

KOSOVO:

‘LITE’ ISLAM OR A FOREFRONT OF RADICALISM?

Konstantinos Louridas (PhD)
(Security Analyst)

Copyright: www.rieas.gr

Since the battle of Kosovo Polje (the Field of Blackbirds) in June 1389, where the Turkish Sultan had defeated the Serbs and their Christian allies, Ottoman conquest has interrupted the political and socio-economic progress of the Balkan states for hundreds of years and violence has ravaged the Balkans psyche with great regularity. As a result, when they emerged in the late 19th and early 20th century as independent nations, they lagged far behind the political mature and technologically advanced nations of the West. Their strict perseverance to their past and on fighting the same battles over and over again, in the name of nationalism and religion, reminded Europe of her dark history, an era that she needs to move beyond. Unable therefore to understand and to accept history’s symbolic trauma and the scale of brutality and human suffering in the region, West has euphemistically christened Balkans Peninsula ‘Europe’s powder-keg’.

The state of affairs in Kosovo can not be easily explained. The fact that both Serbs and Albanians have strong emotional attachments to the territory and maintained conflicting positions clearly indicates that the roots of this conflict go back some hundreds of years. The “Albanian writers Arshi Pipa and Sami Repishti describe the term Kosovo as a metaphor used by both Serbs and Albanians for the suffering

and injustices inflicted upon both nations throughout their turbulent history”¹. For historians and political analysts those differences took the form of a struggle after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, for two main reasons: a) It is quite difficult to have a coherent perception of the region’s history during the Ottoman occupation and b) it is when both Serbs and Albanians, influenced by a notion of ‘romantic’ nationalism and aspired each one by its own ‘Great idea’, expressed their will for an independent state. Still, it is very important to realize that Albanian nationalism took root later than the rest of the Balkan states and in a different historical context. There were two spoken dialects (the southern Tosk and the northern Gheg), three religions (Muslims, Orthodox Christians & Roman Catholics), and great social inequalities between the rich South and the poor North².

Yet, due to their proximity to the epicenter of Islamic fundamentalism (in relation to Western Europe and North America), the finger has been pointed in Balkans for having served, and continue to do so, as a forefront for Islamist Radicals who wish to elevate their activities in the West and the rest of the world. Muslim volunteers mujahideens that fought the holy war in Bosnia remained there and fought, next to the KLA/UCK, the Serbian military and police forces in the Kosovo war³.

¹ Miranda Vickers, “Kosovo, the Illusive State”, in William Joseph Buckley (ed.) “Kosovo: Contending voices on Balkan interventions”, (Michigan & Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), p. 97.

² It [Albanian nationalism] “appeared at the close of the Russian-Turkish war (1878) and subsequently in the course of the Ottoman Empire’s rapid decay, in response to the need to preserve Albanian territories from the Slavs and Greeks. Albanian nationalism, at this time largely Muslim, started first in response to the need to be free from the dangers posed by the Albanians’ neighbors, who were Christians. Turkish support was an important factor in this. However, those who are today known as the leaders of the Albanian national rebirth, who conceived the spirit of romantic nationalism, have felt the need for separation from Turkey, and began to appeal to history and legends evoking the pre-Ottoman period. It was in this way that they came across and retrieved the national hero of Skenderbeg, who had fought against the Turks. [Fatos Lubonja, “Reinventing Skenderbeg: Albanian Nationalism and NATO Neo-colonialism”, in William Joseph Buckley, *op. cit.*, p. 102.

³ “A joint CIA-Albanian intelligence operation has reported Mujahideen units from at least half a dozen Middle East countries streaming across the border into Kosovo from safe bases in Albania. [...] Albanian intelligence services report an influx of Muslim extremists from a variety of countries into Kosovo. ‘We have information about three or four groups, there are Egyptians, Saudi Arabians,

KLA though denied these accusations, insisting that their struggle against the Serbs is nationalist and not religious. “It’s a clear position; we don’t want anything from these people. Even before they (the US) told us to be careful from them, we’d had this firm understanding”⁴, a senior KLA source said. In spite of this, apparent confirmation of Bin Laden’s activities “came earlier this month when Claude Kader, 27, a French national and self-confessed member of Bin Laden’s Albanian network, was jailed for the murder of a local translator. He claimed during his trial that he had visited Albania to recruit and arm fighters for Kosovo, and that four of his associates were still at large”⁵.

