



KCSS
Kosovar Centre for Security Studies

THE ISLAMIC STATE NARRATIVE IN KOSOVO

DECONSTRUCTED ONE STORY AT A TIME



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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since the first reports of Kosovo citizens joining the Islamic State, or the IS¹, emerged in 2012, Kosovo institutions and society continue to grapple with the push and pull factors that led some 300 of its citizens – one of the highest flow of foreign fighters per capita in Europe, while on basis of per capita Muslim population remains much lower² - to join the IS in Syria and Iraq.

To date, much effort has been put in dissecting and understanding the root causes of violent extremism in Kosovo. Several studies³ have consistently found a mix of tangible internal conditions – weak economy, political instability, poor education system and the rise of various Islamic nongovernmental organizations⁴ competing in Kosovo’s newly democratized public sphere, as well as a list of less stringent circumstances, such as issues of identity, belonging, purpose and social isolation or outright exclusion. Other studies have prescribed the emergence of this phenomenon in Kosovo to the work of faith-based Islamic organizations that promoted a pan-Muslim identity, galvanized by the wars in the Middle East.⁵

Given the potency of the IS propaganda to catalyze the radicalization process and its role in inspiring individuals to commit themselves to violent extremism, KCSS compiled this report with the aim to identify, deconstruct, analyze, contextualize and interpret the IS propaganda targeting Kosovo Albanians as well as to reveal the tools employed to spread this narrative among different audiences in Kosovo. Throughout the report, we define the IS narrative as a term that in the broader sense encompasses

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- 1 While we recognize that IS is not the sole terrorist organization that uses propaganda as a catalyst for recruitment, IS is the focus of this report due to its unprecedented appeal as well as the level and the extent of threat that it has posed to European countries. The activities of this terrorist organization are likely to remain one of the main challenges to Kosovo’s national security.
 - 2 According to official estimates of Kosovo’s Ministry of Internal Affairs, to date 306 Kosovo citizens have joined IS and other terrorist groups in Syria and Iraq.
 - 3 See KCSS report in 2015 for a more detailed discussion of the causes and consequences of Kosovo’s citizens involvement as foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq”
A recent poll launched by Kosovo’s Ministry of Internal Affairs, supported by United Nations Development Program ad USAID, found that nearly half of those surveyed believed radicalization is driven by economic incentives and social isolation. For summary of the findings, click here: <http://www.ks.undp.org/content/dam/kosovo/docs/PVE/Eng.pdf>
 - 4 In 2015, Kosovo’s government suspended the work of 14 non-governmental organizations from Saudi Arabia suspected of promoting extremism in Kosovo under the cover of humanitarian work. <https://www.evropaelire.org/a/27550186.html>. For more on this issue, see also “How Kosovo was turned into a fertile ground for ISIS” by Carlotta Gall in New York Times, May 21, 2016. https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/22/world/europe/how-the-saudis-turned-kosovo-into-fertile-ground-for-isis.html?_r=0
 - 5 Shtuni, “Dynamics of Radicalization and Violent Extremism in Kosovo,” 8

the terrorist organization's worldview, its political and religious ideology and more specifically the way it is told to audiences in Kosovo.

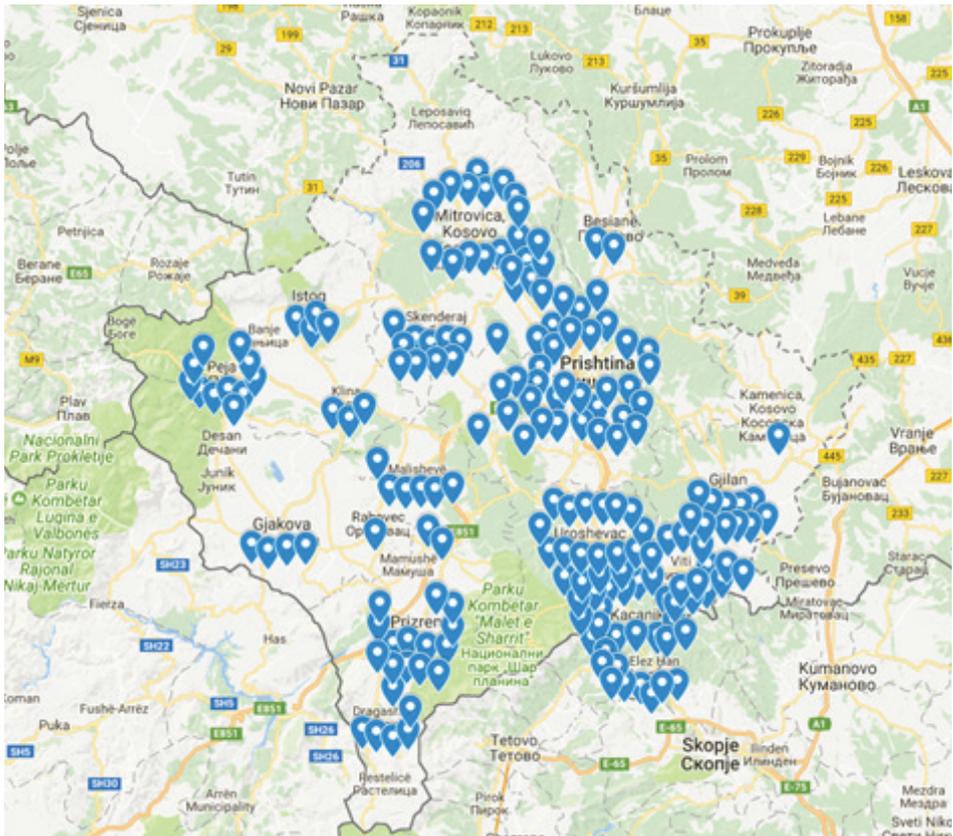
While the IS propaganda has become a "comprehensive brand"⁶ spanning several languages and contexts, this report focuses on how IS propaganda adapted its narrative to the local context in Kosovo. In Kosovo's case, this report finds that the narrative, while laced with religious language and injected with Koranic verses, in essence speaks to local issues. It seeks to utilize local disgruntlement, past grievances as well as events pertaining to the 1998-1999 to mobilize its supporters in Kosovo.

2. THESE KEY FINDINGS EMERGE:

1. The IS narrative is central to its successful recruitment efforts in Kosovo. Other studies have described IS propaganda and narrative as a catalyst, but our findings show a quick trajectory from propaganda exposure to joining the terrorist organization.
2. The IS narrative in Kosovo is launched primarily as a call to supposedly conduct a holy war in Syria, only laced with religious language and Koranic verses as most of it circumvents teaching stories from the Koran and replaces them with shows of direct action
3. The IS narrative exploits Kosovo-specific vulnerabilities related as the post-war society grapples with forging an identity, past grievances pertaining to the 1998-1999 war such as wartime rape and the perceived bias against Muslims to incite recruits from Kosovo to join its war efforts in the Middle East.
4. Consistent with the general IS storyline, the IS narrative to Kosovo's public is a power play that lures its followers with the promise of an alternative way of life in the so-called caliphate, purportedly compliant with Sharia laws.
5. The themes of IS propaganda in Kosovo are consistent with those found in the general IS propaganda that alternate between upbeat messages and idyllic scenery that attempt to project ambition, credibility and solidarity and display of unprecedented brutality to intimidate those that refuse to heed their call.

6 Winter, "The Virtual 'Caliphate': Understanding Islamic State's Propaganda Strategy," 6.

6. Almost without exception, IS narrative addressed to Kosovo respond to local events and debates. This is especially clear when they counter the calls by the Kosovo institutions to discourage Kosovo's citizens from joining IS or media reporting that places an emphasis on the terrorist nature of the organization. It also demonstrates their preoccupation and concern with their image.
7. While their narrative is predominantly focused in raising recruits for their fight in Syria and Iraq for much of 2013 and 2014, IS also demonizes and discredits the political leadership and the Islamic Association in Kosovo, the main religious authority for Muslims, often portraying Kosovo as oppressive to Muslim faithful. Once law enforcement agencies crack down on foreign fighters, IS' spokesmen from Kosovo issue stark warnings against all that do not embrace their call.
8. IS propaganda had two consistent public messengers for Kosovo making their communication with Kosovo's public highly centralized through these particular spokesmen. They appeared alongside IS members and addressed the audience from the war theater, replacing their lectures with action.
9. IS narrative that portrays Kosovo as run by non-believers and servants of the Western powers who allegedly fight Islam, fully omits NATO's intervention and US-led airstrikes against Serbia to stop the brutal ethnic cleansing campaign against Kosovo Albanians.
10. Social media, especially videos disseminated through YouTube but also through the unfiltered transmission of their messages in Kosovo's mainstream media, are vital to recruitment efforts of IS in Kosovo.

Table 1: Mapping the recruitment of terrorist organizations in Kosovo

* Each pin in the map represent a suspected foreign fighter who joined a terrorist organization in Syria or Iraq identified and arrested by Kosovo law enforcement agencies in the period 2012-2016. The map intends to show the geographical distribution and the patterns of recruitment and support.

3. INTRODUCTION

When Naman Demolli spoke with contempt about the newly constructed Roman Catholic Cathedral in the center of Kosovo's capital Prishtina, few paid attention to his strenuous worldview. A black-clad Kosovo Albanian Muslim worshipper, circulated in a 2010 amateur video⁷ with the unfinished Serbian Orthodox Church as his backdrop gave a whirling collage of past and present grievances – a mix of victimization, humiliation and intimidation, of an Islam under threat in Kosovo.

