

# ISLAMIC EXTREMISM IN KOSOVO AND METOHIIJA – A SECURITY CHALLENGE FOR THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA

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In recent years, we have witnessed many unfortunate events across Europe, whose culprits are Islamic extremists. They carry out terrorist attacks, which cause numerous civilian casualties and a sense of fear and defeatism in society, which is one of the main goals of terrorism. It is simply impossible not to notice that the main actors of such events are often Albanians from Kosovo and Metohija (hereinafter referred to as KIM), sympathizers and even active members of the Islamic State and related terrorist organizations. This fact represents a real danger for the security of the citizens of the Republic of Serbia, primarily due to the number of jihadists from Syria and Iraq, who have returned to the territory of the southern Serbian province, but also other factors that will be analysed in this paper using a combination of qualitative and quantitative research method. As the ultimate goal of this analysis, which will represent its scientific and social contribution, potential solutions will be offered that could contribute to our country confronting the threat of growing Islamic extremism, whose epicentre is precisely in the territory of Kosovo and Metohija.

*Key words: Kosovo and Metohija, Islam, jihad, extremism, Islamic State*

## Introduction

In the past, religion was often a cohesive factor between people and contributed to the calming of tensions, but, on the other hand, it often represented a trigger for the outbreak of conflicts that lead to violence.<sup>1</sup> Extremism can manifest in various forms, but

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<sup>1</sup> Nemanja Stevanović, "Manipulacija verskim osećanjima kao determinanta društvenih sukoba-studija slučaja Nigerije", *Vojno delo*, vol. 1, year 2022, p. 16.

the greatest danger certainly threatens from religiously inspired extremism, which can only occur in territories where the religiosity of population is at a high level.<sup>2</sup> When the spread of Islamic extremism in the territory of the Balkans was discussed, the focus was on the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina. However, it has never happened in this country that as many as 40 jihadists were arrested during a day. Such a case was recorded in Kosovo and Metohija, and Albanians connected to Islamic terrorist organizations were detained. The data that proves the connection of Kosovar Albanians to radical Islam is the number of them who joined the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq,<sup>3</sup> which will be discussed in more detail later in the paper. The territory of our southern province has long represented the “seismic ground”, but it is crucial to point out the fact that the so-called “liberation” struggle that Albanians started, has been essentially conducted as jihad<sup>4</sup>, whose ultimate goal is the triumph of Islam.<sup>5</sup> This fact represents a great danger for our country, and also for the rest of Europe, because according to the fundamentalist Islamic ideology, the world is divided into the land of peace (*dar al Islam*) and the land of war (*dar al harb*), which are in a state of constant conflict, as long as the whole world does not become a single Islamic state.<sup>6</sup>

## Albanians and religion

The majority of researchers who have dealt with the Albanian issue since World War II have emphasized that Albanians are a completely indifferent nation in a religious sense, whose only goal is the accomplishment of the national ideal. However, in practice the situation is completely different.<sup>7</sup>

Back to the time of the Ottoman Empire, Albanians were a pillar of the caliphate at that time. They held the most important state positions, and as many as 35 of them held the position of the grand vizier. Albanian Muslims were also highly ranked in the Ottoman Army, holding the positions of heads of many provinces within the Empire. These units made up of Albanians offered the strongest resistance to the Christians in the Balkans

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<sup>2</sup> Milan Vukelić, *Kosovo i Metohija pod zastavom Islamske države*, Centar za proučavanje religije i versku toleranciju, Beograd, 2018, pp. 52-53.

<sup>3</sup> Milan Vukelić, “Albanian Muslims in the Islamic State as Subject of Research of Politology of Religion”, *Politology of religion: a Biannual Conference 2018 – Conference Proceedings, Center for Study of Religion and Religious Tolerance*, Belgrade, 2018, pp. 165-166.

