

The Unintended Consequences of Peacebuilding and Peacekeeping Interventions Contributing to the Rise of Violent Extremism

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Abstract

This article uncovers the nexus between the state- and peacebuilding efforts and religious violent extremism. Exploring an exemplary lifestory interview with a directly affected individual, the article makes use of empirical data to inform the current theoretical debates on the subject. The article shows how the inefficient state and peace building efforts unintendedly lead to a rise in religious violent extremism. These errors from the international community in Kosovo became a source of religious violent extremism in the case of Kosovo, as the exemplary lifestory shows.

Keywords

peacebuilding – statebuilding – Foreign fighters – religious violent extremism – Kosovo – international community – lifestory method

Introduction¹

The latest estimates put the number of jihadists that travelled to Syria and Iraq between 2011 and 2016 at 42,000. These individuals originate from more than

1 This academic article is inspired by the PHD work on 'State and Peacebuilding through Lifestories' as well as the article published at the Security and Global Affairs Journal and the blog at Leiden University Blog.

120 countries.² More than 5,000 foreign fighters originate from the European Union,³ while 30% have returned.⁴ Threats may arise from returnees and those who still support ISIS, both the ones that remained in their countries and the ones that were prevented from leaving their countries of residence or citizenship. 300 million Muslims live in diaspora, with 19 million living in the EU. The social integration of migrants and second generations has not been as successful in the EU as it has in the US.⁵ A high number of foreign fighters from Muslim diaspora in European democracies have joined ISIS. If they are managed inappropriately upon return and remain violent extremists, they will pose threats to a multi-cultural, democratic, peaceful, and secure Europe.⁶ The most worrisome challenge is the “sympathy for IS among some young European Muslims”.⁷ The Paris and Brussels attacks, the military action in Syria, as well as the refugee crisis, show the complex linkages between Middle East conflicts and Europe in an interdependent and volatile world. Additionally, the economic downturn, the COVID pandemic, the high state of polarization, and the changing global order with China and Russia contribute to increasing instability.

Security scholars in politics and international relations have studied religious violent extremism in terms of pull and push factors.⁸ Less attention is

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- 2 Radicalization Awareness Network (RAN), *RAN MANUAL. Responses to Returnees: Foreign Terrorist Fighters and Their Families*, 2017. Retrieved from https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/default/files/ran_br_a4_m10_en.pdf#page=17.
 - 3 A. P. Schmid and J. Tinnes, ‘Foreign (Terrorist) Fighters with IS: A European Perspective’, *The International Centre for Counterterrorism – The Hague* 6, no. 8, 2015. Retrieved from <http://icct.nl/app/uploads/2015/12/ICCT-Schmid-Foreign-Terrorist-Fighters-with-IS-A-European-Perspective-December2015.pdf>.
 - 4 B. Van Ginkel and E. Entenmann (eds.), ‘The Foreign Fighters Phenomenon in the European Union. Profiles, Threats & Policies’, *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague* 7, no. 2, 2016. Retrieved from https://icct.nl/app/uploads/2016/03/ICCT-Report_Foreign-Fighters-Phenomenon-in-the-EU_1-April-2016_including-AnnexesLinks.pdf.
 - 5 J. Galtung et al., ‘The Muslim Diaspora in Europe and the USA’, *Transcend*, 2012, pp. 1–14. Retrieved from <https://www.transcend.org/tri/downloads/MuslimDiaspora.pdf>.
 - 6 General Intelligence and Security Service- Ministry of Interior and Kingdom Relations, *The Transformation of Jihadism in the Netherlands*, The Hague, 2014. Retrieved from <https://english.aivd.nl/publications/publications/2014/10/01/the-transformation-of-jihadism-in-the-netherlands>.
 - 7 Schmid and Tinnes, 2015.
 - 8 Schmid and Tinnes, 2015; A. P. Schmid, ‘Radicalization, de-Radicalization, Counter-Radicalization: A Conceptual Discussion and Literature Review’, *The International Centre for Counterterrorism – The Hague* 4, no. 2, 2013. Retrieved from https://icct.nl/app/uploads/2013/03/ICCT-Schmid-Radicalisation-De-Radicalisation-Counter-Radicalisation-March-2013_2.pdf; L. Fenstermacher, ‘Executive Summary’, in L. Fenstermacher and T. Leventhal (eds.), *Countering Violent Extremism. Scientific Methods & Strategies*, Washington, 2011, pp. 4–24; T. Hegghammer, ‘The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: Islam and the Globalization of Jihad’, in *Quarterly Journal: International Security*, vol. 35, no. 3, 2011, pp. 53–94.

paid to citizen-society relations and to do-no-harm principles. Schmid points out that only a few case studies have been conducted and that findings are provisional because they are based on small samples. Therefore, it is difficult to identify which policies are best suited to countering religious violent extremism and which may or may not be counterproductive. Emphasis must lie on “local context [since it] matters very much”.⁹ The local knowledge is very thin. Only a few case studies have been conducted and many researchers lack primary sources for terrorism research.¹⁰ Thus, evidence-based knowledge seems to be scarce due to the challenges faced during the collection of empirical data. This hinders policymakers understanding of local contexts driving religious violent extremism.

