



# Understanding Local Drivers of Violent Extremism in Kosovo



A PROJECT FROM THE INTERNATIONAL REPUBLICAN INSTITUTE

# Understanding Local Drivers of Violent Extremism in Kosovo

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International Republican Institute  
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*Understanding Local Drivers of Violent Extremism in Kosovo*  
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1225 Eye Street NW, Suite 800  
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info@iri.org

## Executive Summary

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### Approach

- From February to March 2017, the International Republican Institute (IRI) conducted qualitative research with residents from four municipalities in Kosovo – Pristina, Ferizaj, Hani i Elezit, and Kacanik – in order to understand the local drivers of vulnerability to violent extremism in these communities. Three of the four municipalities were selected based on the fact that they represent geographic areas from which a disproportionately high number of European terrorist fighters have been recruited. Pristina was included to offer a contrast to participants who voiced grievances related to regionalism, and because it is the central point of coordination on issues related to violent extremism in Kosovo.
- This report is based on focus group discussions (FGDs) and in-depth interviews with residents of these four target municipalities.
- IRI's approach to preventing violent extremism is anchored in three phases: **understand, inform, and equip**. This report represents the first phase.

### Findings

- The participants generally view democracy in a positive light, and think that it is capable of addressing the governance shortcomings that contribute to violent extremism. However, numerous participants do not believe that *Kosovar* democracy is sufficiently developed to address the rise in radicalism and violent extremism.
- Focus group findings indicate that many of the Kosovars who left the country to become foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq were motivated by a desire to defend Islam against the Assad regime. The focus of these foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) – particularly among FTFs who departed for the Middle East shortly after the war in Syria began – is to defend the Islamic *umma*<sup>1</sup> as opposed to perpetuating radical ideology.
- As conflict continues in the Middle East, many believe that external influences – namely, foreign and foreign educated local imams, international “charities” and associations – are the primary purveyors of radical ideology.
- Several participants noted the lack of moderate religious leaders in the country, which has facilitated Kosovo's susceptibility to imported extremism. Many FGD participants believe that violent extremist organizations and other external groups are exploiting religious illiteracy to facilitate recruitment efforts and provide justification for addressing grievances with violence.
- Many focus group participants believe the media exaggerates the problem of violent extremism.
- Corruption was mentioned in all focus group discussions as a driver of violent extremism. Participants associate the problem of corruption with the government's inability to effectively combat radicalism.
- There is generally greater support for police and security personnel than there is for other government institutions in the fight against violent extremism.

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<sup>1</sup> *Umma* is defined as the whole community of Muslims bound together by ties of religion.

- Unemployment, the lack of responsiveness by local government and the perception of widespread corruption appear to deprive vulnerable segments of Kosovo’s population of their sense of agency and self-worth.

#### Recommendations

- **Recommendation 1:** Increase engagement of elected and appointed officials within their constituencies.
- **Recommendation 2:** Improve transparency by providing citizens with access to information about government decision-making and improved access to government programs.
- **Recommendation 3:** Undertake greater oversight of religious leaders, particularly those who have traveled to the Arabian Gulf for religious education.
- **Recommendation 4:** Increase state support for education institutions to serve as early warning detectors.
- **Recommendation 5:** Build more responsive government policies and programs to prevent and counter violent extremism, and improve coordination between national and local authorities.

## Introduction

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The International Republican Institute (IRI) conducted this research in four municipalities in Kosovo to understand the origins of increased vulnerability to violent extremism in the community.

IRI takes a three-phased approach to preventing violent extremism: **understand, inform, and equip**. Each phase is critical to forging a comprehensive, responsive, governance-focused strategy capable of preventing the conditions that allow violent extremism to spread to take root. IRI’s approach is politically-informed, locally-driven and customized to the unique needs of specific communities.

Drivers of violent extremism stem from several interconnected factors as detailed in *Figure 1*. Much of the existing research on violent extremism focuses exclusively on factors at the macro (global), meso (national and subnational), or micro (individual) levels. However, focusing on just one of these levels risks obscuring the ways in which global, national, sub-national, and individual levels interact with and reinforce each other. In recognition of this fact, the research approach taken by IRI in our “understand” phase uses quantitative and qualitative methods of information gathering, including focus groups, in-depth interviews, and national-level surveys to gather data across multiple levels of analysis. Finally, our regional and thematic knowledge and political expertise allows us to glean unique insights from the research to develop a comprehensive yet nuanced understanding of local drivers of violent extremism.

IRI’s “understand” phase framework includes several levels of analysis to assess “vulnerability,” as well as sources of “resilience.” Vulnerability encompasses the full spectrum of drivers, including social, political and/or economic grievances that cause an individual to support violent extremism. Resilience connotes the ability of individuals to withstand recruitment efforts despite these grievances. Our unique framework allows us to identify not only differences between violent extremists and resilient individuals, but also between “cognitive radicals”—those who agree with

violence but do not perpetrate attacks—and “behavioral radicals”—those who act on their radical ideology with violence. Building off of decades-long survey research experience by IRI’s Center for Insights in Survey Research and Office of Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning, our “understand” phase is customizable and scalable to fit the myriad contexts susceptible to the threat of violent extremism.

This research, the first of the three phases, took place in four municipalities in Kosovo – Pristina, Ferizaj, Hani i Elezit, and Kacanik – in order to understand the local drivers behind increased vulnerability to violent extremism in these communities.