<sup>4</sup> The phenomenon of jihad can be defined as “a system of all actions and procedures at an individual and collective level, which Muslims do with the aim of strengthening the Islamic religion and expanding the community of believers.” Quoted according to: Milan Vukelić, “Pojam džihada u aktivnostima Islamske države”, *Vojno delo*, vol. 6, 2017, p. 454.

<sup>5</sup> Milan Vukelić, *Kosovo i Metohija pod zastavom Islamske države*, gen. quote, p. 12.

<sup>6</sup> Mirosljub Jevtić, *Politikologija religije*, Centar za proučavanje religije i versku toleranciju, Beograd, 2009, p. 309.

<sup>7</sup> Mirosljub Jevtić, *Religija – izazov političkoj nauci*, Centar za proučavanje religije i versku toleranciju, Beograd, 2009, p. 17.

who were fighting for liberation. Therefore, the Ottoman period represented the golden age of Albanian Muslims, and even their historians agree with this, and one of them claims: "Islam brought an Albanian a master's pose that allowed him to be considered equal to the heirs of the most eminent nations of the world."<sup>8</sup> It is crucial to understand that Islam as a religion excludes nationalism and considers it the innovation that every true believer has to reject.<sup>9</sup> Many theorists have written about it. Thus Seyyid Qutb emphasizes in his work *Znakovi na putu*: "There is no governance except that of God, there is no law except that which comes from God, no one has power over anyone, because all power belongs only to God, because the 'nation' that Islam would like people to have – is of a religious character, a religious nation, in which, under Allah's flag, the Arab, Byzantine, Persian and all other nations and races are completely equal."<sup>10</sup> Bernard Lewis, perhaps the most famous non-Muslim Islamologist, says about the relationship between Islam and nationalism: "In the early centuries of the Muslim era, the Islamic community was a state under a ruler. Even after such a community broke up into many states, the ideal of a unified Islamic order was preserved."<sup>11</sup>

Only Christians fought for the establishment of the Albanian nation, because their only chance to fight for any rights as a minority was to overcome religious differences and unite all Albanians in the name of national unity.<sup>12</sup> Muslim Albanians accepted the idea of a common state with Christians only later, viewing it as necessary evil, because the Ottoman Caliphate was coming to an end, but even then the pro-Ottoman feeling never left them.<sup>13</sup> Even at the time of the strongest communism, many Albanians who presented themselves as atheists continued to live according to all Islamic customs,<sup>14</sup> and immediately after the collapse of the single-party system, the revitalization of religion among Albanians officially took place, which was visible at every step.<sup>15</sup>

In the territory of Kosovo and Metohija, the religiosity of Albanians has always been at a very high level, and one of the studies from 2016 that proves this is the research of the Prishtina Institute for Political Studies (PIPS), saying that as many as 32% of the surveyed Kosovar Albanians present themselves primarily as Muslims, and only then as Albanians, while 3% declared themselves only as Muslims. Therefore, according to this analysis, more than a third of Albanians in KiM put their religious affiliation before ethnic one.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Miroljub Jevtić, *Albansko pitanje i religija*, Centar za proučavanje religije i versku toleranciju, Beograd, 2011, pp. 24-25.

<sup>9</sup> Miroljub Jevtić, *Politikologija religije*, gen. quote, p. 250.

<sup>10</sup> Sejjid Kutb, *Znakovi na putu*, Muftijstvo, Tuzla, 1996, p. 27.

<sup>11</sup> Bernard Luis, *Kriza islama*, Čarobna knjiga, Beograd, 2004, p. 18.

<sup>12</sup> Miroljub Jevtić, *Albansko pitanje i religija*, gen. quote, p. 21.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, p. 30.

<sup>14</sup> Milan Vukelić, *Kosovo i Metohija pod zastavom Islamske države*, gen. quote, p. 49.

