WHY DO FOREIGN FIGHTERS JOIN ISLAMIC STATE?

THE CASE OF KOSOVO

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The Case of Kosovo[1]

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Introduction

Foreign fighter mobilisation is not a new phenomenon. However, it has only become a serious political issue worldwide with the rise of the Islamic State (IS). More than 42,000 people from 120 countries have travelled to Iraq and Syria between 2011 and 2016.[2]

Previous studies on IS have been largely concerned with the growth of the phenomenon in the West.[3] Meanwhile, countries with recent experience in violence have also contributed to the numbers in Europe but received less attention from scholars and security experts. More than 900 people from the Western Balkans have joined the ranks of IS and other radical groups.[4] 364 of them originate from Kosovo, the youngest country in the region, born out of the the dissolution of Yugoslavia.

This Strategic Update looks at the emergence of foreign fighter cells in societies with a recent war experience. Did foreign fighters from Kosovo join IS because of their experience of conflict and civil war at home?

To answer this question, I not only examined offical documents and media reports, I conducted semi-structured interviews with returnees – people who had traveled from Kosovo to Syria as foreign fighters and back – as well as their relatives and friends, and the local communities they came from including police and religious leaders.[5]

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Theories of why people become foreign fighters

Why people become foreign fighters has been the guiding question for scholars studying radicalisation and recruitment for jihadi movements. From ideology to the search for belonging and poor socio-economic conditions, researchers have explored different sets of triggering factors.

Petter Nesser's typology of jihadi terrorists in Europe has four categories of fighter: ***entrepreneurs, protégés, misfits, and drifters***.[6] The emphasis is on entrepreneurs and their protégés who proactively seek to build organised extremist circles at the local level through socialisation, manipulation, and recruitment of targeted individuals.[7] Building on these categories to think about ***why*** people are attracted to extremist groups, my research distinguishes between **identity producers** ***(entrepreneurs and protégés)*** and **identity seekers** ***(misfits and drifters).*** Identity provides individuals with the means to see themselves linked by common values, interests and goals.[8] Young people looking for a identity to feel belonging to a group, and those offering an identity and a "home" are both part of the story of creating foreign IS fighters.

IS fighters from Kosovo

Overall 364 Kosovars are known to have travelled to Syria and Iraq between 2012 and 2016 to join different radical and rebel groups. The majority of them ended up either in the ranks of Jabhat al-Nusra or IS.[9] 196 are believed to be still in Syria, while 133 have returned home by 2016.[10] 76 people were killed in the conflict zone, while at least 40 children were born there to women from Kosovo.[11] At least 253 of all "war travelers" were men, 55 women and 36 minors. More than 1/3 of the foreign fighters from Kosovo were in their early twenties prior their departure to Syria, thus, they were too young to have had previous fighting experience from the Kosovo war.[13]

The majority of the male foreign fighters have moderate education. Many were unemployed or held a low socio-economic status prior their departure.[14] Most fighters from Kosovo have joined either IS or Jabhat al Nusra, the branch of al-Qaeda in Syria.

Nearly 20 years after the war, Kosovo remains largely characterised by the features of a post-conflict society. The Kosovo war (1998-1999) was fought by the forces of Slobodan Milosevic's regime and the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA). Following 1999 NATO strikes against the Yugoslav army and after 9 years under UN control, Kosovo declared its independence from Serbia on Feb 17, 2008. The young Balkan state is poor and underdeveloped, struggling with high unemployment, poverty, endemic corruption and visa regime isolation. Along with weak economic and political institutions, residual ethnic divisions and societal disorientation have become a fruitful ground for external influences.

The growth of extremist ideology in Kosovo

In the aftermath of the war, radical religious ideas grew in the region under the camouflage of humanitarian organisations. Middle Eastern charities became active in Kosovo, helping local populations to re-build private and public infrastructure. Along with the financial aid, they were responsible for dissemination of more rigid religious ideas and practices.[15]

For instance, more than thirty Koranic schools were established in the rural areas of Kosovo with funding from Saudi foundations.[16] Meanwhile, religious scholars undertook frequent visits to Kosovo as missionaries. Over time, conservative religious thought increased.