Demolli referred to two Christian buildings in Prishtina's downtown that have often been a cause of friction in Kosovo. The Serbian Orthodox Church was erected on the campus of Prishtina's University during the brutal reign of the former Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic who launched a crackdown on Kosovo Albanians in 1998. The foundations of the Roman Catholic Church "Mother Teresa" was laid on the eve of the country's declaration of independence as a display of Albanian multi-confessionalism as well as to dull Kosovo's image as predominantly Muslim.

In the video, flanked by nodding followers - including Lavdrim Muhaxhiri⁸ at his side, Demolli tried to challenge the widely held view that Serbia's crackdown of 1998-1999 against Kosovo Albanians was based on their struggle to end the regime's oppression and forge an independent nation. "We know that the war in Kosovo was a war against Islam... Whoever thinks that the war in Kosovo was about the nation is very far from justice," proclaimed Demolli, who reached his fame as the leader of the protests to demand the building of a grand mosque in the center of Prishtina. "They came to fight our Islam."

Demolli went on to become one of the first foreign fighters from Kosovo to fight in Syria and Iraq and was later killed in fighting.⁹ His sentiment is enshrined in a narrative espoused by IS propaganda that consistently targeted the terrorist group' potential recruits and circulated among its sympathizers in Kosovo. This outlook forms the backbone, the common thread of the IS narrative. It emerges as an alternative that seeks to challenge and counter the vision of a democratic, pro-Western, secular country and identity that Kosovo's Constitution and international backers have laid out since the end of the war in 1999.

7 "Nje fjalim i shkurter nga Shehidi Naman Demolli para se te binte Shehid." YouTube, last accessed September 5, 2017 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qWoLY8bHgf8>

8 Lavdrim Muhaxheri is a Kosovo Albanian who joined IS in the terrorist organization's early days and became the self-proclaimed leader of the foreign fighters flocking from Kosovo.

9 Demolli, depicted in some Kosovo media as a "volunteer against Bashar al-Assad's regime" was reported killed by his family and friends in November 13, 2012. For more see news report in this YouTube link https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NaD-hopf1_s

Underpinning it is also a story of an emerging interpretation of Islam – a religion that no longer cohabits with the secular state, but one that consistently competes with it and often undermines it. In the past years, especially with the advent of technology and the widespread use of social media, an increasing number of imams have risen to stardom in a bid to carve out a space of their own in the new “marketplace of ideas.”¹⁰ Some imams consistently try to connect their followers to a more globalized religious identity encompassing far more than the Muslim followers constrained by Kosovo’s physical borders.

Additionally, political changes in the Arab world following the Arab Spring brought in Kosovo a renewed political interest on the Middle East affairs as a change of regimes - formerly tightly allied to Yugoslavia as part of the Non-Aligned movement and most of them abjectly opposed to Kosovo’s independence - opened up an opportunity for the Arab world to recognize Kosovo’s independence. Kosovo gained recognition from Egypt and Libya shortly after the oppositions in these countries ousted the dictators of the respective countries in 2013.¹¹ The same logic followed the case of Syria with the expectation that such a pattern of regime change would bring about a government more likely to recognize Kosovo’s independence than the Bashar al-Assad’s government.¹²

It is in the context of the post Arab Spring that developments in Syria, far removed from the political realm of the Balkans and the young nation, became of interest to people in Kosovo.¹³ While the IS propaganda has become a “comprehensive brand”¹⁴ spanning several languages and contexts, this report focuses on how IS propaganda adapted its narrative to the local context in Kosovo. In Kosovo’s case, this report finds that the narrative, while laced with religious language and injected with Koranic verses, in essence speaks to local issues. It seeks to utilize local disgruntlement, past grievances as well as events pertaining to the 1998-1999 war to mobilize its supporters in Kosovo.

10 For context on this issue, see Roy and Elbasani, *The Revival of Islam in the Balkans: From Identity to Religiosity*

11 “Egypt becomes 100th country to recognize Kosovo,” last accessed September 5, 2017 <https://www.voanews.com/a/egypt-recognizes-kosovo/1690046.html>; “Republic of Kosovo establishes diplomatic relations with Libya” last accessed September 5, 2017 <http://www.mfa-ks.net/?page=2,217,2383>

12 “Kosovo voices strong support for Syria opposition” last accessed September 5, 2017 <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-kosovo-idUSBRE84D1E120120514>

13 On July 12, 2012, the head imam of Kosovo, Naim Ternava ordered 800 mosques throughout Kosovo to dedicate a Friday sermon to the developments in Syria. The controversial prayer calls believers to help Syria “with whatever they can” and speaks at length about the “values of Sham.” While Ternava has defended the move and since issued regular statements against IS, critics have considered the sermon as a tacit call for Kosovars to join the fight in Syria. For the full version, see link: “Hytbe kushtuar refugjatëve dhe të zhvendosurve të Sirisë” <http://www.kbislame-pr.org/page47.html>

14 Winter, “The Virtual ‘Caliphate’: Understanding Islamic State’s Propaganda Strategy,” 6.

The first part of this paper details the methodology used to compile the report, to continue with a brief overview of the most recent scholarly work on IS propaganda, its key components and vehicles of its dissemination, a close reading and analysis of IS propaganda in Albanian language, followed by an identification of the audience that the propaganda targeted in Kosovo and its reach in social media.

In conclusion, the report identifies successful counter-narrative strategies and tools employed in other countries affected by violent extremism. It offers a handful of recommendations for Kosovo's institutions and civil society organizations to engage with various stakeholders, the public at large and the endangered communities in jointly countering the IS narrative.

4. METHODOLOGY

As part of Kosovo's drive to prevent and counter violent extremism, the Kosovar Center for Security Studies (KCSS) launched a study that identifies and analyzes the existing violent extremist narratives and the means through which those narratives reach the vulnerable audiences. The report measures the impact and the role of the IS narrative on the radicalization of Kosovo's citizens to join the ranks of the Islamic State and other terrorist networks.

Pertaining to Kosovo's specific context, the report is the first step in a process to develop a set of principles for a counter-narrative drive. It brings forth a set of key policy recommendations to Kosovo's institutions, civil society and international donors to assist them in countering violent extremism through a strategic communication effort.

Initially, we have conducted a review of the existing academic literature on IS' reliance on religiously construed narratives to lay the groundwork for the radicalization and the raising of recruits for the terrorist network and support for their cause. The literature review primarily helped in identifying the key parameters that underpin the general IS narrative. Such a review, while exhaustive, is brief in description and limited to the narrative that IS has utilized across languages and audiences. The aim of such a review has been to establish the theoretical context, to clarify the working definitions and the limitations through which this study is conducted.

Secondly, a brief assessment of the National Strategy to Counter Violent Extremism (Kosovo Government 2015), other government-sponsored reports as well as studies by think tanks and local civil society organizations has been conducted to establish the importance and centrality of the counter-narrative strategy to address the lack of information, to counter religious interpretation of the IS recruitment effort. That is juxtaposed with the findings of the KCSS roundtable discussions in municipalities that have been more affected by radicalization that brought together local governments, law enforcement authorities and leaders of religious communities.

The findings from those discussions indicate that stakeholders often make blanket claims that ignorance and lack of critical thinking among the determining factors that made the IS narrative appealing to Kosovo's young.

While there is a plethora of complex push and pull factors that interact to lead to radicalization and encourage individuals to commit to violent extremism, we focused only on identifying current narratives specifically aimed at Kosovo Albanian citizens.

It is the goal of this study to identify concretely how IS and other terrorist networks exploit the vulnerabilities of the Albanian population in Kosovo.

To identify the existing narratives and capture the nuances of their messages, a detailed desk research of social media sites and Albanian-language web content by using the “snowballing technique” has been conducted. Our research focused on close listening of general lectures about the state of affairs delivered by five controversial imams in Kosovo who have been detained under suspicion for aiding and abating IS recruitment efforts in Kosovo. While those lectures do not explicitly call Kosovo’s citizens to join terrorist organizations – with the exception of those delivered by Zeqirja Qazimi who encourages support for IS – they advocate a more resurgent Muslim identity in Kosovo.

The report studied the court records, which contain intercepted conversations of the former IS fighters, their family members and alleged recruiters in Kosovo to understand the impact of the narrative in the process of recruitment. The court records help us establish the centrality of Zekirja Qazimi, an imam in the town of Gjilan in southeastern Kosovo to give rise to the initial group of enablers through his teachings that lead to radicalization and later to Muhaxheri’s as the messenger of the IS propaganda.

Additionally, this report relies on four KCSS interviews with former foreign fighters from Kosovo, including those currently in detention for their time as members of IS and other terrorist organizations, to capture the elements of the narrative that swayed them on the path toward violent extremism.

Social media, websites and chat groups are a primary platforms that allow for virtual connection between recruiters and vulnerable populations and given the wide usage of internet and social media in Kosovo, the report sought to assess the use of technology to spread the IS’ narrative and its iconography. This report contains an overview of social media such as Facebook and Twitter to identify and assess the content of the messages distributed on those platforms and their reach.

At the conclusion of this report, KCSS offers a list of recommendations to policymakers, local stakeholders and donors vested in countering the IS narrative in Kosovo, reducing the risk of further dissemination of IS-related propaganda and discrediting the appeal of the violent extremist ideology.

Lastly, following the identification of the IS narrative and the platforms of its dissemination, the report identifies the different means through which the counter-narrative should be delivered.

By detailing the content of the IS propaganda videos that have been circulated on the web and in mainstream media in Kosovo, it is the aim of this report to highlight all dimensions of the IS propaganda, namely what story the various IS protagonists tell to best capture the nuances through which the terrorist organization has managed to

seize the attention of its sympathizers in Kosovo. The content of the videos with which IS communicated its message to the public in Kosovo is discussed to prove the array of themes that IS employs simultaneously.

