



Balkan Jihadists

The Radicalisation and Recruitment of
Fighters in Syria and Iraq

March 2016

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Project scope

The regional and country analysis pieces have been produced by Balkan journalists as part of the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network, BIRN, *Strengthening Media Reporting and Public Understanding of Extremism in the Western Balkans* project.

The project is entirely focused on the radicalisation and recruitment of jihadi fighters for the conflicts in Syria and Iraq in the following Balkan states: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia.

The project also envisages additional reports – news, analysis, interviews – all published online on BIRN’s portal Balkan Insight.

BIRN recognises other political and religion-based extremist groups are present in the region and wishes to stress that this project is focused on analysing just one; violent Islamic jihadism.

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A note on terminology:

BIRN has chosen to use the terms ‘jihadism’ and ‘jihadist’ to refer to Islamic extremists who have advocated violence and acts of terrorism or fought with jihadi groups in Syria and Iraq such as Islamic State, ISIS, and Al Qaeda-affiliated Al Nusra.

The use of those terms should not be confused with the concept of ‘jihad’ – that can refer to all kinds of non-violent, religion-inspired personal, spiritual or political struggles.

Albania Faces ‘Jihadi Fighters in the Shadows’ Threat

While the state grapples with returnee fighters and regulating mosques, experts say youngsters are still being radicalised online and warn of potential ‘lone wolf’ attacks.

By Aleksandra Bogdani, BIRN, Tirana

“That mosque is so near Tirana but we went there a full eleven years after it was built. This shows that a part of the responsibility [for radicalisation] lies with the community,” says Ylli Gurra, Mufti of Tirana and Islamic Community of Albania official.

Gurra was speaking to the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network, BIRN, about his November visit to the mosque in Mezez, a village on the outskirts of the capital.

The mosque had been linked to the radicalisation and recruitment of Albanian fighters in Syria for some years, yet he was the first official from the Islamic Community of Albania, ICA, to step foot inside the building.

Its imam, Bujar Hysa, is currently standing trial with eight others at the Serious Crimes Tribunal in Tirana. All are accused of distributing violent jihadist propaganda and recruiting as many as 70 Albanian jihadi fighters. All nine deny the charges.

The Mezez mosque is one of about ten mosques that operate outside ICA authority. Unlike the majority of Albania’s 727 mosques, these mosques have rejected the leadership of ICA-appointed imams.

The government estimates that since 2012 more than 100 Albanians, mostly young men, have joined jihadi groups fighting in Syria. Almost all joined Al Qaeda-affiliate Al Nusra or ISIS. The majority were, according to security service sources, radicalised and recruited in mosques outside ICA control.

Bringing mosques under ICA control has been a top priority. The ICA, which is partly state-funded, represents Albania’s Sunni Muslim population and belongs to the Hanafi school of Islam that is traditional to the Balkans. It is regarded as highly tolerant and advocates co-existence with secular values.

Yet the ICA has struggled to establish control over all mosques, partly as a result of the dramatic changes in religious freedoms and exposure to other, stricter interpretations of Islam that followed the collapse of communism in 1990.

With Albanians free to openly practise religion, the country was flooded by foreign Islamic groups with differing aims. Some came to help the poor, others to build mosques and still others to advocate hard-line conservative interpretations of Islam.

The mosques that remain outside of ICA control are reported to belong to the highly conservative Salafi tradition and around seven of those, including the Mezez mosque, have been directly linked with promoting violent jihad and recruiting fighters for ISIS and Al Nusra.

Returnee fighter risks

Besides tackling radicalisation linked to some mosques, Albania has also had to deal with the threats associated with both 'exporting' jihadists and returnee fighters. By early 2014, at least 40 Albanian fighters had returned from Syria.

According to an intelligence dossier seen by BIRN, Albania's security services believe 15 returnee fighters in particular pose an acute security threat.

"They [the 15] stay hidden but retain a high level of radicalisation," said one security source, speaking on condition of anonymity.

Another source confirmed at least 40 returnees, some of whom are not considered to pose a high risk, remain under surveillance.

Despite the threat, the government found itself lacking legislation under which would-be and returnee jihadi fighters, and those accused of radicalising, funding and supporting violent Islamic extremism, could be prosecuted.

In February 2014, parliament approved legal reforms that made, in most cases, participating in armed conflicts and joining military groups in foreign countries a criminal offence punishable with up to eight years in jail.

Albanians now also face prison sentences of up to 15 years for inducing, recruiting, financing and supporting others to fight in foreign conflicts.

The new laws paved the way for the raids and arrests of March 2014. A total of 10 Albanians, including two imams, are currently being tried on charges of encouraging and recruiting fighters. Nine in one trial, one in another.

Amir Daci, a former imam from Pogradec also known as Ebu Belkisa, is to be tried *in absentia*. He is believed to be currently fighting with ISIS in Syria.

Albania's security services believe the number of Albanians trying to join fighter groups in Syria has sharply declined since the introduction of the new laws.

"The Albanian State Intelligence Service believes that only one person has left the country for Syria after that... after the implementation of the new legislation there have been zero returnees from Syria," one source told BIRN.

In addition, the country has beefed up border security and is sharing information with international law enforcement and security services. Sources say Albania has gained more experience in handling the issue since 2013.

Security agencies 'lack resources'

Dr Mimoza Xharo, an academic who has more than 20 years' experience working with the Albanian intelligence community, claims Albanian security services were aware of the jihadist threat at an early stage and could respond relatively quickly, partly because of cooperation with American and European agencies.

However, she believes Albania needs to increase resources to tackle terror threats in the future, particularly in terms of staffing levels and funding to update technology.

"For now, the weakness [in resources] has been covered by foreign intelligence partners," she said.

Despite the decline in fighter numbers and the prosecution of some alleged to have radicalised and recruited them, some experts are concerned that the state's response to radicalisation has so far been largely limited to rule-of-law agencies.

The government, some say belatedly, announced in January that it plans to open a counter-radicalisation and violent extremism centre focusing on education and promoting religious tolerance.

Social Welfare Minister Blendi Klosi said the centre "will open soon thanks to international partners" but no date has been set.

Fabian Zhilla, a cybercrime expert and professor at the Canadian Institute of Technology in Tirana, believes much more needs to be done to understand "the factors pushing them [young Albanians] into going to Syria" before radicalisation can be effectively tackled.

Gjergji Vurmo, a researcher at the Tirana-based Institute for Democracy and Mediation, IDM, agrees. He is the main author of the Religious Radicalism and Violent Extremism in Albania study conducted between September 2014 and June 2015.

The report was focused on communities where significant numbers of jihadi fighters came from and found the country lacks a coordinated, multi-agency response to the issue. In particular, he is highly critical of "the perception... radicalisation was an issue [solely] for the police or prosecutor's office".

"It is fundamental that prevention should include a large number of actors like schools, local government, youth, social institutions, labour agencies and the media," he told BIRN.

Since September last year, the IDM has organised a number of workshops including teacher-training sessions in areas associated with the radicalisation and recruitment of ISIS and Al Nusra fighters.

'Rehabilitate fighters, improve security'

Zhilla is also highly critical of the way Albania handles those returning from Syria, claiming: "We do not have a strategy for the integration of returnees."

He said that it is difficult to objectively assess the impact of measures the Albanian government has so far taken to combat violent extremism, including how best to manage returnees.

"Today, we still do not have an accurate analysis from the Albanian state about factors that pushed some people to go and fight in Syria...without such analyses, the rehabilitation of returnees will be difficult," he said.

Xharo is also concerned, particularly as many returnee fighters, especially those now disillusioned by what they witnessed in Syria and Iraq, do not have access to rehabilitation programmes.

"I am not aware of any returnees being provided with the consolation of a psychologist or a sociologist. Neither are their families," she said.

An intelligence agent, who spoke to BIRN on condition of anonymity, thinks that national security will benefit from proper rehabilitation of returnees.

"It would be good if the state could offer them jobs or help them with psychologists, because they have been in a war zone. They have been disappointed by what they found in Syria and this would be a good start for so-called 'de-radicalising' them and minimising the risk they pose to the country," he said.

Both Zhilla and Xharo remain concerned that while mosques are increasingly brought under ICA authority, young Albanians remain vulnerable to radicalisation online. Both believe the phenomenon of Islamic extremist radicalisation might be much bigger than originally thought.

Zhilla is currently researching online radicalisation and says a significant number of young Albanians, mostly those with little religious knowledge, are accessing ISIS propaganda via popular social media networks such as Facebook.

"ISIS has made permanent efforts to spread a sort of propaganda online and their audience is mostly comprised of individuals supporting violent acts," he said.

Xharo describes this group, young Albanians with little religious education, as "potential fighters in the shadows" and notes there was a "boom" in sharing violent extremist propaganda on social network accounts immediately after the November terror attacks in Paris.

“Albania is threatened not only for being a part of the coalitions [against ISIS], Albania is also threatened by the boom in online supporters [of violent extremism] who tomorrow might act as lone wolves,” she warns.

Fighter numbers

The government estimates more than **100** Albanians have joined jihadi groups in Syria and Iraq, including **13 women** and **31 children**, **26** of whom are minors.

BIRN has identified at least **107** Albanians who have been to Syria and Iraq during the past four years.

55 Albanians are still in Syria and all are believed, according to security service sources, to be fighting for ISIS or residing in ISIS-controlled territory.

