

# Terrorism Monitor

In-depth analysis of the War on Terror

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## JORDAN: SUICIDE ATTACK RAISES FEARS IN SYRIA'S NEIGHBOR

Alexander Sehmer

A suicide car bomber killed six members of Jordan's security forces and injured 14 others at a military post on the border with Syria, close to the al-Rukban refugee camp on June 21. Following the incident, Jordan closed the border, terming the area a closed military zone, and has so far resisted calls from human rights groups to re-open it ([al-Bawaba](#), June 23). Tens of thousands of Syrian refugees rely on aid deliveries from the Jordanian side of the border, and the closure makes their situation even more precarious.

Jordanian intelligence had warned of the possibility of Islamic State fighters infiltrating the camp. Many of the more than 60,000 refugees at Rukban have come from areas in eastern and central Syria that are under IS control. Despite the military build-up in the area, the influx of people into what is essentially a no-man's land has been difficult for the Jordanians to monitor effectively.

Jordan tightened security checks at the beginning of the month and reduced the number of people allowed

across the border from 300 per day to just 150 ([Asharq al-Awsat](#), June 23). Nonetheless, there are questions to be asked about the effectiveness of Jordanian security measures. The suicide bomber was able to drive a booby-trapped car up to the border post despite restrictions imposed by Jordanian forces, reportedly at the behest of U.S. intelligence agents, on how close vehicles can approach ([Haaretz](#), June 23).

Despite its proximity to the Syrian conflict, Jordan has remained relatively unscathed. There are, however, suggestions IS has a presence of sorts in Jordan. In March, Jordanian forces broke up an IS-affiliated cell based in the northern city of Irbid, killing seven suspected militants in what was Jordan's largest security operation in years ([al-Bawaba](#), March 2).

Jordan's refugee camps, with their large disaffected populations, are a likely hotspot for jihadists. Some commentators argue such elements have been there for years. An attack on June 6 on an intelligence base at the Baqaa camp, a Palestinian refugee camp on the outskirts of Amman, left five people dead. The attack may have been the work of a lone, disaffected camp resident rather than an IS sympathizer ([Jordan Times](#), June 6). It remains to be seen whether, following the Rukban attack, IS has now set Jordan in its sights.

## **KENYA: GREATER PROTECTION FOR LOCAL ELDERS AMID AL-SHABAB THREAT**

*Alexander Sehmer*

Five Kenyan police officers were killed and another five injured in an attack by suspected al-Shabab fighters as they escorted a passenger bus in Kenya's Mandera County on June 20 ([Radio Dalsan](#), June 20). The five were killed when the Toyota Landcruiser they were travelling in was hit by an RPG. Meanwhile, in the hours after the Mandera County attack, Kenyan security forces made several arrests at a mosque in Lamu ([The Star](#), June 21). They also claimed to have thwarted a terrorist attack in Kwale County and killed a wanted al-Shabab commander ([The Star](#), June 20). The spate of incidents follows al-Shabab's threats to intensify attacks during Ramadan and a warning from police officials over al-Shabab activity ([The Star](#), June 10).

The supposedly thwarted attack in Kwale carries some significance for local security officials accused of not doing enough to prevent the killing of three Nymba Kumi elders in the county, shot dead supposedly by al-Shabab fighters in what appear to be execution-style killings in their homes at the end of last month ([Citizen Digital](#), May 29). All three men had spoken out against the Somali militant group.

Nyumba Kumi is effectively a government-backed community policing initiative that is devoted to local elders' matters that might ordinarily be handled by state law enforcement agencies. Proposed in 2014, it has had a degree of success mediating local disputes. Officials in Kenya's Garissa County, with its large ethnic Somali population, credit Nyumba Kumi elders with curbing inter-clan violence ([Hivisasa](#), June 20).

The killing of the three men in Kwale – at least one of whom, Hassan Mwasanite, was a local religious leader – has sparked anger and given rise to calls for greater protection for Nymba Kumi elders. Officials appear to have been responsive. The tough-talking coordinator for the Coast region, Nelson Marwa, criticized local security officials and called on residents to go over their heads and feed intelligence directly to his office in Mombasa ([Daily Nation](#), May 30).

Although ill equipped to carry out anti-terror operations themselves, the close connections Nymba Kumi officials

have with their local community make them a potentially valuable tool in the government's wider security strategy. Something Marwa, promoted to his role at the beginning of the year based on his strong security credentials, likely appreciates.

# Bangladesh Launches Crackdown on Islamist Threat

*Animesh Roul*

After months denying the existence of transnational jihadist groups on its soil in the face of a violent campaign against secular and progressive forces, Bangladeshi authorities appear to have woken up to the reality of extremist militancy.

