

Albania: Extremism & Counter-Extremism

On August 17, 2016, 29-year-old terrorist suspect Dijar Xhema attempted to lure three people into his car in the coastal Albanian city of Vlora. According to police, the failed kidnapping attempt—which took place over the course of two hours—was accompanied by cries of “Allahu Akbar” as well as claims that the assailant had been “sent by Allah” and would “kill you all.” (Source: [Balkan Insight](#))

The attack—if proved to have been motivated by religious extremism—would constitute the first Islamist attack on Albanian territory. Albania is known for its history of religious tolerance and cohesion. Although dozens of Albanians are believed to have traveled to join insurgent groups in Syria, this figure is believed to have capped in 2014 at between 100 and 150. Authorities claim that since 2015, no Albanians have managed to leave the country to join extremist groups abroad. (Sources: [Balkan Insight](#), [Associated Press](#), [Balkan Insight](#))

Overview

Albania is a religiously diverse country, with an estimated 57 percent of its population practicing Sunni Islam, 10 percent practicing Roman Catholicism, seven percent practicing Christian Orthodoxy, and two percent practicing a form of Shiite Sufism. Albanians are also by and large ethnically homogenous, with an estimated 80-90 percent of Albanians believed to be ethnically Albanian. (Sources: [U.S. Department of State](#), [UNICEF](#))

Albanian ethno-nationalist movements in neighboring Kosovo and Macedonia have led to a rise in terrorist groups like the Albanian National Army, the National Liberation Army, and others. However the danger from Albanian ethno-nationalist terrorism has largely bypassed Albania itself. Instead, Albania is often heralded for its culture of religious and ethnic tolerance and cohesion. Religion is also not often a point of conflict for Albanians, who frequently intermarry and engage in interfaith celebrations. (Sources: [Reuters](#), [Balkan Insight](#), [Telegraph](#))

With the rise of ISIS and the Nusra Front, however, Albania’s Islamic religious community has worked to challenge the calls to join extremist groups abroad. An estimated 100-150 Albanian citizens are believed to have joined extremist groups in Syria between 2012 and 2014, a trend that is believed to have stopped in early 2015 with the disruption of a nine-person recruiting cell. (Sources: [Balkan Insight](#), [Reuters](#), [Balkan Insight](#))

Radicalization and Foreign Fighters

Radicalization and Recruitment

Albania has a long history of religious tolerance and cohesion. Due to regional instability in the 1990s, high crime rates, and weak border security, al-Qaeda managed to gain a foothold in Albania in the mid- to late 1990s. Since then, Albania has worked to improve its border security, strengthen its counterterrorism laws, and expand its counter-extremism programs nationwide. (Sources: [U.S. Department of State](#), [Islamic Terrorism and the Balkans](#), [Reuters](#), [U.S. Department of State](#))

From 2012 to 2014, between 100 and 150 Albanian citizens are believed to have traveled to join insurgent groups in Syria, including ISIS and al-Qaeda’s then-affiliate in Syria, the Nusra Front, although some reports put the figure—at least of ethnic Albanians—much higher. Albanian foreign fighters are believed to have been recruited to these groups primarily in person, through a nine-person recruiting ring led by the now-incarcerated extremist imam Bujar Hysa. ISIS and the Nusra Front have also worked to recruit Balkans-based fighters—including ethnic Albanians and Albanian citizens—through propaganda distributed online. Several terrorism cases and attempts in Albania—including the August 2016 kidnapping attack and the January 2017 thwarted bomb attack in Vienna—involved Kosovar terrorists from the northern city of Mitrovica. (Sources: [Balkan Insight](#), [Reuters](#), [Balkan Insight](#), [La Repubblica](#), [EURACTIV](#), [Associated Press](#), [SkyNews](#))

ISIS

[ISIS](#) has recruited in Albania through in-person recruiting networks, including in mosques. Extremist cleric Bujar Hysa—along with fellow extremist clerics Genci Balla and Gert Pashja and six other recruiters—are believed to have

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recruited the majority of Albanian foreign fighters recruited between 2012 and 2014. Hysa pledged allegiance to ISIS, although his recruits are believed to have joined ISIS and the Nusra Front. (Source: [Reuters](#))

Although Albanians were recruited throughout the country, there are concerns of heightened ISIS activity near the Albanian border with Kosovo. Three villages in particular are known to have produced a disproportionately large number of extremist recruits: the southeastern town of Leshnica and its nearby villages, Zagoracan and Rremenj. Of the estimated 100-150 Albanian foreign fighters in Syria, 24 Albanians came from one of these three villages. The foreign fighters were believed to have been radicalized through in-person networks tied to a local mosque in Leshnica. Almir Daci, the mosque's former imam, is a suspected member of ISIS and was charged in absentia in December 2015 for recruiting to terrorism. (Sources: [Balkan Insight](#), [Balkan Insight](#), [La Repubblica](#), [EURACTIV](#))