<sup>15</sup> See more about it: *Ibid*, pp. 50-52.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, p. 44. See: KIPRED, *What happened to Kosovo Albanians: The impact of religion on the ethnic identity in the state building-period*, Priština, 2016, p. 72, downloaded from:

[http://www.kipred.org/repository/docs/What\\_happened\\_to\\_Kosovo\\_Albanians\\_740443.pdf](http://www.kipred.org/repository/docs/What_happened_to_Kosovo_Albanians_740443.pdf), 23.10.2021.

It is simply impossible not to pose the question to everyone who still considers Albanians to be antireligious and strictly nationalist-oriented people: who has been desecrating and destroying the Christian heritage in Kosovo and Metohija for years? If they are not interested in religion, why are they bothered by Visoki Dečani, Gračanica and other monasteries that they even claim were built by their ancestors? Why would anyone demolish and desecrate facilities that he considers to be “his”?<sup>17</sup> Moreover, if Kosovar Albanians are really uninterested in religion, why they built 150 new mosques after 1999, in addition to the 550 already existing ones. Why Islamic believers prayed in street in Prishtina in 2011 as a sign of revolt because twenty already existing mosques in that city is not enough for them.<sup>18</sup> There are many examples that prove the great religiosity of Kosovar Albanians, *which would not be a problem if it did not turn into extremism.*

## The spread of Wahhabism in KiM

Wahhabism is a branch of Sunni Islam founded by the Islamic theologian Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb with the aim of revitalizing the original Islam from the time of the Prophet Muhammad.<sup>19</sup> Disappointed by the morality of the believers at that time, Abd Wahhāb condemned many beliefs of that time as innovation and return to paganism, as in the time of pre-Islamic Arabia, so he called on Muslims to return to true values.<sup>20</sup>

In the territory of the Balkans, Wahhabism began to develop with the outbreak of the conflict in Bosnia in 1992, when many members of radical Islamic organizations came to the battlefield to support their brothers in faith in the conflict against the “infidels”. The development of Wahhabist ideology was noted in all countries in the region where Muslims live, but it did not develop anywhere at such speed as in Kosovo.<sup>21</sup> According to Albanian sources from 2013, as many as 50 thousand Muslims in Kosovo and Metohija practice Wahhabism.<sup>22</sup>

Saudi Arabia has contributed the most to the spread of Wahhabism in KiM, by donating funds for building a great number of mosques in which the ideology that represents the state religion in this country is propagated. Even the US media have written about it. Thus, the prestigious *New York Times*, in a text from 2016, reports

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<sup>17</sup> Miroљjub Jevtić, “Islamska suština albanskog secesionizma i kulturno nasleđe Srba”, *Nacionalni interes*, year X, vol. 17, no. 2/2013, p. 233.

<sup>18</sup> Milan Vukelić, *Kosovo i Metohija pod zastavom Islamske države*, gen. quote, p. 40.

<sup>19</sup> Jonathan Schanzer, Steven Miller, *Saudi Clerics, Wahhabi Islam, and Social Media*, FDD Press, Washington D.C, 2012, p. 7.

<sup>20</sup> John L. Esposito, *Što bi svatko trebao znati o islamu*, Filozofsko-teološki institut družbe Isusove, Zagreb, 2003, p. 62.

<sup>21</sup> Milan Vukelić, *Kosovo i Metohija pod zastavom Islamske države*, gen. quote, p. 82.

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.derstandard.at/consent/tcf/1358304927258/radikaler-islam-als-tickende-bombe-im-kosovo>, 23.10.2021.

that, owing to Saudi influence and money, a “tolerant Islamic community” has transformed into a radical - Wahhabist one.<sup>23</sup> Saudi Arabia is spreading its influence on KiM, as well as around the world, by establishing many organizations that carry out their activities secretly, most often under the guise of humanitarian work. As an example, we should cite the Al-Haramain organization, which operates in many countries, and its main activities are translating and distributing Islamic literature, helping the poor population, building mosques and madrasas, organizing various manifestations of a religious character, providing scholarships for education in Islamic countries, etc. In the period from 1999 to 2005, Al-Haramain donated 18 million euros to the “Government of Kosovo” at that time in the form of aid, and it also financed some media in KiM, as well as building of nine mosques.<sup>24</sup>