Following the war, Kosovars have been more inclined to identify with their ethnic Albanian identity rather than with the newborn national identity. As Kursani (2018) points out: "There is a whole generation to whom their own identity is not clear anymore - are they Albanians or Kosovars, what is their flag, their symbol?".[17] Since the goal to have an independent state was accomplished, the impetus of the national cause has diminished but without fully satisfying people's need for belonging and identification.[18] As the national identity seems to be fragile, another became more salient, the religious one.

The Takfir ideology (sanctioning violence against countries and people who are not Islamic enough) promoted today by IS and other extremist groups arrived in the Western Balkans around 2005. The phenomenon is not home-grown to Kosovo, neither to the other countries in the region.[19] It appeared in the Western Balkans through a number of imams from the region who, before and during the war, got their education from Middle Eastern religious institutions. At that time, some of them established close connection with Takfir circles, mainly in Egypt. Those Balkan imams were influenced by the combination of "revolutionary Islam" (with roots in Egypt)

with fundamentalist Islam (originating from Saudi Arabia) employed by Al Qaeda and later the Islamic State.[20] Once they returned to the Western Balkans, they began spreading their radical views.

Memories of the Kosovo War and Recruitment

With the outbreak of the Syrian war, the key message was: Islam is under threat locally and globally; it is every Muslim's duty to join the war in Syria.[21] The prospect of going to Syria as a foreign fighter became popular among young Kosovars who were seeking strong indentities. Some of those who traveled to Syria and were interviewed for this research seek to present themselves as "wanna-be" soldiers, as they were between 8 and 14 years old when the Kosovo war broke out. Since they did not have the chance to participate and defend the community because they were too young then, the Syrian war provided them with an opportunity for a second chance.

The link between personal war memories and the ongoing events in Syria was rationalised by both identity seekers and identity producers, and eventually became a trigger for many to travel to the battlefield:

> "It was very sensitive for us because everything they were living through at that time [in Syria], we had it before in Kosovo" (Source C, a returnee).

> "I was frustrated during the war, I wanted to be part of it but I was only 13 years old…going to Syria, I sought to have the experience to take the gun and protect the community, something that I couldn't do during the Kosovo war…I cannot simply stay and watch people suffering. I want to do something for the community. It makes me feel useful" (Source A, a returnee).

"The prospect of going to Syria as a foreign fighter became popular among young Kosovars who were seeking strong identities."

> "My family was well off, however, during the war we've lost everything. My father became an alcoholic, one of my sisters started taking drugs. I felt isolated. It was May 2007, I remember, I was walking down the street, I passed the mosque in Dardania district in Pristina and heard the ***Azzan*** (the call to prayer). I was only 15 years old. I went inside I prayed for the first time in my life" (Source B, an ex-Takfir follower, among the students of a radical imam in Kosovo).

Another IS fighter, interviewed while serving his sentence in one of the Kosovo' prisons, shared that he keeps a strong war memory of seeing the mother of a friend killed before his eyes. In his own words the experience of his community being in need in the past made him believe that he should "return the gesture" and help people in Syria.[22] War memories, therefore, were effectively exploited by identity producers on the ground.

> "In the aftermath of the war, radical religious ideas grew in the region under the camouflage of humanitarian organisations."

The narrative of "failed nationalism" in Kosovo employed by local recruiters relies on people's disappointment with the current state of domestic politics:

> "They first isolated you from your family. They ask you if your family pray. If not, they are called unbelievers. The next step is to isolate you from the state, by saying, this is not your state, and it is controlled by the Americans. It does not represent you. The state is against you; therefore, you should hate it."
> (Source H)

These words seemed to be appealing to people who sought to be part of something politically and ideologically significant, a project that goes beyond the borders of Kosovo.

While there was targeting from identity producers, identity-seekers were also active in seeking to become foreign fighters. Though they were not necessarily part of radical religious circles, they were exposed to the narrative of Muslim victimhood, and the war in Syria:

"I would not say I was recruited, I would say, I was betrayed. I told the guy who convinced me to go to Syria that I don't want to be part of Al Qaeda. But they knew where they were sending me by giving me exactly the contacts I got…I've never denied that religion plays an important role in my life. However, it was not religion that made me go to Syria. It was the dictatorship there and my desire to help Syrian people. I became religious after the war, I started to pray, but I've never had sympathy for extremist organizations. I've never had sympathy for Al Qaeda, I knew they had this wrong ideology." (Source A)

> "Various forms of activism have shaped two distinct types of identity producers: local influencers and messengers from the battlefield."