## Methodology

IRI conducted focus group discussions (FGDs) and in-depth interviews in four municipalities in Kosovo in the spring of 2017. IRI worked with a Kosovar research organization to prescreen focus group and interview participants, administer the focus group discussions and in-depth interviews, translate the transcripts into English, and supply initial analysis.

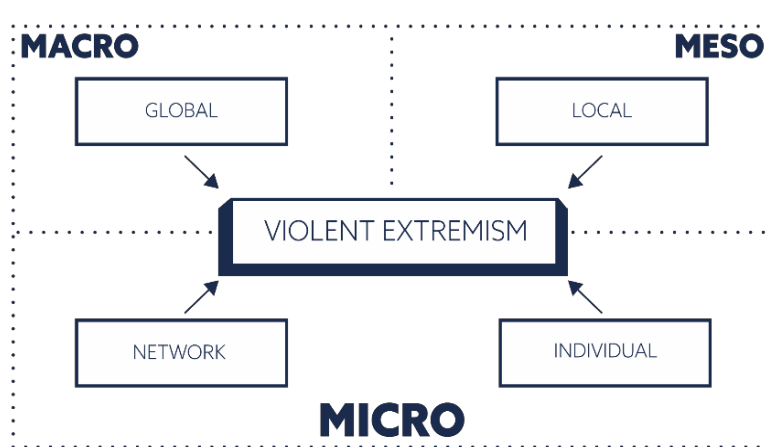


Figure 1: IRI analyzes grievances at multiple levels

We conducted a total of five focus group discussions in Kosovo, each composed of a diverse sample of the population from different sectors or society. In order to gain a better understanding of the micro-dynamics that drive fighters to leave Kosovo to fight in Iraq and Syria, we supplemented the focus group research with 28 in-depth interviews.

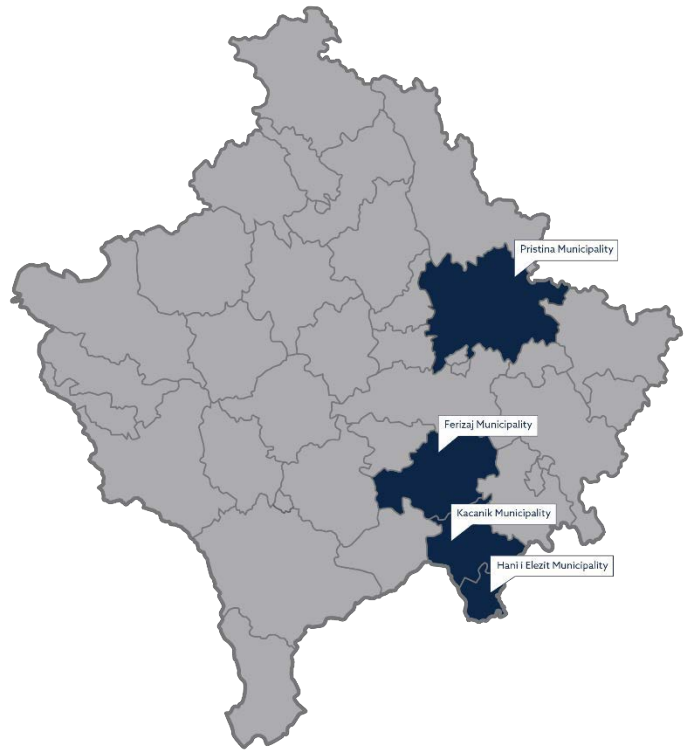
### Focus Group Participants

We used our unique pathways to violent extremism model (Figure 2), a literature review on violent

extremism in Kosovo, and input from our local research partner – the Kosovar Centre for Security Studies (KCSS) – to determine who we wanted to include in our focus groups. A diverse sample of the population of 18-35 year olds was divided based on a pre-screening questionnaire that measured religiosity. Groups were formed based on age, gender and religiosity as determined by the pre-screening questionnaire. The literature review also informed our decision on which municipalities would be our area of focus. Participants were selected from four towns across three municipalities:

1. Ferizaj – Ferizaj Municipality
2. Hani i Elezit – Kacanik Municipality
3. Kacanik – Kacanik Municipality
4. Pristina – Pristina Municipality

These specific municipalities were chosen because a significant number of Kosovar foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq have come from these areas. Based on research conducted by our local partners, we determined that there are approximately 10 fighters from Hani i Elezit, 20 from Ferizaj, 23 from Kacanik, and 43 from Pristina. Many of the FGD participants were university-educated but unemployed, like many Kosovar youths. A majority of known foreign fighters have a moderate formal education, and two-thirds live in average or above average economic circumstances.<sup>2</sup> The age range (18-35) was chosen both because of the susceptibility of this age group to violent extremism and because Kosovo's median age is 28.7.<sup>3</sup>



#### In-Depth Interviews

IRI conducted in-depth interviews to supplement the FGDs and gain deeper insight into the demographics most vulnerable to recruitment and radicalization, those working to prevent and counter violent extremism as well as several returned foreign fighters. The reluctance of returned fighters to speak about their experiences resulted in only three interviewees in this last category. Among those interviewees, only one was directly involved in armed combat; of the other two, one was the wife of a recruit who followed her husband to the Middle East.