Therefore, it can be concluded that Saudi Arabia, as well as other Wahhabist centres, supporting the project of the “independent Kosovo”, saw an excellent opportunity to expand their influence, both in the region and the rest of Europe. Their goal is to turn KiM into a typical Islamic state, and also the complete disappearance of the Christian heritage in that territory.<sup>25</sup>

The spread of Wahhabism in KiM has also caused many conflicts among population. That Wahhabist ideology is the enemy of Albanians themselves is shown by the fact that members of this movement have condemned even the greatest hero of the Albanian nation, Skanderbeg, because he left Islam, which is a mortal sin according to this religion. The situation in KiM is best described by an interview published on a French portal in 2005, in which a former member of Wahhabist movement in Kosovo claims: “When Kosovo becomes independent, Wahhabism will destroy Islam in this territory.”<sup>26</sup>

## Kosovar Albanians in the Islamic State

According to the US State Department 2018 Terrorism Report, more than 400 Albanians from KiM travelled to Syria and Iraq to join the Islamic State.<sup>27</sup> *This is the greatest number of foreign fighters who have joined this terrorist organization from the European ground, viewed per capita.*<sup>28</sup> In addition, Kosovar Albanians have advanced very quickly in the hierarchy of the Islamic State.<sup>29</sup> The most famous of

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<sup>23</sup> See: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/22/world/europe/how-the-saudis-turned-kosovo-into-fertile-ground-for-isis.html?mcubz=2&r=0>, 26.10.2021.

<sup>24</sup> Milan Vukelić, *Kosovo i Metohija pod zastavom Islamske države*, gen. quote, pp. 122-123.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, p. 88.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, pp. 88-89.

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2018/>, 28.10.2021.

<sup>28</sup> Milan Vukelić, *Kosovo i Metohija pod zastavom Islamske države*, gen. quote, p. 165.

<sup>29</sup> Milan Vukelić, “Albanian Muslims in the Islamic State as Subject of Research of Politology of Religion”, gen. quote, p. 171.

them is certainly Lavdrim Muhadjeri from Kačanik, a town in KiM that many analysts consider the European centre of jihadism. Muhadjeri stayed in Syria from 2012 to 2017 and was the commander of a unit within the Islamic State, which was made up of Albanians. He took part in several propaganda videos in which he brutally liquidates enemies and calls his brothers in faith to join jihad. He died in Syria in 2017 after the military intervention of the Russian aviation.<sup>30</sup>

In addition to holding important positions within the Islamic State, Albanians from KiM represented one of the last forms of jihadist struggle in Syria. As a part of the terrorist organization Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a unit composed of ethnic Albanians, primarily from North Macedonia and KiM, operated in Idlib under the name Jamati Alban.<sup>31</sup> This armed formation was also very active in propaganda activities. In August 2018, they published a video in the Albanian language, with English title, called "Albanian snipers in the lands of Sham", which presented the training of the members of the unit, their very high-quality weapons, which includes modern rifles, expensive optical sights, hand-made suppressors and the like.<sup>32</sup> This is a proof that Albanians were one of the pillars of the caliphate of the Islamic State, ready to fight to the last breath under the flag of jihad, considering it their religious obligation.<sup>33</sup>

### *The return of jihadists to KiM*

Perhaps the greatest security challenge for the Republic of Serbia is the return of Kosovar jihadists from Syria and Iraq. Through them, the Islamic State could potentially start building the European caliphate, carrying out terrorist attacks directed at non-Islamic population, as well as Takfiri Muslims, who do not support the activities of the Islamic State.<sup>34</sup> By analysing relevant sources, it can be concluded that around 250 Albanian jihadists have returned to KiM, so it is quite expected that most of them will try to convey their experiences from the battlefield to their countrymen, as well as that they will continue to spread the radical Islamic ideology that inspired them to go to Syria and Iraq. An example that confirms this is the case of Fitim Ldrovci, a returnee to KiM, who stated in an interview with the British media: "I would like to establish an Islamic state in Kosovo and I will gladly die to achieve that."<sup>35</sup> In September 2020, the Basic Court in Prishtina sentenced this

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid, p. 171.

