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**PROSELYTIZATION IN ALBANIA BY MIDDLE EASTERN
ISLAMIC ORGANIZATIONS**

by

Arben Kullolli

March 2009

Thesis Co-Advisors:

Abbas Kadhim
Zachary Shore

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ORGANIZATIONS**

Arben Kullolli
Civilian, Department of Defense
B.A., History-Geography, Shkodra, Albania, 1996

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Author: Arben Kullolli

Approved by: Abbas Kadhim
Thesis Co-Advisor

Zachary Shore
Thesis Co-Advisor

Harold A. Trinkunas, PhD
Chairman, Department of National Security Affairs

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ABSTRACT

Since the fall of communism in 1992, Albania has undergone fundamental reform and change. Some of the more profound changes have included massive migration, open elections, 1997's governmental meltdown, and religious revival. Although most of the changes have been quite welcomed and positive, some have created problematic situations. Although, the revival of Islam was seen as a sign of freedom, it soon became an unexpected problem for the government and the population.

Through non-profit organizations, schools, aid, and porous borders, Islamic extremists were able to access a small part of the population. However, Albania's long history of religious tolerance, shallow roots in formal religion, and Western cultural orientation has created a hostile environment for radical Islam.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CPA	Communist Party of Albania
EU	European Union
FIS	Algerian Islamic Front
GIA	Islamic Algerians Armed Groups
IEJ	Islamic Egyptian Jihad
IDB	Islamic Development Bank
IIRO	International Humanitarian Organization
LPA	Labor Party of Albania
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NGO	Non-Government Organizations
OIC	Organization of Islamic Conference
PKSH	Communist Party of Albania
RPSH	People's Republic of Albania
SEED	Support for East European Democracy Act
SHIK	Albanian National Intelligence Service
U.S.	United States of America
WAMY	World Assembly of Muslim Youth

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I. INTRODUCTION

A. MAJOR RESEARCH QUESTION

Islamic fundamentalism has become a serious threat to the world's security. Members of radical Islamic organizations in recent years have had a noticeable presence around the globe, thus putting pressure on countries in the world, including Albania. In line with such a trend, the purpose of this study is to discuss the impact of the continuous growth of this extreme ideology in Europe and America in general, and Albania in particular. Furthermore, this thesis will examine the likelihood of the people of Albania converting to Islam and the outcome of such conversion for world security.

In short, this thesis aims to investigate the following questions: How successful will the Wahhabi movement be in converting Albanians to radical Islam? In addition, what factors will limit the success of radical Islamic movements, such as the Wahhabis, in Albania?

Research seems to point to the fact that prospects for successful proselytization in Albania by Middle Eastern Islamic organizations, notably Wahhabi missionaries from Saudi Arabia, may be limited by key factors in Albania's history and its contemporary political orientation. More specifically, these are: 1) its complex religious traditions and the peaceful coexistence of multiple religions in Albania since the Ottoman period; 2) the dominance of a communist regime in Albania from 1945 to 1992, and an officially atheistic country from 1967 to 1992; 3) and Albania's interest in having close relations with the United States due to the prospect of this relationship for Albania's future membership in NATO.

B. IMPORTANCE

The investigation is important since it will help advance understanding of the prospects for radical Islamic proselytization in Albania. The results of this study should be of interest to United States' policy-makers and analysts, and also to those concerned

with the political future of the Balkan region. Needless to say, the recent history of the Western Balkans has shown that terrorism and extremist insurgencies can destabilize the region and hamper efforts to integrate this part of Europe into Euro-Atlantic structures. The study will rely on international sources and foreign government documents, as well as Albanian daily press coverage of events in the country for its gathering of data.

C. PROBLEMS AND HYPOTHESES

This study is guided by the assumption that the success of Wahhabis in converting Albanians to extremist Muslims is highly unlikely due to the peaceful coexistence of the different religions in this country for centuries, the deeply rooted atheist beliefs remaining from the communist era, and the Albanian government's determination in repressing any efforts that would jeopardize its relations with the West.

More specifically, from the time of Albania's independence until the dominance of communism (1912-1944), four main religions have coexisted peacefully in Albania. These are 1) the Sunni Muslims comprising 50% of the population,¹ 2) the Bektashi,² a faction of Islam, 20%, 3) the Orthodox 20% and 4) the Catholics 10%.³ After Bektashi were banned in Turkey in 1925 by Ataturk, the order moved its headquarters to Albania. For Albanians, their identity as a nation supersedes their religious inclination; they consider Albanians as their religion, which explains the reason for such peaceful coexistence.

This period was followed by over four decades of religious repression enforced by the ruling of the communist party (1944-1992). The Agrarian Reform Law of August

¹ The Central Intelligence Agency, The World Factbook, Albania, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/al.html> (accessed September 4, 2008).

² The Muslims of Albania during the Ottoman invasion were divided into two main communities: those associated with Sunni Islam and those associated with the Bektashi, a mystic Dervish order that came to Albania through the Albanian Janissaries that served in the Ottoman army and who practiced Albanian pagan rites under a nominal Islamic cover. After Ataturk banned the Bektashi in Turkey in 1925, the order moved its headquarters to Tirana and the Albanian government subsequently recognized it as independent from Sunnism. Sunni Muslims were estimated to represent approximately 50% of the country's population before 1939, while Bektashi represented another 20%.

³ The percentages are estimates; there are no available current statistics on religious affiliation; all mosques and churches were closed in 1967 and religious observances prohibited. In November 1990, Albania began allowing private religious practice.

1945 nationalized most property of religious institutions, including the estates of monasteries, orders, and dioceses. For the next two decades, religion was not eradicated but was under the strict control of the communist party, and it had a less visible presence in the country. By May 1967, religious institutions had relinquished all 2,169 churches, mosques, cloisters, and shrines, many of which were converted into cultural centers for young people.⁴ Many Muslim imams and Orthodox priests renounced their “parasitic” past. More than 200 clerics of various faiths were imprisoned; others were forced to seek work in either industry or agriculture.⁵ In other words, religion moved from a less visible state to an invisible state for over four decades. The generation that grew up during this period lost contact with religion and raised their children without strong religious beliefs. The fall of communism in the world did not qualitatively change the status of religions in Albania and the atheist mindset of the people. The practice of religion became free for the people of Albania but the long atheist tradition continued to prevail and rule at an invisible level.

The close relationship between the United States and Albania adds an additional barrier to the possibility of extreme Islamic views developing roots in Albania. At a time when the United States is increasingly focused on security outside Europe, Albania is similarly trying to engage in the war against terrorism successfully by freezing terrorist assets, shutting down suspect Islamic NGOs, expelling Islamic extremists, and providing military and diplomatic support for the U.S.-led actions in Afghanistan and Iraq. Ultimately, Albania hopes to become a member of NATO and the key to such membership is keeping such extremist views out of Albania. Based on the abovementioned views, the researcher is inclined to believe the unlikelihood of any extreme religious view to succeed and prevail in Albania.

D. LITERATURE REVIEW

The first section of this paper attempts to discuss a number of issues in more detail with the hope that this discussion will provide the necessary background

⁴ Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religion_in_Albania (accessed September 4, 2008).

⁵ Ibid.

knowledge regarding the main topic of this thesis. These issues are as follows: 1) the rise and fall of Islam during major historical periods of Albania and 2) multiple perspectives on the function of NGOs in developing countries, and their possible ties to terrorist networks in Europe. The following section discusses these topics in more detail.

1. Arrival of Islam in Albania

After the division of the Roman Empire in 285 A.D., the greater part of the Balkan Peninsula fell to the Eastern Roman (Byzantine) Empire with its capital at Constantinople.⁶ The Byzantine Empire remained the most powerful military, political, and cultural force in the area for a thousand years. Its position of religious leadership was most important. After 1054, when the Christian churches of East and West split, Constantinople became the center of the Orthodox world, and its influence extended over the Orthodox peoples of the Balkans.

At the time of the Ottoman's arrival in Albania in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the Albanians were religiously split between a Catholic north and an Orthodox south, which had been the result of the Great Schism in 1054.⁷ The Ottomans brought Islam, which was a new religion to the Albanians, but they did not force it onto the public initially. In time, many Albanians converted to Islam, mostly in the late 17th century.⁸ Stravo Skendi cites three reasons concerning the enormous spread of Islam among the Albanian Christians—both Catholic and Orthodox—in the 17th century. He notes in particular, “the desire to avoid the payment of taxes; the attraction of worldly advantages, for in the Ottoman Empire the political-economic basis was religion and not nationality; and the insufficient number of intelligent clergy to supply the spiritual needs of the

⁶ R. E. Zickel and W. R. Iwaskiw, *Albania, A Country Study* (Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., 1992), 82.

⁷ When the definite schism occurred in 1054, the northern part of the country was placed under the jurisdiction of Rome.

⁸ Noel Malcolm, *Kosovo: A Short History* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1999), 163-169.

population.”⁹ This held true for both the northern Catholic and southern Orthodox regions. Although many Albanians embraced Islam, many of the converts also maintained their Christian identity simultaneously.¹⁰

In public, many of these crypto-Christians “professed” Islam, but within their homes and villages, they practiced Christian beliefs, while some Albanians even blended the two faiths, and even included other religions (Bektashism).¹¹

Perhaps, this subject is best articulated in a letter by Lady Mary Wortley Montagu where she comments, “These people [Albanian soldiers] ... declare that they are utterly unable to judge which religion is best; but, to be certain of not entirely rejecting the truth, they very prudently follow both, and go to mosques on Fridays and the church on Sundays, saying for their excuse, that at the day of judgments they are sure of protection from the true prophet; but which that is, they are not able to determine in this world.”¹² Her comments reveal much about Albanian societal structure and the role of religion within it.

Edith Durham’s observations during her travel to Albania coincide with those of Montagu. She states:

The Albanian remains Albanian. He is first of all Albanian. Religion always comes in the second place. [...] When an Albanian must obey circumstances, he does it in order to make circumstances obey him. He never takes Christianity seriously, but apparently, even Islam has not been introduced properly. [...] Some nations have a natural inclination towards religion. While Albanians, as a nation, do not care.¹³

⁹ Stavro Skendi, *The Albanian National Awakening, 1878-1912* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967).

¹⁰ Stavro Skendi, “Crypto-Christianity in the Balkans under the Ottomans,” *Slavic Review* 26, no. 2 (June 1967): 227-246.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Lady Mary, Wortley Montagu. Letters and Works*, ed. Lord Wharncliffe and W. Moy Thomas, 2 vols. (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1893), vol. 1, 291.

¹³ Mary Edith Durham, *The Burden of Balkans* (London: E. Arnold, 1905), in “The Albanian Renaissance in Political Thought: Between the Enlightenment and Romanticism,” ed. Lea L. Ypi, *Sage Journal Online, East European Politics & Societies* 21, no. 4 (2007): 7.

Petrika Thengjilli, on the other hand, believes that economic factors had a determining role in the spread of Islam in Albania. He states, in order to avoid paying the Xhizja tax to the Ottoman occupiers, many farmers converted to Islam. More specifically, tax was to be paid by all Christians, Jews and Roma, aged between 15 and 75 years old. However, all women, children, aged men, handicapped people, prisoners and priests were exempt from this tax. This explains why in some families men converted to Islam, the women continued to practice their Christian faith, as they were exempt from Xhizja.¹⁴

According to Thengjilli, the Roman Catholic Church did not show sufficient care for people of the Catholic faith in these lands and did not provide effective measures for the education of Catholic priests of Albanian origin. While the Roman Catholic Church had established seminaries for its priests in many other countries, it did not consider it necessary to open such seminaries in Albania, even though this country is just across the Adriatic from Italy. The Vatican did not pay the remaining religious officials in Albania on a regular basis.¹⁵ The above also became a reason encouraging the catholic Albanian to convert to Islam.

However, Sami Frasher, a scholar and representative of the late 19th century Albanian renaissance, provides a different interpretation on the manner by which Islam spread in Albania. He says, “in addition to the spread of Islam by invasions, there also exists another way in which a religion can spread; it is a way not mentioned by historians. It is the way religion spreads by itself, without invasions, without swords and without soldiers. Even though this way is not more powerful than the first one, it is almost equal to it.”¹⁶ Considering that the Ottoman Empire had invaded other countries of the Balkans at about the same time or somewhat earlier than Albania, had they used force for religious conversion, then Serbs, Bulgarians and Montenegrins should have converted to Islam as well. On the contrary, they preserved their Orthodox religion.

¹⁴ Petrika Thengjilli, “Shqiptaret mes lindjes dhe perendimit 1506-1839,” (Albanian between East and West 1506-1839), *Tiranë Fusha Fetare* (Religion Field), 1, (2003): 40.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 177.