The IS is the focus of this report due to its unprecedented appeal, its rapid rise and success in capturing and controlling territory. Its ability to reach out and raise recruits globally has affected countries far beyond its territorial reach. Its understanding and use of social media and the level and the extent of threat that it has posed to European countries has warped it from one of many of the terrorist organizations into the main carrier of violent extremism.

Moreover, the IS recruitment effort in Kosovo has posed one of the greatest national security threats that has bewildered Kosovo's law enforcement agencies and their partners alike due to its appeal. In addition, while the flow of recruits from Kosovo has ebbed following the numerous blows that the organization has received in Iraq and Syria that have forced IS to roll back on its initial territorial gains as well as the crackdown by Kosovo law enforcement agencies in 2013 to name a few, KCSS assesses that IS appeal will remain a challenge for Kosovo's security establishment unless its institutions mount a comprehensive and multifaceted response and is successful in reintegrating its former foreign fighters.

5. THE UNDERPINNINGS OF IS PROPAGANDA

In the last decade much of the studies on violent extremism have focused on understanding the factors that gave rise to the Islamic State and other terrorist organizations as off-shoots of the ongoing civil war in Syria and following the state breakdown in Iraq after the U.S. intervention in 2003.

In this section, the report will provide a summary of a select body of work that has broadened the understanding on the role of the IS propaganda in violent extremism, its potency in recruitment and the use of social media to secure for itself an unprecedented reach to engage manpower.¹⁵

Any such review should take into account the 2004 book “The Management of Savagery” by Abu Bakr Naji, an Al Qaeda strategist, whose work became a blueprint for jihadist groups and inspired IS treatment of violence and its media strategy with the ultimate aim of establishing “the caliphate.” While his book deals with the immediate needs of the jihadist organizations in the Middle East, his plan is replicated beyond the borders of that region and can be used as a template to understand and explain the strategic goals of the Islamic State, which largely appears to have adopted the plan.

Naji’s book deals mostly with propaganda and calls for jihadist elements to fill in a power vacuum that he predicts will appear with the erosion of governmental institutions. While his treatise is not the subject of this paper, the foundation it lays in the thinking that came thereafter informs a lot of the reasoning behind the brutality of the IS and the use of social media platforms. Naji describes a set of different stages that must be met before the “caliphate” is established, with one of them being the power of “vexation and exhaustion,” a tactic of widely dispersed, brutal attacks against the enemy aimed at weakening their resolve. It is in this remit that places such as Kosovo fall - in the periphery of the immediate struggle led by personalities whose call is amplified by social media.

In the case of Kosovo, its implementation was best exemplified in the figure of Lavdrim Muhaxheri, who provided the type of education that Naji called for, circumventing teaching stories from the Koran and replacing them with direct action: “... because speaking on the pulpit is easy and in the newspaper even easier and in books even easier than that. As for having (one’s) home destroyed and one’s family made homeless and one’s mother and sister torn to pieces, only the most extraordinary men are capable of (bearing) that.”¹⁶

15 For a broader context of the challenges encountered on drafting an effective counter-narrative, see Cottee’s “Why It’s So Hard to Stop IS Propaganda?”

16 Naji, Abu Bakr, “The Management of Savagery,” 59

This kind of an approach is not incidental; it propelled Muhaxheri – and later Ridvan Aqifi,¹⁷ the leader of the Kosovo Albanian contingent in IS - into a carrier of the IS narrative that went far beyond the radicalization through teachings of radical imams in mosques. The two men rose to prominence almost overnight not because of their deep knowledge or the use of Koran to justify their deeds, but because their physical presence in Syria and Iraq alongside IS, gave them a whim of credibility. In a short time span, he became the vector of the violent propaganda that attracted a following of dozens in Kosovo.

The French political scientist Olivier Roy - who argues that the violent extremism is in essence a movement of young with nihilist tendencies attracted by the heroism narrative that IS offers¹⁸ - recognizes the centrality of the IS narrative in moving sympathizers of the terrorist organization. In his latest study of French foreign fighters, Roy finds that “the main motivation of young men joining jihad seems to be the fascination for a narrative we could call ‘the small brotherhood of super-heroes who avenge the Muslim ummah.’” In this context, the “ummah,” according to Roy, is abstract and not connected to any national cause and the revolt is cast in religious terms, particularly Salafism, because of its simplicity and negation of cultural Islam.

A detailed study of the IS propaganda output over 12 months that followed the declaration of the Islamic State in June 2014 commissioned by the Quilliam Foundation¹⁹ found that while the IS propaganda is not “singularly responsible for radicalizing individuals, let alone their joining the jihadist cause abroad or carrying out attacks at home... it does catalyze the Islamist extremist’s passage from tacit supporter to active member.”²⁰

The study has dissected the IS propaganda into six themes or narratives, often appearing simultaneously, speaking to various audiences, as building blocks to prove the existence of the Islamic State. They are: brutality, mercy, victimhood, war, belonging and utopianism, offered to IS followers and sympathizers as “an alternate way of living” of which utopia is the most appealing.²¹ Analyzing it through the theoretical lens of the French philosopher Jacques Ellul, the

17 The conviction brought against Zeqirja Qazimi in 2015 by the Basic Court of Ferizaj on May 20, 2016, which includes multiple mobile messages between the defendant and various individuals in his network at the time of the investigation reveals a power struggle between Muhaxheri and Aqifi that Qazimi brokers. On allegations that Muhaxheri is not looking after Albanian IS recruits in IS, the evidence assembled by the prosecution alleges that Qazimi decides to appoint Aqifi as the leader of the Kosovo contingent in IS. Conviction PKR 54/15, made available to KCSS in hardcopy.

18 Roy, “What is the driving force behind jihadist terrorism?”

19 Quilliam is the world’s first counter-extremism organization. The London-based organization is founded by former members of Islamist group and seeks to promote Islam as a religion, opposing it as a political religion or ideology. For more see the organization’s website: <https://www.quilliaminternational.com>

20 Winter, “The Virtual ‘Caliphate,’” 6

21 Winter, “The Virtual ‘Caliphate,’” 6

study finds that IS simultaneously uses these themes in IS videos to intimidate local populations and provoke reaction by policymakers through brutality, to elevate the IS morally through mercy, to elicit empathy through the perceived victimization of Sunni Muslims, to transmit their determination and credibility through the display of their war machine and perceived gains, to attract new recruits through spectacles of community and belonging, and lastly to show that the 'caliphate' is not only virtual, but its promise is brought to life in the lands where it exists as a means to legitimize its existence²².

The study also finds that social media – particularly Facebook, Twitter and YouTube - have been the vehicle through which the propaganda almost in its entirety has been delivered and disseminated. While brutality has captured the attention of the mainstream media and turned them into a means of dissemination of the IS message, the study warns of the “everyday life in caliphate” narrative that has been largely ignored despite its importance.²³

The extensive use of social media to attract new recruits and inspire attacks by “lone wolves” has been documented by J.M. Berger and Jonathan Morgan who found 46,000 Twitter accounts were used by IS supporters in a three-month timeframe in 2014, each account with about 1,000 followers.²⁴ In 2015, IS and its supporters produced 90,000 tweets and other social media responses a day.²⁵

Similarly, in their study of the dynamics between foreign fighters and locally raised recruits, Scott Gates and Sukanya Podder identify similar patterns of the IS propaganda. According to the authors, the organization uses video rather than text, utilizes the linguistic knowledge of its diverse body of recruits and gives centrality to its ideological call.²⁶

In their work concerning the drafting of an effective counter-narrative to IS propaganda, Jordan Isham and Lorand Bodo find that the approach of governments and other stakeholders has been to restrict its dissemination, rendering such efforts insufficient.²⁷ According to the authors, the goal of a counter-narrative should be to “discredit the false perception” that IS creates for vulnerable individuals. They recommend the development of a tailored counter-narrative that is grounded on research around understanding the vulnerabilities that IS exploits, identification of the target group and means through which the violent extremist narrative is delivered.²⁸

22 Winter, “The Virtual ‘Caliphate,’” 22-29

23 Winter, “The Virtual ‘Caliphate,’” 32

24 Berger, J.M. and Morgan. “ISIS Twitter Census.”

25 Schmitt, “US Intensifies Effort to Blunt IS’ Message”

26 Gates, Scott and Podder, “Social Media, Recruitment, Allegiance and the Islamic State,” 2

27 Isham, Jordan and Bodo. “Countering the Narrative,” 1

28 Isham and Bodo, “Countering the Narrative,” 2

As detailed above, these studies have sought to shed light on the goals of the organization the brutality exhibited by it and the strategy to raise recruits, capture territory and the tools deployed to spread their ideology. While the literature on the local dynamics of the organization and its appeal among foreign fighters is still evolving, a full review is beyond the scope of this report. Instead, this section and the entirety of the report will focus on the findings that emphasize primarily the IS propaganda and the narrative it promotes in order to define the framework and the prism through which we will analyze and contextualize the extremist narrative in Kosovo.

While the majority of the literature takes a meta-analysis approach to IS propaganda, it is the intention of this report to fill an important gap in the literature by focusing on an individual case study to identify the grievances and the vulnerabilities exploited and catered to by recruiters acting on behalf of IS. The report establishes the centrality of the narrative in recruitment, identifies three key dimensions of the narrative, analyzes the institutional response to the propaganda, and discusses the means through which the narrative is delivered.