Following a series of knife and machete attacks, shootouts, and sectarian assaults usually directed against those criticizing Islamists prejudices and religious fanaticism, the Bangladeshi government initiated a countrywide crackdown on Islamist extremists on June 10. The search and sweep operations covered most of the hotspots of Islamic militancy, including the capital Dhaka, Chittagong, Bogra, Khulna, Dinajpur, Rangpur, Kushtia, Gaibandha, and Rajshahi. An unprecedented number of suspects engaged in criminal activities in the country were apprehended during the weeklong operation.

Among those arrested were at least 194 militants linked to outlawed local Islamist networks such as Harkat-ul-Jihad-al Islami Bangladesh (HuJI-B), Jamaatul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), Hizb ut-Tahrir, and Ansarul-lah Bangla Team (ABT). The police also seized large amounts of firearms, explosives, machetes, motorbikes, and jihadi literature during the raids ([BD News24.com](#), June 19).

Bangladesh's Internal Affairs Minister Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal underscored that to contain the violent attacks on secular individuals, free thinkers, and the country's minorities (generally speaking, a reference to Hindus, Christians and Buddhists) there may be another round of crackdowns soon.

## Attacks on Liberals and Minorities

This massive pan-Bangladesh operation was in fact triggered by events that occurred in the preceding week. Suspected militants in Chittagong city attacked and killed Mahmuda Khanam Mitu, the wife of acclaimed local counter-terrorism official Babul Akhter ([Dhaka Tribune](#), June 6). Suspicion fell on the al-Qaeda linked Ansar al Islam, the Bangladesh chapter of al-Qaeda in

the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), and its strike unit ABT. Perhaps sensing the coming retributions and societal backlash, however, Ansar al-Islam branded the killing "impermissible under Islam" and distanced itself from Aktar's murder ([SITE Intelligence](#), June 10; [BD News24.com](#), June 11).

On the same day, June 5, Islamic militants also killed Sunil Gomez, a Christian grocery shop owner, in Baraigram, Natore district. Within the next few days, militants killed a Hindu priest named Ananta Gopal Ganguly in Naldanga area in Jhenaidah district. Islamic State (IS) subsequently claimed responsibility for the deaths of Gomez and Ganguly through its Amaq News agency, a pro-IS media outlet that emerged in 2014 in the midst of the crisis in Syria ([Dhaka Tribune](#), June 07).

Over the past three years, the Islamist terrorists, who openly claim affiliations with IS and AQIS, have killed or injured more than 50 people in Bangladesh. Often they attack in broad day light with machetes or crude homemade firearms. The attacks have targeted freethinkers, secular writers, liberal intellectuals, and religious minorities, all with relative impunity facilitated by divisions within Bangladesh's own political establishment.

## Government in Denial

In the face of these attacks, the Bangladeshi government denied the presence of IS or AQIS in the country, putting the blame instead on the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), the country's main opposition party, and the banned religious organization Jamaat-e-Islami.

For its part, the BNP continues to insist blame should fall on the ruling Awami League for misgovernance and "the absence of democracy." It has reiterated many times that the activities of extremist militant groups have grown as the government has resorted to "the course of violence in governing the country" ([New Age Bangladesh](#), May 22). The BNP has also claimed the recent raids were designed to stifle political dissent and to detain its leaders and activists.

Amid the country's long-standing political and religious divide, Islamic militants of varied hues are finding opportunities to reinvent themselves with the blessing of IS or AQIS, which are attempting to establish and expand their presence in the country.

The deteriorating law and order situation in Bangladesh has proved to be a fertile ground for the militants, providing space for these two groups to develop their operations. Al-Qaeda, which has a history of engagement with Bangladesh dating back to the 1990s, found new avenues of support in early 2013 during the Shahbagh movement and the calls for Bangladeshi Islamist leader Abdul Quader Molla to face the death penalty. The turmoil engendered by those protests, which saw violent confrontations between secular and Islamist forces, presented an opportunity for the group to re-establish its influence. It was during this time that Ansar Islam and ABT emerged, acting in line with al-Qaeda's regional jihadist agenda.

Evidently, the political and religious situation also offered an opportunity for the then Syria-based IS to create pockets of influence in Bangladesh through existing militant networks – especially by using the subdued JMB, newly formed hybrid groups like Islamic State of Bangladesh (ISB), or Jund al-Tawheed wal Khilafah (JTK) – to reinvigorate and consolidate militant movements.