18 are believed to have been killed in the conflicts and **12** injured.

3 fought with Turkish Al Qaeda-affiliate the Murat Gezenler battalion, all others joined Al Nusra or ISIS.

42 returned to the country before the government passed new laws criminalising fighting in foreign conflicts.

The number of Albanians leaving to fight in Syria and Iraq declined sharply after the government passed the new anti-terror laws in February 2014.

2012: 20 Albanian men left the country to fight in Syria and Iraq.

2013: 83 Albanian men, women and children left for Syria and Iraq

2014: 4 Albanians left for Syria and Iraq

2015: 1 Albanian left for Syria

Source: Albanian Prosecution Office (February 2016)

Anti-terror law reforms

In February 2014, the Albanian parliament approved law reforms to tackle the jihadi fighter issue.

Albanians found guilty of “participation in armed conflicts or [joining] military groups in foreign countries, who are not nationals of the foreign country or a member of the armed forces of conflict parties” now face jail terms of between three and eight years.

Prison sentences of between five and 10 years can be handed down to those found guilty of fighting abroad “with the aim of overthrowing the constitutional order or the violation of territorial integrity of a foreign state”.

In addition, the “inducement, recruitment, organisation, leadership, training, creation or use of funds or other funding or financing for people in any form or manner to carry out” participation in armed conflicts or joining military groups in foreign countries is now punishable with prison sentences of between five and 15 years.

Distributing extremist propaganda and any form of public call to participate in foreign armed conflicts is punishable with up to three years imprisonment.

Sources: Articles 265/a and 265/b of the Albanian Penal Code

Arrests and prosecutions to date

In March 2014, the Albanian police conducted its biggest ever counter-terrorism raid resulting in the arrest of nine suspects. All nine are standing trial, all are charged with distributing violent extremist propaganda and recruiting Albanians to fight in Syria.

Bujar Hysa, imam of the Mezez mosque, Abdurrahim Balla, imam of the Unaza e Re mosque, Edmond Balla, Gerti Pashja, Orion Reçi, Zeqir Imeri, Astrit Tola, Fadil Muslimani and Verdi Morava are being held in custody. All deny the charges.

Almir Daci, an imam from the Leshnica mosque in Pogradec, eastern Albanian, is believed to be fighting in Syria with ISIS alongside other Albanians. Daci will be tried *in absentia* on charges of advocating and recruiting people to conduct terrorist acts.

Also known as Ebu Belkisa, Daci is considered one of the most active Albanians in ISIS. A video released on YouTube in June 2015 features Daci threatening Albanians who do not embrace ISIS and predicting terror attacks in Albania and other Balkan states.

Bosnia ‘Failing to Share Terror Threat Intelligence’

Returnee fighters from Syria and Iraq pose “biggest threat”, says Bosnia’s security minister, yet officials confirm intelligence-sharing between the divided state’s police agencies is slow or even non-existent.

By Denis Dzidic and Amer Jahic, Sarajevo

Six days a week Ibrahim Delic lives in the small village of Bocinja in central Bosnia and takes care of his sheep.

On Mondays, however, he travels to Sarajevo to stand trial on charges of having fought in Syria.

Delic is one of about 200 Bosnian Muslims, all members of the Salafi community, who have travelled to Syria and Iraq since 2012. Most are believed to have fought with jihadi groups, including Islamic State, ISIS, and Al Qaeda-affiliate Al Nusra.

According to Bosnia’s State Investigation and Protection Agency, SIPA, at least 30 have been killed in the conflicts and 50 have now returned home, Delic among them.

Once a destination for foreign fighters during the 1990s, Bosnia has become a significant country of origin for jihadi fighters, particularly given its relatively small population of around 3.8 million.

“Until mid-2013, we had no idea people were going or planning to go, we just found out all of a sudden about 100 had left,” says Goran Kovacevic, a professor at Sarajevo University’s criminal sciences faculty.

As the scale of the problem became apparent, Bosnia adopted law reforms in June 2014, creating a number of new offences including “enlisting in a foreign military, paramilitary or para-police unit”.

The new laws have been applied retroactively, which is why Delic and others who are accused of fighting in Syria and Iraq since 2012 are now on trial. Many are angry they are being tried for offences that did not exist at the time they left for the Middle East.

“No one forbade those travels in 2013. I went to oppose Bashar al-Assad. America was against him and so I think it was fine,” Delic told the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network, BIRN.

He denies fighting in Syria and says he went solely “to help the Syrian people” and “see where all the Bosnians were going and... bring them into one group”.

Delic insists he poses no risk to security and that he returned home disillusioned by the “anarchy” he witnessed in Syria. The authorities, however, disagree.

Returnee fighters ‘biggest security threat’

The Bosnian security and police agencies consider all returnees from Syria and Iraq as potentially dangerous.

In February, Bosnian Security Minister Dragan Mektic confirmed suspected returnee fighters from Syria and Iraq are under surveillance because they pose “the biggest threat to security”.

He also said 67 arrest warrants, including two Interpol red notices, have been issued for Bosnians believed to be fighting in Syria and Iraq.

Amer Veiz, the head of SIPA’s counter-terrorism unit, notes some returnees from warzones are not only skilled in using explosives and weapons but are “additionally radicalised”.

“We have operational knowledge that some are still involved in the recruitment of people to go and fight [with ISIS in Syria and Iraq],” he says.

Uros Pena, deputy director of Bosnia’s Directorate for the Coordination of Police Bodies, is of the same opinion.

“These persons are obviously a security threat. They were ready to take up arms and kill, so they are a threat. It is impossible that they are not completely changed after being there,” he says.

While Pena regards returnee fighters as a significant threat, he is critical of plans to create specialist prosecutors for religion-based terrorism trials.

Instead, he believes the police services need to adopt a more community and prevention based approach to policing, including working with young people in schools and also tackling mental health issues.

Pena also notes a reliance on estimated numbers for returnees and those at risk of radicalisation means Bosnia’s policing bodies “only deal with consequences”.

“We don’t even know how big this problem of terrorism and radicalisation is...Until we get to the bottom of how big this problem is and create an entire strategy to deal with this – and that means going back to basics, to community policing, being among the people, which we don’t do anymore - we will have this problem,” he told BIRN.

Agencies ‘don’t share information’

Even when there is credible intelligence of a threat, BIRN has learned information is not always shared between the country's 15 police services.

"Sharing information is a big problem. Each agency holds on to the best information. They all have obligations to share information, but this is not done. They are jealous. We do not have clear definitions of jurisdiction, so we always have problems", says Pena.

Policing in a state as highly divided as Bosnia is complex. The country's two entities, the Bosniak-Croat Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Bosnian Serb-dominated Republika Srpska, come under some state-level governance but have their own government, parliament and police bodies.

As a result, there are separate police agencies in each entity, in the 'ethnically-neutral' Brcko district and in each of the federation's 10 cantons, as well as state-level bodies, including SIPA and the border police.

The director of the Bosnian Serb Interior Ministry, Dragan Lukac, also told BIRN that the "existing agencies are not communicating fast enough" in terrorism investigations.

"Experience shows us that the biggest problem is poor coordination and sharing operational intelligence between police agencies. The terrorist-related attacks in Zvornik and Sarajevo showed us that we need to work better together," he says.

In the past year there have been two incidents which the Bosnian prosecution classified as terrorist attacks.

In one, Nedin Ibric, a member of the Salafi community, gunned down a police officer in the Republika Srpska town of Zvornik. Ibric was later killed. In another, a man killed two Bosnian army officials in Sarajevo before taking his own life.

Security Minister Mektic said the state-level intelligence agency had received information a few days before the Zvornik shooting that "an incident was possible". The Bosnian Serb ministry then complained this information had not be shared with them.

The authorities are currently implementing a 2015 anti-terrorism strategy that will see the creation of a single database, available to all police units, for all operational information regarding radicalisation and terrorism.

Security services 'hijacked by politicians'

Experts believe intelligence sharing between Bosnia's numerous police forces is further complicated by the influence of politicians, many of whom stand accused of exploiting the country's inter-ethnic tensions for political gain.

Professor Kovacevic goes as far as saying Bosnia's political parties have "hijacked the security system".

“We have a constitutional set up based on ethnic background and we have security systems operating on the same principle. We have Serbs operating in Republika Srpska’s interests only and we have Bosniaks overriding entity levels. They don’t trust each other at all... Essentially, very few are operating based on the law,” he says.

Vlado Azinovic, a terrorism expert and professor at Sarajevo University’s political sciences faculty, underlines security service chiefs are political appointees.

“This is why communication and coordination between them is a problem,” he says.

Others believe undue political influence has led to incidents being too quickly categorised as terrorist acts.

“When we have incidents, classification [as a terrorist act] is given by politicians. Politics was never more involved in police structures. The same is true for prosecutions and the courts. It is especially visible when we talk about the election of persons in charge, and this is why results are bad,” says Pena.

The Bosnian prosecutor’s office told BIRN there are 40 active terrorism investigations, about half of which are related to returnees from Syria and Iraq.

Jihadists ‘radicalised in unofficial mosques’

According to prosecutors, most Bosnian jihadi fighters were radicalised by extremists preaching online or in ‘unofficial’ mosques that operate outside the control of the country’s official Islamic affairs institution, the Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina, IZ.