The geography of recruitment: cells and 'radicalisation hubs'

Despite the presence of socio-economic and ideational factors, the most striking finding in studying foreign fighter recruitment in Kosovo is the importance of religious leaders in specific locations. Recruitment, like politics, is local.

Whether intiated by charismatic 'identity producers' or created by gatherings of 'identiy seekers', foreign fighters from Kosovo were products of local cells that emerged around local leaders.

Places where identity producers and identity seekers met played a vital role in the process of foreign fighter mobilisation in Kosovo. Recruitment happened in hidden spaces, as well as in public areas such as bars and cafes.[23] Radical imams delivered sermons and had discussions with their followers afterwards. A few legal and illegal mosques, religious NGOs, and private spaces were the key spots for these meetings. For example, two religious organizations in Kacanik (a town near the border with Macedonia), 'Parimi' and 'Islamic Youth-Kacanik', contributed to foreign fighter mobilisation.[24]

Another type of gathering was a religious summer school that first took place in 2012.[25] The two figures behind it were two of the most prominent radical imams, later

sentenced for recruitment. There were about 50 participants, who had the chance to connect with each other, share ideas, books and other materials.
One participant said:

> "It took place in a dormitory, where we slept and prayed in the mornings, then we had lectures where they were teaching us the Quran… they were telling us that we were not allowed to work for any state structures, such as policy or military; that we should not vote; that women should wear burka…they were telling us about jihad, they were condemning Shia, Christians, Jews, they were also talking against the Islamic community in Kosovo, saying that they are puppets of America." (Source D)

Types of local leadership

Various forms of activism have shaped two distinct forms of local leadership (identity producers): ***local influencers*** and ***messengers from the battlefield***, **as these categories are not mutually exclusive**.

The first type included charismatic radical preachers, who also played the role of recruiters on the "supply side" of the recruitment channel. They used to give religious sermons in and outside mosques and had extensive discussions with their followers about injustices against Muslims and the virtue of jihad. They combined a religious emphasis on "back to the roots" Islam with rejection of the state and official religious institutions in Kosovo.[26] In their speeches, they sought to build an identity-based link between their local followers and a global religious community by creating a sense of belonging, loyalty and religious duty.

Messengers from the battlefield, on the other hand, combined ideological influence on their community with real actions. These were top commanders in the ranks of IS, active in online propaganda from the battlefield and positioned on the "demand side" of the foreign fighter channel from Kosovo. They appeared in videos on social media addressing the audience from the "epicenter" of the war theatre. The first videos in the Albanian language from the conflict zone appeared in 2013. The key messenger from the battlefield, Lavdrim Muhaxheri, took part in a series of propaganda materials, including videos, photographs, and interviews, openly advocating for jihad.

In a late 2013 video, he and another Albanian-speaking man called on ethnic Albanians from all parts of the Balkans to join the war against the Assad-regime and other "infidels".[27] In a January 2014 video, Muhaxhiri speaks surrounded by men holding national passports. He calls on Albanians to join him to fight ***taghut*** and ***kuffar***: "We praise Allah for his blessing and for gathering us together with the lions of IS from all around the world".[28] He threatens all "unbelievers" with slaughter, holding a knife. The video ends with everybody tearing up their Kosovo passports as a sign of loyalty: "We are all Muslims".[29]

Both types acted as authority figures and played vital roles in the recruitment process, as their functions sometimes overlap. The research of individual biographies illustrates the significance of their informal-authority role over time in building IS foreign fighter cells. Though they were not given any authority from the central IS leadership, they gained prominence through interaction with identity seekers. They shaped the identity and enemy perception of those who seek to identify with a greater cause or a broader community.