¹⁶ Xhavit Shala, *Siguria Kombetare dhe Sfidat e Integritimit* (National Security and the Challenges of Integration), (Tirana, 2003), 21.

According to Xhavit Shala, geographical location may have played in the spread of Islam. Albania is situated between the western and the eastern nations and this position of Albania was much envied and desired by the Ottoman Empire whose goal was expansion toward Europe. The long-term occupation of the Albanian lands by the Ottoman Empire, therefore, created conditions that facilitated the spread of Islam among Albanians.¹⁷

2. Islam in Albania from Independence until 1992

Following the liberation of Albania from the Ottoman Empire in 1912, there were two consolidated faiths in Albania, Islam and Christianity that specifically divided into four communities: 1) the Sunni Muslims 50%; 2) the Bektashi 20%; 3) the Orthodox 20%; 4) and the Catholics 10%. However, after the country gained its independence, during King Zog's regime (1924-1939), Albania became a secular state. During his reign, there was no official religion in Albania. In effect, King Zog treated all religions equally and did not favor one above another. However, this state did not last for long.

After the liberation of the country in 1944,¹⁸ the Albanian Communist Party that had led the resistance became the only governing political force. The country was led toward socialism and the communist Marxist –Leninist ideology became the dominant ideology in the country. Consequently, Albania became the first country in the world without religious institutions. The battle against religion began with the destruction of the churches and mosques, but as Enver Hoxha, the dictator of Albania stated on March 22, 1967, “the war against religion (did) not end with the destruction of churches and mosques.”¹⁹ In fact, clergymen were arrested and placed in jail, and people were not allowed to promote religion publically. This position continued to be maintained by the Albanian state during the period from 1966 to 1992, and only changed with the end of the cold war.

¹⁷ Shala, *Siguria Kombetare dhe Sfidat e Integritimit* (National Security and the Challenges of Integration), 23.

¹⁸ November 1944: Albanians had thrown the Germans out, the only Southeast European nation to do so without the assistance of Soviet troops.

¹⁹ Hoxha Enver, *Work no. 35* (Tirana, 1982), 138-139.

3. Islam in Albania following 1992

During the first years of the transitional period 1992-1998, when the country faced immense economic difficulties, the government, hoping for additional economic prospects, applied to become a member of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) on December 1992. As a result of such membership, Albania opened its doors to the NGOs from many Islamic countries some of which, mostly from Saudi Arabia, tried to use this opportunity for promoting their interpretation of Islam under a humanitarian disguise. As noted by the U.S. State Department, the Albanian membership in the OIC probably encouraged those NGOs not only to become very active in religious affairs, but also to open an Islamic Bank in Tirana.²⁰ In fact, in the month of October of 1992, a delegation from the Islamic Development Bank (IDB) visited Tirana to lay the grounds for Albania to join this bank. As incentive, it promised huge loans to ameliorate Albania's economy. In particular, they offered to send a group of Albanian students abroad to undergo religious educational training in the IDB member countries and to return to Albania to teach Arabic and Islamic beliefs.²¹

Additionally, they used the poor economic conditions that many Albanian families were experiencing at the time, particularly in rural areas, to expand their efforts in converting Albanians to Islam. For example, they gave \$25 per month to poor parents, who in return would send their children to Islamic lessons that taught the Wahhabi-Salafi traditions and ideas.²² Moreover, they offered to send young students to Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Malaysia, and Pakistan to study Islamic theology.²³ Some of these students could not endure the life and customs of these schools and returned home. Others, however, succeeded, and today they serve as clergymen in different parts of Albania.

²⁰ In its 1997 Report on Human Rights, the State Department said that, according to the Minister of the Culture, there were 20 different Muslim societies and sects with around 95 representatives in the country

²¹ Miranda Vickers, *The Albanians: A Modern History* (New York: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 1999), 10.

²² *Xhavit Shala, Siguria Kombetare dhe Sfidat e Integritimit (National Security and the Challenges of Integration)*, (Tirana, 2003), 102.

²³ Leonard Demi, *European Enlargement and the Integration of the Western Balkans* (Master's Thesis, June 2003), 45.

These young clergymen behaved differently upon their return. They had the tendency to underestimate Albanian traditional values and customs, and behave contrary to the known practices.²⁴ Some of them with financial support from abroad wanted to introduce Saudi style mosques instead of what is known as a traditional Albanian style. Some were able to build new mosques even when the traditionalists opposed them, as happened in Dragostunje.²⁵

The above-mentioned influence led to two outcomes. First, a struggle for power began between the young imams, educated at Islamic universities by these Wahhabi NGOs, and the older generation of clergymen who had survived the Communist era and had established their place in the Muslim leadership hierarchy.²⁶ Second, many of these students who went abroad were too young to have experienced religion and were, therefore, not eager and curious to hear what these young clergymen had to offer. The Islamic Relief organization rightfully describes Albanian Muslims of this period as a dry sponge, ready to soak up anything given to them.²⁷

4. Islamic NGOs and Osama Bin Laden

Had these NGOs merely tried to convert Albanians to the Islamic faith, the problem would not have been a serious societal issue. However, evidence seems to suggest that this was more than just an effort of ideological conversion but rather an effort in expanding terrorism in the name of religion. In fact, evidence points out a close tie between these Islamic NGOs and terrorist networks. According to a number of unsubstantiated reports, Bin Laden is said to have visited Albania in 1994 as a wealthy Saudi Arabian businessman, offering support to charities rebuilding mosques and schools as a cover to gain access for his operatives. The London Independent has quoted Interpol

²⁴ Demi, *European Enlargement and the Integration of the Western Balkans*, 46.

²⁵ “Radikalizmi Islami në Dragostunje (Islam Radicalism in Dragostunje),” *Zeri i Popullit*, January 28, 2003.

²⁶ “Opposition in the Muslim General Committee,” *Shekulli*, January 28, 2003.

²⁷ Vickers Miranda and James Pettifer, *Albania – From Anarchy to a Balkan Identity 2nd* ed. (C. Hurst & Co. Ltd., 1999), 104.

allegations that Bin Laden was known to have visited Albania.²⁸ Police also suspect that Bin Laden, working with organized crime networks, may have taken advantage of the theft of 100,000 Albanian passports during the chaos that swept the country in 1997 and provided them to his supporters for international travel.²⁹

It was, therefore, no surprise that several high-ranking U.S. officials cancelled visits to Albania in the summer of 1999, believing there was a risk from terrorist groups linked to Bin Laden.³⁰ At about the same time, a number of Islamist terrorists were arrested and deported in 1998-99 for plotting to attack the U.S. Embassy in Tirana. Since the latter event, U.S. intelligence has been given a free hand by the Albanian government to obtain the detention and expulsion of foreigners suspected of planning to use Albania as a springboard for terrorism in Western Europe.³¹

5. Wahhabism and Its Potential Success in Albania

However, at this point, it may be appropriate to address an important question prior to moving any further in the discussion and that is the tenants of the belief called “Wahhabism” promoted by Osama Bin Laden and his followers.

Wahhabism or Wahhabi-Salafism is an Islamic faction that has been in power in Saudi Arabia for centuries and has continuously aimed to expand its presence in the Balkans. After Albania and other countries in the Balkans were opened to the world, Wahhabis began to take their first steps to expand their ideology and religious traditions.

²⁸ Colin Brown, “Bin Laden linked to Albanian Drug Gangs,” *The Independent* (October 2001), 21.

²⁹ International Crisis Group, *Bin Laden in the Balkans; The Politics of Antiterrorism*, Balkan Report no. 119 (Brussels: ICG, November 9, 2001), 5, <http://www.crisisweb.org/home/index.cfm?id=1239&l=1> (accessed July 14, 2008).

³⁰ Secretary of State Madeleine Albright decided not to stop in Albania in June 1999 following her visit to Macedonia due to security concerns. Defense Secretary William Cohen cancelled a trip to Tirana the following month due to an alleged threat related to Islamic militants affiliated with Osama bin Laden. Ambassador to the United Nations Richard Holbrooke cancelled his visit to Tirana planned for August 1999 and President Clinton avoided the country in his subsequent visit to the region.

³¹ International Crisis Group, *Bin Laden in the Balkans; The Politics of Antiterrorism*.

Albania, in fact, was not an isolated case but another example of the world trend. Kepel has noted that the Wahhabi objective was to bring Islam to the forefront of the international scene, to substitute it for the various discredited nationalist movements, and to refine the multitude of voices within the religion down to single creed of the masters of Mecca.³²

The penetration of Islamic organizations can legitimately be considered a threat to the national security of any country, and Albania was no exception.³³ Unlike Greeks, Serbs, and Montenegrins, all of whom use religion as a basis for developing their national identity; Albanians have not based their national identity on religion. Instead, the basis of Albanian national identity is the country's language, culture, and tradition, as there are four main religions in Albania. If Albania's national identity were based merely on religion, this would ignite a fierce rivalry between the country's religions. For this reason, the Wahhabism that started to expand into Albania became a serious threat to the country's national security.

Wahhabi-Salafism hurt the country's national identity and endangered its democracy because this faction of Islam does not accept democratic rule. Instead, it insists that the state must be based on religious law. It therefore does not have anything in common with Albanian Muslims or Albanians as a nation.

Albanian traditions are vastly different from those associated with the religious culture promoted by the charitable organizations financed by the Arab world. For Albanians, religious tolerance is considered a national treasure with foundations dating back over a century. In the late 19th century, the poet Pashko Vase Shkodrani (1825-1892), addressing himself to the Albanian people, wrote:

³² Gilles Kepel, *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 70.

³³ Artan Hoxha, "Si erdhen ne Shqiperi terroristet e Xhihadit (How Jihad Terrorists Came to Albania)," *Gazeta Shqiptare*, www.balkanweb.com (accessed January 15, 2008).

Wake, Albanian, from your slumber,

Let us, brothers, swear in common,

And not look to church or mosque,

The Albanian's faith is Albanianism!³⁴

At the end of the 19th century and still today, this slogan remains valid: the religion of the Albanian people is Albanianism. However, what does religious tolerance mean in Albania? The word tolerance, although widely used today in the Albanian language, is a borrowed term. It comes from the Latin word *tolerare*, which means to carry or to endure. Religious tolerance in Albania means to prevent discrimination against any person on account of his faith, and to respect each person's right to choose his religious faith.³⁵ In the political sense, religious tolerance represents a public policy that guarantees freedom and equality of faiths within the state.

The fact that 70% of Albanians are Muslims presents no obstacle to the redefinition of the country's civilization, partly because the Christian faiths have always enjoyed an equal status with the other faiths since the declaration of independence in 1912. The Christians in Albania are either Orthodox (20%) or Catholic (10%) The western redefinition of Albania's civilization identity has the support of the country's political and economic elite and of the Albanian people as a whole. This redefinition promises to be realized fully once Albania becomes a member of the EU and NATO.

³⁴ Pashko Vasa, trans., Robert Elsie, www.albanianliterature.com/authors2/AA2-16poetry.html (accessed November 14, 2007).

³⁵ Shala, *Siguria Kombetare dhe Sfidat e Integritetit (National Security and the Challenges of Integration)*, 102.

E. METHODS AND SOURCES

The method of research will primarily be historical analysis of how Islam evolved in Albania. For this reason, it will examine international sources and foreign government documents as well as Albanian daily press coverage of events in the country. It will also use the historical study of the literature and legal documents published by the Albanian government.

This study should be interesting to American and Albanian policy-makers and analysts, and also to those concerned with the political future of the Balkan region. The recent history of the Balkans has shown that terrorism and extremist insurgencies have the ability to destabilize the region and hamper efforts to integrate this part of Europe into Euro-Atlantic structures. The war against terrorism requires the joint efforts of all countries. This thesis will contribute to documenting the historical study of a small, yet peculiar country, located in a troublesome region, and with a Muslim majority, which seeks its future inside the European Union and is a strong supporter of the U.S.-led war against terrorism.

F. THESIS OVERVIEW

This study is divided into four chapters. Chapter I set the background to this research. More specifically, it provided an overview of the major research questions in this study, background information regarding its topic, methods for collecting and analyzing data, as well as the significance of this study.

Chapter II provides a brief history of Albania, with special attention to religious factors. It starts by presenting the way in which Islam was introduced to the Albanian people. This chapter presents arguments on the role religion played in Albanian society beginning with the Ottoman occupation, when Islam was first introduced, until the fall of communism.

Chapter III discusses the revival of Islam in Albania after 1990. Specifically, it addresses how certain NGOs, which were in the country performing humanitarian relief missions, introduced radical Islam to the Albanians. The thesis then suggests what might

be the most promising and cost-effective way to resolve the problems relating to radical Islam in Albania, a new solution that should defuse tensions and promote security, stability, and prosperity for both the region and Europe as a whole, calling attention to the importance of strong institutions and good governance.