The in-depth interviews were divided into three groups:

1. Democratic Governance Actors: Government Representatives, Municipal Officials, and Civil Society Organizations
2. Religious Community Leaders
3. Returned Foreign Fighters

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<sup>2</sup> Shtuni, Adrian. "Dynamics of Radicalization and Violent Extremism in Kosovo." USIP, 2016.

<https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/SR397-Dynamics-of-Radicalization-and-Violent-Extremism-in-Kosovo.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> World by Map. <http://world.bymap.org/MedianAge.html>



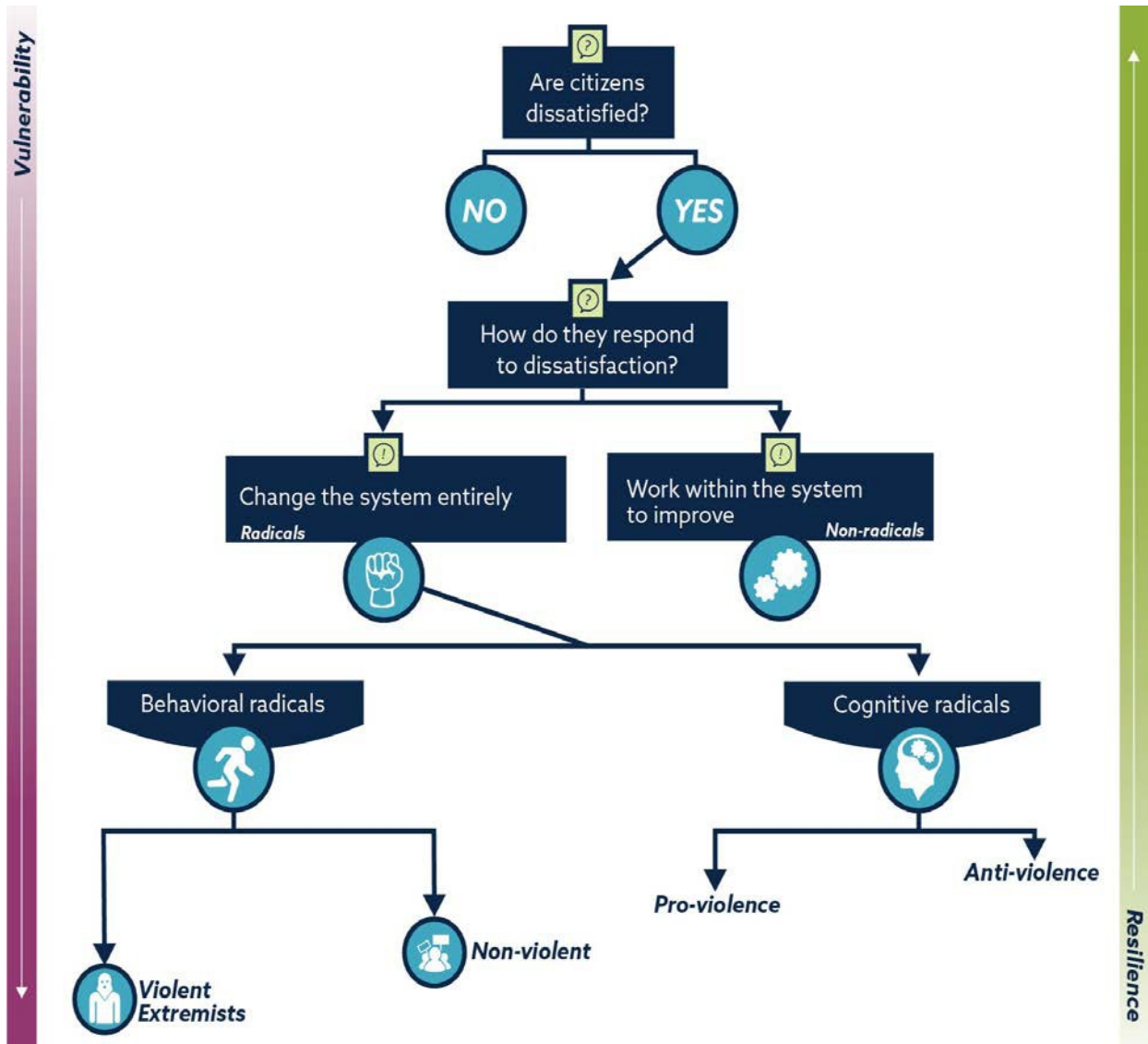


Figure 2: IRI's Pathways to Violent Extremism

## Findings

### Ineffective Democratic Systems

IRI's FGDs uncovered a dichotomy in Kosovars' perceptions of democracy. Participants in all FGDs expressed an overall favorable view of democracy as a system of government. Yet while democracy is generally viewed as an effective way to address local grievances and prevent violence, participants emphasized what they perceive to be the poor quality of Kosovar democracy and the negative interactions they have had with state officials and institutions. Interviews with government officials revealed that even many political leaders believe that the underdevelopment of state institutions and society and the lack of accountability are push factors motivating foreign fighters.



Most participants believe democracy prevents the emergence of violence. For most Kosovars, democracy protects fundamental rights and is the system that will help them continue to strengthen their newly-established nation.

In spite of the mistrust of the national government expressed in all focus groups, there is a higher degree of trust in local institutions in smaller communities within the Kacanik municipality because of their regular interaction with local officials.