### **Outside Influence on Domestic Actors**

IS propaganda magazine *Dabiq* – in issues 12 (November 2015) and 14 (April 2016) – broadly revealed the extremist group's shadowy presence in Bangladesh when it published a eulogy to a slain Bangladeshi IS fighter named Abu Jundal Al Bengali (a.k.a. Ashequr Rahman) and an interview with the leader of IS Bangladesh chapter, Sheikh Abu Ibrahim al-Hanif.

Rahman, who was killed in Syria, had been a student at Dhaka's Military Institute of Science and Technology (MIST). He joined IS having left Dhaka on February 21, 2015 to attend a conference in Turkey. Al-Hanif, meanwhile, described in his interview how efforts to recruit "soldiers of the Khilafah" in Bangladesh had gained "great momentum," with many Muslims joining its ranks. Al-Hanif – identified as Tamim Chowdhury, a Canadian resident of Bangladeshi origin – also hinted that cadres of Jamaat-e-Islami were joining the Khilafah's soldiers in Bengal.

Previous IS media releases have also referred to the support of JMB remnants, describing them as the real defenders of Islam in Bangladesh. [1] Separately, a number of IS publications have eulogized JMB and its slain leaders for attempting "to awaken the Muslim

masses of Bengal to the importance of ruling by shariah and the fundamentals of Al-wala wa-l-bara [loyalty and disavowal]."

Besides these, IS media units make great efforts to exhort the people of Bangladesh through literature and social media to join its fold.

Similarly, AQIS has repeatedly urged Bangladeshi Muslims to "confront the crusader onslaught against Islam" through its *As-Sahab* media unit. It also regularly exhorts its followers in Bangladesh to stand up against secularist fervor and confront alleged "atrocities" carried out by the security forces against pro-Islamic elements of the populace.

Mufti Abdullah Ashraf, the supposed Ansar al-Islam spokesperson, and the group's suspected leader Syed M Zia-ul-Haq have both called for a Sharia-based caliphate in Bangladesh and condoned the killings of secular bloggers and intellectuals. Reports suggest that there are around 200 active members of Ansar Al Islam and ABT in the country ([Daily Star](#), June 07).

The group also claimed the killings of two LGBT rights activists, Xulhaz Mannan and Samir Mahboob Tonoy, in April this year [2]

### **Continued Attacks**

Even though Bangladesh's counter-terror apparatus has now swung into action, it is clear that the recent massive sweep operation has not deterred militants from staging random attacks. During the operations, fresh attacks took place in Madaripur. Machete-wielding militants attacked Ripon Chakraborty, a Hindu mathematics teacher in the government-run Nazimuddin College; on June 10, Nityaranjan Pandey, an elderly volunteer at a Hindu ashram in Pabna district, was hacked to death. IS claimed responsibility for Pandey's killing ([Daily Star](#), June 11).

Meanwhile, an eleven-member panel of leading Islamic clerics issued a *fatwa* (a religious diktat) against terrorism. The panel, led by Farid Uddin Masoud, the chairman of the Bangladesh Jamiyatul Ulama (BJU), condemned the activities of the militants in Bangladesh. A total of 101,524 Islamic clerics signed the *fatwa* against militancy and violent extremism ([Daily Star](#), June 18; [Dhaka Tribune](#), June 06).

The Bangladeshi government has struggled to explain the rise in violence while simultaneously denying the presence or influence of transnational jihadi groups in the country. It is time that the Awami League-led government recognized that remnants of previously subdued militant groups have found moral and ideological support through the rise of AQIS and IS in the region.

The far-reaching shadow of al-Qaeda or IS on Bangladesh's local militant networks has been constantly overlooked and ignored. The government crackdown suggests the authorities have, belatedly, resolved to tackle the situation, but more will need to be done to halt the attacks that threaten the country's secular fabric.

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## NOTES

[1] See, Abu Abdur Rahamn al Banghali, "The Revival of Jihad In Bengal" With the Spread of the light of the Khilafa", Dabiq, No 12, November 2015, pp.38-41.

[2] See "Statement Regarding Assassination of Xulhaz Mannan & Samir Mahbub Tonoy," May 4, 2016, <https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2016/05/anscca3acc84r-islacc84m-bangladesh-22regarding-the-assassination-of-xulhaz-mannan-and-samir-mahbub-tonoy22.pdf>

# Political Stalemate Heightens Appeal of Religious Extremism for Western Sahara Youth

*Andrew McGregor*

The death from illness on May 31 of the Polisario Front's long-time leader Mohamed Abdelaziz has brought the exiled Sahrawi independence movement of the Western Sahara to an ideological crossroads. The Polisario nation, known as the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), is effectively a state without land, save for a small strip of desert optimistically known as "the Free Zone." Nonetheless, the SADR is recognized by 46 nations and is a full member of the African Union.