In addition to in-person recruiting networks, Albanians are believed to have been lured to join ISIS through online recruiting materials. Kosovar-born Lavderim Muhaxheri is the alleged leader of a battalion of ethnic Albanian ISIS fighters in Syria. Since arriving in Syria in late 2012 or early 2013, Muhaxheri has appeared in a number of ISIS videos and other propaganda materials urging ethnic Albanians—including Albanian citizens and ethnic Albanians in neighboring Kosovo and Macedonia—to join ISIS in Syria. It was Muhaxheri who allegedly ordered and coordinated a failed ISIS attack targeting an Israeli soccer team in November 2016. (Sources: [Balkan Insight](#), [Balkan Insight](#))

ISIS also recruits Albanians on WordPress, Facebook, and YouTube, among other platforms. Although ISIS appears to be losing its capacity to recruit in person in Albania, the group continues to recruit heavily online, in some cases aiming to attract an Albanian-speaking audience by mixing attractive religious messages with ISIS's propaganda. According to Albanian analyst Fabian Zhilla, "It is often very difficult to distinguish between messages that call on [Albanians] to strengthen their faith and messages that call on them to join the cause of ISIS." (Source: [Balkan Insight](#))

Nusra Front (Jabhat Fateh al-Sham)

Albanians have also been recruited to the [Nusra Front](#) (also known as Jabhat Fateh al-Sham), al-Qaeda's former affiliate in Syria. In March 2014, Albanian police arrested seven people who were believed to be recruiting for ISIS and the Nusra Front. This included an imam from Tirana, Genci Balla, who said in a video released on YouTube that the Nusra Front and ISIS were the "only groups that are fighting to create an Islamic state where sharia law will rule." Some Albanian citizens, including Mariglen Dervishllari from the southwest village of Rremenj, were moved by these or similar calls to join the Nusra Front in Syria. (Sources: [Balkan Insight](#), [Balkan Insight](#))

Al-Qaeda

During the 1990s, [al-Qaeda](#) used Albania as one of several launching pads for operations in Europe. The terrorist group reportedly set up cells in the country posing as humanitarian organizations. From there, al-Qaeda was able to conduct profit-making schemes including money laundering, human trafficking, document forgery, and weapons smuggling. In these and other activities, al-Qaeda often worked closely with members of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad, who also maintained a presence in Albania during the 1990s. (Source: *Bin Laden: the Man Who Declared War on America*, p. 268; 297-298)

Albanian National Army

The Albanian National Army (ANA) is a Kosovar-based terrorist organization formed in 2001. The ANA—which rejected the 2001 peace accords in Montenegro—seeks to unify ethnic Albanians under one state spanning Kosovo, Albania, and parts of Serbia, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Greece. (Sources: [TRAC](#), [b92](#))

Although the ANA is not believed to maintain an active presence in Albania, the group released a statement in April 2016 asserting that it was present not only "in several parts of Kosovo," but also in "Albania, Macedonia, and the Presevo valley." The statement, released by one of ANA's founders, claims that the group remains "organized, well[-]trained and can mobilize quickly." The ANA has threatened Montenegro with war as recently as August 2016. (Sources: [TRAC](#), [b92](#), [InSerbia](#))

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Foreign Fighters

An estimated 100-150 Albanian citizens are believed to have traveled to Iraq and Syria since 2012, with the vast majority of these citizens leaving Albania in or before 2014. Of those estimated to have traveled abroad (including at least 31 children and 13 women), the majority (at least 70) were recruited by a nine-person ring whose members were convicted on terrorism-related charges in May 2016. (Sources: [Reuters](#), [ICSR](#), [Washington Post](#), [Combatting Terrorism Center](#), [Balkan Insight](#))

Lavdim Muhaxheri, a notorious Albanian foreign fighter who led a group of Albanian ISIS fighters, was killed in a U.S. drone strike in Syria on June 8, 2017. Muhaxheri was one of the alleged masterminds behind the thwarted terror plot to attack the Israeli soccer team playing in the Albania-Israel World Cup qualifying match in Elbasan, central Albania, on November 17, 2016. (Sources: [Balkan Insight](#), [Balkan Insight](#))