Chapter IV offers conclusions and recommendations.

II. A BRIEF HISTORY OF ARRIVAL OF ISLAM IN ALBANIA

A. OTTOMAN EMPIRE INTRODUCES ISLAM TO ALBANIA (1385-1912)

Having discussed the complicated history of religion in Albania and its significance in the post-9/11 world, this chapter seeks to discuss the origins of Islam in this state. Five centuries of Ottoman rule left the Albanian people fractured along religious, regional, and tribal lines. The first Albanians to convert to Islam were young boys forcibly conscripted into the sultan's military and administration. The division of the Albanian-populated lands into small quarreling fiefdoms ruled by independent feudal lords and tribal chiefs made it an easy prey for the ambitious Ottoman Empire, who at the time, aspired to expand its boundaries.

Islam was introduced in Albania toward the end of the fifteenth century, following the Ottoman invasion. The conversion to the faith of the invaders, however, was a very slow process. In the north, the spread of Islam met Roman Catholic opposition. The Church's resistance and the mountainous terrain contributed to curb Muslim influence and also preserve Pagan practices.³⁶ In the center and south, however, by the end of the 17th century, the urban centers had largely adopted the religion of the growing Albanian Muslim elite.³⁷

The Turks allowed the conquered Albanian clan chiefs to maintain their positions and property, but they had to pay tribute, send their sons to the Turkish court as hostages, and provide the Ottoman army with auxiliary troops.

³⁶ Shqiperia.com, www.shqiperia.com/kat/m/shfaqart/aid/210/Depertimi-i-islamit-ne-tokat-shqiptare.html (accessed September 4, 2008).

³⁷ Ibid.

For example, Gjon Kastrioti³⁸ Kruje,³⁹ one of the Albanian clan leaders who had submitted to Turkish suzerainty was compelled to send his four sons to the Ottoman capital to be trained for military service. The youngest of his sons, Gjergj Kastrioti (1403-68), who later became the Albanians' greatest national hero, captured the sultan's attention. Renamed as Iskander following his conversion to Islam,⁴⁰ the young man participated in military expeditions to Asia Minor and Europe and when appointed to administer a Balkan district became known as Skanderbeg.⁴¹ After Ottoman forces under Skanderbeg's command suffered defeat in a battle near Nis (present Serbia) in 1443, Skanderbeg rushed to Kruje and tricked a Turkish pasha into surrendering him the Kastrioti family fortress. In the 15th century, Skanderbeg united the Albanian tribes in a defensive alliance that held up the Ottoman advance for more than two decades. One of the most important elements of Kastrioti's era is unity among Muslims and Christians. As a result of his accomplishments, his family's banner, bearing a black two-headed eagle on a red field, became the flag under which the Albanian national movement rallied centuries later.⁴² The Gjergj Kastrioti era was one of the most revered periods in Albanian history during which Muslims and Christians remained united.

After the death of Kastrioti, the Albanian territories regressed into a state of war among themselves and the occupying force. Five centuries of Ottoman rule left the Albanian people fractured along religious, regional, and tribal lines. In the early 17th

³⁸ Gjon Kastrioti was the father of Albanian national hero Skanderbeg. Kastrioti was prince of the region surrounding Krujë. As was common among nobility on the Ottoman frontier, his sons were taken to the Ottoman court to ensure Kastrioti would be faithful to the Empire. In 1430, Gjon Kastrioti led an unsuccessful uprising against the Ottoman Empire in the city of Krujë in what is now Albania. His death in 1442 prompted Sultan Murad II to occupy the region in central Albania quickly.

³⁹ City in central Albania.

⁴⁰ Zickel and Iwaskiw, *Albania: A Country Study*, 84.

⁴¹ Gjergj Kastrioti Skanderbeg (May 6, 1405 –January 17, 1468) (Albanian: *Gjergj Kastriot Skënderbeu*, widely known as Skanderbeg, Turkish *İskender Bey*, meaning “Lord or Leader Alexander”), or Iskander Beg, was a prominent historical figure in the history of Albania and of the Albanian people.

⁴² Zickel and Iwaskiw, *Albania: A Country Study*, 87.

century, however, Albanians converted to Islam in great numbers. In addition, the Muslim community further fragmented into Sunni⁴³ Muslims and the Bektashi⁴⁴ sect.

B. FACTORS THAT INFLUENCED PREVALENCE OF ISLAM IN ALBANIA

Ottoman occupation of Albanian territories impacted not just the political, economic and social aspects of the population, but also its religious structure. Dominant Christian adherence of Albanians both in Catholic and Orthodox religions began its downfall to the benefit of Islam, the official religion of the Ottoman state.⁴⁵

The economic factor was a prevailing element for the convergence of the Albanians into the Islamic religion in cities where craft and trade were mainly under the monopoly of Muslims, because they were excluded from paying a tax per person residing in the house and various abuses committed during tax collection. In the second half of the 16th century, there were 450 Muslim craftsmen vs. 23 Christian.⁴⁶ Islamism was the official state religion and the “*devsirme*”⁴⁷ was a state policy. At the time, the Ottoman Empire used slaves and captives as servants and recruited the best of them for its military. These slaves could earn their freedom only if they were to embrace Islamic

⁴³ Sunni (from Sunna, meaning “custom,” having connotations of orthodoxy in theory and practice) - a member of the larger of the two great divisions within Islam. The Sunnis supported the traditional (consensual) method of election to the caliphate and accepted the Umayyad line. On this issue, they divided from the Shia (q.v.) in the first great schism within Islam. In 1944, when the communists assumed power in Albania, about 75% of the country's Muslims were Sunnis.

⁴⁴ An order of dervishes of the Shia branch of the Muslim faith founded, according to tradition, by Hajji Bektash Wali of Khorasan, in present-day Iran, in the 13th century and given definitive form by Balim, a sultan of the Ottoman Empire in the 16th century. Bektashis continue to exist in the Balkans, primarily in Albania, where their chief monastery is in Tiranë.

⁴⁵ Shqiperia.com, www.shqiperia.com/kat/m/shfaqart/aid/210/Depertimi-i-islamit-ne-tokat-shqiptare.html (accessed September 4, 2008).

⁴⁶ Petrika Thengjilli, *Historia e Popullit Shqiptare 395-1875 (History of the Albanian People 395-1875)* (Toena, Tirane 2004), 309.

⁴⁷ Derived from Ottoman Turkish: *devşirme* meaning “collection, gathering”; was the systematic collection of non-Muslim children and their involuntary conversion to Islam followed by their conscription as regular troops for the Ottoman Empire.

religion. The process of conversion was an irreversible one, because if an individual chose to reconvert to the catholic religion, he/she would incur harsh punishments, like incarceration or death.⁴⁸

Non-Muslims paid extra taxes and held an inferior status, but they could retain their old religion and a large measure of local autonomy. By converting to Islam, individuals among the conquered could elevate themselves to the privileged stratum of society. In the early years of the empire, all Ottoman high officials were the sultan's bondsmen, the children of Christian subjects chosen in childhood for their promise, converted to Islam, and educated to serve. Some were selected from prisoners of war, others sent as gifts, and still others obtained through *devsirme*, the tribute of children levied in the Ottoman Empire's Balkan lands. Many of the best fighters in the sultan's elite guard, the janissaries⁴⁹ were conscripted as young boys from Christian Albanian families, and high-ranking Ottoman officials often had Albanian bodyguards.

The spread of Islam also happened to avoid paying the *Xhizja* tax. This per capita tax was collected by the state. According to Sharia⁵⁰ law, those who paid this tax could safely practice their faith and the state pledged to protect their life and wealth.⁵¹ The *Xhizja* tax (to be paid by all non-Muslims, aged between 15-75 years old⁵²) upon the Christians was mandatory for non-Muslims that were under the authority of the Muslim state, exclusively for adult men in full physical and mental state, with the condition that they could meet wealth resources to pay for it.) According to Basha, women, children, elderly and incapacitated unable for combat, were excluded from this toll, unless they were wealthy. The basis set for the *Xhizja* tax obligation was that the Islamic state would guarantee the protection of non-Muslims for any type of aggression;⁵³ therefore, this was

⁴⁸ Thengjilli, *Historia e Popullit Shqiptare 395-1875 (History of the Albanian People 395-1875)*, 311.

⁴⁹ Soldiers, usually of non-Turkish origin, who belonged to an elite infantry corps of the Ottoman army. They formed a self-regulating guild, administered by a council of elected unit commanders. From the Turkish *yeniçeri*; literally, new troops.

⁵⁰ Sharia is the body of Islamic religious law.

⁵¹ Xhavit Shala, *Albanians in the Crossroads* (Tirane, 2004), 23.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 24.

⁵³ M. Ali Basha, *Neper gjurmet e Islamit (Through Footsteps of Islam)* (Tirane, 2005), 15.

considered as a compensation for the protection provided, but not limited to other benefits from the Islamic state. This tax was a sort of balance with what was acquired from Muslims, like “zeqati,”⁵⁴ and other obligations for remission of mistakes and sins made; Thus, from a non-Muslim was acquired as much as from a Muslim.⁵⁵

The Turks put into practice religious discrimination which favoured Muslims in both social and fiscal matters. The *Xhizja*, or tax upon the Christians, was so high that it was almost impossible to pay: it rose from 45 aspres a year in the 15th century to 305 aspres⁵⁶ at the beginning of the 17th century, and by the middle of the century, it had reached 780 aspres⁵⁷ for some categories. The majority of the people had no alternative but to become Muslim converts.⁵⁸ The Ottoman legislation provided advantages and favors to populations that embraced Islam and all bodies of this system were in disposition to the Muslim population.⁵⁹

The absence of a single church and the fierceness of the struggle between Orthodoxy and Catholicism lead to an estrangement of Albanians from Christianity. This environment created favorable conditions for the spread of Islam.⁶⁰ During the 14th-15th century, the principdom leaders, and subsequently, the population of those principdoms led religious conversion as well. Conversion from one religion to the other and the inherited paganism were suitable ground for the expansion of Islam in Albania.⁶¹ According to

⁵⁴ Zeqati “alms for the poor” is the Islamic principle of giving a percentage of one's income to charity. It is often compared to the system of tithing and alms but unlike these older systems, it serves principally as the welfare contribution to poor and deprived people in the Muslim lands, although others may have a rightful share. It is the duty of the state not just to collect it; but to distribute it fairly as well. Zeqati (Zakat) is one of the Five Pillars of Islam.

⁵⁵ Basha, *Neper gjurmet e Islamit (Through Footsteps of Islam)*, 15.

⁵⁶ S. Pollo and A. Puto, *The History of Albania from its Origins to the Present Day* (Routledge & Kegan Paul London, Boston and Henley, 1982), 90.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 90.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Thengjilli, *Historia e Popullit Shqiptare 395-1875 (History of the Albanian People 395-1875)*, 311.

⁶⁰ Shala, *Albanians in the Crossroads*, 22.

⁶¹ Thengjilli, *Historia e Popullit Shqiptare 395-1875 (History of the Albanian People 395-1875)*, 309.

Thengjilli in 1573, the “kadi” of Elbasan, to end the war with the Ottomans, recommended to the sultan the conversion of entire populations to Islam, thus, in census of 1582, there were 170 Muslim families, out of which 160 were converted.⁶²

The geographical position also played a role in the spread of Islam. The Albanians found themselves on the border between East and West; their lands often becoming battlegrounds for cultural clashes. The Ottoman Empire saw this territory as an excellent bridge toward their European expansion.⁶³ The war between the Church of Rome and the one in Constantinople⁶⁴ for dominant strategic positions in Albania had a major influence on the abrupt expansion of Islam, while the two churches were spending minimal funds for the upkeep of religious institutions, human resources or protection of their followers.⁶⁵ The majority of the population did not have an in-depth religious education to create strong convictions able to withstand the religions of the invaders. Those Balkan people whose religious traditions were more consolidated, who had no inner conflict between Roman Catholic and the Byzantine Church, and who were unified under one religion, were able to preserve their faith.⁶⁶ Additionally, Rome did not show sufficient care for the Catholic faith in Albania. It did not provide effective measures for the training of the Albanian clergy. While Rome had established training colleges for its clergy in every other country, in Albania, only with the Adriatic Sea between, it did not consider it necessary to open such training colleges.⁶⁷

The conversion of the Albanian population was quite superficial. For example, in Northern Albania to avoid intrusion by the Ottoman state on their internal affairs and selfgovernance, the population formally adhered to the Islamic religion but kept their old names and observed the Christian faith within their homes. Those were known as

⁶² Thengjilli, *Historia e Popullit Shqiptare 395-1875 (History of the Albanian People 395-1875)*, 310.

⁶³ Shala, *Albanians in the Crossroads*, 23.