As Marcia Christoff Kurop - a former special correspondent for The Wall Street Journal Europe and U.N. Correspondent for The Christian Science Monitor - argued in an article she wrote in 2001 on Al Qaeda’s Balkan links “the Balkans’ uncharacteristically silent exit from the world stage as the most prominent international hot spot of the last decade belies its status as a major recruiting and training centre of Osama bin Laden’s al Qaeda network. By feeding off the region’s impoverished republics and taking root in the unsettled diplomatic aftermath of the Bosnia and Kosovo conflicts, al Qaeda, along with Iranian Revolutionary Guard-sponsored terrorists, have burrowed their way into Europe’s backyard”⁶.

Through the years, Kosovo’s Albanian population pushed for their independence from Serbia and the creation of a separate sovereign and internationally recognized Muslim state. For James Jatras and Serge Trifkovic, such a decision

Algerians, Tunisians, Sudanese’, said Fatos Klosi, director of the Albanian intelligence service.”. [Chris Stephen, “US tackles Islamic militancy in Kosovo”, in “The Scotsman”, 30/11/1998].

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Chris Stephen, “Bin Laden opens European terror base in Albania”, in the “Sunday Times”, (29/11/1998),

<http://209.85.229.132/search?q=cache:CZ5HuyUEZN8J:www.savekosovo.org/default.asp%3Fp%3D4%26leader%3D0%26sp%3D20+Bin+Laden+opens+European+terror+base+in+Albania+by+Chris+Stephen,&cd=2&hl=el&ct=clnk&gl=gr&client=firefox-a>

⁶ Marcia Christoff Kurop, “Al Qaeda’s Balkan Links”, in “The Wall Street Journal Europe”, November 01, 2001

“would open a Pandora’s Box of geopolitical, legal, moral and security issues, and create a black hole of lawlessness, endemic corruption and jihad-terrorism. Today’s Pristina or Podujevo are reminiscent of Gaza or Ramallah - Saudi-financed mosques, armed men, and roadside rubbish heaps included”⁷.

Nonetheless, to many people, all these seem gibberish, a way to discredit a whole population by linking it to networks of extremists. The word ‘terrorism’ carries a certain emotional weight in Kosovo (for both Serbs & Albanians) and its Albanian population do not endorse terrorism as they themselves have fell victims to Milosevic regime tactics. In addition they have adopted a mild version of Islam and they do not possess almost any of the attributes that a Middle-Eastern Muslim does, let alone an extremist jihadist. They may pray in Mosques, but they also drink alcohol, women do not cover themselves, etc. “Our Islam is ‘lite’ - like Coke Lite or Marlboro Light cigarettes, said Ilmi Krasniqi, an imam at one of five mosques in the eastern town of Gnjilane. This is not Baghdad, and what goes on in Saudi Arabia cannot happen here”⁸.

However, regardless of how far-fetched linking Kosovars with Jihadist may seem, radical Islam has impacted Kosovo's Muslim ethnic Albanians. Here are some characteristic examples:

According to Thomas Gambill, “a former security officer with the OSCE in more than one case, UN bosses of the occupied Serbian province ‘have turned a blind eye’ to dangerous charities – including a local branch of an Islamic fundamentalist group that has been linked to terrorist attacks and/or extremism in countries ranging from Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Afghanistan to Azerbaijan, Albania, and Bosnia – a

⁷ James Jatras & Serge Trifkovic, “U.S. Kosovo Policy is Bad for Israel”, “Perspectives Papers on Current Affairs”, Perspectives 35, (November 6, 2007).

⁸ William J. Kole, “Muslims in Kosovo practise Islam Lite”, in “The Seattle Times” (21/02/2008), http://seattletimes.nwsources.com/html/nationworld/2004192973_kosovoislam21.html.

group that has, in fact, been partially blacklisted by both the Bush administration and the UN since January 2002”⁹.

Caroline Glick, of The Jerusalem Post, quoted John Gizzi who reported in ‘Human Events’ that “the German intelligence service BND had confirmed that the 2005 terrorist bombings in Britain and the 2004 bombings in Spain were organized in Kosovo. The man at the center of the provision of the explosives in both instances was an Albanian, operating mostly out of Kosovo... who is the second ranking leader of the Kosovo Liberation Army, Niam Behzloulzi”¹⁰. Similarly, the Seattle Times noted that “in 2007 a 25-year-old Kosovo native living in the United States - pleaded guilty to charges of conspiring to provide weapons to five other Muslims who allegedly plotted an attack on the U.S. Army's Fort Dix military base in New Jersey”¹¹.