While the Polisario leadership will use a 40-day mourning period to decide whether a leadership change should reflect the desirability of new directions for the movement or the persistence of the status quo, Morocco, which lays claim to Western Sahara, will simultaneously be seeking new openings to break the lingering impasse. During this crucial period, the Sahrawi exile community, most of whom live in a complex of six refugee camps surrounding the southwest Algerian town of Tindouf and are reliant on international donations of food and other aid, must deal not only with leadership succession, but also with:

- Morocco's expulsion of the UN mission charged with organizing an independence referendum;
- The attraction of the Islamic State and other extremist factions to alienated Sahrawi youth; and
- The political implications of offshore oil exploration contracts negotiated by Morocco without Polisario involvement.

Morocco insists it is merely reclaiming territory (its so-called "Southern States") that had been occupied by the Spanish up until 1975. Polisario regards the Moroccan presence as colonialism, "an international crime against the Saharawi people, as well as a continuing threat to peace and regional security" (Ennahar [Algiers], June 15).

The dispute has been absorbed into the wider rivalry between Morocco and its Maghreb neighbor, Algeria, contributing to its intractability.

## The Leadership Question

Mohamed Abdelaziz was elected as Polisario Front secretary-general and president of the SADR in August 1976, ruling with the help of a small but powerful group of loyalists. At the time of his death, he was serving his 12th consecutive term as president. The interim leader is one of Abdelaziz's closest associates, Khatri Adouh, the president of the Sahrawi National Council (the SADR's governing body).

Among the candidates for the SADR presidency are Brahim Ghali, who will likely have Algeria's approval; Mohamed Lamine Bouhali, the current defense minister and a former Algerian army officer; Prime Minister Abdelkader Taleb Omar; Reconstruction Minister Mohamed Salem Ould Salek; and Bashir Mustapha Sayed, the brother of Polisario Front founder El-Ouali Mustapha Sayed ([North Africa Post](#), June 1).

Polisario has always been as much a social movement as a political one. It has a strong focus on eliminating tribalism through the eradication of tribal identities and the pursuit of Arab nationalism and (at least initially) Marxist-style collectivism and anti-colonial ideology derived from political theorist Franz Fanon and various African liberation leaders of the 1960s. Its claim to a collective purpose expressing the common will of all Sahrawis and its pervasiveness in Sahrawi refugee life precludes for the Polisario leadership any possibility of internal opposition to the movement. Since the SADR's existence depends on external aid and all such aid is funneled through Polisario-friendly Algeria, the leadership has the means of enforcing this opinion.

Polisario anti-colonialism, however, carries within it a fatal contradiction – the SADR is based on the amalgamation of several territories defined by colonially-imposed boundaries. Rejection of these boundaries as the basis of the SADR would tend to validate the Moroccan position that no state existed in the region prior to Spanish occupation aside from a handful of local tribal chiefs, many of whom at one time or another had pledged allegiance to the Moroccan Sultan or established economic relations with the Kingdom.

In the absence of a political system that accommodates opposition viewpoints, dissenting Sahrawis tend to vote with their feet, defecting into Moroccan-governed terri-

tory to reunite their divided families. Morocco claims over 10,000 Sahrawis have done this so far, but the process is strongly discouraged by the Polisario, which recognizes that the only thing keeping the SADR from becoming a purely virtual state is its ability to claim the loyalty of a significant portion of the Sahrawi population. Protests continue in the Moroccan-administered area against rule from Rabat, often resulting in excesses by the Moroccan police.

## Failure of MINURSO

Formed in 1991, the UN mission in the Western Sahara, known as MINURSO, continues to fulfill its mandate to monitor the 1991 ceasefire, but it has yet to begin its task of registering voters and preparing a referendum on the Western Sahara's future. Many officers of this expensive peacekeeping mission have instead passed the time by vandalizing the region's prehistoric rock art with spray-painted graffiti ([The Times](#), February 7, 2008). Furthermore, thanks to French opposition in the UN Security Council, MINURSO remains the only UN mission without a human rights component, tying its hands when confronted with human rights abuses.

Both the Polisario and Morocco oppose MINURSO efforts at voter registration, given disputes over the eligibility of the large number of Moroccans who have settled in Moroccan-ruled Western Sahara since 1975 and the number of Malians, Mauritians and Algerians who have joined the SADR camps. A census in the Tindouf camps might also reveal a smaller number of refugees than are currently claimed by authorities, putting at risk the ability of Algerian and Polisario authorities to siphon off an over-supply of humanitarian aid that eventually appears in regional markets. In the event MINURSO is kept from fulfilling its mission, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon has warned of "escalation into full-scale war" and the presentation of new opportunities for "terrorist and radical elements" to exploit the situation ([al-Jazeera](#), April 19).