⁶⁴ Center of the Byzantine Church.

⁶⁵ Thengjilli, *Historia e Popullit Shqiptare 395-1875 (History of the Albanian People 395-1875)*, 310.

⁶⁶ Shala, *Albanians in the Crossroads*, 24.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

cryptochristians.⁶⁸ However, the harsh attitude of Rome against Crypto-Catholics and its persistence that all Crypto-Catholics declare openly their religion, influenced the official conversion of many Albanian Christians to Islam. The position of Rome against Crypto-Catholics became even more radical after the Assembly of Arber in 1703. This assembly demanded that the religion had to be declared openly by all citizens. They were to do this even in life threatening circumstances. This attitude against Crypto-Catholics forced a large part of the population to embrace Islam for good.⁶⁹ In public, many of these Crypto-Christians “professed” Islam, but within their homes and villages, they practiced Christian beliefs. Some Albanians blended the two faiths, and some even included other religions such as Bektashism.

The Muslims of Albania were divided into two main communities: those associated with Sunni Islam and those associated with Bektashi, a mystic Dervish order that came to Albania through Ottoman Janissaries.⁷⁰ Bektashism is believed to have been introduced in Albania by dervish Sari Sallteku in the late 15th century. He founded seven *tekkes*, (the Albanian term is *teqe*) including one in the mountains above Kruje, where he was said to have slain a dragon. The sect increased steadily throughout the country, except in the Catholic areas to the north.⁷¹ Many early leaders of Albanian nationalism were Bektashi.

Following the destruction of the Janissary Corps and the banning of the *tariqat* in 1826, many Bektashi *babas* (i.e., Bektashi religious leaders) and dervishes fled to the remote areas of the Balkans far from the reach of the Ottoman government. During this period (especially after the order outlawing of the Bektashis was rescinded in the 1860s), the *tariqat* (the followers of Bektashi) had gained a sizeable presence in southern Albania. Their toleration and ability to absorb local customs provided the population with

⁶⁸ Thengjilli, *Historia e Popullit Shqiptare 395-1875 (History of the Albanian People 395-1875)*, 311.

⁶⁹ Shala, *Albanians in the Crossroads*, 27.

⁷⁰ Soldiers, usually of non-Turkish origin, who belonged to an elite infantry corps of the Ottoman army. Formed a self-regulating guild, administered by a council of elected unit commanders. From the Turkish *yeniçeri*; literally, new troops.

⁷¹ The Bektashi Order of Dervishes, <http://www.beyond-the-pale.co.uk/albanian4.htm> (accessed October 4, 2008).

a 'folk' Islam to which they could easily relate.⁷² The spread of Islam in Albania was given a special impetus by the Bektashis, a heretical Muslim sect whose doctrine and outlook were generally more acceptable to Christian communities and those of the official Sunni.⁷³ The Bektashis did not demand observance of the Islamic rites of prayer and fasting as it allowed women to appear unveiled in public and to mix socially with men.

The history of religion in Albania highlights the weak roots of religion in the Albanian society. Albanian literature, especially that of the 19th century renaissance, praised the pre-Turkish freedom of the Albanians and their wars against the Ottoman invaders. It became obvious to these poets and writers that what united Albanians were their history, land, culture and language. Indeed, one of the few elements that divided the Albanians at the time was religion, which was a foreign/imposed belief. Later on, one of Albania's most celebrated poets, Frasheri (a Bektashi), highlighted this fact, through works about his love for the country and the battles of the Albanians against the Turks.⁷⁴ Authors such as Konica, Skendo, and Cajupi made their love for their country their main subject not the religion of their country. These literary works prepared the Albanians for their war of independence, which they won on November 28, 1912. The Albanian unity during the war for independence was due to their emphasis on nationalism vs. religious belief. Consequently, the Albanian version of Islam was a more tolerant version of Islam largely due to its geographical distance from the center of Islam, Mecca.

C. STATUS OF ISLAM IN ALBANIA FROM INDEPENDENCE (1912) UNTIL END OF WORLD WAR II (1944)

Once independent, Albania did not adopt a state religion. The constitutions of the Republic and of the kingdom both declared that the Albanian state has no official religion, that all religious and faiths were respected, and that their liberty of practice was

⁷² The Bektashi Order of Dervishes.

⁷³ Anton Logoreci, *The Albanians Europe's Forgotten Survivors* (Westview Press, Inc., 1978), 32.

⁷⁴ He was a Bektashi, but Bektashis in Albania tended to be patriotic and nationalist.

assured.⁷⁵ This is not to say that friction did not exist between the different religious institutions in Albania. For example, the Orthodox and the Roman Catholic Church had an antagonistic view of each other. Furthermore, the declaration of independence and the founding of the Albanian state, the Islamic religious organizations, together with Islamic educational institutions, were faced with urgent and difficult challenges regarding the preservation of their doctrine.⁷⁶

In the 1920s, when the Albanian state re-emerged after World War I, the Muslims began to break their former religious ties with Turkey.⁷⁷ According to Zekaj, the Albanian Sunni congregation, which had interrupted its relations with Istanbul since 1921, organized its first congress in 1923⁷⁸ and elected its mufti⁷⁹ who moved to reside in Tirana together with the High Council of Shariah. The charter of this council published in 1925⁸⁰ stated that:” The head of the High Council of Shariah represents the Albanian Muslim congregation and holds the title “The head of the muftis.” The High Council of Congregation was also founded which was composed of four other “muftiny” (organizational zones), that of Shkoder, Tirana, Korca and Gjirokastra.⁸¹

Similarly, in January 1922, an assembly of five hundred Bektashi Muslims resolved to abolish the tutelage of Ankara, and settled in Tirana in 1925 and the headquarters of the Bektashi sect was transferred to Tirana.⁸² On August 1925, Zekaj reports a total of 1048 active mosques in Albania with 1315 personnel.

⁷⁵ Stravo Skendi, *Albania East-Central Europe under the Communists* (Frederick A. Praeger-New York, 1958), 287.

⁷⁶ Shqiperia.com, www.shqiperia.com/tr/besimet_fetare.php (accessed October 10, 2008).

⁷⁷ Skendi, *Albania East-Central Europe under the Communists*, 289.

⁷⁸ Dr. Ramiz Zekaj, *The Development of the Islamic Culture among Albanians during the XXth Century*, <http://www.iiu.edu.my/deed/quran/albanian/islamic-culture.htm> (accessed December 10, 2008).

⁷⁹ A mufti is an Islamic scholar who is an interpreter or expounder of Islamic law Sharia.

⁸⁰ Zekaj, *The Development of the Islamic Culture Among Albanians During the XXth Century*, 6.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Skendi, *Albania East-Central Europe under the Communists*, 289.

1. The Period of the King Zog 1925-1939

Albania's King Zog⁸³ took an example from leader of the Young Turks⁸⁴ and founder of the new Turkey state Mustafa Kemal and undertook same important reforms. These reforms intended to consolidate and unite Albania. King Zog was determined to create a new, non-secular image of Albania. After 1929, when a new constitution of the Albanian Muslim community was established, the supreme leader of this community recognized the four Grand Muftis of the four zones, and a delegate for each prefecture of Albania, which strengthened the unity of the Muslim in the different parts of Albania.⁸⁵ The significance of this desire for unity is highlighted in some duties of the muftis stated in the organization law: "to encourage national brother-hood among Albanians of all beliefs; to urge Muslims to become informed concerning modern civilization."⁸⁶

2. Islam under Italian and German Occupations 1939-1944

On April 7, 1939, Italian troops occupied Albania and remained there for the next four years. During this time, the Italians maintained religious toleration, with no established state church.⁸⁷ Although, they revised the organization of the Muslim community, including the Muslims to create a Council of Ulemas, with a president to head their community, no changes were made in the Orthodox and Catholic communities.⁸⁸ The Italians attempted to play Christians against Muslims; however, King Zog, who was a Muslim, employed a Christian Prime Minister to counter this attempt.⁸⁹

⁸³ Zog I, Skanderbeg III of the Albanians (born Ahmet Zogolli, later changed to Ahmet Zogu), October 8, 1895 – April 9, 1962, was King of Albania from 1928 to 1939. He was previously prime Minister of Albania (1922-1924) and president of Albania (1925-1928).

⁸⁴ The Young Turks were a coalition of various groups favoring reforming the administration of the Ottoman Empire in the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century.

⁸⁵ Skendi, *Albania East-Central Europe under the Communists*, 288.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 292.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 293.

On the contrary, when the Germans occupied Albania in September 1943, they made no changes in the organizations of the religious communities⁹⁰ in Albania, and religion was not an issue of concern to them.

D. ISLAM DURING THE COMMUNIST PERIOD (1944- 1992)

1. First Phase 1944-1967

The Communist came in power in Albania in November 1944. Once in charge, they immediately sought the destruction of religion.⁹¹ On May 5, 1945, the Communist regime reorganized the Muslim community by excluding the Bektashi and dividing the Islamic community in Albania into four zones, with a Grand mufti for each.⁹² As a result, the Bektashi constituted their own community. The government, while ostensibly satisfying the Bektashis' desire for independence, succeeded in decreasing the Sunni-Bektashi conflict.⁹³ Since Albania was the home of Bektashism, the Communists seized the opportunity to declare the Head of this community the "World Grandfather of the Bektashis."

Subsequently, the land reform law of August 1945 deprived religious organizations of almost all of their property, and a law of November of 1949 required all religious communities to develop among their members a sense of loyalty towards "people's power" and the (then) People's Republic.⁹⁴ Islam was the first to be subjected to state interference and control, probably because it was less well organized than the Christian churches. By excluding Bektashis from formal recognition as part of the Muslim community, the state accentuated Sunni-Bektashi differences.⁹⁵ In 1947, dervishes of their own order murdered two leading Bektashi communist-sympathizers as

⁹⁰ Skendi, *Albania East-Central Europe under the Communists*, 293.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid., 294.

⁹⁴ Derek Hall, *Albania and the Albanians* (London: Pinter Pub Ltd., 1994), 44.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

traitors near Tirana.⁹⁶ On November 26, 1949, a law was enacted requiring all religious communities to develop among their members the feeling of loyalty toward “people power” and the People’s Republic of Albania.⁹⁷

In the years that followed, the Communist Party of Albania undertook certain radical measures to establish a totalitarian socialist state. Accordingly, Islam and all other religions were weakened gradually and finally prohibited to practice their belief. In this anti-religious war, the communists used different methods. In the first years after the liberation, the Albanian leadership did not categorically prohibit the practice of religion and the activity of religious institutions. In this way, CPA avoided an aggravation and followed a moderate policy, which emphasized religion as a private matter. However, religion institutions could not interfere in any way, shape, or form with the affairs of the state. Thus, initially religion could be practiced but not in a way that it would interfere with state affairs.

These ideas were reflected in the first constitution of RPSH (People’s Republic of Albania) in 18th article, which stated that: “the freedom of belief and religion is guaranteed to all citizens.”⁹⁸ At the same time, this constitution forbade the use of religion for political purposes and the formation of political-religious organizations. The Islamic Congregation as the other congregations was free to practice its religious ceremonies but only within the limits of the law. On the other hand, this policy claimed that the state should not interfere into religious activities. Adhering to this strategy, the PKSH maintained the same policy as the one implemented during the kingdom’s period (1929). According to this policy, religion and state were kept separate, while the state acknowledged the existence and religious communities.

Apart from the legislation of new measures on political and economical aspects and on limitation of religious influence on society, the communist party organized a continuous atheistic campaign. Although there were few orientations calling for prudence

⁹⁶ Hall, *Albania and the Albanians*, 44.

⁹⁷ Skendi, *Albania East-Central Europe under the Communists*, 294.

⁹⁸ The first Constitution of the People Republic of Albania came into effect on March 7, 1946.

toward the believers (especially the Muslims) all the mass media, schools, other governmental institutions, and social organizations openly confronted religious ideology. These confrontations aimed to weaken religious beliefs, prohibit religious literature and create an atheist society. All the anti-religious measures taken from 1944-1965 and the youth actions during 1966 encouraged the Albanian leadership to shift toward another phase which meant an open, massive war against religion. This tendentious war was part of the orientations given by LPA (Labour Party of Albania) aimed to create a purely atheist society.

A more careful analysis of this period shows that this was a coordinated effort to mirror the Chinese Cultural Revolution. During the communist oppression in Albania, many religious workers were jailed, interned or killed.⁹⁹ Albania had some 1,666 mosques in 1967, but once the communist state outlawed religion, these religious centers were destroyed because they would “poison human minds and serve as hotbeds for hostile activity.”¹⁰⁰ Thus, Albania became the first country in the world without churches and mosques, without priests and Imams.