On 17 February 2008, the Provisional Institutions of Self-Government¹² had unanimously adopted the 2008 Kosovo declaration of independence. Fears that awarding part of Serbia’s territory to a violent ethno-religious minority and having a second predominately Muslim state (Bosnia-Herzegovina being the first) in Europe’s doorstep could very easily assist the growth of Islam’s influence in Europe’s Christian club of states rose once again. This decision was firmly supported by the US’s diplomatic machinery, most of European Union’s member states and much of the

⁹ “I had this info [about the charities] all the way back in 2001, but the State Department didn't want to hear about it. And I brought it up at every meeting I went to that included [the U.S.] military, but nada. Many of the American KFOR [Kosovo Force] guys were there for their six months - you know, get the ribbon, do a few good deeds, and go home. And those who confided in me didn't want to rock the boat with their superiors... the thinking was, 'hey, we're here for only six months - let's get the job done as assigned and get home". [Christopher Deliso, “Has the UN let a blacklisted Islamic Charity Roam free in Kosovo?” in “[Balkananalysis.com](http://www.balkananalysis.com)” (10/02/2005), <http://www.balkananalysis.com/2005/10/02/has-the-un-let-a-blacklisted-islamic-charity-roam-free-in-kosovo/>].

¹⁰ Caroline, Glick, “Column One: Kosovo’s stark warning” in the ‘[Jerusalem Post](http://www.jpost.com)’, 21/O2/2008, <http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1203605149058&pagename=JPost%2FJPArticle%2FShowFull>

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Local administrative bodies in Kosovo established by UNMIC under the terms of UNSCR 1244.

international community¹³, as the only possible solution to violence's rising percentages in the region and in pacifying extremists, unfortunately at Serbia's expense.

In the words of Nicholas Burns, "it's our view that we have now [to] act resolutely in the coming weeks...we looked at this very carefully with our European friends. And we said, are we better off supporting a solution in the spring of 2007 or delaying a year or two? We became convinced in looking at it, all of us, that the prospects for violence would be greater if we waited. Because 92 to 94 percent of the people who now live in Kosovo are Albanian Muslims. They have been waiting a long, long time...And so we the international community must act"¹⁴.

International acceptance of Kosovo's independence has set a dangerous precedent for International Relations and a nightmare for all states that face irredentism and minority problems and who do not wish to see a Kosovo-like scenario in their soil. If Albanian Muslims could be granted separation from Serbia then so should the Serbs of Republika Srpska, the Kurds in Turkey, the Basques in Spain, the Arabs in Israel, the Scots in Britain, etc. Indeed, Yasser Abed Rabbo, a top aide to Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas, wasting no time, claimed - on February 20, 2008 - that "Kosovo is not better than us. We deserve independence even before Kosovo,

¹³ "Despite several recent reports suggesting that radical Islam in Kosovo no longer represents a significant security threat, "the beating of a prominent Albanian imam Osman Musliu, chairman of the Islamic Community in Drenas, by Drenica-area Wahhabi Muslims indicates that the challenge within the Muslim community, the real target of the foreign-funded extremists, persist. The attack on Musliu represented the second time in recent months in which Islamic Community members were attacked by extremists, who take their inspiration, and funding, from the austere Wahhabi sect of Islam, official state religion of Saudi Arabia. This and other Muslim states were leading donors to post-war Kosovo, building hundreds of mosques in the process, though their contributions are said to have dried up considerably due to much of the population's disinterest in Islamic activities. Following Kosovo's independence declaration in February of 2008, the reticence of many Muslim states to recognize this status led to a widespread speculation that an element of revenge was justly playing out (! my emphasis)". [Christopher Deliso, "Lingering security concerns in Kosovo, as Iman attacked by Radical Islamist", in "[Balkananalysis.com](http://www.balkananalysis.com)", 13/01/2009, <http://www.balkananalysis.com/2009/01/13/lingering-security-concerns-in-kosovo-as-imam-attacked-by-radical-islamists/>].

¹⁴ <http://politicalmavens.com/index.php/2007/04/22/lantos-jihadists-will-love-us>.

and we ask for the backing of the United States and the European Union for our independence”¹⁵.

Overall, Kosovo should not be taken light-heartedly. It is not only a matter of Albanians self-determination. It goes under the heading of ‘unfinished 19th century irredentism business’ and it is not a child’s play. We cannot impose solutions and we do not have the luxury of approaching things in a black and white manner, thus having arrogant winners and angry losers. A policy of sanctions would not bare any fruits. At a certain point, Europe will be asked to foot the bill in order for democracy to blossom.

¹⁵ http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/7254434.stm.