Yet while democracy is viewed as a positive system capable of stemming the rise of extremism and preventing violence, FGD participants feel much less confident in their country's democratic capacity. Many expressed frustrations with poor governance on both the national and subnational levels, and do not trust elected and appointed officials to forestall the rise of violent extremism in Kosovo. Many of the participants noted that they also do not trust governmental institutions to address their more immediate problems. Although institutional mistrust was widespread throughout all of the focus groups, we observed a higher degree of trust towards local institutions within the smaller communities of Kacanik and Hani i Elezit. This is likely due to the fact that these smaller communities have more regular contact with the local institutions and the mayor.



“The public system has failed, so we failed in healthcare, in education and there is a great dissatisfaction among the citizens. The politicians in Kosovo are focused on the private sector and those who are in power benefit, because they have destroyed the public sector to profit from the private...I do not have faith in institutions and courts...All these discontents with the system show that someone has the potential to be radicalized.”

-FGD Respondent, Hani i Elezit

FGD participants identified the shortcomings of the state as one of the main reasons that the government is incapable of addressing the problem of violent extremism in Kosovo. From corruption to policy that is unresponsive to citizens' priorities, to government inattentiveness, Kosovars see the government as weak and undemocratic and thus unable to stem the tide of radicalism. In some instances, FGD participants went so far as to blame the ineffectual government *for* violent extremism.



“The main cause [of violent extremism] is the state because of corruption and unemployment. If corruption and unemployment were not a problem, we would not have these 300 people involved in the conflict of Syria and Iraq. [The government] blames the imams, but unemployment is the main problem for fighting the violent extremism. If the state had the will, it could solve this problem by enforcing laws and working the right way.”

FGD Participant, Hani i Elezit

The in-depth interviews conducted with government officials supported the idea that the state is having difficulty addressing the issue of violent extremism. They identified the problem as deriving from a lack of coordination and collaboration in drafting and implementing the national strategy against violent extremism between the central and local levels of government in Kosovo. For example, municipal officials both in Kacanik and Hani i Elezit stated that they were never consulted by the national government while the “National Strategy against Violent Extremism that leads to Terrorism” was being drafted. These municipalities have formulated their own action plans to prevent and counter violent extremism, creating a disconnect between the national and local level strategies to prevent violent extremism.

Interviewees offered strong criticism of the proposed national strategy, arguing that the strategy does not take into consideration the significant budgetary commitment required for successful implementation. It was felt that this inordinately affects the smaller municipalities, requiring them to rely on alternative sources of funding and support from different organizations in order to implement the national strategy. Centrally, there are disagreements about the allocation of donor funding for efforts to counter and prevent violent extremism. Municipal officials believe it is crucial for local organizations to be the main implementing partners of these projects as opposed to organizations from other countries or local groups based in different municipalities. The interviewees pointed out that local empowerment can strengthen efforts to prevent and counter violent extremism, as local citizens will maintain ownership of the projects and thus be more willing to buy into new policies and projects.

Interviews with government officials revealed the pressing need for more coordination and communication between the national and local government officials.

Participants perceived the government as counterproductive in addressing the drivers of violent extremism, and thus they see the government’s inattentiveness as one of the drivers of violent extremism. Many FGD participants expressed frustration about exclusion from the governance system and noted that they had no role in the decision making process in their own community.

Beyond expressing generic mistrust in the ability of municipal institutions to address basic needs, many FGD participants claimed that politicians misunderstand and mischaracterize violent extremism. Communities such as Hani i Elezit that have been characterized as “hotbeds for

radicalism” are concerned that this stigmatizes their community as dangerous without addressing the real problems. FGD participants described this as an attempt on the part of the government to distract from the scandals and corruption that plagues the government.



“The democracy in Kosovo is selective. For example, Islam is more used by politicians to take away attention from other scandals. The problem is being exaggerated more than it should be.”

-FGD Participant, Hani i Elezit

### Media Distorts the Problem

While participants acknowledged the issue of violent extremism in Kosovo, many said the media was exaggerating the problem. Participants claimed that journalists benefit from sensationalizing the issue of Islamic terrorism. They stated that there are many types of extremism in Kosovar society, but that the media is overly-focused on religious extremism and perpetuate the attitude that associates terrorism with Muslims. The issue of labels and prejudice based on religion and appearance was also described as being perpetuated by the media. Interviews with religious leaders revealed that many interviewees had experienced verbal abuse – mainly through social media – but have not experienced physical violence directly.

Participants in the religious conservative group emphasized the distinction between violent extremism and religion, and do not believe that Islam condones violence. One participant claimed that the media “are exaggerating the problem and associating it with Islam.” Participants in another group from the Hani i Elezit argued that rumors of violence are spread by the media because of the city’s reputation. Regarding the media, participants emphasized the need for news reports to focus on fighting terrorism rather than Islam itself.



“Our town is small and quiet, even though the media [claims that there is an] alarming situation, our youth have been labeled as foreign fighters. This is not a correct thesis but the media have increased this phenomenon.”

-FGD Respondent, Hani i Elezit

Aside from assertions that the media is exaggerating the problem of Islamic extremism, participants also contended that the media engages in selective reporting and uses offensive language toward

certain groups. From reporting false accounts to not reporting real events for political reasons, there is a high level of mistrust in the media's ability to report on anything, let alone the realities of violent extremism. One participant told a story of how the media did not report on a hospital being demolished because the perpetrator was a powerful person acting in retaliation for the death of his brother due to negligent doctors.