The IZ is now in the process of closing down these ‘unofficial’ mosques, known locally as paradzemati or ‘para-mosques’. It says 64 paradzemati are currently operating across the country, mostly in rural and mountainous areas.

"It's a widespread phenomenon. Basically every Bosnian town has its own paradzemat," Ismet Veladzic, a member of the Reisul-ulema, the cabinet of the higher authority of the IZ, told BIRN.

"The issue is being urgently addressed by the Islamic Community and especially by the individual imams operating at community level," he says.

The issue is highly controversial and many paradzemati leaders fiercely reject being labelled as extremist.

Prayers at the paradzemat in the central Bosnian village of Osve are led by 28-year-old Selvedin Dzanic. Osve is a closed Salafi community that has been regularly linked to extremists, including ISIS supporters, in the regional and international press.

Delic, the shepherd accused of fighting with jihadists in Syria, is also known to have delivered sermons in Osve.

A SIPA staffer confirmed several residents are under surveillance and the village is of “security interest in regard to violent extremism and radicalism”.

Dzanic insists, however, his village has been unjustly targeted because of negative media coverage.

“We only want to live an Islamic life...a life of prayer,” he says.

Prevention and rehabilitation

Experts remain concerned that aside from attempting to close down paradzemati and prosecute returnee fighters, little is being done to tackle the root causes of radicalisation.

Apart from the Super Citizens programme - a coalition of NGOs brought together by the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe to tackle all kinds of hate crime in Bosnia – the state has only recently begun to implement the strategy to tackle violent extremism drafted in 2015.

Professor Kovacevic says the state must combat poverty, corruption, organised crime and poor levels of education before the issue can be effectively addressed.

Around 800,000 Bosnians, almost one quarter of the population, are unemployed and represent, says Kovacevic, a “great mass for radicalisation”.

“We have very poor formal or informal mechanisms of education and population control... we need to help the people, to educate them, to help them find jobs [and] work with young people.”

Others believe that as long as Bosnia remains sharply divided along ethnic lines tackling one kind of radicalisation, in this case Islamic extremism, will be hard to do.

Banja Luka-based sociologist Ivan Sijakovic says Bosnian society as a whole suffers “extreme radicalisation in all fields”.

“The problem is we have extreme radical behaviour in parliaments – politicians coming out with radical statements. We also, as a society, do not work on creating a system of values for young people, especially those marginalised in rural areas,” he says.

Aside from the lack of multi-agency prevention programmes, experts are also concerned that simply criminalising returnee fighters could prove counter-productive, particularly as some are thought to have been radicalised in prisons in the first place.

Professor Azinovic notes many left Syria because they were appalled by what they witnessed.

“They thought they were going to fight with the best of the best, but they saw paedophiles, rape, robberies, [and] drug addicts,” he says.

In a 2015 [report on Bosnian fighters in Syria](#) he co-authored with Bosnian theologian and columnist Muhamed Jusic, Azinovic suggests establishing lines of communication with fighters, their families and, in particular, family members who opposed their departure to Syria and Iraq.

“This would build support networks for their successful reintegration into society (if desired) and would vitally inform the development of tools to assess the readiness of returnees for such reintegration,” the report reads.

Meanwhile, Professor Kovacevic fears Bosnia faces future violence unless the issue of radicalisation, particularly of young people, is addressed.

“We have seen in the early 90s that a war broke out because of politics. Terrorism today is being used by politicians to drive a wedge between the different ethnic groups in the country. I only hope that we will not continue down this road, because we have seen what it can do,” he warns.

Fighter numbers

Around **120** Bosnian men are thought to be currently fighting in Syria and Iraq with ISIS and Al Nusra, **30** are believed to have died in the conflicts so far

50 are known to have returned to Bosnia, some are standing trial accused of fighting in Syria and Iraq

The number of Bosnians leaving to fight in Syria and Iraq dramatically declined in 2014. The departure date of around 20 Bosnians is unknown, however, the following numbers are believed to have left for Syria and Iraq in these years: *

2012: 15

2013: 114

2014: 19

2015: 15 known to have left for Syria and/or Iraq

61 women and **81** children are believed to have travelled to Syria and Iraq **

Sources: Bosnia's State Investigation and Protection Agency, SIPA (February 2016)

** The Lure of the Syrian War: The Foreign Fighters Bosnian Contingent - Azinovic, Jusic (2015)*

*** Azinovic, Jusic – updated research (March 2016)*

Anti-terror law reforms

The state-level government adopted new laws in June 2014 criminalising joining foreign military, paramilitary and para-police formations, punishable with minimum prison sentences of three years.

Bosnians with dual nationality serving with internationally-recognised armed forces in a country of citizenship are exempt.

In addition, “whoever organises, directs, trains, equips or mobilises individuals” to join foreign military, paramilitary and para-police groups face at least five years in jail. Those found guilty of inciting others to join these groups face prison terms of between three months and three years.

The new offences updated existing anti-terror legislation passed in 2003, which already criminalised planning and committing terrorist acts, organising terrorist groups, financing terrorist activities, incitement, recruitment and training.

Key prosecutions to date

According to the Bosnian prosecutor’s office, there are currently 40 active terrorism investigations, about half of which are linked to suspected returnee fighters from Syria and Iraq.

Bilal Bosnic, a leader of the Salafi community, received a seven-year jail sentence in November 2015 for incitement to commit terror offences after being found guilty of encouraging Bosnians to fight for ISIS.

In another trial, Husein Erdic was sentenced in October 2015 to three-and-a-half years for financing and recruiting fighters for ISIS. He stood trial with three others, Midhat Trako, Nevad Husidic and Merim Keserovic.

Husidic and Keserovic each received 12-month prison sentences for attempting to travel to Syria to fight with ISIS, Trako was jailed for 18 months for paying for their plane tickets to Istanbul. All were members of the Salafi community.

Ibrahim Delic is currently standing trial at the state-level Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina in Sarajevo with eight others: Fatih Hasinovic, Enes Mesic, Jasmin Jasarevic, Mirza Kapic, Salko Imamovic, Adem Karamuja, Fikret Hadzic and Samir Hadzalic. They are accused of fighting in Syria and Iraq in 2013 and 2014 with jihadi groups. All deny the charges.

The trial began in August 2015 and is expected to continue for several more months. A tenth defendant, Emin Hodzic, agreed to a plea deal in return for a one-year jail term. The terms are expected to be reviewed by the Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina in the near future.

Safet Brkic is being tried at the Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina, accused of fighting in Syria and Iraq during 2013. He denies the charges. The trial began in August 2015 and is expected to last several more months.

Senad Kostica and Mirel Karajic were extradited from Turkey and have been separately charged with attempting to travel to Syria in order to fight with ISIS. Their trials are expected to begin in the spring.

‘Offer Kosovar Fighters “Jihadi Rehab” to Combat Extremism’

More than 50 Kosovars face jail if convicted of offences linked to fighting in Syria and Iraq, but experts warn simply locking up returnees will do little to tackle violent extremism.

By Ervin Qafmolla, Pristina

Little was known about Kosovo’s jihadi fighters until the summer of 2014, when the security services suddenly arrested dozens of suspected terrorists, including several imams. Since then, more than 100 locations across the country have been raided.

Few were aware of how many ethnic Albanian Kosovars were believed to be fighting with Islamic State, ISIS or Al Qaeda-affiliate Al Nusra in Syria and Iraq. The government announced last November that an estimated 300 Kosovars were fighting with jihadi groups or living in ISIS-controlled territory.

The same month, Prime Minister Isa Mustafa and security officials announced a ‘state of alert’ on grounds Kosovo faced “real risks associated with terrorism”. They declined to provide further details on the severity of the threat but confirmed it was directly related to Islamic extremism.

Three months later, Mustafa told attendees at a security conference in Pristina the number of Kosovar fighters in Syria and Iraq had “decreased to fewer than 70”.

The government has not made public how many Kosovars have returned to the country after fighting with jihadi groups in the Middle East, but the Kosovar Centre for Security Studies, KCSS, estimates around 160 suspected former fighters have returned home.

More than 50 of those accused of committing offences related to fighting in Syria and Iraq are now facing trial and most have been charged with joining and participating in terrorist groups or inciting and assisting others to do so.

Kosovo adopted law reforms in March 2015 that made, in most cases, fighting in foreign conflicts a criminal offence punishable with up to 15 years in prison. As most of the suspects currently on trial are accused of having fought in Syria and Iraq in 2013 or 2014, they cannot be tried under the new legislation. Instead, they have been charged under older anti-terrorism laws.

Despite a sharp decline in the number of Kosovars leaving for Syria and Iraq - thought to be the result of the new laws and greater awareness of ISIS’s activities - it appears some are still trying to do so.

Two men and a woman, all in their 20s, were stopped by Turkish authorities late last year at the border with Syria and returned to Kosovo. They have since been charged with “participation in terrorist organisations”. All three deny the charges.

House arrests ‘poorly enforced’

Returnee fighters, many with battlefield experience and skilled in the use of explosives and weapons, are widely regarded as a security threat. So the fact that at least 35 suspected ISIS and Al Nusra returnee fighters are not in custody while they stand trial has raised eyebrows in Kosovo.

Critics note that house arrest and control orders are not suitable for high-risk suspects and, as such, are not always rigorously enforced in Kosovo. The first-instance Basic Court in Pristina confirmed five suspects were put back behind bars after they violated house arrest or control order terms.