<sup>31</sup> Adrian Shtuni, "Western Balkans Foreign Fighters and Homegrown Jihadis: Trends and Implications", Combating Terrorism Center (CTC), Vol. 12. Issue 7, U.S. Military Academy, West Point, New York, 2019, p. 19.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, p. 20.

<sup>33</sup> <https://srb.news-front.info/2019/08/14/albantsi-u-siriji-posledna-linija-djihada/>, 28.10.2021.

<sup>34</sup> Milan Vukelić, *Kosovo i Metohija pod zastavom Islamske države*, gen. quote, p. 134.

<sup>35</sup> Milan Vukelić, "Albanian Muslims in the Islamic State as Subject of Research of Politology of Religion", gen. quote, p. 174.

Kosovar jihadist to two-year imprisonment for supporting the Islamic State and inciting the commission of a criminal act. He was also ordered to undergo mandatory psychiatric treatment when he is released. When it comes to prison sentence itself, the time he spent under house arrest was also taken into account.<sup>36</sup> This means that this jihadist, who does not hide his true goals, today freely moves through the territory of KiM, just like many other returnees from Syria and Iraq. In addition, introducing the measure of psychiatric treatment to the man who believes that he is doing exactly what is God's will and that he will be rewarded for that by going to heaven, shows that the responsible Prishtina institutions do not understand the essence of the problem.

## The recommendations for countering Islamic extremism in KiM

In the continuation of the paper, recommendations will be offered, which our country could use to develop a strategy for countering Islamic extremism in the territory of KiM. As claimed by Miroљjub Jevtić, a professor from the Faculty of Political Sciences: "Every political problem, just like every disease, can be solved or cured only if the cause of the disease, i.e. the diagnosis is adequately set..."<sup>37</sup> First of all, it is necessary to define the greatest danger that threatens our country from the Albanian factor meaning whether we face the national and secessionist movement, which threatens to seize a part of the territory of the Republic of Serbia and establish the so-called Greater Albania, or Islamists, whose goals are planetary, so in that case the establishment of the so-called Great Albanian state would represent only the first step towards complete Islamization and the establishment of a caliphate that would have no borders. Therefore, prof. Jevtić points out that, if the problem is of a religious character, by establishing the so-called Greater Albania the appetites of Albanians would not be satisfied because they would eventually seek to expand towards Europe and the rest of the world. In the current conditions, when launching a global Islamic project is reality, this possibility has to be taken into consideration.<sup>38</sup>

The next thing that should be done in order to suppress Islamic extremism in KiM is to start an interreligious dialogue with the Islamic community of the so-called Kosovo, which can influence believers and prevent their further radicalization. However, the question arises whether this institution really wants this. The Albanian intellectual Veton Surroi in his book "The ambassador and other heretical notes" states that the Islamic community of the so-called Kosovo sent a directive in 2012 to all mosques in the territory of KiM that they have to preach khutbah in which believers are invited to join jihad in Syria. Surroi cites the case of a mosque in Prizren, where Hoxha Irfan

<sup>36</sup> See: <https://kossev.info/fitim-ladrovci-osudjen-na-dve-godine-zatvora-i-psihijatrijsko-lecenje-zbog-podrske-isis-u/>, 29.10.2021.

<sup>37</sup> Miroљjub Jevtić, "Islamska suština albanskog secesionizma i kulturno nasleđe Srba", gen. quote, p. 232.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, pp. 232-233.

