

*AIS-public presentation on religious radicalism in Albania.*

*The emergence of religious radicalism and extremism in Albania* is the topic of the latest public discussion held by the Albanian Institute for International Studies and the Open Society Foundation for Albania where the spotlight was on Mr. Enri Hide, PhD, who presented the results of his study on radicalism and extremism on Albania to community and media representatives. Mr. Hide's report aims to display a thorough and realistic analysis of this global phenomenon, thus covering a wide array of factors related to the issue, such as ideological and socio-economic factors that contribute to it. Assessing the riskiness of religious extremism on a national security level is particularly important as to perceive the readiness of state and society to deal with religious radicalism and positively react to extremism in Albania. Hence the purpose of this study is to generate recommendations for policy-makers and non-governmental actors.

The report analyses the problem on a global and regional context, by putting Albania on the map as one of the estimated 80 countries of origin, whose citizens are among the Islamic State's army ranks. Official reports released by the CIA, ICSR, CTC and CRS claim that the number of Albanian citizens who have joined ISIS varies between 140-150, whereas the digits double when it comes to Kosovo citizens, according to the Ministry of Interior of Kosovo. A geographical distribution is also made available where the most problematic areas are Pogradec, Elbasan and mostly the rural areas.

*What brings this people to set aside the religious harmony Albania's been long known for and embrace the radical Islamic doctrine?* According to the aforementioned report, some of the factors include the socio-economic gap and the high unemployment rate; the overall distrust on the rule of law and a few, even put the blame on the Muslim Community who failed to keep under its systematic review the mosques, thus being unable to control the attempts to establish extremist groups within its community. As supported by Mr. Ilir Dizdari, head of the religious cults Committee, out of 727 mosques, there are currently 200 that are non-functional as they've never been opened.

After having treated religious radicalism as an "import" for so long, Mr. Ermir Gjinishi, former vice-director of the Albanian Muslim Community, addressed the issue as an **autochthon factor**, given the fact that Albanians have already established their religious doctrine, discourse, radical cells and there are Albanian citizens who have joined ISIS – unlike France, Belgium or other countries whose militants are immigrants. Balkan is believed to be seen as one of the main targets of ISIS and the Albanian government has yet to prepare a strategic plan, where the contribution of theologians is indispensable.

Unfortunately, it is expected that due to a lack of deradicalizing instruments in our country, extremism will prevail within vulnerable circles, mostly through social media and Internet. Albania's image is undoubtedly threatened by the security challenges radicalism is imposing and its negative effects will directly influence foreign investments in Albania, as well as tourism. Another concerning issue is the fact that organized crime entities can operate through radical entities, thus abusing and criminalizing religion.

As a conclusion, developing a thorough strategic plan would be the first step towards identifying and intervening against violent extremism, participation in combats and assuring rehabilitation upon return.