Some are thought to have even left the country while under house arrest, including Bekim Mulolli who was standing trial on terrorism charges related to assaulting two American Catholic missionaries in Pristina.

Mulolli admitted assaulting the missionaries and expressed regret but the prosecution had widened their investigation and charged him with additional terrorism offences. He was placed under house arrest in February 2015 but went missing later that year.

He is rumoured to have been killed while fighting in Syria, according to a statement released in December by the trial judge, Nora Bilaca. The authorities have not been able to verify whether Mulolli did die in Syria.

Some suspects have been released under control orders stipulating they report to their local police station on a weekly basis. Kosovo does not require suspects to wear electronic ankle bracelets so their movements may be monitored.

Kreshnik Gashi, a legal expert and presenter of the Justice in Kosovo TV programme, describes the decision to release so many suspects from detention as “strange... given that the police poorly enforce house arrest measures”.

“Usually the only verification is a daily visit by police officers from the suspect’s local station. Imagine where a person... can go in 24 hours,” he says.

‘Plead guilty or stay in jail’

While many worry suspects who may pose a genuine threat to security are too loosely monitored while under house arrest, lawyers have also voiced concerns that clients are being pressured into pleading guilty to avoid being held in custody while on trial.

Gezim Baloku is representing Artan Kadriu who is accused of ‘organising and participating in terrorist organisations’. Kadriu eventually entered a guilty plea and was released from custody and placed under house arrest.

“What this means is ‘plead guilty and we’ll let you out of jail’. This isn’t fair, it’s blackmailing the suspect,” says Baloku.

Hilmi Zhitia, a lawyer who served as chief prosecutor when Kosovo was part of the former Yugoslavia, has also criticised releasing suspects, some said to have been charged despite scant evidence of wrongdoing, apparently in return for guilty pleas.

“They have made detention a form of blackmailing and the court is not able to assess whether a suspect that pleads guilty is charged on any evidence at all,” he says.

Shpend Kursani, an associate researcher at the KCSS, believes some prosecutions have been launched “in haste and with little evidence”, saying this suggests politicians are trying to look like they are addressing the issue.

Some indictments seen by BIRN are just a couple of paragraphs long and appear to rely on just text messages sent to suspects but not replied to or testimony from one witness.

BIRN contacted the Special Prosecutor’s Office in Kosovo several times for a response to the claims but has not yet received one.

Aside from concerns over how prosecutions have been managed, Skender Perteshi, researcher and project officer at the KCSS, cautions the new laws in themselves are unlikely to deter Kosovars leaving for the battlefields of Syria and Iraq who “have very little respect... for government laws that are not related to their version of Sharia [law]”.

The need for a comprehensive anti-extremism programme has been recognised by the government and it published its official strategy - [Prevention of Violent Extremism and Radicalisation Leading to Terrorism 2015 to 2020](#) – in February this year. Proposals include measures outside of rule-of-law agencies to tackle radicalisation, including religious education and multi-agency awareness-raising campaigns.

The strategy acknowledges that jihadists have been motivated by different factors, including ideology, a sense of injustice over atrocities committed in Syria and Iraq, propaganda, a desire for adventure and the chance of holding leadership roles they are unlikely to attain at home.

‘Radicals exploit disillusioned youths’

While stating money is not a key driver for radicalisation in itself, the strategy notes Kosovo’s high unemployment and poverty rates are aggravating factors. The state’s statistics agency puts unemployment at 35 per cent, with youth unemployment at 65 per cent.

Perteshi from the KCSS says extremists have been able to exploit disillusioned, marginalised and poorly educated youths in the absence of tangible state efforts to improve the lot of young Kosovars.

“Education has been undermined... this has resulted in a lack of critical thinking among students,” he says. “We should not forget that Kosovo has the youngest population in Europe and this comes with responsibilities to the younger population. The young should feel important and useful to their country, they should be able to channel their energy and desires.”

Perteshi also says that many jihadists were actually new to Islam and had little religious instruction. The KCSS estimates around 70 per cent of those who fought in Syria and Iraq came from families that were not practising Muslims.

“They [young jihadi fighters] were referring to incompetent, dubious and radical scholars,” he says.

The Islamic Community of Kosova, BIK, is responsible for appointing imams and overseeing religious affairs. It has drawn much criticism for its perceived failure to address the issue of violent extremism and radical preaching.

Perteshi agrees the BIK was slow to respond but underlines it still has no official mandate to enforce regulation of mosques and imams. Legislation regulating religious institutions has not yet been passed despite being the subject of debate for 10 years.

“The absence of a law that regulates religious communities in Kosovo has invalidated the executive powers of the BIK, including over its own imams. The BIK can only decide not to pay an imam but they cannot fire them,” he says.

In response to BIRN’s request for comment on its role in preventing and tackling extremism, the BIK sent a written statement stressing it had publicly denounced the actions of violent extremists while noting it “does not hold executive powers”.

“The [extremist] groups are opposed to Islamic teachings, the Koran and the legacy of the Prophet Muhammad, which unequivocally forbid taking an innocent life... [BIK counsels]...all Muslim believers to not fall for this un-Islamic propaganda... Islam is a religion of peace not violence, it does not preach terror,” the statement reads.

Ekrem Avdiu, imam of a mosque in the city of Mitrovica in northern Kosovo, acknowledges “de-radicalisation of individuals can hardly be achieved but by bringing the right imams into

the game”, but says the government should shoulder some of the responsibility for failing to counter violent extremism.

“If 300 youths went [to fight] in Syria... the responsibility falls primarily on the security structures. State institutions should ask themselves where they went wrong,” he says.

‘Free advertising for ISIS’

Both Avdiu and Kursani are also critical of some media outlets who have, they believe, gifted ISIS with free marketing.

“Irresponsible media... provide free advertisement for ISIS by reproducing and distributing their propaganda material,” says Kursani.

Ekrem Avdiu believes some outlets and journalists have taken “an increasingly aggressive stance”.

“Some... often engage in irresponsible reporting, using defamatory words and even hate speech targeting Muslims. Instead of trying to better understand and compare Islamic teachings with the actions of extremists for the sake of informing the public and to contribute to the fight against extremism, they resort to inciting fear and divisions in society. Basically, every bearded man is [portrayed as] a terrorist,” he says.

Perteshi from the KCSS agrees prior to the police raids there had not been any “real discussion that Kosovars should not become part of this war, including the [Islamic] rules of participating in jihad”.

While returnee fighters deemed to pose a security threat should, say experts, be handled within the criminal justice system, others are concerned the government has been slow to provide for case-by-case assessments of whether returnees pose a threat.

“If somebody went to Syria to fight and then came back after a short time, perhaps disillusioned, is it logical [for them] to be subjected to repressive measures or to be included in a rehabilitation programme?” asks Avdiu.

The government’s counter-extremism strategy does outline proposals to assess returnees individually and offer rehabilitation programmes inside and outside prisons, but experts say a comprehensive plan should be implemented as a matter of urgency.

Kursani from the KCSS says the threat of incarceration will not only deter fighters – including those disillusioned with ISIS and Al Nusra – from coming home but could also result in unintended and unwanted consequences. He describes simply locking returnees up as akin to throwing “the grenade under the rug temporarily”.

His colleague, Perteshi, notes there are already indications that some disillusioned returnees are being radicalised again after being put in detention.

“This is a real issue... a concrete plan is needed to address returned fighters. Prison is not a universal solution to the problem and in some instances it may prove counterproductive,” he warns.

Fighter numbers

More than **300** Kosovars have travelled to Syria and Iraq, according to the interior ministry.

The prime minister announced in February that around **70** Kosovars are believed to be currently fighting for ISIS or Al Nusra in Syria and Iraq.

Kosovo police sources previously told BIRN that **36 women are known to have left the country to live in ISIS-controlled territory.**

According to the latest estimates from the Kosovar Centre for Security Studies, KCSS, around **60** Kosovars are believed to have been killed in the conflicts.

While the government has not made public the number of returnees, the KCSS estimates **130** fighters have so far returned home.

Kosovars reported as having left for Syria and/or Iraq by year: *

2012: **68**

2013: **123**

2014: **19**

There are no figures available for 2015 but Shpend Kursani, KCSS associate researcher, estimates 16 Kosovars joined ISIS during the first quarter of that year.

* Source: *The Kosovar Centre for Security Studies (March 2016)*

Anti-terror law reforms

In March 2015, Kosovo’s government adopted new laws that made “joining or participating” in foreign armies, police, paramilitary or para-police groups a criminal offence, punishable by jail terms of three to 15 years.

Kosovars with dual nationality serving for military and police units controlled by internationally-recognised governments or organisations are exempt.

Those found guilty of organising, recruiting, leading or training others with the aim of illegally joining foreign police or military groups face between five and 15 years in jail.

Directly or indirectly funding or offering material assistance to a person who intends to illegally join a foreign police or military group is punishable with prison sentences of three to 15 years.

However, many Kosovars returned to the country before the new laws were passed and are being tried under anti-terrorism laws passed in December 2012.

Those laws criminalised committing, assisting and facilitating terrorist acts, recruiting, training and inciting acts of terror, participation in terrorist groups and preparing terrorist activities. If convicted, the accused face jail terms of five years to life imprisonment.