According to Albanian authorities, law enforcement and legislation have successfully curbed the number of Albanian foreign fighters. Albania claims that close to zero Albanians traveled to Syria in 2015, and that none of its citizens joined extremist groups in 2016. Some analysts have credited the drop off in Albanian foreign fighters to disillusionment among Albanian fighters abroad and falling demand for foreign fighters from the insurgent groups themselves. (Sources: [Associated Press](#), [Balkan Insight](#), [Balkan Insight](#))

Major Extremist and Terrorist Incidents

Albania does not have a notable history of violent extremist attacks on its soil. The country does, however have a history of thwarted attacks, and some Albanian citizens have been implicated in terrorist attacks abroad. (Sources: [Balkan Insight](#), [Dnevno](#))

2016 Attempted Kidnapping Attack

On August 17, 2016, Dijar Xhema—a 29-year-old man from the Kosovo town of Mitrovica—drove around the Albanian coastal city of Vlora for two hours while trying to forcefully kidnap three victims. During this time, Xhema reportedly shouted “Allahu Akbar,” “I will kill you all, and “I am the emissary of Allah.” Wielding a knife, Xhema issued threats to passersby and slightly wounded his victims, each of whom successfully avoided capture. (Sources: [Balkan Insight](#), [Dnevno](#), [b92](#), [Giornale](#))

Xhema was found and arrested soon after. Xhema reportedly resisted arrest, lunging at the Albanian officers who attempted to apprehend him. According to authorities, Xhema had a “lengthy” criminal record in Kosovo that included attempted murder, kidnapping, violence, and illegal weapons possession. At the time of his arrest, Xhema was carrying marijuana in his car. (Sources: [Balkan Insight](#), [b92](#), [Giornale](#))

Xhema was arrested on terrorism-related charges. Since Xhema had a prior history of mental illness and depression, he was admitted to a psychiatric hospital to await trial. The attack—if proved to have been motivated by religious extremism—would constitute the first documented Islamist attack to have taken place on Albanian territory. (Sources: [Telegrafi](#), [Balkan Insight](#))

- **January 2017:**Albanian police thwart an attempted terrorist attack in Vienna. The alleged assailant—returning foreign fighter Enos Begolli—was wanted in Kosovo on terrorism-related charges. Sources: [Associated Press](#), [SkyNews](#)
- **November 2016:**Albanian and Kosovar police foil an attempted terrorist attack on an Israeli-Albanian soccer match in Elbasan. Attacks were allegedly coordinated by two Albanians working with ISIS. Source: [NBC News](#)
- **August 17, 2016:**Twenty-nine-year-old terrorist suspect Dijar Xhema attempts to lure three people into his car in the coastal Albanian city of Vlora. According to police, the failed kidnapping attempts—which took place over the course of two hours—were accompanied by cries of “Allahu Akbar” as well as claims that the assailant had been “sent by Allah” and would “kill you all.” The attack—if proved to have been motivated by religious extremism—would constitute the first documented Islamist attack to have taken place on Albanian territory. Source: [Balkan Insight](#)
- **January 13, 2003:**The general secretary of Albania’s Islamic Community, Sali Tivari, is assassinated.

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Tivari had reportedly been threatened by Islamic extremists before his murder, although the case remains under investigation. Sources: [Irish Times](#), [U.S. Department of State](#), [Balkan Insight](#)

- **1999:**U.S. Defense Secretary William Cohen cancels his trip to Albania due to fears of an al-Qaeda-linked assassination plot. Sources: [New York Times](#), [Wall Street Journal](#)
- **August 1998:**The United States and Albania foil a potential attack on the U.S. Embassy in Tirana. The CIA raids and disrupts an al-Qaeda forgery and terrorist cell. Sources: [New York Times](#), [9/11 Commission Report](#)

Domestic Counter-Extremism

Albania has worked to counter the threat from domestic extremism by strengthening its domestic and border security apparatus, cracking down on travel to foreign conflict zones, and working alongside the national Albanian Islamic Community to combat the unique threat from Islamic extremism. The government has been working with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to open its Center against Violent Extremism, and has also appointed a “national coordinator” for the so-called war against violent extremism. (Sources: [Balkan Insight](#), [Partnership for Peace Consortium](#))

Legislation

Albania has criminalized terrorist-related activities, including carrying out acts of terrorism, contributing to terrorist financing, recruiting and training terrorist actors, and participating in designated terrorist organizations. In September 2014, Albania’s parliament passed three additions to the country’s criminal code in an effort to confront the specific threat of foreign fighting. The statutes criminalized the recruitment, act, and facilitation of foreign terrorist fighting. Individuals convicted under these statutes were eligible to receive maximum prison sentences of between three and 15 years. (Sources: [U.S. Department of State](#), [U.S. State Department](#))