Salihu told his believers that angels had spread their wings over the lands of Sham and that Allah himself had sent his best believers there to fight for the triumph of Islam. Everyone who dies heroically in that fight and becomes Shaheed, Hoxha has promised a place in paradise with all the benefits that Jannah offers to Muslims.<sup>39</sup>

Furthermore, Surroi states that with the appointment of Naim Ternava as the head of the Islamic Community of the so-called Kosovo, a transition has been quietly done from the moderate Hanafi Madhhab, which was traditionally practiced in KIM, to a rather more radical ideology.<sup>40</sup> The position of the Islamic community of the so-called Kosovo on Islamic extremism is also shown by an event after the death of the aforementioned Lavdrim Muhadjeri, when that news was announced over the loudspeaker of the mosque in Kačanik, which was supported by Naim Ternava himself. The truth is that at the end of 2013, the Mufti of Kosovo condemned the departure of believers to Syria and Iraq, but the goal of his statement was to satisfy the appetite of the international community and the sponsors of “Kosovo independence” because if it were not so, why would his son Haris Ternava glorified the Islamic State and called for jihad via social networks?<sup>41</sup> After all, Naim Ternava himself was under investigation for cooperation with dubious Islamic organizations, as well as with radical imams that he kept in service.<sup>42</sup> Therefore, it is necessary to put the dialogue with representatives of the Islamic community of the so-called Kosovo regarding this issue on the agenda of all institutions of our country that deal with the Kosovo issue.

In order to suppress Islamic extremism in the territory of the Republic of Kosovo, pressure should also be exerted on the international community to review the activities of Prishtina institutions in relation to this issue. Although political officials in Prishtina often emphasize that they are committed to the fight against terrorism and preventing Albanians from travelling to foreign battlefields, many data show exactly the opposite. In this regard, the event from May 2017 should be mentioned, when the Round Table entitled “The war in Syria and the public story of ex-combatants” was held in Prishtina, organized by the Centre for Security Policy Research. At that conference, one of the returnees from the battlefield stated that he and his comrades received the support for going to the Syrian battlefield from the Government of the so-called Kosovo.<sup>43</sup> The current Prime Minister of the so-called Kosovo Albin Kurti, who presents himself as a social democrat, which is really paradoxical considering his political steps and decisions, is also very close to certain persons and organizations that propagate jihadist ideology. The prominent Islamic theologian Mustafa Bajrami has recently

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<sup>39</sup> Veton Suroi, *Ambasador i druge jeretičke beleške*, Samizdat, Beograd, 2016, pp. 100-102.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 105-106.

<sup>41</sup> Milan Vukelić, *Kosovo i Metohija pod zastavom Islamske države*, gen. quote, p. 93.

<sup>42</sup> <https://mondo.me/Info/EX-YU/a387664/Pod-istragom-i-celnik-Islamske-zajednice-Kosova.html>, 29.10.2021

<sup>43</sup> Milan Vukelić, *Kosovo i Metohija pod zastavom Islamske države*, gen. quote, p. 135. See: <https://www.nezavisne.com/novosti/ex-yu/Bivsi-borac-ID-sa-Kosova-Nismo-mi-krivi-sto-je-vlada-uputila-poziv-za-odlazak-u-Siriju/425942>, 29.10.2021.



become a member of Kurti's political party Self-Determination Movement. This means that Bajrami, as an expert on Sharia, will never put the so-called "independent Kosovo" and belonging to the Albanian nation before belonging to the Islamic religion because if he did so, he would be punished by Allah and eternal torment would await him in the afterlife. In the same way, he would never join a movement without it being in the interest of religion, so he believes that Kurti, when the time comes, will support the achievement of the Islamic goals.<sup>44</sup>