Key prosecutions to date

More than 50 Kosovars have been charged with offences including recruitment to commit terrorist acts, facilitation and support of terrorist activities, organising and participating in terrorist organisations and illegal possession of firearms.

Around 40 are accused of having joined ISIS or Al Nusra in Syria and Iraq during 2013 and 2014.

Four Kosovars were jailed between 2015 and early 2016 for participation in terrorist groups, namely ISIS and Al Nusra. All had entered guilty pleas and expressed remorse.

Fitim Lladrovci, a former ISIS fighter from Kosovo, gained country-wide attention when, in 2014, he returned a minor to his mother in Kosovo. The child's jihadist father had taken the boy to Syria without the knowledge of his wife.

The leader of Kosovar ISIS fighters in Syria, Ridvan Haqifi, declared Lladrovci an apostate and issued a death sentence on him. Lladrovci was jailed for five years in January 2015 for participation in terrorist organisations and for firearms possession.

Following the 2014 arrests, 32 suspects are being jointly tried at the Palace of Justice in Pristina on a variety of terrorism related offences. Not all the cases are directly linked.

At the time of writing, 18 had entered guilty pleas and were placed under house arrest or control orders – most of them during the first half of 2015 - while the courts reviewed their cases. Most of the others that deny the charges were also released from detention and placed under lighter security measures.

To date, only one of the 32 suspects, Hajdin Elezi, remains in custody. He denies participating in terrorist organisations.

No one has yet been convicted of recruiting fighters or other material-assistance related offences.

Ethnic Tensions Complicate Counter-Extremism in Macedonia

Young Muslims are being radicalised online and in mosques resisting full regulation, warn experts, as Skopje weighs security risks posed by returnee fighters amid inter-ethnic tensions and the refugee crisis.

By Sinisa Jakov Marusic, Skopje

Around 110 Macedonians are in Syria and Iraq, 27 have died in the conflicts so far and more than 70 have returned home, according to police estimates.

The numbers are startling considering Macedonia has an official population of just 2.1 million, of which roughly one quarter are predominantly Muslim ethnic Albanians.

Speaking on condition of anonymity, senior police sources say radicalisation and recruitment remains a serious concern in Macedonia, despite recent law reforms that have made illegally fighting in foreign wars a criminal offence punishable with a minimum of four years in jail. Those convicted of promoting violent extremism face jail terms of up to five years.

“The problem is still overwhelmingly present... as it is very hard to track radicals who work in small closed groups and anticipate their intentions, including possible terror acts on Macedonian soil,” one police source told the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network, BIRN.

Experts say the new legislation appears to have reduced the number of Macedonians leaving to fight with jihadi groups abroad but note it has not entirely stemmed the flow. No one has yet been convicted of encouraging and recruiting jihadi fighters under the new laws.

“This [legislation] helped deter people to a certain degree,” a police source told BIRN, “but changing the law is certainly not enough because we are dealing with brainwashed individuals here who are sometimes willing to risk it, and even get killed if necessary, for their imagined cause.”

Just this January, several local media outlets reported two young ethnic Albanians from Skopje had been killed while fighting for ISIS in Syria.

Most, but not all, Macedonians who joined violent jihadi groups in Syria and Iraq originate from Skopje and nearby ethnic Albanian villages. Two predominantly ethnic Albanian districts within the capital - Cair and Gazi Baba – and the rural Skopje suburbs of Aracinovo and Saraj have been associated with Islamic extremism.

A smaller number have been recruited from other, largely ethnic Albanian towns in northern and north-western Macedonia.

There has been a notable lack of in-depth coverage of the issue, something Ramadan Ramadani, a trained imam and political commentator, says has left the public ill-informed.

“There are not enough [media] investigations... this is owing to the media atmosphere in Macedonia as well as to the sensitivity of the topic... and state institutions are limited in disclosing information,” he says.

Ramadani is critical of “a tendency to abuse this [issue of Islamic extremism] politically against Albanians as the main representatives of Muslims in the country”.

“We don’t only have Islamophobic attacks and spin... but also concretely directed attacks towards one ethnic community,” he says.

Youngsters ‘brainwashed’

The Albanian-language newspaper Koha is among the few media outlets in the country that try to cover the issue in some depth and speak to relatives and friends about why young Macedonians have chosen to fight for jihadi groups abroad.

Relatives and family friends usually refuse to speak about their experiences out of fear or shame, those who do talk will almost always insist on anonymity.

The newspaper reported three men from Gazi Baba recently departed for Syria, all were aged between 19 and 20.

A man who said he knew the youngsters told Koha he did not believe money was a motivating factor for youngsters leaving to fight with jihadi groups abroad.

“No one can stop them because that is what they want, they were brainwashed,” he told Koha.

The newspaper reported another young man from Gazi Baba was killed in Syria in early 2015. His parents said they had borrowed money to send him to Germany to set up a new life but, unbeknown to them, their son went to Syria instead.

Koha interviewed a man described as close to the family who said the man, who was in his 20s, had experienced mental health issues before going to Syria. He claimed an extremist group recruited him after promising to cure his psychological problems.

While acknowledging there are many drivers for radicalisation including social and economic factors, Ramadani believes that some Macedonians who left for Syria well before the rise of Islamic State, ISIS, did not see fighting with forces opposed to Assad as wrong.

“Before ISIS spread to Syria from Iraq, there was a momentum created that the entire justice-loving world should help the Syrian opposition and the people in the fight against a regime that dropped chemical weapons, destroyed towns and annihilated civilians,” he says.

“Some people decided to join out of solidarity but were stuck in the internal fights between the [Syrian] opposition forces and the emergence of the new terrorist group ISIS.”

Ramadani says “conspiracy theories that were perpetuated for years by these extremist organisations seemed authenticated” when “the US and Russia agreed not to punish” Assad’s regime earlier in the conflict.

Some mosques ‘resist oversight’

However, both the Macedonian police and clerics from the Islamic Community, IVZ, warn much of the radicalisation and recruitment of young Macedonians can be traced back to radical, militant preaching in mosques that are not always under full IVZ control.

The IVZ, which promotes a moderate interpretation of Islam that is widely regarded as more traditional to the Balkans, says it is struggling to establish full control over some of Macedonia’s 700 mosques.

Former Skopje Mufti Ibrahim Shabani is concerned that young Muslims are being manipulated by radicals invited to preach at night without IVZ approval.

“Imams in most cases fight this phenomenon [violent extremism] but the lectures by unauthorised persons during the night hours cast serious doubt on what is happening there,” said Shabani.

“The problems are related to the mosque councils that refused to communicate with us... when they invite people, theologians, even hodzas [clerics] from other places... to hold lectures, we don’t know what those lectures contain because none of those people are officially invited.”

Shabani also says the IVZ has been told recruiters have offered high wages to would-be jihadists, although he acknowledges this to be less of a motivation as fighters are well aware they might not come back alive.

“We have had cases of parents blaming the mosques for their children’s departure [to frontlines]... The war against these people [extremists] and this phenomenon must be coordinated because we cannot cope alone.” Shabani said.

The Macedonian police, in what is thought to have been the only major raid officially related to Islamic extremism, arrested nine individuals in August last year on a range of charges including having alleged links to ISIS, recruitment and participating in the conflicts in Syria and Iraq.

Eleven suspects have now been charged, six of whom indicated they would enter guilty pleas in return for more lenient sentences. The others deny the charges.

Officers say they are still searching for another 25 suspects who may or may not be in Macedonia in a large-scale cross-country operation, codenamed Operation Cell.

Online radicalisation fears

Police sources are also concerned that youngsters continue to be recruited online, often establishing direct links with notoriously violent ISIS outside mosques or improvised religious buildings.

“How many more young people are getting infected by this virus through propaganda sites and social channels on the internet, sitting at their homes, as we speak?” asks one police source.

Ramadani agrees, saying the jihadi fighter issue is a global phenomenon.

“We do not have a home-grown source for intellectual recruitment. This is a global event and with the availability of YouTube and other [social networks], it is absolutely irrelevant whether those who indoctrinate people are physically present here [in Macedonia], he says

In an attempt to tackle radicalisation, the IVZ launched a campaign last year called Stop Terror aimed at promoting Islam as a peaceful religion and reinforcing the organisation’s commitment to a tolerant and moderate interpretation of Islam.

The programme also aims to offer religious assistance to returnee fighters who might be jailed for their involvement in the Syrian and Iraqi conflicts to help them reintegrate within society.

“We got support from all foreign representatives in the country who said this is a good idea but, ironically, we still lack practical support from our own institutions,” the head of the IVZ, Sulejman Rexhepi, told BIRN.

The plan is relatively simple, to work with detainees who are jailed for participating in or helping violent jihadist groups so that once they are released they have a better chance of reintegrating into society.

Still, the IVZ remains concerned over what it describes as a lack of cooperation between religious and government authorities at local, regional and international level when it comes to suppressing religious violent extremism.

Counter-terrorism ‘seen as anti-Albanian’

Former IVZ Secretary Afrim Tahiri says he has never been approached by the police in relation to violent Islamic extremism and believes that the Macedonian authorities are

perhaps reluctant to get involved in the work of mosques for fear they might be seen as anti-Albanian.

In 2001, Macedonia experienced a short armed conflict between security forces and ethnic Albanian insurgents demanding greater rights. Relations between the country's Orthodox Christian population and ethnic Albanians remain very tense.