2. Albania: The Only Atheist Country in the World, 1967-1992

Influenced by the Chinese Cultural Revolution, Enver Hoxha announced in February 1967 the beginning of a furious campaign against the bourgeois attitudes, the unequal status of women, a pervading spirit of individualism, and religious practices. The latter, whose inauguration was subsequently attributed to a spontaneous movement by Durres students, culminated in the closure of all the country’s 2,169 places¹⁰¹ of worship and the imprisonment of many clergy. Albania declared itself, in September 1967,¹⁰² to the first state-sponsored atheist country. The communists viewed religion as a divisive force and a source of external subversion, representing the interests of Albania’s predatory neighbors: Italy (Roman Catholicism), Serbia and Greece (Orthodoxy), and

⁹⁹ Redi Shehu, “50 Years in an Atheistic Dungeon Emergence, Challenge and Resistance,” *Impact International*, 30 (September 9, 2000).

¹⁰⁰ *The History of the Party of Labor of Albania* (Tirane: Naim Frasheri Publishing House, 1981), 485.

¹⁰¹ Hall, *Albania and the Albanians*, 44.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

Turkey (Islam).¹⁰³ Discouragement of, and restriction of mosque attendance and Islamic teaching was followed by the gradual closure of mosques. Persecution and suppression continued until, in 1967, teams of the young revolutionaries similar to Mao's Red Guard in China, were sent on a national crusade to persuade the population to remove religion from their lives.¹⁰⁴ The country's 1946 constitution, not replaced until 1976, did nonetheless; guarantee all citizens the freedom of conscience and of the faith.¹⁰⁵

This atheist campaign targeted symbols of organized religion.¹⁰⁶ Most mosques had their minarets destroyed. Tombstones with any religious symbols were overturned. People caught wearing any kind of religious symbol, like a cross or gold medallion of the Qur'an around the neck, could be sentenced to up to ten years in prison.¹⁰⁷ People were even afraid to say "mashallah" or "inshallah," expressions that were used in the fabric of daily conversation when seeing a new baby or when talking about the future.¹⁰⁸ The very mention of religious holidays could be punished. For example, a villager from Libohova once announced to a horrified audience, while drunk, that the next day was Bayram (a Muslim holiday).¹⁰⁹ He was fined a substantial sum of money, but his family was relieved he had not been given a jail sentence as well. Further, to prevent people from passing on names with religious significance, a Dictionary of People's Names was published.¹¹⁰ The only names that could be legally given had to be found in that official list.

¹⁰³ Hall, *Albania and the Albanians*, 44.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ Frances Trix, "The Resurfacing of Islam in Albania," *East European Quarterly* (Winter 1994): 1.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

In the early 1970s, an anti-religious museum was established adjacent to Shkoder's erstwhile Roman Catholic Cathedral. Nationally, parents were discouraged from giving their children names that held any religious connotation and the official list of the Illyrian and other proper names were published.¹¹¹

Article 37 of the Albanians constitution published in that year declared that:

...the state recognizes no religion whatsoever and support atheistic propaganda for the purpose of inculcating a scientific, materialistic world outlook in people.¹¹²

The following is a list of important factors that define the communist government in Albania (1944-1990):

- Religion was seen by the post-war regime as a divisive rather than unifying force for Albanian national identity (despite, or perhaps because of, the fact that Albanians of different faiths had come together in the national reawakening in the second half of the 19th century);¹¹³
- Religion was viewed as acting as a Trojan horse for alien influences and potentially hostile foreign powers;¹¹⁴
- Both the above perceptions were particularly motivated by the mutual hostility of the religion and communist ideology;¹¹⁵ and
- Being divided between three competing faiths, institutionalized religion was unable to withstand the onslaughts of the Hoxha regime.¹¹⁶

Among the religious buildings that did survive, the 18th century Edhem Bey Mosque in Tirana was protected as a cultural monument.¹¹⁷ This monument was used for foreign Muslim diplomats if they asked for a place to pray, but Albanians were forbidden

¹¹¹ Hall, *Albania and the Albanians*, 45.

¹¹² *Constitution of the People's Socialist Republic of Albania*, Tirana, 8 Nëntori, 1977, 20.

¹¹³ Hall, *Albania and the Albanians*, 44.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ Trix, "The Resurfacing of Islam in Albania," 4.

to pray there. Other buildings were put to different uses. The Roman Catholic Cathedral in Shkoder became a sports arena, while several Bektashi tekkes, including the headquarters in Tirana, became old people's homes.

E. THE DISAPPEARANCE OF STATE ATHEISM: ISLAM (1989-1992)

Albania's dictator, Enver Hoxha died in 1985. There were three main indications that the communist regime was loosening its tight grip on religion. First, Mother Teresa's three-day visit in August of 1989 became a symbol of religious tolerance.¹¹⁸ Second, the state opened telephone lines with the West in April of 1990. Not only did people begin to call relatives in the Albanian Diaspora, they began using previously prohibited phrases like "inshallah," "God's will."¹¹⁹ Third, Father Simon Jubani, who had been just been released from prison after twenty-six years, gave a religious ceremony for thousands of Muslims and Catholics in city of Shkoder.¹²⁰ In February of 1991, the huge statue of Enver Hoxha in Tirana was pulled down. This act had been preceded by student demonstrations in December of the previous year in Shkoder, Durres, Korce, and even in Gjirokaster, hometown of Hoxha.

Mosques and churches, albeit in dilapidated state, were opened again in January of 1991 after twenty-four years of being closed.¹²¹ However, many Muslim Albanians date the reopening of mosques with the beginning of Ramadan in mid-March, leading to the celebration of the first Bayram or holiday of Id al-Fitr in mid-April of that year. They recount how, for the first time in many years, people fasted for the thirty days of Ramadan. As might be expected, Saudi Arabia served as a source of funds and personnel, and sent imams to teach the people. Muslim visitors from Libya, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Kosova, and North America came for the holiday. The day of the holiday of Id al-Fitr, people gathered in Tirana's Edhem Bey Mosque, located on the main square of the city.

¹¹⁸ Trix, "The Resurfacing of Islam in Albania," 6.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 7.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid.

Hafiz Sabri Koci, the new head of Albania's Sunni Muslim Community, who himself was seventy-one and had spent twenty-one years of hard labor including time in a copper mine, officiated the ceremony.

Saudi Arabia paid full expenses including transportation for over eighty people to go on the pilgrimage to Mecca. Such pilgrimage had been forbidden to Muslims in Albania since 1945. Further, by 1993, Kuwait was reportedly financing Qur'an classes in Albania for Albanian Muslims after regular school hours.¹²² In March of 1991, there was also an official reopening of the Bektashi Headquarters in Tirana¹²³ on the holiday of Nevruz. During Communist rule, the Headquarters had served as an old people's home, and when in 1990, religion was re-legitimized, only one room of the building had been accorded the Bektashis.

After forty-seven years of Communist rule, including twenty-four years of total suppression of religion, Islam again became a publicly practiced religion in Albania.¹²⁴ Many Albanian Muslims never believed that they would see the day that the holiday for the end of Ramadan and for Nevruz would again be publicly celebrated in Tirana; many villagers did not believe they would be allowed to rebuild their turbes. In these public events of the spring of 1991, the first year that religion was again permitted in Albania, the legacy of Enver Hoxha's Communism was apparent in the advanced age of the few remaining Muslim clerics, in the condition of their places of worship, and in the very curiosity of the crowds, particularly in the capital city.¹²⁵

F. CONCLUSION

In summary, a detailed history of Islamic indoctrination in Albania provides a clear understanding of religious beliefs in this state. For example, in the beginning of the 21st century, 70% of Albania's people were Muslim (mostly Sunni Muslim, and some Bektashi), and the rest Roman Catholic, Orthodox and Atheist. Such diverse collection of

¹²² Trix, "The Resurfacing of Islam in Albania," 7.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

religions in a relatively small population and area is explained through a long history of invaders, counter-invaders and political regimes. More specifically, Albania has endured the unforgiving Hoxha atheist dictatorship and it was/is home of religious headquarters. For example, when Ataturk closed the Sufi tekkes (centers) in Turkey in 1926, the headquarters of the Bektashi order moved from Anatolia to Albania. Beginning with the Communist victory in 1944, and culminating in Hoxha's declaration of Albania as an atheist state in 1967, the very survival of religion in Albania came into question. Since the fall of the Communists in 1990-1991, there has been a revival of faith, but the loss of religious clerics and the destruction of centers of worship that occurred during Communist times took their toll. In the third chapter, this thesis will present the return of Islam to Albania in 1991, the first year public worship was again permitted and the events that followed up to date.

III. RADICAL ISLAM'S CHALLENGE IN ALBANIA

Having discussed a detailed history of Islam in Albania in the previous section, this chapter seeks to discuss the following. First, it will articulate the religious vacuum created by the communist government. Second, it will discuss why and how these radical groups were able to infiltrate into the Albanian population. Finally, this chapter will list the various government efforts to counter this influence, and their efficiency.

A. THE FALL OF COMMUNISM AND REVIVAL OF ISLAM IN ALBANIA

Hoxha's long ban of religion had a reverse effect. Once the ban was lifted in the early 1990s, organized religion was accepted in a large scale. However, Hoxha had not only destroyed all mosques, churches and monasteries but also killed most religious leaders to eradicate any religious teaching.¹²⁶ As a result, believers found it difficult to practice under an organized religion. In fact, the legalization of religious expression created great difficulties for the Muslims, Catholics, Bektashis, and Orthodox because they lacked resources to practice religion. These groups needed money for the construction of religious buildings and salaries for the religious leaders who had survived communism.¹²⁷ This situation provided grounds for various Arab organizations¹²⁸ to rush to Albania and help with the resurgence of Islam in Albania.

Albania's membership in the Organization of the Islamic Conference on December 2, 1992¹²⁹ facilitated the coming of these missionaries to the country. Along with membership in the Islamic Conference came the concrete action of removing the country's visa requirement for all citizens of the Islamic world. As a result, hundreds and

¹²⁶ Artan Hoxha, "Miliono dollare per te marre Komunitetin Mysliman (*Millions of Dollars to Take over the Albanian Muslim Community*)," *Gazeta Shqiptare*, www.balkanweb.com (accessed January 16, 2008).

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

¹²⁹ Alternative Information Network, "Political Ping-Pong in Tirana with the Islamic Conference," http://www.aimpress.ch/dyn/trae/archive/data/200110/11019-005-trae_ir.htm (accessed December 11, 2008).

thousands of Arab Muslims rushed to Albania to revive Islam, some of whom were suspicious elements identified by the Albanian secret service as fundamentalist terrorists.

1. The Rebuilding of Mosques and Madrasahs

Needless to say that without the financial help of Arab charities, most Muslims in Albania would have had to continue to practice their religious rituals underneath the open sky. In effect, the ten million dollars¹³⁰ donated primarily by organizations in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, and Turkey made it possible for over 400 new mosques¹³¹ to be constructed in Albania in record time. These funds were also used to build eight Madrasahs and two institutions for the training of new clerics. Hospitals, health centers, and aqueducts were built with this money, and financing was provided to support orphans and individuals without any other means of support. In addition to the above, to train the future clerics of the country, scholarships were given to Albanian students to enroll in Arab universities to study theology¹³². These students brought back a new religious culture to Albania that was different from the traditional faith of the country, thereby igniting conflict between the old clerics and the new ones linked to Islam after the 1990s.

2. The Emergence of a New Form of Islam in Albania

Having been educated in Arab religious schools, these new clerics tried to make the Islamic Community of Albania resemble their ways of worship, introducing a stricter form of Islam and demanding for the radicalization and Arabization of Islam in Albania.¹³³ However, many of the Islamic rituals and cultural customs that they had learned in Arab countries were in conflict with the liberal Islam that had been practiced in

¹³⁰ Artan Hoxha, "Si erdhen ne Shqiperi terroristet e Xhihadit (*How Jihad Terrorists Came to Albania*)," *Gazeta Shqiptare*, www.balkanweb.com (accessed January 15, 2008).

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 3.

¹³³ Artan Hoxha, "Si shpetoi Komuniteti Mysliman nga radikalet (*How the Muslim Community was Not Taken over by Radicals*)," *Gazeta Shqiptare*, www.balkanweb.com (accessed January 15, 2008).

