western Balkans places it at the crossroads of various regional dynamics. The presence of Albanian individuals and networks involved in terrorism, often connected to groups like Al-Qaeda and ISIS, raises concerns about the potential for regional instability (Porter, 2017). Neighboring countries in the Western Balkans, already grappling with their security challenges and ethnic tensions, are vulnerable to the spillover effects of extremism emanating from Albania (Spahiu, 2020). The interconnectedness of the region, characterized by porous borders and historical ties, facilitates the movement of individuals and the spread of extremist ideologies.

Moreover, the Western Balkans' proximity to Europe and its ongoing integration with the European Union necessitate a coordinated regional response to address the threat of Albanian-based terrorism (Spahiu, 2016). Regional initiatives and cooperation are essential in sharing intelligence, coordinating counterterrorism efforts, and preventing the cross-border movement of foreign fighters. Furthermore, the Western Balkans' path toward European integration relies on the stability and security of the entire region, underscoring the urgency of addressing the regional implications of terrorism emanating from Albania (Spahiu, 2016).

### **Connections between Terrorism and Serious Organized Crime in Albania**

Eventually, the interconnections between terrorism and serious organized crime have emerged as a multifaceted security challenge with far-reaching implications (Pilaca and Nako, 2021). The Western Balkans, including Albania, have been a hotspot for various forms of organized crime, including drug trafficking, human smuggling, and arms smuggling. These illicit activities provide a lucrative source of funding for extremist groups, making

the nexus between organized crime and terrorism particularly concerning (Herbert, 2022).

Furthermore, terrorist organizations have exploited Albania's geographical location as a bridge between Europe and the Middle East, capitalizing on established smuggling routes and networks. This has enabled them to move funds, fighters, and weapons across borders with relative ease (Pilaca and Nako, 2021). Additionally, the presence of organized criminal groups within the country often creates a conducive environment for radicalization and recruitment, as vulnerable individuals may become entangled in both criminal and extremist circles (Herbert, 2022).

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this interdisciplinary analysis has shed light on the intricate dynamics of Salafist networks and terrorism in Albania within the broader context of the Western Balkans. Albania's historical background, marked by Ottoman influence and religious diversity, provided the backdrop for the emergence of Salafist ideologies and their recruitment strategies.

The communist era's religious suppression left a legacy of religious revival and resilience, but it also fostered conditions conducive to radicalization. The post-communist transition brought both socio-economic challenges and opportunities for extremist narratives to take root. Understanding the multifaceted socio-economic factors contributing to terrorism in Albania is essential for developing effective counterterrorism strategies that address the root causes of radicalization.

Furthermore, this paper has explored the emergence of Salafist networks, their recruitment strategies, and the regional implications of Albanian-based terrorism. Albania's porous borders and the interconnectedness of the Western Balkans have facilitated the movement of individuals and the spread of extremist ideologies. Addressing the regional implications of this threat requires a coordinated approach among neighboring countries and international partners.

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