When discussing democracy and non-violent methods of addressing problems, one participant claimed that democracy allows for excessive openness of the media and freedom of speech, and that this is often used in a negative way to incite conflict. Participants also expressed the belief that violence is the only way to get the attention of politicians and thus achieve change. This idea was reinforced by the view that the media selectively chooses not to report on violent protests in other democratic countries.

### **Unemployment and Lack of Economic Opportunity**

Unemployment was cited in all FGDs as the most significant push factor toward violent extremism. Although unemployment is one of Kosovo's most serious challenges, there is no clear causal correlation between unemployment and radicalization or recruitment in existing research beyond the perceptions shared by FGD participants.<sup>4</sup> It was widely believed that the individuals who joined the conflicts of Syria and Iraq come from poor socioeconomic backgrounds or are unemployed.

Participants in all the FGDs noted a lack of economic opportunities and chances for average citizens to fulfill their own goals. This response was especially common within the smaller communities of Kacanik and Hani i Elezit, who described their daily lives as mundane and lacking leisure or social activities. Many residents (particularly women) highlighted that there are high levels of unemployment despite many citizens having received university degrees. Higher education comes with the expectation of employment, thus creating unmet expectations and discontent within the population.



“Somebody who is well educated goes to Syria only because there is poverty and unemployment [here]. One of my classmates who is there, was a really good student, he did not even miss a class while we were in school.”

-FGD Respondent, Kacanik

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<sup>4</sup>Shtuni, Adrian. “Dynamics of Radicalization and Violent Extremism in Kosovo.” USIP, 2016.

<https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/SR397-Dynamics-of-Radicalization-and-Violent-Extremism-in-Kosovo.pdf>

Participants viewed corruption as the primary reason for the poor state of the economy and lack of opportunities. Poverty, unemployment and poor economic conditions were consistently cited as a key push factor to individuals joining violent extremist groups. There was a widespread belief that recruiters capitalize on impoverished areas by promising a better life and financial opportunities for joining extremist groups. Poverty was also cited as a justification for why an educated person would go to Syria.

Youth participants in particular feel that they are not provided with space to contribute to society. In Kacanik and Hani i Elezit, participants discussed ways that unemployment and poverty allow people to be easily seduced by VE recruiters. For example, one participant stated that the sense of not having a direction in life leaves unemployed youth particularly susceptible to fraudulent information. Another participant explained how poor economic conditions led someone he knows to go to Syria because he was deceived and “told that in Syria a good life was waiting for him.” The general view was that when people lack options for financial security they are more vulnerable to recruitment by violent extremist groups.

Participants in the youth group also argued that unemployment and poverty make people feel devalued and depressed, and that this leads them to seek validation through religion. They reasoned that when people become disillusioned with a system that cannot serve their needs they may turn toward extremism to give them a sense of self-worth. They also claimed that if the state had the will, it could solve the problem of recruitment to violent extremist organizations by enforcing laws and providing solutions to problems like unemployment.

### **Lack of Youth Activities**

Both government and non-government community leaders we interviewed pointed to the lack of recreational activities for young people especially in the municipalities of Kacanik and Hani i Elezit. These interviewees noted that youth are relatively inactive due to the lack of proper recreational infrastructure such as educational facilities, parks and playgrounds, theaters and other extracurricular options. There also appears to be a lack of initiative from the central government to invest in these municipalities and their development of positive outlets for youth.

FGD participants claimed that, due to the lack of youth centers, sports activities and other extracurricular activities, young people in their communities tend to resort to the internet (mainly social media) on a regular basis to occupy their time. Social media sites seem to be the most actively

Youth will go somewhere to overcome boredom and find opportunities for fulfilling their ambition. When the community lacks these positive outlets, youth sometimes turn to violent extremist organizations.

used for the VE recruitment process. Different social media platforms are used to contact people directly and spread information not only by direct communication but also through different pages promoting violent extremist ideologies. YouTube has also played a significant role in spreading violent extremism through videos and propaganda.



“There is the lack of education, sports, and cultural activities. In our municipality we do not have a youth center and this is very important for every young person within the community where they live.”

-FGD Respondent, Hani i Elezit

According to the interviews, because of the limited outlets available to youth, many young Kosovars feel that they lack an outlet to express their interests and pursue their ambitions. Many FGD participants identified this deficiency as a contributing factor priming young people to embrace radical ideology.



“There is no youth center for activism. Disengagement makes them join religious causes and deal with them.”

-FGD Respondent, Kacanik

#### **Foreign Influence – Importing Radicalism**

The above factors parallel the findings of IRI’s Tunisia research,<sup>5</sup> suggesting that poverty and a dearth of outlets for young people are key drivers of extremism. We also noted several elements unique to the Kosovar context, including the influence of foreign mosques and NGOs and support for the Syrian people against Assad.

When asked about drivers of violent extremism and the source of radical ideologies, many FGD participants identified foreign influence as a primary factor. From foreign-based “charities” and associations to foreign-funded mosques and religious education, participants noted that radical ideologies—particularly those stemming from Islamist extremism—were new and imported. Interviews with government officials also referred to the work of some “international organizations” right after the conflict in Kosovo as a contributing factor to VE.