6. INSTITUTIONAL AND COMMUNITY RESPONSE TO THE IS NARRATIVE

In 2015, Kosovo's Government approved the five-year Strategy on Prevention of Violent Extremism and Radicalization Leading to Terrorism and a subsequent action plan for the implementation of the strategy approved by Kosovo's government in 2016.²⁹ The Strategy, the first of its kind for Kosovo, was triggered by a need to address the flux of Kosovo citizens to join IS and other terrorist organizations in Syria and Iraq as well as the immediate threat this posed to Kosovo's national security. While the Strategy recognized the appeal of the "radicalization messages"³⁰ for a number of Kosovo citizens who joined IS in Syria and Iraq as foreign fighters, the document does not recognize the centrality of the narrative as a key component to the radicalization, recruitment and violent extremism of IS recruits in Kosovo. Instead, it calls for awareness raising campaigns to educate the public and in particular the vulnerable

29 Kosovo Government, "Strategy of Prevention of Violent Extremism and Radicalization leading to Terrorism."

30 Foreword of the Strategy by Kosovo's Prime Minister Isa Mustafa, p. 3. Similarly, the Strategy refers to IS saturation of Internet with radical messages and lists as an objective the organization of "an effective campaign" to counter such messages. 15-20

communities affected by radicalization on the threats of violent extremism.³¹ The document does neither define the audience nor the dominant narrative. Instead, it broadly urges various institutions in Kosovo and the civil society to engage in a public debate about “the role of the religion in secular societies, encouraging tolerance and respect on various views.”³²

For the most part, the Action Plan for the Implementation of the Strategy on Prevention of Violent Extremism and Radicalization Leading to Terrorism calls for the design of an awareness-raising strategic communication plan focused on “the process of recruitment and the wrongful path of violent extremism” through the current media operation of the Ministry of Interior Affairs and experts. It foresees lectures in schools and universities, a media campaign on the consequences of the violent extremism and radicalization. The plan also calls for the promotion of stories of “tolerance, diversity, dialogue and the history of religions in Kosovo” and “the drafting and promotion of counter-narratives as a way to weaken the legitimacy of the messages promoting violent extremism.”³³

While the plan recognizes the need for awareness-raising and the drafting of counter-messages by a plethora of actors, including governmental organizations, civil society and religious communities, it is vague in recognizing a thorough understanding of the IS narrative and the need to discredit or debate these claims. Further, the plan does not reveal any intention to understand the different audiences targeted by IS in Kosovo and instead is only focused on identifying the means through which the IS propaganda is distributed, without a clear strategy how to counter its specific distribution in different media, including personal interaction.

Moreover, the plan relies on a mix of state institutions, civil society and religious organizations and donor funding for the implementation of these measures, but to date no centralized authority has produced a concerted counter-narrative that counters effectively the numerous claims made in IS propaganda.

Contrary to Kosovo Government’s on the question of a comprehensive response, the need to counter the IS narrative was determined by community-level stakeholders in affected communities.³⁴ In roundtables and community meetings organized by the Kosovar Center for Security Studies in Kacanik, Han i Elezit, Gjilan and other

31 Kosovo Government, Strategy, 22

32 Kosovo Government, Strategy, 22

33 Kosovo Government, “Action Plan for the Implementation of the Strategy on the Prevention of Violent Extremism and Radicalization that Leads to Terrorism 2015-2020”

34 The Kosovar Center for Security Studies organized a series of roundtables with various stakeholders in municipalities with the highest number of foreign fighters. Participants included local law enforcement representatives, mayors and representatives of the Islamic Association of Kosovo and local civil society organizations. The roundtables were organized in municipalities of Prizren, Peja, Decane, Kamenica, Kacanik, Gjilan, Ferizaj, Prizren, Klina, Hani i Elezit, and Gjakova.

affected municipalities across Kosovo that brought together local stakeholders, such as law enforcement representatives, mayors as well as local imams and civil society organizations, there was a pressing need to provide and empower communities to respond to what they deemed a “manipulated religious narrative” that incited youth from those communities to fight with IS in Syria and Iraq.

The IS Narrative in Kosovo: Externally driven, locally tailored and delivered from the battlefield

Throughout the period in which IS focused its efforts to raise recruits in Kosovo, the organization relied on a narrative that told a motley of stories arching from a continuation of a Crusade-like war against Islam meta-narrative to local debates, perceived injustices and grievances in a bid to counter the vision of a secular state and to undermine the nascent religious doctrine that coexisted with the precepts of the political order. Furthermore, the IS narrative to Kosovo and Bosnia almost always ends with a warning: should they not embrace the creation of “caliphate” the horrors of the 1990s shall revisit both peoples again.

The narrative through which they seek to lure the audience in Kosovo is never static. It preserves consistency on the messengers that deliver the message, it always seeks to project confidence, legitimacy and recognition, but the content of the message constantly evolves.

The report discerns three main patterns as they appeared consistently across time and space in a half a dozen of videos and recorded statements of IS’ protagonists from Kosovo, but also identified through interviews with former IS fighters who are standing trial in Kosovo.

The main patterns that are used as layers in IS narrative are: 1) an externally-driven narrative that relies on an interpretation of Islam, the quotations from Koran and a basic “clash of civilizations” worldview to justify the call to join IS in a bid to create the “caliphate” as an Islamic entity that would triumph over the secular state and the Christian world; 2) internally-driven, locally tailored narrative that pits IS Kosovo Albanian leaders against state and religious establishment in Kosovo in a bid to discredit them, and 3) an attempt to replace appeals to join IS from the pulpit with examples of direct action, often simply by appearing in the war theater, but also by engaging in brutality.

The externally-driven narrative, which is prominently displayed in all videos targeting the Kosovo audience, represents the framework and the context within which IS seeks to connect the developments in Syria and Iraq to Muslim followers in Kosovo.

This dimension of the narrative seeks to appeal to the Islamic religious identity³⁵ and casts the IS as the leader of the heroic resistance to the Western-led conspiracy of dominance that arches back to the Crusades. It tends to lump together Kosovo with Bosnia – despite their stark differences - in appealing to these two countries religious identities and histories as countries that were once part of the Ottoman Empire, but also the shared history and the memory of the 1990s wars.

In the 20-minute video produced by IS media arm al-Hayat for the Balkans, titled “Honor is in the Jihad,” amid the fast-paced storyline that moves from beautiful landscapes to destroyed mosques, massacres from the recent wars, the history of the creation of the modern nation-states and the reign of Communism in Albania, Kosovo, Bosnia and Macedonia is described as a period of humiliation for the Muslims following the loss of territories that were under Islamic rule for nearly five centuries. The video appears as a warning that the two countries suffered through wars because they chose their nationalist identities instead of embracing Islam as the core identity. The subtext is in essence a warning that the secular states are ill prepared to protect their citizens from a Western conspiracy type of war cast through the prism of religions and their struggle for dominance.

These claims, akin to the general IS propaganda, are laced with Koranic verses that are utilized by IS to call for jihad and the creation of the Islamic caliphate.

Perhaps one of the most striking and intriguing pieces of the propaganda distributed by IS in the 20-minute feature released by Al-Hayat in 2016. The dynamic video is a sort of historic time lapse, a continuum of the Crusades, of huge leaps and historical inconsistencies, of a skewed perspective that seeks to awaken a more dormant Muslim identity throughout the Balkans. It draws local events – in particular the Balkan wars in the 90s – into a broader global narrative of a religious clash, of an Islam as constantly under attack by Christians and non-believers. Communism in Albania, coupled with archival footage of the destruction of minarets, is suddenly a local manifestation of these global trends, as is the war in Bosnia with Muslims portrayed as unprotected and weakened by the nationalistic and secular forces, as well as the promise of democracy. But Kosovo, where Serbia ended its crackdown due to Western intervention and it became a state in an internationally guided process is left out largely because it simply does not fit the scapegoat narrative at the hands of the “Christian” world.

But, as we observe a story of purported victimhood and injustices of Muslims in Bosnia and Kosovo at the hands of Christians as an attempt to stir up emotions through

35 In one of the first calls to Kosovo supporters to join IS, Lavdrim Muhaxheri after reciting a greeting in Arabic, switches to Albanian language to thank God for allowing them the opportunity to participate in “jihad” and to be in the “land of Sham” and to live and work by the Sharia law. He also recounts purportedly the dreams of IS members to whom the prophet appears and promises them that they will be soldiers of Imam Mahdi, who is known in the Islamic literature as a redeemer of Islam that will rule on the Day of Judgment.

recent memories of the war, it is as important to note for the purposes of counter-narrative what is intentionally left out. In the case of Kosovo, NATO's intervention and US-led airstrikes against Serbia to stop the brutal ethnic cleansing campaign are fully omitted from the meta-narrative because they stand in contrast to the story of "clash of civilizations" that IS wants to tell its supporters.

Apart from the Muslim victimhood narrative, the anti-Semitic language³⁶ is also an ideological import, traces of which are found to have made it into the narrative that IS sympathizers have adopted. While there are a few references in the IS propaganda videos to the anti-Semitic sentiment, they have sometimes surfaced in unlikely places. For example, in a current affairs show "Udheve" of Kosovo's public broadcaster RTK, followers of Zekirja Qazimi, the imam jailed for raising recruits for IS in Kosovo, accuse the journalists of "being paid by the Jews... you obey everything the Jew tells you."³⁷

The concepts of jihad as well as that of anti-semitism did not feature in the rhetoric until recently, suggesting that both are part of the externally-driven narrative and not innate to Kosovo.

Despite the 1998-1999 rebellion against Serbia's repression, Kosovo's guerrilla force, the Kosovo Liberation Army, never made any reference to religious identity of the warring sides and the KLA steered clear of any help from Middle Eastern countries in terms of recruits and weapons.