The UN secretary-general enraged Moroccan authorities when he referred to Moroccan "occupation" of the Western Sahara during a March 5 visit to the Sahrawi refugee camps around Tindouf ([al-Jazeera](#), March 29). Following accusations that the UN had abandoned its neutral stance on the issue, Morocco expelled U.S. aid staff from the region, ordered the UN to withdraw civilian personnel, and closed a MINURSO military liaison

office despite profuse apologies from the secretary-general's office.

Ban's call for negotiations without precondition between the SADR and Morocco seems bound for the same UN black hole in which most calls tend to disappear. No matter what UN officials might say, such negotiations would be widely regarded both internally and externally as Moroccan recognition of the SADR's existence. Morocco is instead playing out a long-term strategy to create a set of facts on the ground that would make a separate Western Saharan state inconceivable. Most important of these is a 1,250-mile-long sand berm separating the economically useful section of Western Sahara from the lightly populated "Free Zone." Equipped with radar, motion detectors, rapid response teams, air support, and some of the world's largest minefields, this sand wall has proved an effective counter to Polisario's military qualities of mobility and intimate knowledge of local terrain.

### **Attraction of Islamic State and Other Extremist Groups**

More than 50 percent of the population of the Polisario refugee camp is under 18 and few have ever set foot in their "homeland." Limited employment opportunities mean many young Sahrawis are joining the 6,000 to 7,000 strong Ejercito de Liberación Popular Saharaui (ELPS or Sahrawi People's Liberation Army), the military wing of the Polisario Front. Deeply unhappy with the lack of diplomatic progress in resolving the independence issue, many young Sahrawis are calling for a return to the battlefield.

Though internal pressure could drive the Sahrawis back to war, the outcome of any conflict with the larger, better armed and better trained Royal Moroccan Army is predictable. With Algeria unlikely to support renewed conflict in any substantial way, there is a danger veteran jihadis might be able to offer valuable battlefield support against a Moroccan regime, while introducing Salafist-jihadist ideology to the struggle. Similar situations have been seen in the past; in the Chechen anti-Russian resistance, jihadism developed at the expense of secular nationalism as a result of an influx of much-needed, but religiously motivated, foreign fighters.

Alternatively, a quick or even extended collapse of Sahrawi military resistance in renewed combat could

lead to a loss of faith in the nationalist cause on the part of young fighters and an increase in smuggling, an important source of income for young Sahrawis that inevitably puts them in contact with traffickers from extremist groups. Integration with extremist networks such as al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) often follows, whether as paid employees or ideologically committed jihadists.

The 2010 Algerian arrest of a Polisario imam discovered with arms, 20 kilograms of explosives, and correspondence with AQIM leader Abd al-Malik Droukdel (a.k.a. Abu Musab Abd al-Wadud) and the kidnapping the next year of three European aid-workers from a Tindouf camp by a Movement for Unity and Justice in West Africa (MUJWA) cell that included Sahrawis were strong indications that extremism has penetrated the Polisario camps. [1]

By July 2012, Sahrawi Defense Minister Bouhali admitted that there were 20 to 25 Sahrawis involved in Islamist militancy, divided between AQIM and MUJWA ([ABC.es](http://ABC.es) [Madrid], August 11, 2012). The statement was a break from Polisario's usual insistence that AQIM holds no attraction to Sahrawis. In March 2013, Mali's foreign minister insisted that Polisario "mercenaries" had been recruited by the radical MUJWA for monthly salaries running between 200 to 600 Euros ([Le Mag](http://LeMag.ma) [Marrakesh], March 16, 2013).

The best known of the Sahrawis who have committed to religious extremism is Abu Walid al-Sahrawi – a former member of the ELPS, MUJWA, and Mokhtar Belmokhtar's al-Murabitun organization – who joined Islamic State in 2015 and now calls for Moroccans and Sahrawis to support the Islamic Caliphate in the Maghreb. In May, Abu Walid threatened to launch attacks on MINURSO personnel, foreign tourists, and assets in the Sahara ([al-Jazeera](http://al-Jazeera.com), May 4; [North Africa Post](http://NorthAfricaPost.com), May 6; [al-Akhbar](http://al-Akhbar.com) [Nouakchott], May 13, 2015). Like many Sahrawis, Abu Walid was educated in Algeria and Cuba. Algerian universities often expose young Sahrawis to more militant strains of Islam than those that usually prevail in the camps.