Representatives from the government and local officials argued that the work of these organizations should have been supervised as they came from foreign countries such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt and other Arab states. The government officials claimed that nongovernmental organizations masquerading as humanitarian organizations have spread violent extremist ideologies.

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<sup>5</sup> “Violent Extremism Assessment-Beja.” International Republican Institute, 2017

[http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/2017-6-1\\_vea\\_report\\_-\\_beja.pdf](http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/2017-6-1_vea_report_-_beja.pdf)

Participants shared their view that Kosovars became susceptible to the influx of radical ideology during the Balkan Wars, when radical ideologies first gained a foothold in the country and the prospect of leaving to fight a religious war was somewhat normalized. However, most participants acknowledged that the ideological arguments and recruitment tactics used by ISIS and other violent extremist organizations in Syria and Iraq differed significantly from the period during the Balkan Wars. The advent of the internet revolutionized recruitment, while on the messaging side, the contemporary emphasis on establishing a global caliphate differs from the ethno-religious focus that dominated during the Balkan wars. Yet the target population for recruitment during the current ISIS-led recruitment phase in Kosovo seems to be targeting those who are less religious. Most of the religious leaders interviewed noted that they have never been approached by any extremist groups or networks.

According to the focus group participants, in the country's early phases of development a decade ago, many foreign organizations and religious associations moved into Kosovo with limited scrutiny or oversight. FGD participants in the south identified this period as the time when many nefarious actors established a base in the country from which to recruit young Kosovars to join the fight in Syria and Iraq.



**“At the beginning, when organizations from the Arabic countries came to Kosovo, nobody looked at their work and let them do everything they wanted here, but later they started to look and control the steps of these organizations.”**

**-FGD Respondent, Ferizaj**

FGD participants specifically cited the influx of imams and the establishment of NGOs with “different missions.” A mosque in Ferizaj was highlighted by two participants as having received financial support from Arab states. Imams from Macedonia were also mentioned as a source of radical Islamism in Kosovo. While these sentiments were referenced intermittently in the southern municipalities, the FGD in Pristina was particularly adamant about the new reality of imported radicalism and the lack of oversight by the government.

Participants in all FGDs doubted the state's capacity to respond effectively to violent extremism and the spread of extreme Islamic ideology. With consistent references to “outside organizations” and “foreign money,” there is a strong perception that external forces are winning an ideological war in Kosovo. As these foreign organizations build mosques and provide charitable donations to many in the country, some believe that these contributions allow these donors to gain influence over local imams, and encourage them to preach in a certain way or join the fight. FGD participants also expressed the view that there must be greater oversight of the content of sermons delivered in local



mosques throughout the country. Such arguments added to the sense that Kosovars are looking to the government to step in and preserve the so-called traditional religion of Kosovo.



“Our imams keep the traditional religion, and the drivers [of violent extremism] come from the organizations that were not controlled by the government.”

-FGD Respondent, Pristina

#### Desire to Fight Assad – Defend Islam

The phenomenon of Kosovars traveling to Iraq and Syria to fight is not perceived as completely negative in the Kosovar context. The Syrian war is seen as having started as a war for freedom that was coopted by terrorist groups. Some Kosovars think of foreign fighters as freedom fighters who traveled to Syria for humanitarian reasons.



“Extremism is on trend, but what happened to those who joined at the beginning, it was said they will be ambassadors of the state, exactly like the America helped in the case of Kosovo.”

-FGD Respondent, Hani i Elezit

According to participants, at the beginning of the Syrian war, the Kosovar Minister of Foreign Affairs declared his support for the Arab Spring and the Syrian opposition, and even encouraged imams to join the fight with the Syrian opposition. Previously, Kosovar citizens who went to Syria to fight alongside the Syrian opposition were seen as “ambassadors of the state.” Yet in recent years, opinions of the war have changed, and Kosovars are unsure how to define foreign fighters. Many participants believe that people who left Kosovo to fight went “with different intentions, mainly good ones,” and were not all comfortable with labeling the young people who went to Syria as extremists.



“I do not know if it is extremism to fight in a foreign war, but if you join a terrorist organization, it can be called extremism.”

-FGD Respondent, Hani i Elezit

The interviewees uniformly do not support the decision of some Kosovars to join the foreign conflicts of Syria and Iraq for the purpose of violent extremism. The primary reason for this is that they do not see the conflict in Syria and Iraq as a “holy” or religious war but as a conflict being fought for the political and economic interests of different factions in the Middle East. Interviewees strongly disagreed with the notion that Islam promotes violence and extremism.

Religious community leaders see religion as having an important role in Kosovo, as it serves as a means of reconciliation in this previously war-torn country. All of the interviewees asserted that they do not want to see religious tolerance to be threatened, as they consider this as one of the defining values of the Kosovar culture.

Religious leaders in Kosovo see the conflicts in Iraq and Syria as a political and economic fight – not a holy war.

### Returned Foreign Fighters

IRI and KCSS conducted three in-depth interviews with individuals who had participated in some way in the war in Iraq and Syria. These three individuals represent different backgrounds and had different experiences in the Middle East conflict. The motivating factors that drove each one to travel abroad are quite different and therefore do not fit one particular category or profile.