If anything, as it seeks to gain recognition for its statehood and make the case of a multi-confessional country, Kosovo government has tried to reinstate the memory of

36 In the 20-minute video produced by al-Hayat, the media arm of IS, against the backdrop of footage akin to Hollywood reenactments of the Crusades, the narrator claims: the Balkans "have become the new frontier for the Muslims, the new shield against the crusading Europe... But it was neither their surrounding oceans nor its mountain ranges that served as the main defenses for the Umma. It were the believers... those that embraced Islam shielding the sanctity of Muslim blood with their own, the ultimate act of worship." <http://jihadology.net/2015/06/04/al-ayat-media-center-presents-a-new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-honor-is-in-jihad-a-message-to-the-people-of-the-balkans/> For example, in a current affairs show "Udheve" of Kosovo's public broadcaster RTK, followers of an imam jailed for raising recruits for IS in Kosovo accuse the journalists of "being paid by the Jews... you obey everything the Jew tells you."

37 "Në emër të fesë," Udhëve, RTK (November 4, 2016). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FFE7JGrNNg8>

a small pre-WWII era Jewish presence in the country and preserve what is left of that community's footprint in Kosovo.³⁸

But despite the positive attitudes toward Jewish heritage in Kosovo and the region as well as no stark divisions between the traditional Sunni practitioners of Islam and the other sects present in Kosovo such as Bektashi, the potency of this externally driven narrative among IS supporters in Kosovo became obvious during the foiled IS attack against the Israeli football team ahead of the match with Albania in the northern Albanian town of Shkoder.³⁹ The attackers allegedly received money and instructions from Muhaxheri, the IS commander from Kosovo, to attack the Israeli team and in raids police found on them the type of explosive used in attacks in France and Brussels.

Recently some evidence has also emerged that IS recruiters seek to legitimize their claims by looking to the distant past for examples of Albanian fighters who have fought alongside ideological powers. In some instances, according to interviews conducted by KCSS researchers with former IS recruits, IS recruiters have tried to lure Kosovo recruits through a linear historical thesis of Albanians as people at the forefront of important developments by drawing a parallel between the Albanian fighters who fought with the Ottoman Empire and were recognized as conquerors or founders of new states and the opportunity provided to this generation of Kosovo Albanians to be among the founders of the so-called "caliphate."⁴⁰

38 Since the declaration of independence, Kosovo's institutions have committed to the protection of a Jewish graveyard in the city and it has erected a monument to commemorate the Kosovo Jews who perished in Nazi camps near to where the city's synagogue once stood. However, as a sign of changing times, the monument is placed on government building grounds in apparent move to protect it from any potential desecration.

Last year, Kosovo's institutions were quick to ban anti-Semitic literature sold by street vendors in capital's downtown following a letter from the Wiesenthal Center criticizing authorities in Kosovo for allowing such books to be purchased in Kosovo. In addition, the public takes special pride on the fact that Albania rescued hundreds of Jews during WWII. "President Jahjaga and Secretary Clinton Signed the U.S.-Kosovo Agreement on the Protection and Preservation of Cultural Properties" <http://www.ambasada-ks.net/us/?page=2,8,62>, December 14, 2011; "Kosovo unveiling Holocaust memorial," <http://www.jta.org/2013/05/23/news-opinion/united-states/kosovo-unveils-holocaust-memorial>, May 23, 2013. "President of Kosovo bans anti-Semitic books," <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4886106,00.html>, Nov. 29, 2016, The center alleged that the books, translated in Albanian, were printed by the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. For more, see full letter: <http://www.wiesenthal.com/site/apps/nlnet/content.aspx?c=IsKWLbPJLnF&b=8776547&ct=14938317>

39 "Kosovo charges 9 men with plotting attack at Albania-Israel World Cup Match" <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2017-06-14/kosovo-charges-nine-men-with-plotting-attacks-at-albania-israeli-world-cup-match>, June 14, 2017.

40 Interview conducted in July, 2017 by KCSS with a former IS member who is now serving a prison sentence in Kosovo.

The locally tailored narrative, on the other hand, varies between themes of alleged humiliation of Muslims and of a faith under attack in Kosovo, defiance to the state, rejection of the political establishment and of the mainstream religious clerics to lure them to join ISIS in Syria and Iraq. Almost without exception, the messages conveyed mostly by Muhaxheri during this time respond to events and debates in Kosovo, either to counter the calls by the Kosovo institutions to discourage Kosovo's citizens from leaving to join IS or media reporting that during this time placed an emphasis on the terrorist nature of the organization.

The alleged humiliation of Muslims in Kosovo features prominently in the videos produced to lure recruits from Kosovo to join ISIS. IS Albanian spokesmen that are the main protagonists in these videos portray joining IS as a chance to construct of an alternative way of life that would allow the Muslim believers to live according to the Sharia, but also to come together as an entity to stave off future oppression and war. This theme speaks of Muslims who in their view embarrassingly put up with the alleged tyranny of the secular state and calls for their journey – "hijra" – to IS-controlled territory where they can live their faith. The supposed humiliation they experience in Kosovo is contrasted with an attempt to elicit feelings of pride for one's religion to lure them into IS embrace. In the early videos issued by the IS Kosovo spokesmen the call is focused on incentivizing Kosovo citizens to escape the alleged religious oppression. Later, once the flow of the foreign fighters abated in early 2014, IS Kosovo leaders began to issue threats and call for action against those they deemed as responsible for the alleged oppression of Muslim faithful in Kosovo and for the non-believers in general.

For example, one of the first videos to emerge of the Kosovo Albanian foreign fighters in Syria was in November 2013 shows triumphant Muhaxheri, armed and with two tanks as his backdrop. He speaks of victory, of a land without "kufars"⁴¹ and appeals to Kosovars to join the "jihad."

The video coincides with IS territorial gains and following the largest influx of foreign fighters from Kosovo. In this period in 2013, 54 % of Kosovo foreign fighters joined the terrorist groups in Syria⁴² in an unabated flow.

His appeal follows a simple storyline: amid IS gains he extends an offer to Kosovars to join him and other "lions" to an alternative vision, away from the constraints of the secular society. "Allah has given us victory in this land... It gave us a chance to live by the Sharia and work for the Sharia," he explains. "Brothers I advise you, do not spend a minute in your homes. Get ready and get going to jihad. If you only knew what life and what pride the

41 *kufar* is a derogatory name in Arabic to describe the non-believers.

42 Kursani, "Report inquiring into the causes and consequences of Kosovo's citizens' involvement as foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria," 27

Muslim enjoys in this land, you wouldn't stay in your land."⁴³ Here Muhaxheri appears to feed into the narrative that Muslims in Kosovo are oppressed and their religion and way of life is under threat and that in the IS-controlled territory they could enjoy the spoils of a religious life.

A similar sentiment is hammered in a video issued through the central media arm, Al-Hayat, in a form of "Message to the People of the Balkans".⁴⁴ In the carefully choreographed 20-minute video, amid the idyllic scenery of fig trees, greenery and lakes that contrasts the wartime chaos and the notion of deserts⁴⁵ that made for most of IS videos directed to Kosovo's public, IS members address the audience in the various languages and dialects.⁴⁶ "Many of you are complaining there how you cannot grow a beard, how you can't wear niqab, how it's hard to live," exclaims one of the participants from Bosnia. "If you want honor, come here brothers," says another Bosnian member as he carries two children and his niqab-clothed wife through a market. "Don't let the dirty tawaghit arrest you, humiliate you, break into you houses in the middle of the night, finding your wives, your sisters, uncovered."

"Do not think we have forgotten about how you oppress the Muslims. Do not think we have forgotten the enmity you have towards Allah's religion," he says. "Do not think we've forgotten the humiliation which you put the Muslims through and the hatred toward them."

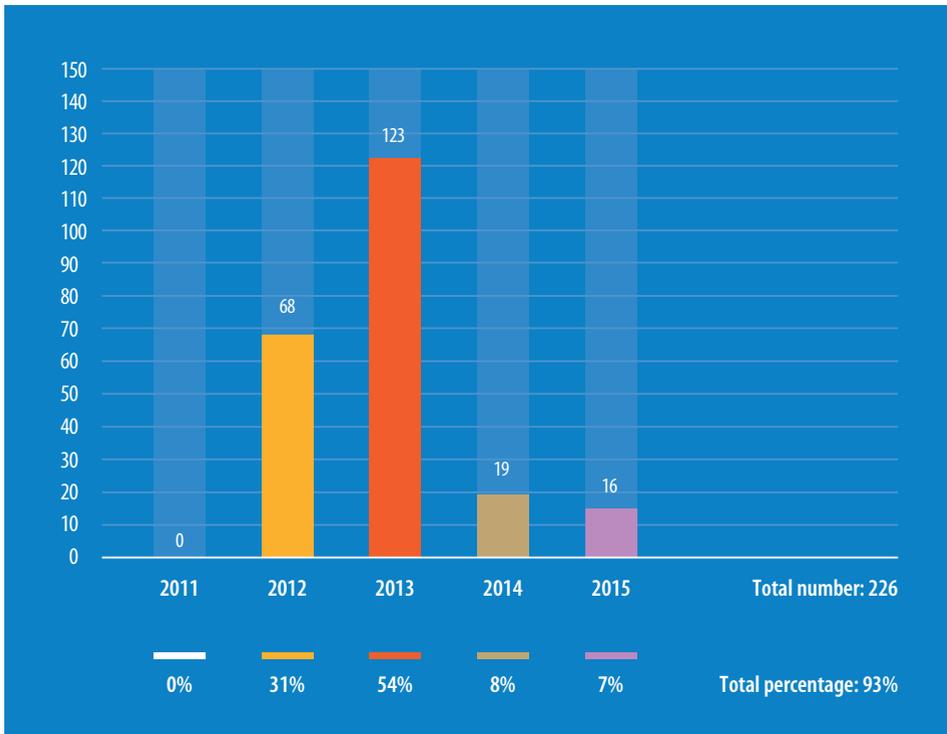
43 "Lavdim Muhaxheri speaks on developments in Syria." See link for the full video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m4yd1k_m1YA

44 "Honor is in the Jihad, A message to the people of the Balkans"

45 In their condemnation of IS, Kosovo imams made various appeals to dissuade Kosovars from joining IS. In one such statement, Kosovo's head imam Naim Ternava was quoted as saying "we have no young blood to water the Arab deserts." Telegrafi, March 10, 2015. See link: <http://telegrafi.com/ternava-nukemi-gjak-te-njome-per-te-ujitur-shkretetirat-e-arabeve/>

46 There is one speaker from Albania and one from Kosovo with their differing dialects, recognizing the separate audiences despite the shared language.