### **Offshore Oil Exploration**

When Morocco began awarding contracts for oil exploration in the Western Sahara in 2002, the UN called for a legal opinion to define the legality of such measures in

the absence of recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over the area. Known as the Corell Opinion, the statement remains the guiding principle for Moroccan-negotiated foreign investment in the region, but the opinion has been subject to much interpretation and has been used to both justify and condemn Moroccan development undertaken without consultation with the Sahrawi people. [2]

Mustapha al-Khalfi, Morocco's minister of communications, insists that investment and the region's natural resource management are driven by the needs of the population. He also maintains that the participation in investment decisions of democratically elected representatives of the Sahrawi community means that "the exploitation of the natural resources in the Sahara takes place within the framework of international law with the involvement of the population and for its benefit" (al-Jazeera, July 10, 2015).

The current controversy over resource extraction is fueled by the Moroccan-authorized offshore exploration activities of Texas-based Kosmos Energy in the Cap Boujdour area, approximately 70km off the shore of Western Sahara and part of the larger Aaiun Basin. Kosmos defends its activities by noting that, at this point, they are "focused solely on exploration and do not involve the removal of resources... We believe, however, that if exploration is successful, responsible resource development in Western Sahara has the potential to create significant long-term social and economic benefits for the people of the territory." [3]

The absence of substantial international opposition to the operations of foreign resource extraction firms in the contested region constitutes an important step in the explicit or *de facto* recognition of Moroccan claims in the Western Sahara.

### **The "Sahrawi State"**

With the slow-moving machinations of international diplomacy and commerce working against them, Polisario's chances of forming a legitimate state diminish with each passing year. The "Sahrawi State" is in the uncomfortable position of existing solely at the sufferance of Algiers. While an Algerian-Moroccan rapprochement seems unlikely in the short term, any future mending of their relationship would make Polisario and all its trappings of a "virtual" state entirely expendable. The future

of the republic lies with its restless youth rather than Polisario's aging first generation. Without jobs or meaningful futures, many desire a return to conflict. However, such a war, like all else, cannot happen without Algerian approval, and this might prove difficult if not impossible to obtain.

Polisario allows Algiers to affect a certain moral superiority over Morocco on the international stage, but a Polisario return to war would immediately be regarded as Algerian-sponsored and would be of little advantage to either party. A more likely scenario is a growing attraction to religious militancy as the foundation of a new state potentially free from both Moroccan and Algerian domination, especially if the option is the perpetuation of a stifling status quo in the isolated camps of Tindouf.

This attraction may co-exist with a greater willingness on the part of other Sahrawis to accept Morocco's offers of regional autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty, combining to eventually shatter the Polisario's independence ambitions.

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### **NOTES**

[1] "The Algerian Foreign Policy on Western Sahara," in Anouar Boukhars and Jacques Roussellier (eds.), *Perspectives on Western Sahara: Myths, Nationalisms and Geopolitics*, Lanham, 2014, p.115, fn.32

[2] Hans Corell, "Letter dated 29 January 2002 from the Under-Secretary-General for Legal Affairs, the Legal Counsel, addressed to the President of the Security Council, United Nations Security Council," February 12, 2002, <http://www.arso.org/UNlegaladv.htm>

[3] See position statement: Kosmos Energy: On Hydrocarbon Exploration Offshore Western Sahara, February 2014, <http://www.kosmosenergy.com/pdfs/Position-Statement-WesternSahara-English.pdf>

# Jihadist Threat Persists in Kosovo and Albania Despite Government Efforts

*Ebi Spahiu*

Since the emergence of Islamic State (IS), more than 1,000 people from countries in the Western Balkans have flocked to the group as foreign fighters, predominantly from Muslim majority areas in Albania, Kosovo, Bosnia, and from minority Muslim populated areas in Macedonia, Serbia, and Montenegro (Illyria Press, August 7, 2015). These numbers peaked following the outbreak of the Syrian conflict in 2011. Local security and intelligence services have since taken action, responding to concerns voiced by international partners. Meanwhile, both Albania and Kosovo have adopted legislation aimed at curbing the participation of their citizens in foreign conflicts (Bota Sot, March 26, 2015).

Following a wide-ranging crackdown between the summer of 2014 and the spring of 2015, the number of IS recruits from the Western Balkans has dramatically declined. That may in part be a result of the changing dynamics of the war in Syria, as airstrikes degraded IS territorial strongholds and financial resources, but the state authorities like to attribute the drop in numbers to the measures they have taken at home. In fact, officials from both Albania and Kosovo boast that since spring 2015, no individuals have traveled to Syria to join the conflict (Koha Jonë, February 29). That claim is, however, disputed.