One of the interviewees was a woman and the other two were men. While their backgrounds differed in many respects, two of the interviewees – the female and one male – experienced loss and tragedy within their families. The female interviewee lost both of her parents by the age of 15. The father of one of the male interviewees was tortured by the Serbian army during the war in Kosovo, and his mother passed away shortly thereafter.

Both of the male interviewees stressed that one of the main motives that pushed them to join the conflict in Syria and Iraq was the desire to help the Syrian people in their struggle against the Assad regime.



“Assad did too many things. One of my wishes was to overthrow him.”

- Interviewee, Returned Foreign Fighter



“In the beginning there was a calm situation, there was no conflict between the different groups like ISIS and we were only being attacked by Assad.”

-Interviewee, Returned Foreign Fighter

According to this interview, his view of the war began to take shape in 2013 and early 2014 when he began to watch online videos about the war in Syria and Iraq. He said that he saw women and children killed by Assad’s regime and this made him even more compelled to join the conflict in Syria.

The sense of injustice this footage inspired was not merely on behalf of the innocent civilians in Syria and Iraq. One interviewee noted that he felt unjustly treated by his *own* government and societal institutions in spite of his following the rules and doing the right thing. He remarked that joining a violent extremist organization gave him purpose. The interviewee expressed frustration that despite the fact that he had obeyed the rules, attended university, the system had failed him.



“This state does not know your potential, and you get angry when you finished the university with all the highest grades and those that barely finished the studies are working in consulates, in ministries, or other places... and you [think] that something is not right with you. And in this stage of revolt, they [recruiters] find these people and tell you that you are useful for another cause.”

-Interviewee, Returned Foreign Fighter

One of the interviewees attributed his decision to participate in extremist activities to his own religious ignorance.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> A *hadith* is a collection of traditions containing sayings of the prophet Muhammad that, with accounts of his daily practice (the *Sunna*), constitute the major source of guidance of Muslims apart from the Koran.



“The most important thing is that I had to read more about Islam. If I read more about Islam, and first asked my parents, and see the context, I would see that it is not my obligation to go [to Syria]. When I returned back from there, I started reading and learning more. I saw people that used fake hadiths, which in Iraq’s war are around 100,000 fake hadiths. And the part with black flag, I read it is a fake hadith. I do not blame anybody; I just blame myself.”

-Interviewee, Returned Foreign Fighter

While the male interviewees emphasized both the crimes of the Assad regime and the sense of injustice the experienced living under the Kosovar state, the female interviewee merely cited her religious beliefs as her reason for traveling to Syria.



“I decided to go to Syria because it is the obligation of my religion. If you’re practicing Islam you feel better when you help people and it is obligated by Islam to help others if they need it. No one pushed me to join in the conflict in Syria and Iraq, not even my husband.”

-Interviewee, Returned Foreign Fighter

While in Syria, this female interviewee noted that she met many other women, a number of whom came from other states in the Balkans, including Albania and Macedonia. Her overall experience as a woman living under the ISIS caliphate was positive. While she described her first few months in Syria as “quite good,” she noted that as the different extremist groups began to fight among themselves, life got worse. Yet despite certain hardships, her reasons for leaving Syria were because of the draconian policies for widows of fighters.



"After a couple months, the situation was more difficult. The reason why I decided to come back was hearing how Kosovar women lost their husbands in the battle, and after 40 days in Caliphate they were then obligated to re-marry other jihadists whom they did not know. I was scared if my husband died during the conflict, because of course I will refuse to get married again with other jihadists. Another problem during the conflict was that everyone changed because of fear of the bombings; during that time it was the war between all extremist groups in Syria and Iraq."

-Interviewee, Returned Foreign Fighter

### Recommendations for Preventing Violent Extremism from Participants

#### Increased Community Activities

When asked how to prevent violent extremism, participants most frequently recommended increased community and youth activities, more religious education, a larger role for religious leaders, and expanded employment opportunities. Focus group participants suggested that alternative outlets for youth to become involved in the community would make them less vulnerable to recruitment by extremist groups. The development of cultural and sports activities and facilities such as libraries or football fields were cited as ways to increase citizens' interaction and engagement in the community. Some FGD participants noted that the complacency and a lack of sense of purpose may contribute to "pull factors" that increase the effectiveness of recruitment.



"Do not let youth [sit around] because the organizations recruit them, offer them possibilities or different alternatives."

-FGD Respondent, Kacanik

## Religious Literacy

Religious illiteracy was also identified as a driver of violent extremism. Participants recommended increasing religious education in schools and increasing the role of religious leaders in directing religious education in the community. The Islamic Community of Kosovo (BIK) and other religious leaders can play an important role by expanding the framework for religious education, as well as serve as early warning mechanisms. Some were of the opinion that schools are best equipped to provide religious education in order to control the messages and activities in which students participate. Teachers are theoretically in the strategic position to act as early warning detectors for radical behavior. Participants (particularly in the southern cities of Kacanik, Ferizaj, and Hani i Elezit) believed that religious education in schools should at least be an option so that students can direct their questions to credible authorities. Participants across the focus groups agreed that increasing opportunities for religious education would “give stability to youth” and make them less vulnerable to recruitment.

Participants also emphasized the need for religious leaders to play a larger role in policy implementation as it relates to violent extremism and responses to radicalization. Throughout the focus groups, participants referred positively to the work done by imams in trying to correct false teachings as a way of combatting radicalization in their communities. Participants think that the state has handled radicalization ineffectively, and asserted multiple times that imams are best placed to deal with this issue.