These September 2014 laws have enabled Albania to charge and convict a number of terrorist fighters and recruiters. In March 2015, Albania dismantled a nine-person foreign fighter recruiting ring, four of whom were the subjects of international arrest warrants. Albania arrested the members on charges of inciting acts of terrorism and—after a year-long trial—the group was sentenced to a collective 126 years in prison. Bujar Hysa, the suspected leader of the ring, was found guilty on charges of recruitment to terrorism, calling for terrorist acts, and inciting hatred. He was sentenced to 18 years in prison, while two other imams were sentenced to 17 years each. (Sources: [OSAC](#), [Washington Post](#), [Balkan Insight](#))

Police and Law Enforcement

Albanian police have made a series of arrests in 2015, 2016, and 2017 that are believed to have significantly curtailed terrorist recruitment. In August 2016, the government found and arrested a Macedonian ISIS fighter in Tirana. In October 2016, the government stopped four Albanians and 15 Syrians that were allegedly attempting to reach Western Europe by traveling through Kosovo. In November 2016, Albanian police arrested four terrorist suspects, two in Shkodra, near the border with Montenegro and two others in Peshkopi, near the border with Macedonia. Police said that the four suspects were returning ISIS fighters who had collaborated with each other and with citizens abroad to propagandize hate and recruit more fighters. In January 2017, Albanian police also arrested an alleged foreign fighter from Kosovo, wanted on terrorism charges, who had been plotting an attack in Vienna. (Sources: [Associated Press](#), [Balkan Insight](#), [Associated Press](#), [SkyNews](#))

The government has also successfully dispatched its police force—and particularly the recently formed Counter-Terrorist Directorate unit—to address domestic terrorist threats in Albania. In late November 2016, the Albanian government instated maximum security conditions when hosting the Israeli soccer team for a match in Elbasan. Neighboring Kosovo had arrested 19 people suspected of planning attacks during the match in the days leading up to the games. The cell was reportedly directed by two Albanians who had fought with ISIS. (Sources: [Balkan Insight](#), [Balkan Insight](#), [Balkan Insight](#))

The police have also enhanced Albania’s border security and surveillance, an effort credited with exposing foreign fighter routes through the Western Balkans. During a visit to Albania in December 2016, U.S. CIA chief John Brennan commended Albania’s police for its efforts to combat terrorist activity in Albania and abroad. Brennan called the Albanian police’s efforts to collaborate with agencies in and outside the country “an example to be followed.” (Sources: [Balkan Insight](#),

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[Partnership for Peace Consortium](#))

Countering Extremist Narratives

Albania has long worked with the officially-recognized Muslim community, the Albanian Islamic Community (Komuniteti Mysliman Shqiptarë or KMSH) to promote a tolerant strain of Islam and implement various counter-extremism programs. The KMSH does not, however, represent all mosques within the country. An estimated 10-200 mosques are believed to operate in Albania without the support and recognition of the KMSH, including several mosques that were implicated in Albania's nine-person foreign fighter recruiting ring dismantled in 2015. The KMSH has struggled in recent years to bring some of these mosques into the fold, an effort that has been met with mixed success. (Sources: [Regional Cooperation Council](#), [Balkan Insight](#), [Jamestown](#))

Among the mosques that did not fall under KMSH jurisdiction was the Mëzez mosque, run by ISIS-aligned imam Bujar Hysa. The suspected ringleader of the nine-person recruiting ring, Hysa was sentenced in May 2016 to 18 years in prison on charges of recruitment to terrorism, inciting public hatred, and making public calls to carry out acts of terrorism. Hysa's Mëzez mosque was linked to the terrorist recruitment of an estimated 70 Albanians. The KMSH has since regained control over the Mëzez mosque, and is now in charge of appointing and overseeing the mosque's activities. (Sources: [Balkan Insight](#), [Jamestown](#), [Reuters](#))

National Counter-Extremism Strategy

In November 2015, Albania published a national strategy to counter violent extremism. As part of this program, the government identified and focused on four areas: education, engagement with religious leaders, economic opportunity, and research. In these respective areas, the government has sought to:

- Utilize its Ministry of Education to help facilitate greater awareness of the threat and dangers associated with violent extremist ideology (Educate);
- **Work** with religious leaders in the KMSH to support counter-narratives in the country's official religious centers (Engagement);
- Utilize its Ministry of Social Welfare and Youth to devise ways to improve social and economic conditions for at-risk individuals, particularly Albanian youths (Economic Opportunity); and
- Open a center (the first of its kind) to better study, understand, and ultimately counter—the phenomenon of foreign terrorist fighting. (Research) (Sources: [Global Coalition](#), [Regional Cooperation Council](#))