Albania for the past five hundred years.¹³⁴ This resulted in a number of religious clashes between Muslim moderates and a young generation of Muslims educated in the Middle East who espoused a more radical version of Islam.¹³⁵

For instance, Salih Tivari, 58, was shot dead in his office on the morning of January 13, 2003.¹³⁶ As secretary general of the Muslim community, he was the second-highest ranking official after Koci,¹³⁷ and in charge of managing the administrative affairs of this organization. After his killing, Ermir Gjinishi, the 30-year-old deputy head of the country's Muslims, who is associated with the new wing of leaders advocating a more purist approach to Islam in Albania, was immediately taken in for questioning by the police, only to be released without charge after two days.¹³⁸ According to Fatos Klosi, a former head of the Albanian secret police, Tivari had met with him on numerous occasions to voice his concerns about a new generation of Albanians schooled in radical Islam at Arab universities.¹³⁹ Klosi told reporters on January 21:

Salih Tivari met more than once with me to tell me about the pressure of a Muslim extremist wing, mainly youngsters educated in Arab countries, who wanted power in the community.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁴ Hoxha, "Miliona dollare per te marre Komunitetin Mysliman (*Millions of Dollars to Take over the Albanian Muslim Community*)."

¹³⁵ "Albanian Jihad? Divided Sons of God," *Klan* (independent weekly), Tirana, Albania, January 23, 2003.

¹³⁶ "Lutfi Dervishi Albania: Imam Killing Exposes Muslim Divisions." This article was originally published by the IWPR (Institute for War Peace Reporting), London, in its Balkan Crisis Report (BCR No 402, January 31, 2003). The Institute for War & Peace Reporting strengthens local journalism in areas of conflict. Religioscope has been allowed by the IWPR to repost its articles: <http://www.iwpr.net/> (accessed December 12, 2008).

¹³⁷ In 1990, religious freedom was restored. The following year, he was elected Mufti by the Muslim Council of Albania.

¹³⁸ "Lutfi Dervishi Albania: Imam Killing Exposes Muslim Divisions." This article was originally published by the IWPR (Institute for War Peace Reporting), London, in its Balkan Crisis Report (BCR No 402, January 31, 2003). The Institute for War & Peace Reporting strengthens local journalism in areas of conflict. Religioscope has been allowed by the IWPR to repost its articles: <http://www.iwpr.net/> (accessed December 12, 2008).

¹³⁹ F. Klosi, quoted in Lutfi Dervishi, "Albania: Imam Killing Exposes Muslim Divisions." This article was originally published by the IWPR (Institute for War Peace Reporting), London, in its Balkan Crisis Report (BCR No 402, January 31, 2003). The Institute for War & Peace Reporting strengthens local journalism in areas of conflict. Religioscope has been allowed by the IWPR to repost its articles: <http://www.iwpr.net/> (accessed December 12, 2008).

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

However, these clashes did not end with this incident and deepened even more in the years that followed. In 2005, the head of the Islamic Community, Selim Muka, and the chair of the government Committee for Religion, Ilir Kula, both of whom strongly opposed these new views also received death threats,¹⁴¹ and the police who assessed these threats to be genuine had no choice but to place them under police protection.¹⁴²

3. The Emergence of Islamic Terrorist Organizations in Albania

Among the Islamic organizations that mushroomed in Albania during this period, several of them were radical Islamic terrorist groups that tried to abuse the situation in expanding an extremist Islamic ideology in Albania.¹⁴³ These were well known terrorist organizations such as the “Islamic Egyptian Jihad,” “Egyptian Islamic Group,” “Algerian Front of Islamic Salvation,” and “Islamic Armed Group of Algeria.”¹⁴⁴ Between 1994 and 1996, radical Islamic terrorist activities in Albania increased, and the country began to be used as an interim point for mujahedin from Afghanistan who were on their way to Bosnia to fight the Serbian army.

In 1997 and 1998, after the end of the war in former Yugoslavia,¹⁴⁵ mujahedin attempted to enter Kosovo under the pretext of supporting the resistance of their Muslim brothers, and the leaders and financiers of terrorist organizations from the Arab world attempted to change the liberation war of the Albanian people in Kosovo into a religious war

¹⁴¹ WorldPress.org, “Albania: The Young Scholars,” <http://www.worldpress.org/Europe/2335.cfm> (accessed December 12, 2008).

¹⁴² Ibid., 2.

¹⁴³ Hoxha, “Si shpetoi Komuniteti Mysliman nga radikalet (*How the Muslim Community was Not Taken over by Radicals*).”

¹⁴⁴ Hoxha, “Milionë dollarë për të marrë Komunitetin Mysliman (*Millions of Dollars to Take over the Albanian Muslim Community*).”

¹⁴⁵ Established in 1918 as the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes. The kingdom included the territory of present-day Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, Kosovo, Vojvodina, Croatia, and Slovenia. Between 1929 and 1945, the country was called the kingdom of Yugoslavia (land of the South Slavs). In 1945, Yugoslavia became a federation of six republics under the leadership of Josip Broz Tito. In 1991, Yugoslavia broke apart because of long-standing internal disputes among its republics and weak central government.

Many factors contributed to the ability of terrorist organizations to use Albania as a safe haven for building a large logistical base for financing and supporting their activities. One of these factors was the geographic location of Albania in the Balkan region in Southeastern Europe, a location that made it possible for them to expand their ideology to western European countries.¹⁴⁶ It is no wonder that organized crime in Italy, Greece, and Russia had been attracted to Albania for the same reason.¹⁴⁷

Another important factor was the poor economic situation that many Albanian families found themselves in, particularly in rural areas that had favored the penetration of Islamic organizations after the fall of the communist regime. Unlike other religious groups that flocked to Albania during this period, the Islamic organizations pretended that the primary purpose of their organizations and businesses was to foster the Albanian economy.¹⁴⁸

A third factor was the lack of legal infrastructure in the post-communist Albanian state. The new democratic system that came into power after the fall of the communist regime was both legally and politically weak.¹⁴⁹ It had many other problems as well, such as widespread corruption, a porous border, and reluctance to scrutinize foreign investments, companies, and organizations rigorously. A general lack of experience and skill made it difficult for intelligence and law enforcement agencies to monitor the activities of Islamic charity organizations and the extremist groups¹⁵⁰ and individuals coming into the country to work for these foundations.

The final factor contributing to Albania's status as a haven for Islamic terrorist organizations was the simple fact that the majority of the country's population was Muslim and actively welcomed the Islamic organizations. This allowed terrorist

¹⁴⁶ CIA Factbook, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/al.html#Geo>, (accessed February 2008).

¹⁴⁷ Milan V. Petkovic, "Islamic Extremism and the European Quest," <http://www.guskova.ru/misc/balcan/AT/eng/01> (accessed January 5, 2009).

¹⁴⁸ M. Vickers and J. Pettifer, *Albania: From Anarchy to a Balkan Identity* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 10-32.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

organizations to create the proper atmosphere in which to execute their activities, with the goal of gradually influencing the community's faith to push it toward extremism and radicalism.

4. The Alternative Motives of the Arab Organizations in Albania

It is important to remember that Islam came to Albania during the time of the Turkish occupation, in a way similar to that in which it came to many other countries in the Balkans and the East during the Ottoman invasion. As 500 years passed, Islam began to take on a different shape in Albania and the Balkans than it had taken in Arab countries.¹⁵¹ This tolerant version of Islam was more acceptable to Europeans, but it was quite different from the Islam generally practiced in the Arab world. Benefiting from the unique circumstances and opening of borders resulting from the fall of the communist regime, many Arab organizations entered Albania, but unfortunately, not all of them played a positive role.¹⁵²

A major problem was that many law-abiding agencies were unprepared for this type of phenomenon and did not know much about it. Many religious communities were so poor that anyone who came from abroad was viewed as a divinity if they could offer help, donations, or assistance with building a religious shrine.¹⁵³ These religious communities opened their hearts to everyone without discrimination, and the Islamic terrorist organizations used this generosity to bring to Albania extremists who should not have been allowed to enter the country since they had alternative motives.

Many of the Islamic organizations that came to Albania after the fall of the communist regime were extremely generous, giving endowments and building religious shrines. However, some of these gifts were provided conditionally. When a gift enabled a community to build a mosque was given, the Islamic organization that provided the gift often demanded that the Imam be someone who represented the same faction as the

¹⁵¹ Miranda Vickers, *Islam in Albania* (Advanced Research and Assessment Group Balkans Series 08/09, March 2008), 9.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁵³ Hoxha, "Si erdhen ne Shqiperi terroristet e Xhihadit (*How Jihad Terrorists Came to Albania*)."

organization. Islamic organizations also gave financial assistance to orphans and then required them to attend religious courses.¹⁵⁴ These courses did not teach the traditional version of Albanian Islam, which was a tolerant form of Islam, but rather an Islam that was foreign to Albanian religious believers. This resulted in a conflict between the supporters of Albania's liberal interpretation of Islam, i.e., the Hanefi school of Islam, and the supporters of the less tolerant and more radical Salafi or Wahhabi school of Islam, who were primarily people who had returned following their education in an Arab country.¹⁵⁵

5. Wahhabism

Wahhabism or Wahhabi-Salafism is an Islamic faction that has been in power in Saudi Arabia for centuries¹⁵⁶ and has continuously aimed to expand its presence in the Balkans. After Albania and other countries in the Balkans were opened to them, Wahhabis began to take their first steps to expand their ideology and religious traditions there. While it is not illegal to be Wahhabi in Albania, Albanian traditions are vastly different from those associated with the religious culture promoted by the charitable organizations financed by the Arab world. Unlike traditional Islamic believers in Albania, followers of Wahhabism followed more strict and less democratic Muslim principles with little tolerance for deviation. For example, the male wore beards, and ankle length trousers (Selefi sect.) and the women wore the Islamic Hijab. Being exposed to these principles, male students who returned to Albania after having studied in Arab countries asked their wives and sisters to wear the veil, they wanted their wedding celebrations to be more religious, and they quit drinking alcohol and listening to Albanian folk music. In addition, Albanian girls who attended the Madrasahs began to wear the veil in and out of school.

¹⁵⁴ Hoxha, "Si erdhen ne Shqiperi terroristet e Xhihadit (*How Jihad Terrorists Came to Albania*)."

¹⁵⁵ Vickers, *Islam in Albania*, 9.

¹⁵⁶ Christopher M. Blanchard, Analyst in Middle Eastern Affairs Foreign Affairs, Defense, and Trade Division, *The Islamic Traditions of Wahhabism and Salafiyya*, CRS Report of Congress, Updated January 17, 2007.

6. What Measures did Islamic Organizations Undertake to Achieve their Goal?

This difference of opinion, however, did not halt the activities of the radical Islamic organizations in Albania. In fact, these organizations were quite active in 1997¹⁵⁷ and 1998.¹⁵⁸ Their investments were showing results, and they had built a fairly large number of religious buildings in which they generally placed people who had studied abroad and then returned home. These people were the personnel the organizations needed to advertise their beliefs and views among their own people. In 1998, the Islamic organizations in Albania spent millions of dollars¹⁵⁹ to gain control over the Albanian Muslim community¹⁶⁰ by removing their opponents, i.e., the traditional believers of Islam in Albania who tried to protect Albania from Islamic extremist elements. If they had achieved their goal, this would have been a national disaster. However, several Albanian governmental agencies, most specifically SHIK,¹⁶¹ informed the government about these organizations' real plan¹⁶² in legalizing a radical Islamic structure in Albania that with the support of the Arab countries, would eventually overshadow the traditional Albanian Muslim community. Additionally, the four traditional religious in Albania began to express concern about the actions of these radical groups¹⁶³ in brainwashing the younger generation and providing them with military training. They achieved the former goal by offering Young Albanians religious courses in their schools, and sending the

¹⁵⁷ A pyramid scheme is a non-sustainable business model that involves the exchange of money primarily for enrolling other people into the scheme, usually without any product or service being delivered. The massive Albania Pyramid Schemes of 1997 brought the collapse of the Albanian state and led to the almost destruction of all the state institutions.

¹⁵⁸ Hoxha, "Si shpetoi Komuniteti Mysliman nga radikalet (*How the Muslim Community was Not Taken over by Radicals*)."

¹⁵⁹ Artan Hoxha, "Xhihadit vendosi ne Tirane shtabin e falsifikimeve (*Jihad Place in Tirana: The Center of Falsifications*)," *Gazeta Shqiptare*, www.balkanweb.com (accessed January 23, 2008).

¹⁶⁰ Hoxha, "Milionat e dollarave per te marre Komunitetin Mysliman (*Millions of Dollars to Take over the Albanian Muslim Community*)."

¹⁶¹ Albanian National Intelligence Service.

¹⁶² Hoxha, "Milionat e dollarave per te marre Komunitetin Mysliman (*Millions of Dollars to Take over the Albanian Muslim Community*)."

¹⁶³ Hoxha, "Si erdhen ne Shqiperi terroristet e Xhihadit (*How Jihad Terrorists Came to Albania*)."

most loyal of their Albanian students to study in Arab countries. Upon finishing their studies, these students came back to Albania with beliefs and behaviors that concerned many of the local religious communities in Albania.

