

Remarks by:

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Conference on

VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN THE WESTERN BALKANS:

External Influences and Local Drivers

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Conditions

The first step in solving a problem is acknowledging that the problem exists. Some politicians in the Western Balkans do not acknowledge the problem of Islamic radicalization. What are the facts?

A recent report by the US Institute of Peace found that the Western Balkans are a prime source of foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria. 314 Kosovar nationals have traveled to Iraq and Syria since 2012. Kosovo and Macedonia are among the European countries most effected by radicalization according to population size. The Skopje municipality is in the world's top five locations for volume and proportion of Islamic State fighters per capita.

Just look around. In Cair, across the street from the US Embassy in Skopje, we see many women wearing a hijab and men sporting the Salafist trademarks of a long beard with the upper lip clean shaven and pants above the ankles.

I have worked in the Western Balkans for nearly thirty years. Communism suppressed religiosity. Albanians have always been staunchly pro-American and European. Nationalism and ethnic identity – not religion – were typically tools for mobilization.

How did radicalization occur over the past five years?

External Influences

Sustained and targeted investments by various Islamic countries that use religion as a foreign policy tool, aggressively promote the primacy of religious identity and a conservative Islamic lifestyle. Foreign sponsors cultivate pan-Muslim identity rooted in principles of brotherly solidarity and fueled by anger over aggression against Sunnis in Syria.

Foreign countries in the Gulf States and especially Turkey have lavishly funded activities and political parties aimed at spreading Islamism. TIKA, Turkey's Cooperation and Coordination Agency, has played a prominent role financing the restoration of Ottoman structures and cultural facilities. Tika often provides cash grants; there is no banking record. It supports a network of mosques, faith-based organizations, and Koranic madrassas. TIKA provides educational scholarships for youth to study at religious institutions in the Middle East and Turkey. It seeks to mold a new identity based on political Islam, inspired by the Ummah as a supranational Islamic community.

Turkey and Qatar have funded political parties. BESA should be transparent about its financial records. Where did the money come from for extensive activities that enabled BESA to gain 5 seats in recent elections? BESA is not a genuine Macedonian political party. It is a branch of Turkey's Justice and Development Party (AKP), which functions like a branch of the Muslim Brotherhood.

In addition to promoting Orthodox extremism, does Russia support Islamist groups in order to stoke tensions and exploit political fissures in a traditionally pro-American region? Russia is notorious for using proxies to destabilize countries in a bid to promote its nationalist and pro-Serb agenda.

Europe and the United States also bear responsibility. European identity is elusive. Locals are susceptible to radicalization because they feel rejected by Europe. The denial of visa free travel for Kosovars exacerbates frustration and isolation.

The United States is also partly to blame. Americans and Albanians have a special bond. However, Washington has neglected the Western Balkans over the past eight years. America's diminished role has created a gap, filled by extremism.

Local Drivers

USIP research finds that economic deprivation and lower levels of education are not main contributors to violent extremism. Rising and frustrated expectations are more common contributors.

Other factors include on-line radicalization and local imams preaching messages of hatred that contradict the noble teachings of Islam as a religion of peace.

Citizens have little trust in government institutions, which they perceive as largely corrupt, self-interested and incapable of addressing pressing issues for ordinary citizens.

Does Macedonia have a government yet after nearly two years of political infighting? Why was Europe's Bektasi center built in downtown Tirana? Why is Albania's Prime Minister Edi Rama overly friendly with Turkey's President Tayyip Erdogan, dancing at the wedding of Tayyip's daughter. How were Turkish concerns able to acquire Kosovo's airport and Kosovo Energy Distribution Services at bargain prices? Where did the money go?

Response

The initial response focused on law enforcement. Measures were adopted to criminalize participation in foreign conflicts and crack down on recruiting cells and returnees. More recently, national action plans and donor support emphasize prevention. Efforts also focus on reintegration both within prisons and outside.

Community response is critical. Civil activism and community-based programs raise awareness and strengthen the community's immunity to violent extremism. Kosovo, Macedonia, and Albania have developed national action plans. Through this conference, we want to highlight lessons learned and best practices in their national action plans and lay the ground for a regional strategy. Techniques for preventing violent extremism in the Western Balkans can be exported to Southeast Europe and beyond.

This conference explores the dynamics of radicalization, external influences, and local drivers. We have blue ribbon panels to explore these issues and a distinguished audience as discussant.

Columbia University welcomes you and offers best wishes for constructive conference.

Thank you.