Mapping the evidence

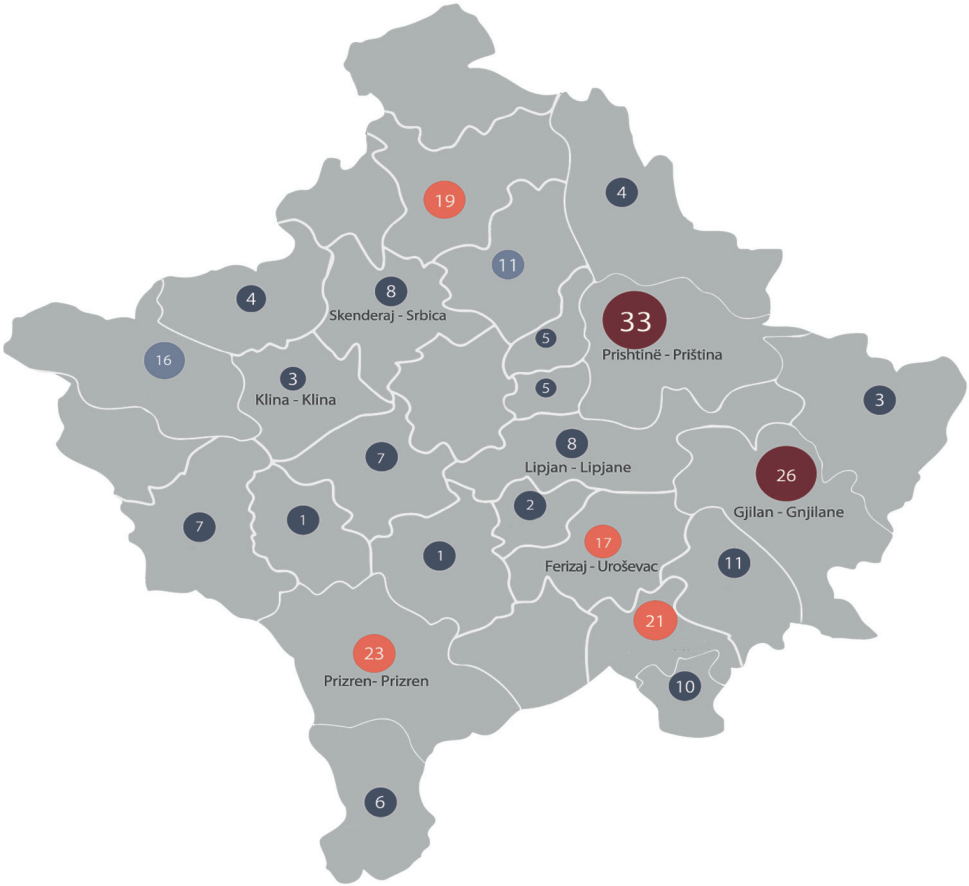
“The map of foreign fighter mobilisation in Kosovo shows that cells emerged where radical imams were particularly active.”

The major source of ideological influence that sparked foreign fighter mobilisation from Kosovo was a circle of radical preachers from Macedonia and Kosovo, who share similar backgrounds of studies in the Middle East and have been particularly active following the war. Though they differ in their ideological focuses and target different audiences, they began to cooperate over time driven by shared goals.[30] The interactions between them determined the trajectory of their activities, and therefore, the creation of radical cells in a few neighboring municipalities that became famous for “producing” foreign fighters after 2012. By December 2016, 54 individuals from the southeastern part of Kosovo travelled to Syria and Iraq.[31]

The map of foreign fighter mobilisation in Kosovo shows that cells emerged where radical imams were particularly active. A few municipalities near the border with Macedonia have disproportionately high mobilisation rate compared to the rest of country.[32] Though all Albanian populated municipalities have been affected by the phenomenon, these spots have made significant contributions to the foreign fighter contingent.

More than 1/3 of the male foreign fighters originate from the following places: Hani I Elezit, Kacanic, Mitrovica, Gjilan and Viti, and the first two have a joined contribution of 30 fighters (but only account for 2.4% of Kosovo’s

Map 1. Number of Kosovo men (253) who travelled to Syria and Iraq by municipality



Source: UNDP. 2017. Understanding Push and Pull Factors in Kosovo: Primary Interviews with Returned Foreign Fighters and their Families.

population).[33] According to 2017 UNDP Report, the southeast municipalities Gjilan, Ferizaj, Kacanik, Hani i Elezit, Viti and Kamenica account for about 35% of those who travelled to the conflict zone.[34]

As mentioned, lack of working institutions, high levels of unemployment, and lack of opportunity to integrate into society are among the structural pre-conditions considered contributing to foreign-fighter mobilisation. Although these factors do not differ greatly from one municipality to another, the southeast part of Kosovo, near the border with Macedonia is generally poorer, underdeveloped, socially and religiously more conservative. These features of the region were used by radical networks to manipulate and mobilize youngsters. Furthermore, identity producers found a suitable ground for radicalisation among young people, who go through identity crises, deal with feelings of hopelessness, feel like losers without any economic prospects for the future.[35] Both propaganda and poverty fit into these gaps and shaped the process of foreign fighter identity building in small local cells.