Table 1: Timeline of recruitment: Estimates of Kosovo foreign fighters who joined IS across time. Data provided to KCSS by Kosovo law enforcement agencies.⁴⁷



In the context of the locally-tailored narrative, over time, the messages disseminated from IS in Kosovo are replete with intimidation, belittlement and threats in 2014 as the state authorities in Kosovo launch a crackdown on the IS network in the country, imams increasingly distance themselves from the war in Syria and Iraq, foreign fighters begin to abandon the battlefields and families of former IS members killed in Syria and Iraq begin to publicly out the organization and its Kosovo leaders. In 2015 and 2016 the IS propaganda is a mixed bag of utopia, camaraderie and explicit threats.

For instance, the video released in May 2014 shows outright outrage and action against the secular state as it seeks to discredit the political leadership and the Islamic religious establishment in Kosovo and intimidate the believers. The vectors of the IS propaganda targeting Kosovo grow impatient. A video released in May 2014 shows Muhaxheri giving a threatening speech in Arabic on camera flanked by other fighters

⁴⁷ The data provided in this chart does not represent the whole number of Kosovo's foreign fighters which have joint conflicts in Syria and Iraq. The data presented in table 1 includes the period up to March 2015. The citizens which have joint conflict in Syria and Iraq after March 2015.

who take turns to burn their passports, including Kosovo's.⁴⁸ While his message speaks to the broader religious themes that are a hallmark of IS propaganda, such as the triumph of the "caliphate" and the defeat of the non-believers, the act of the collective burning of passports – a trademark of national identity - in bonfire are a display of resolve of the foreign fighters to fight with IS, embrace their new identity, create a bond of belonging between people of different origins by participating in a joint ritual as they unite in their allegiance to the Islamic State.

At the same time, the video is a direct response to the stepped up debates in Kosovo at this time to withdraw citizenship to Kosovars joining terrorist organizations and the increased pressure to law enforcement agencies to confront this phenomenon.⁴⁹

In this instance, Muhaxheri again utilizes Kosovo's social and political conditions, namely its isolation as it remains the only country in Europe not to benefit from the visa free travel in Schengen states, to whip up dissatisfaction and relate it to a larger struggle - that of Sunni Muslims under attack.⁵⁰ In this localized context, Muhaxheri's prominent display of his Kosovo passport is also not accidental: the long-awaited passport of the young nation meant to elicit pride among its citizens is thrown on the ground, stomped on and burned in a sign of defiance to the secular state as a product of Western intervention. In the video, Muhaxheri dismisses the passport as "a passport of kufars."

The call of IS leaders to boycott elections should also be viewed in a similar context as their attempt to undermine Kosovo's political order and institutions as a country governed by manmade laws as opposed to divine laws. It is also as a way to reject granting legitimacy to those that govern through those laws as well as an effort to put their religious beliefs in practice.

In a later video, released in January 2014, the IS fighters from Kosovo seek to cow men for allegedly caving in to the mainstream religious clerics that they liken to "Sultan's sages," servants to the political establishment, and media that they compare to "Moses' magicians who confused the masses."

48 The video, which originally was circulated on YouTube and picked by extensively by Kosovo media, has since been removed. However, inserts of the video can be found at "Mediat serbe transmetojnw videon: Shqiptaret e Sirise grisin dhe djegin pasaportat." <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=523mBk9SIfY>

49 At the time, Kosovo's President Atifete Jahjaga made numerous public announcements warning of the danger posed by violent extremism and demanded action from law enforcement agencies and justice system. For more, see her annual speech to Kosovo's Assembly in December 12, 2013. <http://www.kuvendikosoves.org/?cid=1,128,6067>

50 In his study of dynamics of radicalization in Kosovo, Shtuni elaborates how the religious bond between Kosovars with a newly acquired religious identity and the supranational Islamic identity have enabled the recasting of local grievances as manifestations of a larger global trend against Muslims. See p. 8-10 for a detailed discussion.

“Islam is being heavily fought,” Muhaxheri exclaims. “The enemies of Islam have gathered the way hungry people gather around a table.”

He then launches an attack against on imams in Kosovo who, he claims, “have sold the world... for a leather armchair” specifically condemning imams who have reached a whole new level of popularity through videos made in their mosques or offices and distributed widely through social media. His statement is made in a bid to discredit these imams as corrupt in eyes of the devout Muslims. The video is released as the Islamic Association in Kosovo came under increasing pressure by Kosovo’s institutions and the public opinion to condemn IS and appeal to Kosovo Albanians unequivocally to stay away from Syria and Iraq.

Muhaxhiri also belittles his audience in Kosovo. “O you wretched Muslims, until when are you going to sleep?” To humiliate them further and condemn them as cowards, he contrasts them to IS foreign fighters “who have left their families, their wealth, have abandoned their kids and climbed the mountains and meadows to fight” for the establishment of the “caliphate.”

Moreover, various IS protagonists in some instances exploit past grievances and draw a parallel between developments in Kosovo and Syria as part of this locally tailored narrative. One such vivid example is the issue of rape. Wartime rape remains a highly emotional issue in Kosovo’s local context and is the only trauma of the 1998-1999 Kosovo war that remains in the agenda of policymakers and that is accorded media attention. IS protagonists, who seek to place the wars of 1990s in Bosnia and Kosovo in the larger context of the victimization of Muslims at the hands of Christians, have weaved the stories of wartime rape in their narrative targeting their audience in Kosovo. An estimated 20,000 Albanian women were raped by Serbian forces in Kosovo, a story still met with denial in part because of the patriarchal communal order.⁵¹ Through it they whip up the emotions of a trauma and shame suffered at the hands of Serbian forces,⁵² but also one that challenges and emasculates the heroic narrative that dominated the national narrative in the war’s aftermath and renders men as humiliated, helpless and unable to protect their families. This memory is brought back in IS videos to the Kosovo audience, whether through a direct reference to rape in Kosovo and Bosnia wars or by drawing parallels between the fresh memories of Kosovo war and the suffering in Syria to incite their sympathizers into action for a chance to redeem themselves. For example, in the 2013 video from Syria, Muhaxheri speaks of the need to come to the defense of “Muslim sisters who are being raped.”

51 Di Lellio, “Seeking Justice for Wartime Sexual Violence,” 1

52 In one of the earliest videos that projects this narrative, Naman Demolli, who later becomes the first Kosovo Albanian to be killed in Syria, speaks at length about the rape of Albanian women in the region of Drenica by “the Serbian soldiers, who wore the cross.”

The reference to rape features prominently also in the sermon of one of the imams accused of inspiring Kosovo citizens to join the fight in Syria⁵³ and in one of the video addresses of one of the first Kosovo Albanians to join IS.⁵⁴

Yet, in addition to the externally-driven narrative that exploits the schisms between Sunnis and Shias and the thinly veiled anti-Semitic sentiment, and the locally tailored narrative that feverishly undermines the secular state and seeks to delegitimize Kosovo's elected leaders, this report identifies another underlying theme in the narrative that IS disseminated in Kosovo through their propaganda, video messages and sermons. IS narrative tailored to Kosovo's public sought to circumvent teaching stories from the Koran with shows of direct action. In this context, instances of brutality and utopia became central features of IS propaganda videos distributed through social media in Kosovo featuring two prominent Albanian leaders from Kosovo who appeared from IS-controlled territory. In line with the teachings of Abu Bakr Naji in "Management of Savagery" this transition from the pulpit – the lecturing from mosque or in social media – to the battlefield would solidify the credentials of those appealing to others to join.

Often the narrative in the IS propaganda videos alternates between upbeat messages and utopic scenery that attempt to project ambition, solidarity and credibility as if to represent the rewards that await those that join IS, to threatening messages and display of unprecedented brutality, such as the beheading of an alleged collaborator and the execution with a rocket propelled grenade of a young man⁵⁵ by Muhaxheri - as awaiting those that refuse to heed their call.⁵⁶ In a similar vein, Muhaxheri's and later Ridvan Haqifi's storylines follow such trajectory.

This storyline is most notable in the "Honor is in the Jihad" video expanding on the notion of utopia, which as described earlier by Winter seeks to show that the "caliphate" is not only an ambition, but is presented as a tangible achievement. The video then shows members of IS as a band of brothers, chatting over tea and walking their children, as the video's narrator reads: "here, Muslims walk with honor, meet in safety and raise their children fearing none but Allah" to stand in contrast with the threatening descriptions by the leader of the Kosovo contingent, Aqifi of

53 On July 6, 2012, Enes Goga, an imam from Peja, complements the controversial sermon ordered by the Islamic Community in Kosovo to events in Syria with a message purportedly from a group of women in Syria: "O Muslims, o Muslim leadership, either bring weapons for our husbands or bring us pills that will protect us from pregnancy because they are raping us, we will become pregnant and we will give birth to bastards." The statement is featured in "Republika e Xhihadit," Zona Express.