"In [neighbouring] Kosovo, for example, 150 people have been arrested on suspicion of radicalism but there this is not being interpreted as an anti-Albanian struggle. If a similar thing happened in Macedonia, it would surely be interpreted differently," he said.

The ongoing trial of 29 ethnic Albanians, some of whom are from Kosovo, following a shootout last May with police forces in Kumanovo is a case in point. Eight police officers and 10 gunmen were killed.

There are concerns that the Albanian ethnicity of the gunmen could be manipulated by both ethnic Albanian and Macedonian political groups, each seeking to portray the trial as a politically-motivated attack on their communities.

The trial began in February and the defendants face terrorism charges on the grounds of allegedly attacking the police to provoke inter-ethnic discord. All deny the charges and claim the police attacked them first and so acted in self-defence.

"We must be careful with this and other similar cases. Although the backgrounds of some of the defendants and the killed gunmen show they had fought in Syria and Iraq, the potential for this case getting an ethnic pretext is enormous," a police source told BIRN.

Resources diverted to refugee crisis

In addition to highly sensitive inter-ethnic tensions, police sources say they are increasingly concerned about the diversion of resources to deal with the refugee crisis and heightened security measures imposed after the November terror attacks in Paris.

As migrants – many of whom are fleeing war-torn Middle Eastern countries – continue to travel through Balkan states in an attempt to reach western European countries, the security services have few resources to monitor returnee fighters, extremist recruiters and those vulnerable to radicalisation.

"The fact that many of them [jihadi fighters] return poses a great security threat because the police must be able to track their activities and eventually catch them," said one police source.

"We have limited resources, both in manpower and in intelligence personnel... the risk of infiltration of radicals along with the refugees is always there but, more importantly, we must put more attention on home grown radicals and returnees.

“Monitoring their activities takes resources and the threat coming from them is, in my opinion, far greater than the threat from the refugees.”

BIRN contacted the Macedonian Interior Ministry for comment but did not receive a response.

Fighter numbers

Around **110** Macedonians, including women and children, are in Syria and Iraq

27 have died in the conflicts so far and more than **70** have returned home, according to police estimates.

There are no official year-on-year estimates for departures to Syria and Iraq.

Source: Macedonian Police estimates (February 2016)

Anti-Terror Law Reforms

In September 2015, the Macedonian parliament adopted changes to the penal code that criminalised encouraging people to join or offering assistance, including funding, to those seeking to fight with militant groups abroad.

The revised legislation states “those who recruit, call or encourage in any form Macedonian citizens to join military or paramilitary formations... or transport these persons, face a minimum of five years in jail”.

Macedonian citizens convicted of fighting illegally in foreign wars face a minimum of four years in jail.

People who offer support or finance sending Macedonian citizens to military conflicts abroad are to be sentenced to at least five years in prison. Those found guilty of encouraging others to fight abroad on social networks can also be jailed.

Macedonians found guilty of assisting or hiding returnee fighters from foreign conflicts face one to five years in prison.

Arrests and prosecutions to date

Operation Cell is thought to be the only large-scale police raid directly related to violent Islamic extremism in Macedonia.

In early March, 11 suspects were charged with participating in foreign military and para-military groups in Syria and Iraq.

Five defendants - Isa Fuga, Abdula Abdulahi, Erol Rustemi, Muhamet Imeri and Stefan Stefanovski – deny the charges.

Six of the accused - Rexhep Memish, Ahmet Darlishta, Fazli Sulja, Sejfula Eftimovski, Muhamed Shehu and Resulj Saiti - have indicated they are willing to enter guilty pleas in return for more lenient sentences.

Memish, self-proclaimed imam of the Tutunsuz mosque in Skopje, has also been charged with organising and preparing people to go to Syrian battlefields by, according to the prosecution, “indoctrinating them through religious and nationalistic speeches”.

Darlishta was a councillor in the government section in charge of implementing the 2001 Ohrid Peace Accord.

Skopje Criminal Court judges are deciding whether the case should go to trial.

Montenegro Security Services on ISIS Alert

The Montenegrin government has drawn up a new national strategy to counter a “high risk” of violent extremism and deter would-be jihadists from leaving for Syria and Iraq.

By Dusica Tomovic, Podgorica

Montenegrin Muslims were dismayed when a video featuring an armed man calling for Montenegro’s Muslim population to join him in Syria or “kill the infidels in their homes” was shared on social networks last July.

“If you want honour, come here brothers... fear Allah, the call for the caliphate is something you must answer,” said an ISIS member, who was presented as Abu Mariam Al-Albani.

The man was later identified as Mirza Haklaj, a Montenegrin from the capital Podgorica. He was killed during a bomb blast last year in Syria. His wife and children were with him but their fate is unknown.

The video was all the more shocking as violent Islamic extremism in Montenegro is rarely covered by the media or discussed by politicians. Not least because the number of Montenegrins known to have travelled to Syria and Iraq to fight with jihadi groups is relatively small.

An estimated 13 Montenegrins have fought with Islamic State, ISIS, and Al Qaeda-affiliate Al Nusra in Syria and Iraq, according to a report presented to parliament in October last year by the National Security Agency. Six are believed to be still fighting there and four are known to have been killed.

About 20 per cent of Montenegro’s roughly 620,000 population are Muslim, most are Sunni followers of the Hanafi tradition, widely regarded as highly tolerant with a long and deep-rooted history of co-existence with other faiths, including Orthodox and Catholic Christianity.

However, the Balkan wars of the 1990s dramatically changed this tradition of co-existence. In 1992, dozens of Bosnian Muslim refugees were unlawfully arrested by some border police officers and deported to the Serb-majority Bosnian entity.

Following the deportations, most of the refugees were killed. Their remains have yet to be found. In 2008, the government apologised to the families of deported Muslims and agreed to pay compensation amounting to a total of four million euros.

Meanwhile, a number of Balkan Muslims adopted far more conservative interpretations of Islam as espoused by members of the Salafi and Wahhabi communities.

Their influence was more widely noticed in Bosnia and Kosovo, as foreign Islamic groups came to those countries in greater numbers. Their presence was first recorded in Montenegro in the mid-2000s and remains largely restricted to the majority Muslim Sandzak region that straddles the border with Serbia.

The security services highlighted some members of the Wahhabi community, mainly from Bosnia and Serbia, as a potential threat to security and expelled several from the country. The Islamic Community of Montenegro, ICM, the body that governs Islamic affairs, issued calls to resist “extremist teachings”.

Secret surveillance

The security services continue to focus their efforts in areas associated with alleged extremist preaching including the Sandzak region where at least six Montenegrins currently fighting in Syria and Iraq are reportedly from.

The 2015 National Security Agency report confirms the police have placed some individuals and families from towns in the Montenegrin part of Sandzak - including Plav, Gusinje, Rozaje and Bijelo Polje – under surveillance.

Eighteen-year-old Ernad Huseinovic, the fourth Montenegrin known to have been killed in the Syria and Iraq conflicts, came from the northern town of Plav.

He was killed in a bomb attack on January 20 and had spent time in Germany, where some believe he was radicalised, before fighting with ISIS for six months, according to local media reports.

The three other Montenegrin jihadists killed fighting in Syria with ISIS were Mirza Haklaj from Podgorica, Adis Salihovic from Rozaje and Damir Slakovic from Bar.

Last May, threats against three Muslim MPs from Slakovic’s hometown Bar were published on his Facebook account, calling them “renegades who think they are Muslims”.

"Islamic State, with Allah’s permission and help, will arrive there and will clean up this city [Bar] and Islam there from the dirt and lies that you’re telling,” his message read. He is reported to have been killed in July last year.

In February, local media outlets, quoting police sources, reported other Montenegrins from Plav were believed to be fighting with either ISIS or Al Nusra. Those named included the brothers Dzemal and Kenan Canovic, Omar Redzepagic, Semir Casanagic and his wife Ines Canovic.

The security services declined to confirm if this was the case but several local media outlets published photographs apparently showing the Canovic brothers with what appears to be an ISIS flag in Syria.

Monitoring, but no charges

A senior police officer, speaking on condition of anonymity, told the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network, BIRN, “several Montenegrins” were suspected of having plans to join ISIS but, without solid evidence, they cannot be charged.

“For now we only monitor their contacts and links, it's the only thing we can do,” he says.

Interior Minister Rasko Konjevic confirmed the state is “launching an investigation against a number of persons who may be linked to participation in foreign armed formations...recruitment, organising transportation, collecting money and departure of our citizens to foreign battlefields” but declined to give further details.

While insisting there are no specific threats to Montenegrin security, Konjevic stressed such incidents could not be ruled out entirely.

In response, Montenegro has drawn up a new national strategy to combat violent extremism, which BIRN has seen.

The document describes the risk of violent extremism as “high” and outlines new measures to strengthen counter-terrorism efforts and deter would-be jihadists from joining ISIS and Al Nusra.

According to the strategy, Montenegro is setting up a new intelligence-gathering unit to tackle radicalisation and a special team tasked with flagging up terrorism-related and violent extremist content on the internet.

As well as strengthening the capacity of security agencies to identify and prosecute people who are planning to or have participated in “acts of violent extremism or terrorism”, the strategy is also prevention-focused.