Facing territorial losses in both Syria and Iraq, IS has ramped up support for organized cells abroad, including in the Western Balkans, and encouraged so-called lone wolf actors. A report provided to the U.S. Senate by CIA Director John Brennan acknowledges that IS is still in “formidable” shape and is focused on extending its global reach (Ora News, June 16). As a consequence, both Kosovo and Albania continue to see a very real threat from the group. In the Western Balkans, IS presents not only an immediate security risk, but also a threat to social cohesion among the Balkans’ religiously heterogeneous populations.

## Weaknesses in Terrorism Trials

Since the summer of 2014, Kosovo’s authorities have investigated and arrested more than 100 people allegedly involved in terrorist activities (Reporter.al, May 7). In May, Albania’s High Crimes Court sentenced nine individuals, including two self-proclaimed imams, for facilitating and financing the recruitment of terrorists. The men were arrested in March 2014 when Albanian authorities raided two key mosques located in the outskirts of Albania’s capital Tirana (Ora News, March 11, 2014). One of the jailed imams, Bujar Hysa, pledged his support to IS during a taped interview with a local journalist who recorded an interview with him in prison. Hysa also called the court process “a farce” and accused the authorities of undertaking “a war against Muslims.” [2]

The security crackdown and subsequent terrorism trials have revealed weaknesses within the state apparatus. Proceedings have been plagued by a lack of judicial experience in dealing with terrorism trials, and punishments appear overly harsh (Reporter.al, May 7). Some of those accused face minimum sentences of 15 years, the harshest in the region. [1] This in turn has damaged the credibility of the judiciary, while police operations have continued to target a wide range of activities, including more than 15 humanitarian NGOs accused of posing as a cover for extremist supporters in Kosovo (Radio Evropa e Lirë, February 13).

## State Oversight of Islamic Institutions

The authorities often boast about their collaboration with the officially-recognized Islamic communities – BIK (Bashkësia Islame e Kosovës) for Kosovo and KMSH (Komuniteti Mysliman Shqiptarë) for Albania – to counter extremist religious messages. These groups, however, have little influence over the mosques and other religious organizations that are increasingly being established without oversight from officially-recognized Islamic institutions.

Ilir Dizdari, the former head of the State Committee on Religious Cults, another institution mandated to control the management of religious cults in Albania, claimed that more than 200 mosques are outside the jurisdiction of KMSH and other state authorities. Previous claims by intelligence services had put the number of such mosques at 89 (Ora News, December 16, 2015; InfoAlbania.al, November 11, 2015).

To its credit, Albania's KMSH has been able to regain control of the infamous Mëzez mosque near Tirana, which was allegedly instrumental in recruiting more than 70 Albanian citizens to IS (Bota Sot, November 19, 2015). Other areas were also targeted, including the village of Leshnica, where Almir Daci, a 32-year-old former imam and later IS recruiter, now thought to have died while fighting in Syria, was found to be targeting people in his village and nearby areas (Reporter.al, April 6). Despite these efforts, however, reports suggest the KMSH imams are struggling to regain control of the community's daily religious life, leaving this instead to groups of Daci's supporters "until Friday prayer when the KMSH imams show up" (Reporter.al, April 6). This also speaks to the dwindling credibility of KMSH among followers, who often accuse imams of corruption and affiliation with the Turkish Gulen Movement, which largely funds KMSH operations.

### **Wahhabist Influence**

Albania's KMSH also struggles with funding from more conservative Wahhabist and Salafist groups and more recently with an investment from Turkey's Muslim community in the large mosque of Namazgja, inaugurated by Turkey's President Recep Tayipp Erdogan, which when complete will tower over the secular Albanian parliament (Albeu, May 13, 2015). Separately from the KMSH, Prishtina's BIK has also been bolstered by Wahhabist funding since the end of the war in the late 1990s.

The divisions are arguably more pronounced now. One Tirana-based security official, who wishes to remain anonymous due to security concerns, commented: "In 2010, sectarian narratives became even more visible than ever before, and now they are at the core of the rifts between Muslim communities." [3]

Following the Arab Spring and the conflict in Syria, networks established in the 1990s among the local populations were revived to recruit men and women to join conflicts in the Middle East. Although local media tends to portray these tensions as rifts between more moderate imams versus those of Salafist and Wahhabist identities, the struggle is increasingly that of power and control over religious institutions and their followers (Zëri, April 6).