54 In the 2011 video of Naman Demolli, he speaks of wartime rapes in Kosovo and refers to Serb forces that conducted the rapes as "Cross bearers." <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qWolY8bHgF8> see at 2':08"

55 In the horrific video that shows the execution with an RPG, disheveled Muhaxheri, waving his finger, threatens in Albanian that "the same fate awaits all the kufars"

56 In one video circulated in different Albanian-language Youtube channels, Muhaxheri executes a young man tied up on a pole with a rocket-propelled grenade. After he carries out the execution, he makes contact with the camera and threatens that "this fate awaits all of you, kufars"

Muslims supposedly abused in Kosovo, Albania and Macedonia. This message also marks a shift in the IS narrative in Kosovo: while most of its messages sought to lure recruits to join their war efforts, this one includes an explicit call for action against Kosovo's authorities as well as non-believers. "By Allah, dark days are coming to you, you will fear to walk in the streets. You will fear working in your offices. You will be terrorized in your homes. We will terrorize you in your dreams... We will come to you with explosive belts," Aqifi warned in the video from the battlefield. Along the same theme, in the video Muhaxheri, bolstered by the two tanks in the background and the appearance of the normalcy of the everyday life, seeks to project the Islamic State's power and credibility as the holder of monopoly of violence, the sole provider of order and security in the devastated part of Syria, plunged into the lawlessness of war. Yet, the scenes of utopia rapidly give way to explicit threats and intimidation when directed to Kosovo's public in general, and explicitly to its government gaining in relevance because they localize a conflict which otherwise is far removed from Kosovo.

Table 2: Main themes in IS' narrative to Kosovo's audience:

Externally-driven narrative	Locally-driven narrative
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Redemption through Jihad in the Land of Sham - Historical injustices against Muslim in the Balkans - Jewish global domination - Western imperialism and interventionism in the Middle East 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Leaders as Western puppets that suppress a Muslim identity - Corrupt politicians - True Muslims are persecuted by the state - Failure of Kosovo statehood and Western democracy to better lives - Stirring up local ethnic enmities

Footage of brutality as a catalyst to terrorist battlefield: The curious case of Kosovo IS fighters curated through SMS

So far, the report has established the centrality of the IS propaganda in Kosovo and its key features as represented symbolically and communicated verbally to the audience of active participants and sympathizers in Kosovo. It has identified the numerous themes that it brought into play to attract the attention of the media, solicit support and raise

new recruits, as well as the organization's ability to adapt the narrative, alternate its themes but also employ them simultaneously to target different audiences in Kosovo. It also recognized the effort of its messengers to project credibility by establishing direct contact with potential recruits or by appearing from the fighting theater of IS territory.

In this section, the report presents the findings based on insights gained through a thorough study of suspected IS fighters from Kosovo in custody by country's law enforcement agencies statements to the police at the time of their arrest or intimate communication between the IS recruits and their families, loved ones and friends as they appear in court affidavits.

Though limited, the raw communication conducted through mobile text messages of what is in essence the receiving audience of the IS message is the closest researchers can get at this time to discern and understand the motivations, the worldview and sources of influence that led some of the 300 Kosovars to their decision to join IS in Syria and Iraq.

While direct contact with IS recruiters appears as a crucial factor in the process of radicalization that led recruiters to IS, our research corroborates and is consistent with findings of other studies that have established the social media, especially videos on YouTube, as vital for the dissemination of IS propaganda that sets the recruits on a path to radicalization and violent extremism.

There is no doubt that at least some of the Kosovo citizens who joined IS in Syria and Iraq believed they were heeding the call to fight a holy war in Syria. For years, through direct personal contact, local imams worked in their inculcation, exposing them to a set of narratives, religious and one of contempt for the secular state. The most prominent case is that of Zeqirja Qazimi, a local imam who organized a group of young believers initially around a local NGO and later rose to prominence by becoming the imam of al-Kuddus mosque in the southeastern town of Gjilan. Aside from delivering sermons in a strip of municipalities that border Macedonia where the largest number IS recruits were raised,⁵⁷ intercepted communication shows that Qazimi ran an enterprise of financial supporters, logistical personnel, brokered the power struggles in IS for the Kosovo contingent, including the appointment of their leader, and quickly became the go-to recruiter of IS in Kosovo. In the trial, the prosecution presented evidence that showed that at least 22 of Qazimi's followers have later joined IS and al-Nusra in Syria.⁵⁸ Witnesses testified of lectures that drew heavily on "the importance of *jihad*, portrayed the war in Syria as such, the value of *shahid* and were given clear instructions how to conduct themselves following the lectures."

57 According to official data released by Kosovo's Ministry of Interior, 54 Kosovo citizens from Kacanik, Han i Elezit and Gjilan joined in Syria and Iraq. Data obtained by KCSS up until December 2016.

58 Conviction case PKR 54/15 of the Basic Court in Ferizaj brought against Qazimi et al on May 20, 2016

The organizers also appear involved with recruits to Syria in great detail: they suggest to the recruits “to wear earrings, comb their hair and not stand out in their appearance” as they made the trip through Turkey.⁵⁹

But aside from the Qazimi’s direct influence and that of other imams in aiding and abating IS’ recruitment efforts in Kosovo, Muhaxheri appears instrumental in inspiring a following of foreign fighters. He exerted his influence by tapping on his personal network of acquaintances and exposing them to his narrative that centered on a call for holy war and primarily of victimhood. For example, in the interview to Kosovo’s police during the investigation, a defendant, an acquaintance of Muhaxheri from high school, describes meeting him twice before he left for Syria on which occasions Muhaxheri played to him “videos and similar material on YouTube of killings and rapes” allegedly taking place in Syria. That “and his appeal through electronic media in 2013 where he openly calls on the young in Kosovo to join the holy war in Syria,” he claims motivated him to join IS in Syria.⁶⁰ Similarly, in the intercepted text messages to his brother, suspect Kujtim Bllaca writes in awe from Aleppo: “Hey brother, the YouTube guy that called for *jihad* was here today.”⁶¹ Another defendant explains his path to join IS along a similar pattern, this time exposed to religious themes and the war in Syria by Ridvan Aqifi, the other leader of the Kosovo contingent in IS. “He would come to the gym near the car wash I ran and he would stop and talk to me in particular about the war in Syria,” the defendant explains. “He would show me videos of the war in Syria and would invite me to go and fight there.”⁶²

Some family members, too, appear that have adopted the IS narrative. The wives of the defendants often appear to encourage their husbands in Syria. “This requires sacrifice, not everyone commands the blessing of Allah, use it because I don’t know if you’ll be given this chance again. Forgive me for these words, but I want us to earn the paradise,” one writes.⁶³ Another one says, “It’s really difficult for me, but I am proud of you, sweetheart, Allah has honored us with your jihad and I will try to preserve this honor with pride and dedication... I want to see you even more in those clothes (most likely uniform) and don’t forget that I am proud of my husband, my mujahed”⁶⁴ Or, “I don’t doubt your jihad, but I would advise you not to be deceived by dollars or women*; save our Jihad for Allah only.”⁶⁵

59 Indictment PPS nr.111/2014, Basic Court of Prishtina on May 7, 2015

60 Indictment PPS nr. 25/2015, Basic Court of Prishtina on May 7, 2015

61 Indictment PPS nr. 111/2014, Basic Court of Prishtina, May 7, 2015

62 Indictment PPS nr. 26/2015 Basic Court of Prishtina, May 7, 2015

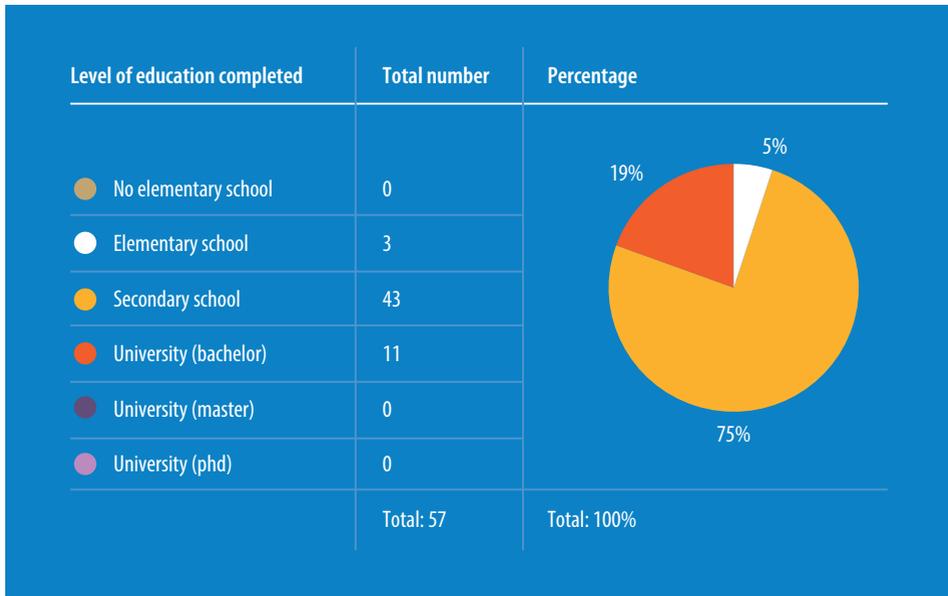
63 Indictment PPS 111/2014, Basic Court of Prishtina, May 7, 2015