The Albanian media reported that Albin Kurti has visited Turkey several times, where he was accompanied by his friend Osman Atalay, who is known as a supporter of Al-Qaeda, an advocate of Anti-Americanism and jihadism. Atalay is one of the leaders of the Turkish jihadist organization IHH (Turkish: İnsan Hak ve Hürriyetleri ve İnşani Yardım Vakfı), which was founded in 1992 as a "humanitarian" foundation and operates in 135 countries around the world. In May 2010, the IHH members were a part of the flotilla, along with the famous ship "Mavi Marmara", which tried to break through to the Gaza Strip. Due to the intervention of the Israeli Armed Forces, ten IHH members died on that occasion. Osman Atalay is known as a man who has been dedicated for years to spreading the anti-American mood in countries where Muslims live, and he is trying to extend his influence to the territory of the Western Balkans, including KiM, as well.<sup>45</sup> Having in mind the above-mentioned, one can doubt that Prishtina would really like to deal with Islamic extremism in the territory of KiM, even though it has officially adopted certain documents and laws, under the pressure of the international community, which should formally suppress the spread of radical Islamic ideology, and also regulate the return of jihadists from Syria and Iraq.<sup>46</sup>

The US professor Walid Phares, one of the world leading experts on the issue of terrorism, lists a series of strategic recommendations that NGOs, international organizations, and the governments of democratic countries should implement in order to counter Islamic extremism. Some of them could also be implemented in our case, namely:

- the initiation of academic discussions, at national and international level, in which legislators and intellectuals would participate, in order to recognize, define and determine threats of terrorism inspired by jihadist doctrine;
- providing support to democratic movements, organizations and individuals who fight against the strengthening of extremist ideologies;
- the implementation of the educational system reform, in order to raise awareness of the radicalization of some social groups;
- using public media and providing room for experts who will present their research on Islamic extremism. For this purpose, an opportunity should also be given to those who have personally experienced persecution, oppression and seen how jihadists carry out radicalization;

<sup>44</sup> Mirosljub Jevtić, "Lažni socijaldemokrata protiv Izraela", *Politika*, February 23, 2021.

<sup>45</sup> <http://www.gazetanewborn.co/kush-eshte-osman-atalay-personi-i-afert-me-albin-kurtin-antiamerikan-dhe-perkrahes-i-xihadizmit/>, 30.10.2021.

<sup>46</sup> Milan Vukelić, *Kosovo i Metohija pod zastavom Islamske države*, gen. quote, p. 134.

– providing room for Muslim reformers who would like to work on detecting and suppressing the activities of jihadist lobbies<sup>47</sup> and explaining their strategy to general public.<sup>48</sup>

In addition to the aforementioned recommendations, perhaps the most important one should be added, which is also a condition for the implementation of the abovementioned ones, and that is the necessity of studying the scientific discipline Political science of religion, which has to be a mandatory course at all faculties whose focus is on political sciences, security and international relations.<sup>49</sup>

## Conclusion

The spread of Islamic extremism in KiM is our reality, and we must not close our eyes to it. Particular attention should be paid to returnees from the Middle Eastern battlefields, who in the event of potential conflicts in the territory of the southern Serbian province would very likely be a striking fist in the fight against the “infidel” Serbs, with the fact that their motivation would not be rounding up the so-called “Kosovo statehood” and the establishment of Greater Albania, but the preparation of the ground for the potential establishment of a new caliphate in Europe. Such aspirations would be generously supported by rich Islamic centres, which consider Albanian Muslims as their brothers. This is proved by constant aspirations, above all of Saudi Arabia, which, in addition to investing greatly in the spread of Wahhabist ideology in Kosovo, actively lobbies in the OIS and puts pressure on the other members to recognize the independence of the so-called Kosovo.

Furthermore, in this paper, an effort has been made to break the stereotype of Albanians as people who are completely secular and uninterested in religion. One of the main arguments, in addition to historical facts that show that they had the best position during the Ottoman Caliphate, is the number of Kosovar Albanians who joined the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. Why would someone who is not interested in religion be willing to join a terrorist organization, whose very name tells what its goals are.