“Imams could have convinced these people not to join the conflict in Syria and Iraq, but the state has stopped the imams from talking about this subject.”

-FGD Respondent, Hani i Elezit

Participants maintained that imams are not given the necessary space to intervene with youth and vulnerable populations. One participant explained that the phenomenon of violent extremism is an ideological problem that can only be addressed with ideology presenting an argument with facts from the Quran and *Sunna*, because recruiters say, “there is no religious [basis for VE], but religious elements” are interpreted out of context of Islam to justify violent extremism. It was also noted that the state has perpetuated stereotypes in their approach to combatting extremism, and that this has perpetuated a negative discourse “[b]ased on beards and trousers.” Participants also complained that the government, Islamic community of Kosovo (BIK), and imams do not take a unified approach to extremism. Rather than working together to address the problems, they are discussing “whether short trousers are allowed, or about the hijab.” Participants also expressed a perception that there is societal bias against the BIK. Participants believe that conservative Muslims are prejudged as a result of lack of understanding about Islam.

## Greater Economic Opportunity

Muslim participants felt that non-Muslims blamed them for the rise in violent extremism, and argue that extremism is primarily the result socioeconomic problems. Participants recommended that improving welfare and expanding opportunities for employment, the government could address the problem more effectively. They noted the social pressure—particularly on young males—to provide for their families, and the fact that their inability to secure jobs creates tension within homes and communities. The participants believe that if they were able to obtain jobs their “parents would be happier” and would not need to worry about them “getting caught in different phenomena.” Participants blamed the government for not creating better life conditions for them, and felt that this was a major cause for people to seek opportunities elsewhere, including with extremist organizations.

## Recommendations

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The recommendations listed below are drawn from the primary grievances identified in the focus group discussions and the in-depth interviews. They do not directly correlate with the suggested solutions mentioned in the FGDs, but those suggestions were taken into account. These recommendations are intended for national and local government officials as well as domestic and international implementers.

- **Recommendation 1:** Increase engagement of elected and appointed officials with their constituencies.

Given the widespread dissatisfaction with the way that democracy has developed in Kosovo, IRI recommends that government officials increase their efforts to engage with their communities and enhance their communication with constituents. Government officials should schedule regular events, such as town hall meetings, and provide easily accessible channels for their constituents to express grievances and raise issues within their community.

Special emphasis should be placed on government programs that promote employment, skills training, and vocational preparedness. These initiatives need to be widely advertised and citizens should be informed about such programs when they interact with administrative officials. Constituents must be reassured that their voices are being heard and leaders need to demonstrate that they are committed to addressing the issues of concern to citizens.

The government should also work with local civil society organizations in order to provide innovative solutions to youth activities and improved community cohesion. The government should increase opportunities for youth to engage in social activities and encourage them to play a larger role in improving their communities and living conditions.

- **Recommendation 2:** Increase transparency by providing citizens with access to information about government decision-making and improving access to government programs.

The government should create more transparent decision-making mechanisms ensuring information is more accessible to citizens. The government should also increase its efforts to combat nepotism and corruption, in order to improve the economic conditions and opportunities for jobs. Many educated people become aggrieved when they cannot obtain jobs in their chosen fields, and thus become vulnerable to alternative measures for



improving their socio-economic conditions. Anti-corruption efforts will help stem the tide of disillusioned and subsequently vulnerable unemployed university graduates.

- **Recommendation 3:** Greater oversight of religious leaders, particularly those who have traveled to the Arabian Gulf for religious education.

In accordance with the national counterterrorism law, the Kosovar government must take appropriate steps to ensure that extremist organizations and individuals are not infiltrating Kosovar mosques. Our research indicates that foreign influence correlates with the spread of radical ideology in Kosovo, and must be addressed through effective oversight.

- **Recommendation 4:** Enhance state support for educators to serve as early warning sign detectors.

Government and education professionals should ensure that counseling and other support is available for students exhibiting troubling behavior. Teachers should be trained to identify warning signs and learn how to engage at-risk students. Educators are strategically-placed to serve as early warning detectors, but they need to be better equipped with the resources and lines of communication. Women in particular should be trained to serve as early warning systems, as their networks in both the education system and in the community can play a key role in identifying troubling behavior if provided with sufficient channels to notify authorities.

- **Recommendation 5:** Build more responsive policies and programs to prevent and counter violent extremism, and improve coordination between national and local authorities.

The Islamic Community of Kosovo (BIK) should be involved in policy design and the development of prevention programs. Additionally, the family members of foreign fighters should be included in returnee reintegration programs. As fighters return, it is important that the government has a strategy in place that allows the option for rehabilitation and reintegration rather than just imprisonment. Prison often cements and spreads radicalization, allowing extremist ideologies to spread to other inmates and for prisoners to unite around shared grievances. Families of foreign fighters can work with the government to provide nuanced insights on the challenge of reintegration. Family members can also support the government by collaborating to provide a support system for returnees as they go through the process of deradicalization.

Both national and local governments must work together to align their strategies to prevent and counter violent extremism to develop complementary approaches that address the underlying issues. Specifically, government personnel must coordinate their enforcement measures to share information and streamline processes.



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International Republican Institute  
(202) 408-9450 Phone  
info@iri.org  
www.IRI.org | @IRI\_Polls