The idea is to identify people in the early stages of radicalisation to prevent them from being recruited by violent extremist groups. The strategy also includes measures to deal with returnees “inside and outside the criminal justice system” and mentions rehabilitation and reintegration programmes.

“Those programmes are generally directed at persons who have become radical with the aim of reintegrating them into society, or at least deter them from future violence,” the document states.

The Montenegrin police have also enhanced border security in an attempt to crackdown on arms smuggling in response to international reports that say ISIS is using weapons sourced from Balkan and Eastern European states.

[Research carried out by the human rights organisation Amnesty International says](#) that assault weapons and small arms sent from Bosnia and Serbia to Britain may have ended up in the hands of the militant Islamist group.

The report released in last December said that ISIS fighters are using ammunition manufactured in 21 countries, including Serbia. Police reports following November's terror attacks in Paris, in which 130 people were killed, said the attackers used Balkan-origin Kalashnikov assault rifles.

Police spokesperson Tamara Popovic told BIRN that Montenegrin police already communicate with partner agencies of other countries to "exchange relevant information" on allegations relating to arms smuggling.

Radicalised Muslims 'felt excluded, betrayed'

A senior police source, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said the radicalisation process has become more sophisticated over time, with some reports that extremist recruiters were targeting women as a means of reaching out to potential male fighters.

"In the last few years we have seen several cases where persuading women to wear hijab was the trigger for the further radicalisation of other family members," BIRN's source said.

Mirsad Kurgas, founder of Islamic community relations NGO Number 19, has been investigating why young Montenegrin Muslims have been departing for Syria and Iraq. He dismisses claims women are targeted by extremists, saying many of those who have fought abroad felt highly marginalised in their home country.

"Living in a majority Orthodox Christian country, those young people have felt excluded and somehow betrayed by their own community. I talked with many of them, they told me that by going to Syria they found a new purpose in life. They felt useful there," he says.

Kurgas, along with some other academics and commentators, is highly critical of the ICM, claiming it is too close to the ruling coalition government party and "turns a blind eye" to the issue of Islamic extremist radicalisation.

He also claims some jihadists had been in conflict with local religious leaders before turning to extremist ideology and that the ICM should do more to reach out to disaffected young Muslims, including returnee fighters.

Speaking of one jihadist who is said to have returned to Montenegro after fighting with ISIS for a year, Kurgas claims: "None of the imams or prominent members of the community [ICM] tried to reach him, to talk with him, although we all knew he was an ISIS fighter... he left the country again and died."

In February, the daily newspaper Dan quoted a professor at Belgrade University's Faculty of Political Science, Mirosljub Jevtic, as saying that a number of imams from the town of Plav had laid the groundwork for the spread of ISIS's violent ideology.

"There's a special recruitment made by the ISIS, backed in Montenegro from Syria," he is reported to have told Dan.

The ICM issued a statement shortly afterwards rejecting claims that it had failed to tackle extremist preaching in Plav.

“The Islamic Community in Montenegro has continuously and unequivocally condemned all forms of radical interpretations of Islam. If someone has... knowledge of any activities that are in the zone of criminal responsibility, we invite them to react and protect the Islamic Community from unsubstantiated accusations,” the statement read.

Islam expert Ivan Ejub Kostic, managing director of the Belgrade-based Balkan Centre for the Middle East, acknowledges the ICM must be closely involved in countering radicalisation but cautions it cannot shoulder the responsibility alone.

“The Islamic Community [of Montenegro] must strive to be as close as possible to young people...if there are, indeed, certain imams within the Islamic community who favour jihadist ideology then...[the council leadership] must act decisively and remove these people from imam positions,” Kostic says.

However, Kostic underlines individuals inciting religion-based violence are often hostile to official Islamic community bodies and should be dealt with by the security agencies.

“It is important that the Islamic Community [of Montenegro] and the security structures are in constant contact to work together to identify potential threats,” he says.

BIRN has contacted the ICM on several occasions for a response but it declined to comment.

Mevludin Nuhodzic, chair of the Parliamentary Committee for Security, is careful to underline that he believes Montenegro’s deep-rooted tradition of inter-faith and inter-ethnic tolerance outweighs the threat of Islamic extremism.

Acknowledging some returnees from Syria and Iraq will be utterly disillusioned by what they witnessed there, he believes Montenegro must offer multi-agency rehabilitation programmes to those who would benefit.

The state has, however, stopped short of offering an amnesty for some returnees from Syria and Iraq, as called for by Kurgas who is concerned the new laws will stop people from returning to Montenegro.

“It would be logical that the government and the Islamic Community [of Montenegro] call on people to return from Syria and to promise they will not be jailed if they didn’t do anything wrong,” Kurgas says.

Nuhodzic cautions the state must pay particular attention to those returnee fighters deemed to pose a threat.

“A number of them are... likely returning with the motive of continuing to recruit followers for their ideas and going to the battlefield,” he warns.

Fighter numbers

13 Montenegrin men are believed to have left the country to fight with ISIS or Al Nusra in Syria and Iraq

4 are known to have died in the conflicts

At least **6** are believed to have come from the Montenegrin Sandzak region

There are no official estimates for returnees or the number of women and children who have travelled to Syria and Iraq

Source: 2015 National Security Agency report

Anti-terror law reforms

In March 2015, Montenegro adopted anti-terror law reforms that criminalised participating in a foreign conflict, punishable with jail terms of up to 10 years.

The amendments to the Criminal Code, passed by 57 votes in the 81-seat parliament, make it a criminal offence to join or participate in “armed conflicts outside of the territory of Montenegro”.

In addition, those found guilty of organising, recruiting, financing, encouraging, leading or training people or groups of people” with the goal of joining or participating in foreign conflicts will face jail sentences from two to ten years.

The law was introduced after it emerged some ethnic-Serb Montenegrins were leaving to fight for pro-Russian forces in Ukraine, as well as those joining jihadi groups in Syria and Iraq.

Arrests and prosecutions to date

The Montenegrin authorities have not charged or prosecuted anyone in relation to radicalisation, recruitment, supporting and funding terrorist activities or for fighting in Syria and Iraq.

However, the Special Prosecutor’s Office told BIRN that two investigations had been launched in a joint action with the police into allegations that some Montenegrins had committed criminal acts, namely “participating in armed conflicts outside of the territory of the Montenegro”.

‘The process is in pre-trial investigation [stage] covering more persons who are Montenegrin citizens,’ the office said.

Jihadists ‘Target Young, Marginalised Serbian Muslims’

Anti-Muslim sentiment and the rift between Serbia’s official Islamic affairs institutions have allowed violent jihadi extremists to exploit disadvantaged Roma and Bosniak communities, warn experts.

By Marija Ristic, Zoran Maksimovic, Sasa Dragojlo, Beograd, Novi Pazar, Smederevo

“My husband explained some things about Islam to me and I decided to embrace it. In the beginning, everything was fine. It was a change but it was OK... But when we went to Syria, everything changed. He was telling me fairy tales. I believed him, so I went,” says Makfirete Saciri.

In her first media interview, Saciri told the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network, BIRN, she travelled to Syria in late 2013 to join her husband, Ferat Kasumovic, and brother, Fahredin Saciri.

Taking her child with her, Saciri crossed into Syria from Turkey and spent three months in Raqqa, considered the ‘capital’ of Islamic State, ISIS. Saciri, an ethnic Roma in her late 20s, says she was placed in “an apartment for women and kids”.

“There were women from France, Germany, [and] Switzerland... There were women from Zagreb and Belgrade, but most of the women there were Bosnian,” she says.

“I barely understood what was happening around me...except that I was scared all the time,” she recalls. “I feared for myself but even more for my child.”

Her brother was killed fighting in Syria, at which point Saciri claims to have “come to my senses”. She, her husband and child returned to Serbia in February 2014 because, Saciri says, “my husband got the order to do so”.

According to security service estimates, 50 Serbian Muslims, including women and children, travelled to Syria and Iraq between early 2012 and January 2016. Many are, like Saciri, from Serbia’s highly marginalised Roma community. Others have been recruited from the Bosniak Muslim population.

As it became clear Muslims were leaving to fight in the Middle East and Serbs were joining pro-Russian forces in Ukraine, the government passed new laws in October 2014 criminalising participation in, or organising and recruiting others to take part in, foreign wars.

Aleksandra Djurovic, a Serbian Progressive Party MP, said during a parliamentary debate held in December the number of nationals leaving to fight in overseas conflicts had declined sharply since the new laws were introduced.

'Network of extremists'

Saciri's husband, Kasumovic, is now on trial with four others at the Higher Court in Belgrade. All have been charged with terrorism offences under older legislation. They are all accused of committing and training others to commit terrorism offences in Syria. Two, Abid Podican and Tefik Mujovic, are believed to be in Syria and are being tried *in absentia*.

All of Kasumovic's co-defendants were leaders of the Islamic youth organisation Furkan, based in the Sandzak city of Novi Pazar.

Prosecutors allege all five were part of "a network of Islamic extremists that targeted marginalised groups" and used the Furkan premises from 2012 to 2014 as a meeting place and base from which to send an unknown number of fighters to Syria and Iraq.

In addition, the prosecution claims the accused organised recruitment and preparatory meetings across Serbia and arranged visits to the north-eastern Bosnian town of Gornja Maoca, hosted by its former imam Nusret Imamovic. ISIS flags have been spotted in the town and, according to the Bosnian security services, Imamovic is now fighting in Syria.