As a result, governmental agencies began to identify those individuals who were practicing unlawful activities in Albania and were inciting religious hatred, a punishable crime according to an article of the Albanian penal code.¹⁶⁴ The responsibility of the Albanian law enforcement agencies increased after they formed a partnership with equivalent American and European agencies, leading to the identification of these extremists Islamists and their exact location using a registration system. However, this did not put a stop to the activities of these Islamic extremists.

7. Why did Islamic Organizations Succeed in Penetrating Albania?

In fact, Europe's limited support to Albania coupled with its poor economic performance, membership in the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), and numerous conflicts in the Balkans, all triggered an increase in the number of Islamic organizations and missionaries from fundamentalist Islamic states, such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Libya, that came to Albania after the fall of the communist regime. The poor economic conditions experienced by many Albanian families, particularly in rural areas, was one of the primary factors allowing for the penetration of Islamic organizations, as many of these organizations provided much-needed social services and funds.¹⁶⁵ For example, some Islamic organizations gave \$25 per month to poor parents, who in return would send their children to take Islamic lessons frequently influenced by Wahhabi-Salafism. They built hospitals¹⁶⁶ and offered flood relief, orphan sponsorship, welfare for widows and vocational training to Albanians.¹⁶⁷ This coupled with political instability,

¹⁶⁴ Hoxha, "Milionë dollare për të marrë Komunitetin Mysliman (*Millions of Dollars to Take over the Albanian Muslim Community*)."

¹⁶⁵ Xhavit Shala, *Siguria Kombëtare dhe Sfidat e Integritetit* (National Security and the Challenges of Integration) (Tirana: 2003), 102.

¹⁶⁶ Damian Gjikhuri, *Albania's Counter Terrorism-Terrorism Policy Options: Finding a Strategy of Common Sense* (Master's Thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 2004), 14.

¹⁶⁷ Islamic Relief USA, <http://www.irw.org/wherewework/albania> (accessed December 11, 2008).

weak political institutions and law enforcement agencies alongside poverty and a blurred perspective of integration into the Euro-Atlantic mainstream, offered a breeding ground for terrorist groups¹⁶⁸

B. ISLAMIC ORGANIZATIONS A THREAT TO NATIONAL SECURITY

The penetration of Islamic organizations was considered a threat to the national security of Albania¹⁶⁹ for a number of reasons. One is that there are four main religions in Albania and if Albania's national identity were to be based on religion, this would ignite a fierce rivalry between the country's religions. Therefore, the Wahhabism that started to expand into Albania was considered a serious threat to the country's national security and peace. Wahhabi-Salafism could also easily hurt Albania's national identity because of their beliefs in theocracy and their insistence on the establishment of states based on the holy law, a belief that was not favored by Albanian Muslims. Not only this, many of these organizations had very clear ties to well known terrorist organizations.

1. The Islamic NGOs with Links to Terrorist Groups

These organizations were a serious threat to Albania as well as the regions due to their ties to terrorist organizations, this leading to the closing of many of these organizations by the government. The "International Humanitarian Islamic Organization" (IIRO) was the first Islamic NGO established in Albania in 1990, when the new democratic government began to allow freedom of religion. This is a Wahhabi organization supported by Saudi Arabia, Al-Qaeda, and other terrorist activities around the world. More specifically, IRO played an important role in helping the mujahedeen in Bosnia with money and logistics. It also supported and was linked with Al-Qaeda and several other terrorist organization, such as "Islamic Algerians Armed Groups" (GIA) and "Algerian Islamic Front" (FIS).¹⁷⁰ IIRO functioned as an overarching group that

¹⁶⁸ Teodora Popescu, "Tackling Terrorism in the Balkans," http://www.hks.harvard.edu/kokkalis/GSW9/Popescu_paper.pdf (accessed December 11, 2008), 11.

¹⁶⁹ Hoxha, "Si erdhen ne Shqiperi terroristet e Xhihadit (*How Jihad Terrorists Came to Albania*)."

¹⁷⁰ Dore Gold, "The Kingdom of Incitement," <http://www.jcpa.org/art/wsj-dg14apr03.htm> - 9k, *The Wall Street Journal*, April 14, 2003 (accessed December 12, 2008).

controlled all the other Islamic organizations that came to Albania later on and evidence indicates that the engineer Muhammad al-Zawahiry, the brother of the Bin Laden's deputy was employed by an Albanian office of the IIRO¹⁷¹ to assist with Al-Qaeda's terrorism efforts in the Balkans.

The "Al Haramain Association" is another Islamic organization established in Albania in 1992.¹⁷² This is also a Wahhabi charity with Saudi Arabia as its main sponsor. From the very beginning, the "Al Haramain Association" was active in building Wahhabi mosques in Albania, opening Islamic cultural centers, and supporting orphans and children of poor families by sending them to Wahhabi theological schools in Saudi Arabia. The "Al Haramain Association" was one of the most active Islamic organizations in Albania in indoctrinating young Albanian imams with Salafi ideology at the same time as they provided financial help. Between 1993 and 1998, "Islamic Egyptian Jihad" (IEJ) and members of Al-Qaeda penetrated the Albanian branch of the "Al Haramain Association." The mission of this Albanian cell of IEJ was to follow the directives from their terrorist organization that ordered them to create terrorist sub-cells by recruiting young Albanians, training them to forge documents, and preparing them to perform terrorist activities and acts of violence in Kosovo to further destabilize the internal situation in Albania by fomenting conflict among the country's various religious groups.

The head of the Albanian cell of IEJ, Ahmed Ibrahim El Sayed El Najar (a.k.a Mohamed Ragab Foudah), worked as the head of the DAWA office, while Mohamed Hasan Mahmoud Hassan (a.k.a Abu Omar) was the director of the foundation.¹⁷³ After these two men were arrested and deported to Egypt, IEJ and members of the Albanian branch of the Al Haramain Association decided to continue to support the branch and therefore assigned several young Muslim Albanian extremists to lead it. Between 1999

¹⁷¹ Levitt Matthew and Jacobson Michael, "The Money Trail Finding, Following, and Freezing Terrorist Finances, Case Studies: Current Status of Terrorist Financing," November 2008, 48, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/pubPDFs/PolicyFocus89.pdf> (accessed December 2008).

¹⁷² "Al Haramain Case Study," 9/11 Commission – Terrorist Financing Ch. 7, http://www.9-11commission.gov/staff_statements/911_TerrFin_Ch7.pdf (November 12, 2008).

¹⁷³ U.S. Department of Treasury, Office of Foreign Assets Control, June 2, 2004, <http://www.treas.gov/offices/enforcement/ofac/actions/20040602.shtml> (December 3, 2008).

and 2005, at which point it was declared closed by the Albanian government, the organization was led by young Albanian Wahhabi and Salafi students who had been trained in Saudi Arabia.

IEJ installed its most important cell, a group committed to forging documents, in Albania.¹⁷⁴ Shavki Attiya and Ahmed Ibrahim El Nejar led this cell, based in Tirana. Their duty was to prepare documents that would allow the movement of the organization's operatives to various countries throughout the world so that they could complete the organizations' missions.¹⁷⁵ Members of this group managed to get important positions in several Islamic humanitarian organizations in Albania. The cell in Tirana included a commander, a person in charge of propaganda, and an action group. A large portion of the cell spent time fighting in Afghanistan or at the Al-Qaeda training camps in Pakistan, where they learned the use of weapons, explosives, and guerilla tactics.¹⁷⁶

In February of 1998, IEJ found itself without funds, so it had to establish a link with Al-Qaeda in the World Islamic Front Organization, which was financed by Bin Laden.¹⁷⁷ Since that time, Ayman al-Zawahiri has been the number two person in Al-Qaeda and had served as Bin Laden's deputy. The interrogation of five IEJ members who were caught in Tirana in 1998 resulted in 20,000 pages of evidence and documents that ended up a year later at a military court in Cairo. The testimony of witnesses provided at that court revealed the existence of an IEJ terrorist cell in Tirana and provided the details of their plans.

The IEJ cell in Albania had been created as a secure base to shelter some members of the organization that had been identified by the Egyptian secret service and sentenced in their absence.¹⁷⁸ While hiding in Albania, a country they could enter

¹⁷⁴ Hoxha, "Xhiahadi vendosi ne Tirane shtabin e falsifikimeve (*Jihad Place in Tirana: The Center of Falsifications*)."

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

without visas, these criminals thought that it would be safe to continue their activities. IEJ members were responsible for securing the necessary documents for moving the organization's operatives throughout Europe and various other countries in the world. Some of the IEJ members who were hiding in Albania married Albanian women and fathered children as cover. They also recruited young Albanians to be used as mercenaries in the organization's operations. During the 1999 trial of the members of the cell in Cairo, evidence came forward showing that funds that came to Tirana from European countries were often transferred to other countries where this money was more urgently needed. Islamic organizations and foundations in Albania have been strictly monitored ever since the IEJ was discovered in Tirana in 1998.¹⁷⁹

The "World Assembly of Muslim Youth" (WAMY) is another Albanian based centered Saudi organization. This organization was co-founded by Kamal Helwabi, a former senior member of the "Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood," and by Osama Bin Laden's nephew, Abdulla Bin Laden, who served as the president of WAMY through 2002 and is now its treasurer. WAMY functions worldwide and raises funds for the terrorist group known as Hamas.¹⁸⁰ The WAMY cell in Albania supposedly aims primarily to construct mosques and provide humanitarian aid, but even from the very beginning, it has been infiltrated by terrorist elements associated with various terrorist organizations, including IEJ and the "Algerian Islamist Group" (GIA).

WAMY is associated with several known terrorists, such as Ahmed Hassan Rabie, who was the head of the Albanian cell of IEJ until 1996. During his time in Albania, Rabie not only played a role as a terrorist, but also prepared all of the documents needed to conceal his background and enable him to move easily into Europe. He left his position in Albania in 1997 and travelled to the Netherlands, from which he then moved to the United Kingdom and obtained political asylum.¹⁸¹ Another terrorist associated with WAMY is Ayman Mohamed Mahmoud Khalaf Mezrag Boufaldja (a.k.a. Abdyl

¹⁷⁹ Vickers, *Islam in Albania*, 7.

¹⁸⁰ World Assembly of Muslim Youth, <http://www.discoverthenetworks.org/groupProfile.asp?grpId=6425> (accessed January 10, 2009).

¹⁸¹ "Egypt's Most Wanted," *Al-Ahram Weekly Online*, 18-24 October 2001, no. 556 <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2001/556/11war3.htm> (accessed August 15, 2008).

Gani), an Algerian national. The FIS and GIA Algerians created a network to equip Bosnian raiders with weapons, documents and money. This strategy was developed in November '92 at a summit in Tirana Albania, which was attended by three factions of the Algerian guerrilla: the pro-Saudites, the Islamic nationalists and GIA. He was a member of the “Algerian Front of Islamic Salvation” (FIS) and stayed in Albania until 2000, at which point he was deported from Albania.¹⁸² The Iraqi citizens Abdul Naem and his brother, Muem Naem, also worked for WAMY until 1999, at which point they were also deported.

WAMY was also very active in bringing Wahhabi and Salafi ideology to Albania. In addition to implementing extremist propaganda, it recruited and sent Albanian students to Saudi Arabia, where they learned only Wahhabi and Salafi theology. Even after a police raid in 1999 that resulted in the deportation of many suspected terrorist elements associated with WAMY, sponsors in Saudi Arabia supported the replacement Albanian leaders of the Albania cell of WAMY by providing them with money and extremist propaganda materials.

Similarly, “Taibah International” is an organization sponsored by Saudi Arabia. Its Albanian cell was established in 1993, and its official mission was originally to support poor families and orphans, and to build schools. This mission was not realized, however, because it was only able to play a limited social and humanitarian role. An extremist Islamic member of the Egyptian Brotherhood that opened two “schools” or associations created “Taibah International.” One of these schools was located in Tirana and was called “Drita.” This school was in reality a place for boys under the age of fifteen to learn about Islam and Wahhabi and Salafi theology. The other school was located in northern Albania and was called “Abu Hanife Institute.” Students of this second school were under the leadership of an Egyptian extremist and ended up being the

¹⁸² Guido Olimpio, “A Report in Terrorism and Unconventional Warfare,” *Applied Science and Analysis, Inc.*, August 1996, <http://www.asanltr.com/newsletter/01-5/articles/015a.htm> (accessed August 15, 2008).

cause of violent conflicts with members of other religions, such as Christians and Shiia Muslims, in not only the area where they studied but also the places they went to live following their graduation.¹⁸³

After 2005, when the police shut down these facilities, the foundation changed its name to “Jeta.” The new managers of this Islamic organization were young Albanian extremist who were former students of the “Taibah International” schools. Due to the connection between “Jeta” and “Taibah International,” as well as other terrorist organizations, the Albanian government decided to shut down this new organization as well.