People of the Balkans have historically practiced Sunni Islam based on Hanafi jurisprudence, inherited after centuries of Ottoman rule. Traditionally, there have been strong interfaith relations between Catholic, Christian Orthodox, and Muslim communities. That tradition is particularly visible in Albania, where interfaith marriages and shared religious celebrations are the norm (Terrorism Monitor, May 15, 2015). The conflicting dynamics and the polarizing effect of religious issues presents a challenge for counter-extremism initiatives that aim to avoid politicizing the factors that drive individuals into the hands of violent extremist groups.

### **National Action Plans**

Both Kosovo and Albania have adopted comprehensive national strategies and action plans to counter violent extremism and religious radicalism. They aim to drive grassroots approaches to countering violent extremism by working with communities and civil society. [4]

Both the rhetoric and the reality appear to be different. At an interfaith summit in Prishtina in early June organized by Kosovo's ministry of foreign affairs with more than a hundred interfaith groups from around the world represented, Kosovo's counter terrorism unit director stressed the drop in foreign fighters was solely due to the work the security forces had conducted against targeted mosques and Islamist NGOs and the work civil society is currently doing.

Similar statements have been frequently reiterated by Albanian officials who attribute zero travels by IS supporters to Syria and Iraq to its own abilities and commitment to fight homegrown Islamist cells (Koha Jonë, February 29).

While some Kosovar civil society groups have in fact been actively engaging with schools and religious leaders to address the problem of extremism, Albania has been lagging behind. Instead it has focused on more top-down approaches, including a recent agreement between the United States and Albania aimed at setting up a Bureau of Investigations modeled after the United States' own FBI and ongoing efforts at justice reforms needed to advance Albania's aspirations to join the EU (Balkan Insight, February 12).

## Increasing Radicalization

While overt calls by local religious leaders for people to partake in jihad have grown much rarer since last year's the security crackdown, the radicalization of Western Balkan individuals continues. IS propaganda and official communications are often translated into Albanian. This has included recent speeches by IS spokesperson Abu Mohammad al-Adnani, who called for lone wolf attacks during the month of Ramadan in messages disseminated via a blog titled "Hilafeti," the Albanian for the word for Caliphate.

As state institutions lack credibility, radical imams and similar groups are filling the vacuum, displacing moderate religious leaders and other local actors. Several testimonies from local civil society groups based in north-eastern Albania describe the rapid transformation of local religious life and an increased commitment among local youth toward following imams. In the absence of a strong school system and meaningful employment opportunities, the lives of these individuals are increasingly shaped by religious doctrine.

Similarly, a recent questionnaire on public perceptions on violent extremism developed by the Kosovar Center for Security Studies found that 57 percent of respondents place a greater level of trust in religious institutions than in the judiciary (Gazeta Express, June 13). Previous reports have also found that Kosovar youth are also becoming increasingly conservative, with their main reference points for spiritual and intellectual guidance being local imams (Tema [Tirana], August 10).

Radicalization is also taking other forms. Sibel Halimi, a sociology professor at the University of Prishtina who looks at the role of women in the recruitment process, speaks of the "radicalization of social issues" as one of the key strategies used to control followers. She stresses that issues around sexuality, such as rules around virginity and family relations, are components that are increasingly highlighted by more conservative female recruiters and religious leaders to exert control.

"We need to stop looking at women as victims in the issue of radicalization and participation in violent extremism. We need to start taking into account that there are active women who partake in the recruitment process," she said. "There are women who actively engage with younger girls to radicalize them." [5]

While religious adherence has been an integral component of Western Balkan society, the increasing influence of Salafist and Wahhabist ideologies has led to a shift in views and attitudes and rifts between community leaders. Furthermore, this has contributed to a greater openness to the message of IS. Added to this, state responses have struggled, due largely to limited capacity and a lack of experience in tackling radicalization. While both countries look toward EU integration and their populations maintain positive views toward the West, growing geopolitical rifts, an IS presence, and the influence of radical Sunni Islam previously alien to the region's indigenous Muslim populations could change the balance.

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## NOTES

[1] Vendimi: 9 "xhihadistët dënohen me 126 vjet burg, Ora News, May 3, 2016 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5a3ujgrTUI>

[2] Te Paeksopozuarit: "Ne, të dënuarit e besimit", intervjua ekskluzive nga burgu, Ora News, May 19, 2016

[3] Author's interview, Tirana (June 16, 2016)

[4] Strategy on Prevention of Violent Extremism and Radicalization Leading to Terrorism 2015-2020, Republic of Kosovo, [http://www.kryeministri-ks.net/repository/docs/STRATEGY\\_parandalim\\_-\\_ENG.pdf](http://www.kryeministri-ks.net/repository/docs/STRATEGY_parandalim_-_ENG.pdf)

[5] Author's interview with Sibel Halimi (June 19, 2016)