The three in custody while on trial - Kasumovic, Sead Plojovic and Izudin Crnovsanin - admit to being in Syria but deny committing terrorist acts.

The trial, which is expected to continue for several more months, is the first Serbian prosecution related to suspected jihadists fighting in Syria and Iraq.

Adem Demirovic, a Vienna-based Muslim religious leader, has given sermons at the Furkan building in Novi Pazar and was considered one of its senior authorities. He denies links to violent extremism and told BIRN he has never advocated fighting for ISIS, insisting Furkan simply "nurtures original Islam".

He claims only two Muslims who "visited Furkan" went to Syria and Iraq and says others, even if they "came here once" are "just attributed to us".

"I personally supported the fight [in Syria and Iraq] in the sense of protecting the innocent who were being killed there and helping them but, when conflicts appeared within the Islamic opposition [in Syria], I immediately said it was not permitted. Under Sharia [law] it is forbidden to take part in... conflicts between Muslims," he says.

According to police sources Furkan has "downscaled activities" in recent months in response to "increased monitoring" by security services and the prosecution indictment.

Serbian Interior Minister Nebojsa Stefanovic said there are no direct terrorism threats to the country but underlined Belgrade is cooperating with national, regional and international security services.

“We are taking this issue seriously. The police are cooperating with the state security agency and the prosecution, and we are closely monitoring the situation in the field,” he said.

Police and state officials confirmed seven nationals known to have returned to Serbia from the Middle East are being closely monitored.

Muslims ‘radicalised in improvised mosques’

According to Serbian intelligence records, Islamic extremists, said to be linked to Wahhabi communities in Sandzak with strong links to groups in Bosnia, are operating through ‘unofficial’ mosques, known locally as paradzemati or ‘para-mosques’.

Islamist recruiters have been, claim Serbian prosecutors, most active in the majority Bosniak Muslim Sandzak region in south-western Serbia that straddles the border with Montenegro and areas with sizable Roma populations, such as the town of Smederevo in central Serbia and the Belgrade suburb of Zemun.

Police records obtained by BIRN state at least 10 people from Roma communities have gone to Syria – including the former imam of the Zemun ‘para-mosque’ Goran Pavlovic. The documents state all other Serbian nationals in Syria and Iraq are Bosniak Muslims.

Muslim leaders in Zemun and Smederevo deny any links to sponsoring or supporting terrorist acts or recruiting and sending fighters to Syria and Iraq.

Adem Morina, imam of the Smederevo mosque, describes the allegations as “false”, insisting; “This is just a place to pray and serves as nothing more than that... there are no deals and no meetings to discuss going there [Syria].”

Representatives of the Muslim community in Zemun declined to comment beyond denying involvement of any kind with fighting in Syria and Iraq.

Marko Milosevic, a researcher at the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy think tank, believes regulating paradzemati is an essential part of tackling radicalisation but warns more needs to be done to prevent people fighting in foreign wars.

He says the new laws allow the authorities to punish offenders but does not combat extremism or provide “mechanisms that would prevent people” going in the first place.

Islamic Community split ‘exploited’

In Sandzak, Novi Pazar Mayor Meho Mahmutovic told BIRN the appearance of Islamic extremists and radicalisation is now one of the town’s “biggest problems”.

“Their way of thinking and activities have nothing to do with Islam. All normal Muslims are against what they are doing under the excuse of being fighters for the faith,” he says.

Mahmutovic says the split between the two official Islamic bodies operating there has resulted in confusion over which organisation has final authority over religious matters.

The Islamic Community of Serbia was set up in 2007 and is headquartered in Belgrade. The Islamic Community in Serbia has its headquarters in Novi Pazar and operates under the auspices of the Islamic Community in Bosnia, based in Sarajevo.

Bekir Makic, a religious leader, teacher and former Islamic Community of Serbia official, acknowledges extremists have exploited the rift between the two official Islamic bodies and says unifying the two “would help to deal with the issue of radicalisation”.

Muamer Zukorlic, former leader of the Bosnian-run Islamic Community in Serbia who resigned from his position in February, agrees radicalisation of some members of the Wahhabi movement was enabled by the split between both organisations.

“I was the one warning on the danger of the Wahhabi movement,” he says, before describing violent Islamic extremism as a “weed that has grown” in the cracks between the two organisations that “now cannot be controlled”.

Zukorlic is more critical of the establishment of the Belgrade-headquartered Islamic Community of Serbia. He claims it was set up by the former government who wanted to install their own Islamic affairs institution in the region.

Mahmutovic and Semira Kacar, president of the Sandzak Council for Human Rights, told BIRN in separate interviews that religion is deeply politicised in Serbia.

“Religion in Sandzak and in Serbia in general is often used as a tool in political battles, which leads to the abuse of religion for political purposes and the exploitation of state institutions by powerful religious communities,” Kacar says.

She believes all forms of religious extremism, be it Muslim or Christian, should be tackled but warns discrimination against Muslims is of acute concern in Sandzak, a region that is struggling with high poverty levels and tense inter-ethnic relations.

Anti-Muslim sentiment is rooted in Serbian history - a legacy of five centuries under Ottoman rule - and was reinforced after the bloody wars of the 1990s between Serbs and Bosniaks that followed the collapse of the former Yugoslavia.

“Religious communities, political parties and non-governmental organisations need to assume their part of the responsibility [for combating discrimination]. Dialogue is one of the most important ways for overcoming tensions in society,” she says.

“A feeling of injustice and desperation is leading people to extremism,” Kacar warns.

'Inequality, alienation breeds extremism'

Ivan Ejub Kostic, author of *Persecuted Islam* and managing director of the Belgrade-based Balkan Centre for the Middle East, agrees key drivers for radicalisation include poverty, poor education, limited interaction within wider society and alienation.

"The state needs to change its attitude towards Muslims and work more on eliminating discriminatory practices... it needs to create a social climate where Muslims feel fully equal as citizens with the rest of the population," he says.

Noting Roma communities "face very bad economic conditions and are not integrated enough within society", Kostic warns this kind of alienation can lead to a "jihadist ideology that has absolutely nothing to do with Islam".

As to criticisms both Islamic Community bodies should tackle the issue, Kostic acknowledges they have a role to play but dismisses the notion they can prevent radicalisation and violent extremism alone.

"More and more you hear that the main responsibility [for tackling radicalisation] lies with the Islamic community but this is not true... primarily, it is a matter for the state security agencies and the police. They must carefully follow what is happening and react if needed," he says.

Former Islamic Community of Serbia official Makic also cautions violent Islamic extremism is a global phenomenon and that youths "are following events in Syria via the media and social networks, which is where most... are being recruited".

Makic says young jihadists "have been presented with a picture of Syria that differs from reality, so they believe they are fighting for real values... [despite there being] no justification for their actions... no religious, human, moral justification for leaving to join the so-called Islamic State".

Aside from tackling poverty and social-exclusion, Makic believes young Serbian Muslims "need to be taught the correct values of faith... and be given an opportunity to live a decent life".

Makfirete Saciri, who is now separated from Kasumovic, would agree.

She remains an observant Muslim but regrets going to Syria, saying her husband and other jihadi fighters abused Islam for their own purposes.

"At this point, I feel sorry for the people there," she says.

Fighter numbers

26 are believed to be still fighting with ISIS or Al Nusra in Syria and Iraq *

8 Serbs are believed to have died in the conflicts so far *

7 former fighters have returned to Serbia *

In total, **50** Serbian nationals are estimated to have travelled to Syria and Iraq between early 2012 and January 2016 *

The Serbian prosecution office estimates at least **10 women** and **15 children** have travelled to Syria and Iraq.

There are no year-on-year estimates for Serbian nationals leaving for Syria and Iraq but the Serbian Military Agency says most left in 2013 and 2014.

** Source: The Serbian police (January 2016)*

Anti-terror law reforms

In October 2014, Serbia adopted criminal law reforms that criminalise participating in a foreign conflict, punishable with jail terms of between six months and 10 years.

Those found guilty of organising or inciting others to fight illegally in foreign conflicts, or of participating in training or organising training, or of equipping others with the aim of fighting overseas face jail terms of between two and 12 years in prison.

The law was introduced after it emerged that Serbian citizens were taking part in wars in the Middle East and Ukraine to punish those who have fought on foreign battlefields and deter others from taking part in conflicts around the world.

Arrests and prosecutions to date

In September 2014, the Serbian authorities charged Abid Podbicanin, Sead Plojovic, Tefik Mujovic, Izudin Crnovsanin and Ferat Kasumovic with committing and training others to commit terrorism offences in Syria.

Podbicanin, Plojovic, Mujovic and Crnovsanin are also charged with financing terrorist activities, with Mujovic facing additional charges of recruiting fighters online.

The accused are standing trial at the Higher Court of Belgrade, although Podbicanin and Mujovic are thought to be in currently in Syria and are being tried *in absentia*.

The other three admit to being in Syria but deny participating in any act of terrorism.

The trial is the country's first related to Serbian fighters in foreign conflicts and is expected to continue for several more months.

In February, Goran Pavlovic from Zemun and Rejhan Plojovic from Novi Pazar were charged with allegedly committing terrorist acts and recruiting others to fight in Syria. They are believed to be in Syria and the prosecution announced an international arrest warrant will be issued. They are expected to be tried *in absentia*.

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