Albania's efforts to combat terrorism domestically have been met with some success, although the U.S. State Department notes that corruption and a relatively weak judicial system have occasionally hindered the country's ability to counter and prosecute terrorist activities. In 2015, the U.S. State Department's Overseas Security Advisory Council (OSAC) rated Albania a "medium"-level terrorism risk for the dangers posed by Albanian foreign fighters, as well as the regional risk posed by ethnic Albanians from Kosovo and Macedonia. (Sources: [U.S. Department of State](#), [OSAC](#))

International Counter-Extremism

Albania was the first country to join the U.S.-led coalition to fight ISIS in 2014. From August 2014 to December 2014, the Albanian government made what the United States called a "significant" contribution to the fight against ISIS, donating four tranches of weapons and ammunition to Peshmerga forces in northern Iraq. (Sources: [Global Coalition](#), [Balkan Insight](#), [U.S. Department of State](#), [Albanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#))

Since then, Albania has continued to work with international bodies to reduce the threat posed by domestic and international terrorism. In 2016, the government began working with NATO to open and host the Center against Violent Extremism to study the phenomenon of foreign fighters and other violent extremist activity. The government has since continued to host regional counterterrorism conferences with the U.S. State Department and other regional governments. (Sources: [Global Coalition](#), [Balkan Insight](#), [U.S. Department of State](#), [U.S. Department of State](#))

Albania also works to counter the threat of terrorism financing, coordinating with the Council of Europe's MONEYVAL body to comply with international standards. In September 2015, MONEYVAL released a report on Albania's efforts to

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counter money laundering. The report stated that Albania had “made progress and implemented the required measures in order to strengthen the effectiveness of its AML/CFT [measures against money laundering and terrorism financing] system and bring its legal and regulatory framework in line with the FATF recommendations.” (Sources: [U.S. Department of State](#), [Council of Europe](#))

In addition to working with international bodies to counter terrorism financing, foreign terrorist fighting, and ISIS abroad, the Albanian government has also worked to strengthen its border security in order to reduce the threat posed by ISIS migrants who seek to travel through the Balkan regions to Europe. Albania has a long history of wrestling with border security and terrorist migration. From 1997 to 2002, an estimated 150,000 migrants and refugees traveled from Turkey through Bulgaria, Macedonia, and then to Albania, using speedboats to travel from Albania to the European Union. Although the government has significantly curtailed the smuggling route in the early 2000s, concerns remain that as countries like Macedonia also tighten their border security, ISIS fighters may attempt to use Albania as a launching pad to travel to Europe and carry out attacks. (Sources: [Gjikhuri](#), [Reuters](#), [International Business Times](#), [Balkan Insight](#))

The U.S. State Department has called Albania a “strong supporter” of international counterterrorism efforts in its 2015 country reports on terrorism. Albania is a member of the United Nations, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), NATO, Council of Europe, and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. Albanian authorities also regularly participate in international conferences and fora to improve their counterterrorism operations. (Source: [U.S. Department of State](#))

Public Opinion

In 2013, Pew conducted a series of polls on beliefs held in Muslim-majority countries. Of those polled, Albanians frequently represented views that were moderate, secular, and tolerant of dissidence. Only 12 percent of Albanian Muslim respondents believed that sharia (Islamic law) should be the official law in the country, compared to much larger percentages in other Muslim-majority countries. Of this 12 percent, the majority (66 percent) said that sharia should apply exclusively to Albanian Muslims as opposed to all Albanian citizens. (Source: [Pew Research Center](#))

There were other notable findings from the 2013 Pew poll. A relatively small percentage of Albanian Muslims—24 percent—said that they believed sharia was the divine word of God. Albanian respondents were roughly split on whether sharia has multiple valid interpretations or only one, with 23 percent saying that sharia has multiple interpretations versus 27 percent who said that sharia only had one valid interpretation. An overwhelming majority of Albanian respondents—92 percent—said that said that suicide bombing in defense of Islam was rarely or never justified. (Source: [Pew Research Center](#))

Polls conducted since then have shown that Albanians by and large are confident in their political and religious institutions, and do not believe that terrorism poses a great threat to the country. When asked, “What do you think are the most important problems facing the entire SEE [South East Europe] region at the moment?” only two percent listed terrorism as one of the region’s major concerns. (Sources: [United Nations](#), [Regional Cooperation Council](#))