Conclusion

Individuals from Kosovo play different roles in the process of foreign fighter mobilisation. Local cells have emerged exactly in places where entrepreneurs and protégés have been active. Their targeting efforts have led to the emergence of ”radicalisation hubs“ across Kosovo where smaller or bigger ideological circles have produced clusters of people who travelled to Syria or Iraq individually or in a group between 2012 and 2016. Research and interviews testify to a number of local cells, well connected to one another, where identity producers and identity seekers interacted.

The emergence of foreign fighter cells is the result of a long-term targeted radicalisation and efforts by extremist circles managed by identity producers. Identity producers use collective grievances to enable narratives of victimization, while exploiting a mixture of political ideology and religious beliefs, war memories and ethnic sentiments to mobilize followers and justify violence in the name of a cause. Identity seekers, on the other hand, describe their reasons for traveling to the conflict zone as morally and religiously justifiable.

So while Kosovo’s specific history of conflict does play a part in motivating foreign fighters to travel to Syria, the major effect is from the organisation of local groups. This should be an important lesson for policymakers across the globe to prevent the further rise of extremism. ■

Notes

1 This Strategic Update summarises empirical findings of a forthcoming paper. The full version of the PhD thesis that this research is a part of will be completed by 2020. The dissertation studies foreign fighter streams from the Western Balkans to Syria and Eastern Ukraine.
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4 Barett, Richard. 2017. Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees. The Soufan Center.
5 The field work took place between February and March 2018.
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7 Ibid.
8 Della Porta Donatella and Diani Mario. 2006. Social Movements. An Introduction. Blackwell Publishing.
9 Kosovo Police 2017.
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
12 UNDP. 2017. Understanding Push and Pull Factors in Kosovo: Primary Interviews with Returned Foreign Fighters and their Families.
13 Ibid.
14 From Interviews with representatives of Kosovo Police and Special Prosecution. See also Shtuni, Adrian. 2016. Dynamics of Radicalization and Violent Extremism in Kosovo. United States Institute of Peace.
15 Kursani, Shpend. 2015. Report inquiring into the causes and consequences of Kosovo citizens' involvement as foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq. Kosovar Center for Securiry Studies (KCSS). April, 2015.
16 Ibid. See also Blumi, Isa. 2005. Political Islam among the Albanians: Are the Taliban Coming to the Balkans. KIPRED.
17 Haxhiaj Serbeze and Nabolli, Elvis. 2018. Parents of Albanian ISIS "Martyrs" Abandoned to Grief. Balkan Insight. January 15, 2018.
18 Kursani, Shpend. 2015. KCSS.
19 *Ibid*
20 Nesser, Petter. 2015. Islamist Terrorism in Europe. A History. Oxford University Press.
21 Kraja, Garentina. 2017. The Islamic State Narrative in Kosovo deconstructed one story at a time. KCSS.
22 From an interview with a returnee (ex IS-fighter), taken in February 2018 in Dubrava Prison where the interviewee was serving his sentence for joining IS. He was released in May 2018.
23 From interviews with returnees and representatives of Kosovo Police.
24 Ibid.
25 From an interview with a special prosecutor in charge for key cases of foreign fighters.
26 Kraja, Garentina. 2017. KCSS.
27 Kursani, Shpend. 2015.
28 Telegrafi. 2017.
29 Ibid.
30 Kursani, Shpend. 2015. KCSS.
31 KCSS 2016.
32 Shtuni, Adrian. 2016.
33 Ibid.
34 UNDP. 2017.
35 From an interview with Fahrush Rexhepi, the Dean of the Faculty of Islamic Studies.

THE AUTHOR

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How does a conflict far away speak to men and women in Kosovo? What does this say about the memories of conflict in their own country? In this Strategic Update Asya Metodieva explores these questions through an in-depth analysis of both quantitative and oral sources, shedding light on the interaction of what are termed 'identity producers' and 'identity seekers'.

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