The thesis presented in this paper can also have direct political implementation and be useful to the state decision-makers because the growing Islamic extremism in the territory of KiM is the strongest argument that our diplomacy can use in the

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<sup>47</sup> The author of this paper was the first in this region to offer a definition of the concept of jihadist lobbies, presenting them as: “A group of individuals and organizations that, through propaganda and subversive activities, seek to Islamize the region in which they operate.” See: Milan Vukelić, “Civilization Jihad by Muslim Brotherhood in the United States of America” *Politology of Religion III Bi-Annual Conference 2021- Conference Proceedings, Center for Study of Religion and Religious Tolerance*, Belgrade, 2021, p. 45.

<sup>48</sup> Valid Fares, *Rat ideja: džihadizam protiv demokratije*, Dosije Studio, Beograd, 2018, pp. 374-376.

<sup>49</sup> See more about the scientific discipline Political science of religion: Jevtić Miroljub, “Political Science and Religion”, *Politics and religion journal*, vol. 1, no.1, 2007.

fight for the preservation of KiM within the Republic of Serbia, and also for the purpose of lobbying for the countries that have recognized the unilaterally declared “Kosovo independence” to withdraw their decision or at least reconsider it.

Emphasizing Islamic extremism as a danger, both for our country and beyond, is not intended to offend moderate Muslims (including Albanians) and to put them in the same group with terrorists, members of the Islamic State, Al-Qaeda and other extremist organizations. Islam is certainly not the religion that supports terrorism, on the contrary, viewing numbers, Muslims are the greatest victims of terrorist acts by Islamic extremist organizations. The presented data is intended to warn Albanians that a radical movement, which is against nationalism, including Albanian one, is developing among them, and also against the moderate Hanafi Madhhab, which has been present in our region for centuries.

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## *S u m m a r y*

The objective of this paper is to shed more light on the overall phenomenon of Islamic extremism, whose epicentre is to be essentially found within the territory of Kosovo and Metohija, and in particular on the not much known fact that, if left unchecked, it may easily amount to the ultimate security challenge and threat for our country. This threat is actually much more serious than, for example, a risk lurking from the potential establishment of the so-called Greater Albania, which in itself is a nationalistic idea that Albanians have been rallying around over the past century and a half. More importantly, this paper's intention is to explain clearly that

the goals of Islamic extremists go beyond national ones. Consequently, as such, their goals are inherently anti-Albanian, simply because they presuppose the dissolution of all countries which are not structured in accordance with, and governed by, the Sharia religious law. Furthermore, the greatest additional value of this paper are the recommendations it offers concerning the practicable ways to prevent the further spreading of Islamic extremism in Kosovo and Metohija. Those recommendations can readily serve as the basis for developing a platform for countering this phenomenon in our country.

The thesis advocated in this paper may easily evolve into direct political implementation, since the growing Islamic extremism throughout the territory of Kosovo and Metohija is the most potent argument to be used by our diplomacy network in its diplomatic and political struggle to preserve the Province of Kosovo and Metohija within the Republic of Serbia. In addition, this argument can also be harnessed in the lobbying efforts intended for those countries which have recognized unilaterally declared 'Kosovo independence' in a bid to, possibly, influence such countries' decision-makers in the direction of questioning, reviewing, and ultimately withdrawing their recognition, or at least reconsidering such a scenario.

Finally, the practical implications of this paper may hopefully turn into a modest contribution towards correcting the almost universally established perception of Kosovar Albanians as a secular nation, which has a single overarching goal and that is the attainment of the national ideal. It should be noted that information presented in this paper is only a part of a huge host of evidence that the territory of our southern province is in fact at the same time a hotbed of Islamic extremism and a recruiting centre for terrorist organizations. Needless to say, this also makes it a potential threat for the entire Europe and beyond.

*Key words: Kosovo and Metohija, Islam, jihad, extremism, Islamic State*

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