After the September 11th incidence, the Albanian government took additional measures against these terrorist groups. The Foreign Islamic organizations were shut down, and their assets and bank accounts were frozen. In 2005, for instance following the shut down of the “Al Haramain Association,” the “Global Relief Foundation” (a.k.a “Secours Mondial”), “Taibah International,” and the “Revival of Islamic Heritage Society” the Albanian government froze approximately \$20 million¹⁸⁴ of the assets belonging to these organizations. The Albanian government is currently doing its best to ensure that its actions targeting international terrorism and terrorist financing are in compliance with international laws and the international charter of human freedom and liberties.

2. Additional Measures Taken to Limit the Influence of Islamic Radicalism in Albania

To prevent the expansion of Wahhabism in Albania, the Islamic community in Albania has also tried to take on a more proactive role in introducing Islamic beliefs to its own people. To reach this goal, the Islamic Community in Albania, the highest Muslim authority in the country, created an adhoc committee to oversee the creation of the

¹⁸³ Hoxha, “Si shpetoi Komuniteti Mysliman nga radikalet (*How the Muslim Community was Not Taken over by Radicals*).”

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

country's first Islamic university¹⁸⁵ after gaining approval from the Albanian government.¹⁸⁶ Since Albanian law forbids the financing of a religious institution by the government, the community had to provide the funds for this new university. With this university, they hoped to attract students from Kosovo, Macedonia, Serbia, and Albania.¹⁸⁷ Moderate Muslim leaders stressed the importance of establishing an Islamic university located in Albania, since it would allow young Muslims to study at home instead of traveling abroad rather than being influenced by fanatic dogmas and ideologies. However, the creation of an Islamic university in Albania remains as a hope at this point and has not yet become a reality.¹⁸⁸

In addition, a year ago, several young Muslims who had been educated in Arab countries presented a proposal to change the religious rituals utilized by the Albanian Muslim community from the traditional Hanefi School to the more radical Salafi School.¹⁸⁹ A detailed discussion of the two schools is beyond the scope of this study. In short, the Hanefi School is has a more liberal interpretation of Islam that reveals itself in their attitude toward women, drinking alcohol, and tolerance toward other religions. To return to the discussion, however, the abovementioned proposal was stopped by the more reasonable members of the community, and, after a long debate, the General Council of the Islamic Community decided not to change the country's traditional religious rituals to the new "imported" rituals, which were considered extreme and fanatical by many older Albanian Muslims.¹⁹⁰ This was an encouraging victory for the many Muslims in Albania who wanted a liberal and tolerant Islam in their country.

¹⁸⁵ Vickers, *Islam in Albania*, 8.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

C. POTENTIAL OF FUNDAMENTALISM IN ALBANIA

The evidence provided above clearly shows how Islamic organizations in Albania were used as a legal cover for the terrorist operations of the mujahidin, the recruitment of Al-Qaida operatives, and the planning of terrorist operations in Europe. The Albanian government, therefore, closed down many of these organizations. For this reason, foreign supporters of Islamic organizations have started to work more intelligently, operating through think tanks and continuing to convert Albanian Muslims into Wahhabism, especially in poor rural regions. Their efforts, however, have not yield favorable results as Albanians continue to favor religious equality and receive the support of the western world.

In fact, Albania currently enjoys friendly and cooperative bilateral relations with the United States, and pro-United States sentiment is widespread among the Albanian population. Even while the United States was being vilified by communist propaganda during the Hoxha regime, many ordinary Albanians remembered that Woodrow Wilson had protected Albanian independence in 1919.¹⁹¹ In 2003, Albania and the United States signed and ratified a number of agreements, including a treaty for the “Prevention of the Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction and the Promotion of Defense and Military Relations,” the “Adriatic Charter,” and an agreement regarding the surrender of various people to the International Criminal Court.

Between 1991 and 2003, the United States has provided \$358.62 million through the “Support for East European Democracy Act” (SEED) for Albania’s humanitarian needs and its economic and political transformation.¹⁹² On July 11, 2007, the Albanian Ministry of Defense informed the United States that the remains of chemical arms from the ex-Soviet Union that had been stored in Albania had been destroyed through the Nunn-Lugar Threat Danger Reduction Program.¹⁹³

¹⁹¹ Albania (10/03), U.S Department of State, <http://www.state.gov/outofdate/bgn/a/33653.htm>, (accessed September 2008).

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ “Shkaterrohen mbetjet e armeve kimike ne Shqiperi (*The Destruction of the Remains of Chemical Weapons in Albania*),” July 2007, <http://www.mod.gov.al> (accessed September 10, 2008).

The United States strongly supports Albania's goals to join the EU and NATO, and President Bush has been enthusiastically welcomed as the first American president to visit the country since the collapse of the communist regime.¹⁹⁴ Although the United States supports Albania's bid to join NATO, President Bush has said that the country still has to make several more political and military reforms as well as crack down on corruption and organized crime. "We are determined to take any decision, pass any law, and undertake any reform to make Albania appropriate to receive the invitation" to join the western military alliance, Berisha said at a news conference with President Bush.¹⁹⁵

Predominantly Muslim, Albania has 140 troops stationed in Afghanistan and about 120 troops stationed in Iraq, a presence that former President Alfred Moisiu said will remain as long as the Americans are also engaged there.¹⁹⁶ President Bush has met with some of the Albanian troops who have served in Iraq and Afghanistan. "Albanians know the horror of tyranny," President Bush said, "and so they're working to bring the hope of freedom to people who haven't known it. And that's a noble effort and a sacrifice."¹⁹⁷ Saluting Albania's new democracy, Bush praised the country as one that has "cast off the shackles of a very oppressive society and is now showing the world what's possible."¹⁹⁸ A western-style redefinition of Albanian identity has the support of the political and economical elite in Albania, as well as of the Albanian people as a whole, and it will become fully realized once Albania has been accepted as a part of Western civilization.¹⁹⁹ Radical Islam will therefore never succeed in becoming established in Albania because the country looks primarily to the West in creating its identity.

¹⁹⁴ "President Bush Gets Enthusiastic Welcome in Albania, Pushes Kosovo Independence," 2007, <http://www.signonsandiego.com/news/world/20070610-0949-bush.html> (accessed August 20, 2008).

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ Shala, *Albanians in the Crossroads*, 133.

D. CONCLUSION

Chapter III gave a thorough analysis of why and when radical Islam was introduced in Albania. Although the large majority rejects such influence, the fact that radical Islamists were able to form groups of operations in this state is a cause for concern. The following chapter will outline a detailed list of policy recommendations and counter-balancing options against further expansion of radical Islam in Albania.

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IV. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study assessed the rise and strengthening of radical Islam in Albania. The fall of communism presented Albania, as it did many other countries of Eastern Europe, with the challenge of completely redefining its relationship with the Western community, as well as with an opportunity finally to overcome its long self-imposed isolation from the rest of the world. Albania adopted a strategic reorientation and during the last decade, its foreign policy has been focused on its integration into Euro-Atlantic structures based on three main paradigms: a strong relationship with the United States; an interdependent relationship with the European Union; and a moderate regional policy approach.

A. KEY CONCLUSION

The terrorism threat in Albania appeared and developed during the transition period from communism to democracy. Such threats were the result of a variety of domestic and international factors, many of which are still present. Neo-Islam in Albania is influenced and infiltrated by extreme political Islam. Although, it seeks the Islamization of Albania's secular political spectrum, this goal has not been obtained and militant Islam has not emerged on a popular scale.

Some of the factors that have impeded radical Islam from taking root in Albania include history, culture and politics. Albania's long historical and cultural affinity with the West makes it one of the most pro-United States countries in the world. Their close cooperation has served Albania's national interests. More specifically, in the last nineteen years, every government in Albania has adopted a pro-U.S. policy based on its national interest and the widespread positive feeling of the Albanian people toward the United States. Albania is trying to prove to the United States and the international community that it can play a constructive role in regional security affairs and help on the global war on terrorism to obtain the necessary financial support to rebuild its dire economy.

In fact, despite its daunting problems at home, Albania has wholeheartedly supported the United States in the global war on terrorism and is trying to engage itself

successfully as a useful partner to the United States by exchanging security information, freezing terrorist assets, shutting down suspect Islamic NGOs, expelling foreign Islamic extremists from the country, and providing military and diplomatic support for the U.S. led actions in Afghanistan and Iraq. Albania has not only publicly backed the U.S. intervention, a move that put it at odds with many Western European members of the European Union, but also sent a combat unit to Iraq.

However, Italy, Greece, Macedonia, Montenegro, Kosovo and Serbia surround Albania. About 3.5 million Albanians live in the Republic of Albania. Another 2 million live in Kosovo and an additional 700,000 in Macedonia. Adding up the number of people scattered in these territories, there are an estimated 6.5 million ethnic Albanians in the Balkans, a large percentage of whom are Muslims (70% in Albania, 95% in Kosovo, and 99% in Macedonia, respectively²⁰⁰). This implies that the threat of radical Islam though insignificant today, may prove to be a major problem if necessary steps are not taken to prevent the growth of such extreme groups in these areas.

B. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE ALBANIAN GOVERNMENT

To prevent the expansion of radical Islam in the abovementioned areas, the following suggestions are made.

- The Albanian government should allow/encourage the clergy to study the history, culture, and traditions of the more progressive Hanafi school of thought.
- The Albanian government should immediately control the activities of the “humanitarian” religious organization including Islamic and Christian organizations operating in Albania.
- The Albanian government should fully control the borders to prevent unwanted individuals from entering’ Albania. Furthermore, they should take firmer action against corruption and organized crime by strengthening the institutional structures necessary for implementing the laws that would limit money laundering,
- The Albanian government should immediately start investment in schools in villages. This includes building more schools, training teachers, and

²⁰⁰ Witness Pioneer, A Virtual Islamic Organization, <http://www.witness-pioneer.org/vil/Articles/issues/albania.htm> (accessed January 9, 2009).

giving financial aid to the majority of the students to enable more students to attend school. This is important because all the money from the Albanian government is going to the schools in the cities versus those in rural areas; this thereby allows the NGO to use these areas and schools for the expansion of their views.

- The Albanian government should give more importance to local religious organizations and encourage the long tradition of the harmonious co-existence of the four religious groups in Albania.

C. THE NEED FOR INTERNATIONAL ASSISTANCE

Albania cannot meet its domestic security threats including terrorism without assistance from the international community. There is a general interest from the side of the European Union (EU) to embark Albania on the European integration process, this creating an unprecedented opportunity in the Albanian history. More specifically, such assistance would need to include the following.

- An increase in the EU financial aid in the areas of police, border control, customs, and prisons. This aid should include training and equipment for security personnel and, in particular, those related to enhancement of investigative capabilities.
- An improvement in infrastructure, for example, equipping courthouses with modern technology so that the court files could be kept secure.
- An increased trust in the positive role of Albania as safe grounds for potential American bases. Washington should make sure that Albania is included in any regional planning for security and development of the Balkans due to the military benefits that the United States can obtain from such involvement. At a time when the United States is increasingly focused on security outside of Europe, the Albanian geographic location can not only serve as a useful staging area for U.S.-NATO-related exercises but also can assist in projecting American military capabilities and security leadership to nearby crisis zones. As is known, over the past decade, Western European countries, especially Germany, have placed growing restrictions on the training of U.S. forces stationed on their territory. The United States is seeking other locations for the U.S. military to be stationed for better coping with the international terrorist threat. Albania has expressed its willingness to host American military bases in its territory if so asked by the United States and can play an important role as one of America's strongest Balkan allies and partners. Albanians are keen on showing their support for the anti-terrorist coalition led by the United States and to demonstrate to the international community that Albania is a reliable partner in stability operations, as well as in terms of

control of flows of information, people and money. Albanians know that a reliable partnership in the fight against terrorism will be a valuable element when the United States assesses Albanian candidature for NATO membership. Nevertheless, Albanians must be realistic and realize that a pragmatic and sophisticated American policy takes into account both the scope and the limits of the possibilities offered by a tiny country like theirs. At the same time, they should understand that as much as the United States can help, it is for Albanians to create their national policies and to take full responsibility for them.

In summary, this paper demonstrates why the Wahhabi movement has been somewhat unsuccessful in Albania, and provides recommendations regarding ways to prevent radical Islamist groups from taking root in Albania.

D. POTENTIAL RESEARCH

This is a brief overview, relatively speaking of Islam in Albania and more research and more questions need to be raised on this topic. For example, are any political parties influenced or financed by foreign groups/individuals? What is the government's view of the growing Islamic faith in young people? Are there serious intelligence efforts within Albania to combat radical Islam? The author acknowledges the limitations of this study to answer all possible questions or variations related to the topic, and is confident that his next works will answer these kinds of questions in more depth.

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