64 Indictment PPS nr. 25/2015 Basic Court of Prishtina, May 7, 2015

65 Indictment PPS nr. 25/2015 Basic Court of Prishtina, May 7, 2015

Other times, there is contempt for the secular state. A spouse who is trying to make her way to Syria to join her husband with their children relays a conversation with a friend to her husband in which she warns that “families should go (to Syria) with their husbands because there will come a time here (in Kosovo) when they (the state authorities) will take away the kids of a Muslim who are not send to school... we must go where you're judged by the Sharia.”⁶⁶

Table 3: Education levels of suspected foreign fighters from Kosovo



* Data provided from Kosovo Police to KCSS captures the education background of suspected foreign fighters who at one point joined terrorist organizations in Syria and Iraq and were arrested by Kosovo police upon their return to Kosovo. ** Data illustrates that the majority of the suspected foreign fighters have completed higher education.⁶⁷

66 Indictment PPS nr. 25/2015 Basic Court of Prishtina, May 7, 2015

* in the text message transcript, the word used is “ganimetet” to describe women warriors after Ganimete Terbeshi, a WWII heroine in Kosovo

67 The data provided in table 3 does not represent the whole number of Kosovo's foreign fighters. The data presented in table 1 includes the period up to March 2015. The citizens which have joint conflict in Syria and Iraq after March 2015

7. THE VIRTUAL FOOTPRINT OF THE “CALIPHATE”

Studies into IS' thorough use of social media established that the terrorist organization has relied on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube to deliver and disseminate its narrative globally. In many ways, IS outreach and output through social media in 2015 had reached unprecedented levels, with a reported 90,000 tweets and other social media engagement per day. Because of the pressures of 24-hour news cycles and the fear that their threats relayed through propaganda incited, mainstream media often became the very vehicles of the dissemination of their propaganda.⁶⁸

The case of Kosovo is no different. A forthcoming KCSS study found that IS recruiters and violent extremists use Facebook and YouTube extensively as platforms through which IS propaganda is disseminated, but also through individual profiles that members of IS from Kosovo that are in Syria or Iraq use to provide updates about the war in Syria and to attract new recruits.⁶⁹ Court affidavits analyzed for this report confirm this finding. Along with cellphone text-messages (SMS), former IS members communicated through Facebook with other members of the terrorist organization and as part of their radicalization that led them on the path of violent extremism they were exposed to various videos played out of YouTube.

With nearly half of the population on Facebook, Kosovo's citizens can access numerous Facebook pages, closed and open, that disseminate IS propaganda. These include online material that calls for jihad, appeals for support to IS fighters from Kosovo who are in Syria and Iraq, hate speeches, incitement of hatred for other countries and ideologies and support for terrorist attacks.⁷⁰ Through these pages IS also planted an abundance of new words in the vocabulary of its supporters as they try to create a sense of superiority stemming from firsthand knowledge of Islamic literature, whose original language is Arabic.

Most videos released by IS intended for Kosovo's public have been broadcast unfiltered by country's mainstream media. At the time of their broadcast videos drew extensive debates that filled the screens of the current affairs shows, but more often than not their full availability on their websites unintentionally turned mainstream media, which in Kosovo have hundreds of thousands of followers, into platforms from which IS continued to spread its propaganda unhindered.

68 Winter, "The virtual 'caliphate,'" 32

69 Kelmendi, "New Battlefields," 3

70 Kelmendi, "New Battlefields," Forthcoming

Table 5: The most frequently used words in social media by IS operatives and sympathizers

<p>Types of materials distributed</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Direct calls and support for jihad - Support for foreign fighters in Syria - Hate speech - Materials propagating against different ideologies and countries - Support for terrorist attacks
<p>Most used words</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Tauhid - Taghut - Qafir - Munafik - Kufri - Islamofob - Xhihad - Shehid - "Hoxhallarët e Hakut" - Luanët (Lions) - Muxhahid - Kryqtarë

* Data derived from the monitoring of over 60 pages and over 150 profile accounts on Facebook, YouTube and Telegram by Vesë Kelmendi for the forthcoming KCSS report "The New Battlefields: The activity of extremist groups in social networks in Kosovo, Albania and Macedonia"



8. CONCLUSION, RECOMMENDATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This report is an initial overview of the IS narrative targeting Kosovo. Through thorough research and close reading of IS propaganda, we have established the centrality of the narrative to the radicalization and recruitment efforts of the terrorist organization. While narrative often appears to be an accompanying feature of any organization's communication strategy, in the IS case the use of multiple facets and strands of stories gains more prominence as it appears as an important catalyst that has moved individuals quickly from exposure to direct action. In Kosovo's case, to raise recruits for their war effort, IS tells a story that mixes the country's troubled history of transition, exploits its identity politics and past grievances and perceived injustices to undermine the secular state and its political order. It puts in doubt the sustainability of the state as a multicultural and multi-religious entity while targeting those sitting at the margin of the protracted democratic transition to whom the state and its secular narrative feels distant. Through intimidation, threats and tacit warning, IS narrative aims to blackmail those that do not follow, while according opportunity, albeit virtual, to those that heed their call to join the terrorists in establishing the "caliphate." In line with teachings of the masterminds of terrorist organizations of the 21st century, the aim of the IS narrative matches that of the organization's to continuously erode the trust in government institutions and move to fill the ensuing vacuum. We find that IS in Kosovo has also followed a trajectory of brutality in an attempt to show competence. While brutality seeks to intimidate and to set the authorities on a vicious cycle of action and reaction that keeps the organization present and relevant, their bid to demonstrate competence enables stakeholders to understand the vulnerabilities that IS seeks to manipulate and grievances that it seeks to exploit.

While limited in its scope, the report is the first attempt to identify the stories that compose the IS narrative as told to Kosovo's audience since 2011 through its spokesmen – the men who have joined the terrorist organization and who have continued to raise recruits at home throughout their engagement with IS. Apart from providing a contribution by analyzing an individual case study that turns IS meta-narrative of a far removed war into a local conflict, the report seeks to alert policy-makers, Kosovo's civil society, religious authorities and law enforcement community to the urgency with which they have to come together to offer a comprehensive counter-narrative that tackles all the layers of the narrative and the multiple audiences that IS targeted. As such, the report is the first step in the process of developing a set of principles for a counter-narrative drive.

The report makes the case that a clear, strategic communication of a well-thought counter-narrative forged in a spirit of cooperation and in measured steps will be central to Kosovo's success to address radicalization that leads toward violent extremism.

Accordingly, KCSS concludes with a list of relevant stakeholders that will be key in producing an effective counter-narrative and provides an initial list of recommendations.

To Kosovo's Government

Draft a strategic communications plan on the basic commitments of the Republic of Kosovo as a multiethnic and multicultural country ahead of the 10th anniversary of the declaration of independence. The anniversary activities should be tailored to individual contributions to independence efforts. They should serve as a teaching moment on the country's recent history, including NATO's intervention to end the war, and to the rest a chance to reclaim their contribution in Kosovo's path to independence.

As part of the strategic communication, Kosovo's key institutional leaders must make a concerted effort to reach out to cities and towns in weekly visits to explain Kosovo's commitment to creating a secular state, especially in conducting an inclusive debate on what secularism is, with a particular emphasis on its commitment to treat all faiths equally and to guarantee the freedom of worship and engage with audiences on these questions.

The government should appoint an envoy that will reach out to endangered communities to identify and communicate their needs to Kosovo's authorities.

The senior government officials should be prepared to discuss the role of the faith in the public sphere and current affairs challenges such as the plans to build a grand mosque in Prishtina as well as decisions to build the Catholic Cathedral and the preservation of the unfinished Serbian Orthodox Church on the grounds of University campus.

Explain clearly Kosovo's foreign policy goals, including developments in the Middle East and the process of recognitions

Work together with civil society to help them identify families and former IS fighters that as part of their repentance process and reintegration into the society would be willing to share their stories

Work with interfaith leaders and experts of oral history and media to identify stories on the contribution of faith communities in the blood-feud reconciliation in 1990s, civil disobedience and their contribution to independence movement.

Fund a media awareness raising campaign that counters every layer of the IS narrative with facts, especially in shattering the image of utopia by contrasting it with the

developments on the ground. Such a campaign should be discrete yet preserve the complexity of the task at hand (note for the reviewers: it shouldn't look anything like the ad produced by the Ministry of Interior or KFOR).

Kosovo's Islamic Association (BIK)

Because of the distrust that exists between the established religious authorities and IS sympathizers in Kosovo, it is best that BIK leaders play less of a public role, but increase their efforts throughout the network of imams and mosques in Kosovo to remind their followers of the nascent practice of Islam in the country.

BIK leaders should also increase their efforts to counter the religious interpretations in the IS narrative and to delegitimize the organization's spokesmen by contextualizing their meaning or providing a counter-narrative to the interpretation that IS provides. Such contribution should be made available also to civil society organizations for further distribution.

BIK should publicly call out every imam affiliated with it for any endorsement of terrorism.

Kosovo's Civil Society

As the most credible player and in essence the mediator between IS sympathizers, vulnerable communities and the general public, the civil society organizations in Kosovo must urgently create a coalition or an umbrella organization to prevent overlap and doubling of efforts.

The CSO coalition should then create a joint platform where it would launch its efforts to counter the IS narrative through engagement of former IS fighters and their families.

Work closely with media and data startups to showcase such work, especially in pitching stories that contribute to countering the IS narrative.

In cooperation with the Kosovo government, launch an online campaign on Facebook and YouTube akin to Quilliam Foundation's #NotAnotherBrother

Work with government agencies and startups to increase the Albanian-language content on the Internet.

Donors and CSOs to secure and offer expertise and conduct training for all beat reporters of CVE and PVE

Assist editors of mainstream media in Kosovo to draft and commit to a joint protocol on how to report on radicalization and violent extremism cases in the country.

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