Most importantly, the relapse to war is very frequent. As seen in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya, despite the international community’s interventions to rebuild post-war zones through state- and peacebuilding interventions. In fact, “half of all civil wars result from post-conflict situations gone wrong”.¹¹ Unsurprisingly, the highest numbers of foreign fighters come from the North Africa and the Middle East regions – where the most fragile states are located.¹² Weak states are viewed as a source of violent extremism, drugs, and poverty.¹³ Thus, strengthening fragile states during peace and statebuilding period is one of the most important processes on prevention of new conflicts and violent extremism. So far, the few studies based on secondary sources which have analyzed the links between peacebuilding and violent extremism, conclude that both fields lack impact – affecting policymaking in a way that leads to more peace – while pointing out that these two fields can also stall each other: sometimes revoking violent extremism, and other times supporting limited peace interventions.¹⁴

9 Schmid, 2013.

10 B. Schuurman and Q. Eijkman, ‘Moving Terrorism Research Forward: The Crucial Role of Primary Sources’, *The International Centre for Counterterrorism – The Hague* 4, no. 2, 2013. Retrieved from <http://icct.nl/app/uploads/2013/06/Schuurman-and-Eijkman-Moving-Terrorism-Research-Forward-June-2013.pdf>; P. Neumann and S. Kleinmann, ‘How Rigorous Is Radicalization Research?’, in *Democracy and Security*, vol. 9, no. 4, 2013, pp. 360–382.

11 P. Collier, ‘Postconflict Economic Policy’, in C. T. Call and V. Wyeth (eds.), *Building States to Build Peace*, Lyenne Rienner Publishers, 2008, pp. 103.

12 M. Reardon, *The real threat of foreign fighters in Syria*, Aljazeera, 2015. Retrieved from <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2015/12/13/the-real-threat-of-foreign-fighters-in-syria>.

13 F. Fukuyama, *State-Building: Governance and World Order in the 21st Century*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004, pp. ix.

14 I. Tellidis, ‘Terrorism and Peacebuilding’, in O. Richmond and G. Visoka (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Peacebuilding, Statebuilding, and Peace Formation*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020; O. P. Richmond and I. Tellidis, ‘The Complex Relationship between Peacebuilding and Terrorism Approaches: Towards Post-Terrorism and a Post-Liberal Peace?’, in *Terrorism and Political Violence*, vol. 24, no. 1, 2012, pp. 120–143.

Thus, this article contributes to filling two gaps: providing empirical data derived from lifestory interviews conducted in the Republic of Kosovo (Kosovo) and uncovering the nexus between the state- and peacebuilding and religious violent extremism. It tries to establish this link through primary sources, lifestory interviews, so as to understand the affected individuals' perspective at the micro-level, rather than contributing to the above macro-level analysis leaving out citizens' perspectives.

This link is established by exploring an exemplary lifestory that uncovers the experiences of the directly affected individuals to inform the current theoretical debates. Lifestories can be used to link state- and peacebuilding and religious violent extremism phenomena and inform the earlier theories with the local perspectives through evidence-based research and thick descriptions. This oral history tool gives a voice to unheard stories by uncovering the meaning "behind the data".¹⁵ The lifestory explores to what extent religious violent extremism and state- and peacebuilding narratives are linked in the individual level, and how these links can inform the institutional level -policymakers- to counter better religious violent extremism in Kosovo and Europe. Kosovo is relevant because it has experienced more than two decades of post conflict reconstruction as of the humanitarian intervention in 99, and a rise of religious violent extremism after the war. The country faces various internal and external state- and peacebuilding challenges which indicate a lack of a robust peace. Kosovo is less religious due to historical conditions, pro American due to the United States' role in its liberation, and while, in everyday life, women in veils or burqas and men with short trousers and beards have historically been uncommon, they are common sights nowadays.¹⁶ Kosovo has a demographically young population, making it more vulnerable to religious violent extremism. The country also boasts the region's highest internet usage, rendering the youth more vulnerable to religious violent extremism.¹⁷ The country is also experiencing challenges due to the current geopolitical alterations. The

15 N. Inayatullah (eds.), *Autobiographical International Relations: I, IR*, Routledge, London, 2011, pp. 24.

16 A. Xharra, *Few but Fanatical – the Kosovo Women Who Go Over to ISIS*, Balkan Insight, 2016. Retrieved from <https://balkaninsight.com/2016/01/26/few-but-fanatical-the-kosovo-women-who-go-over-to-isis-01-22-2016/>.

17 S. Kursani, 'Report inquiring into the causes and consequences of Kosovo citizens' involvement as foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq', Kosovar Centre for Security Studies (KCSS), Prishtinë, 2015. Retrieved from http://www.qkss.org/repository/docs/Report_inquiring_into_the_causes_and_consequences_of_Kosovo_citizens'_involvement_as_foreign_fighters_in_Syria_and_Iraq_307708.pdf.

conflicting interests between the US, Russia, Turkey, and other Gulf countries are manifesting in the country's domestic politics, fermenting unrest in the process.¹⁸ Kosovo has also come to host a high number of religious charities from Middle Eastern states, such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey in its post-war period.¹⁹

Most importantly, the country emerged as Europe's biggest hub for jihadists, after Belgium in Western Europe. It has 125 foreign fighters per 1 million citizens, making it the highest origin country for foreign fighters, followed by Bosnia and Herzegovina with 85 and Belgium with 42 in Europe.²⁰ The estimations regarding the number of foreign fighters vary but range between 336 and 403.²¹ More than 110 citizens returned from Syria and Iraq in April 2019.²² The total number of returnees through informal and formal routes is estimated to be 242.²³ Five returnees have been estimated to have planned a domestic attack after return,²⁴ thus the security threat remains active especially in combination with the level of polarization and the level of radicalization within the state and Europe.

The perceptions of local Kosovo Albanians who are involved in state- and peacebuilding and religious violent extremism uncovered through lifestories indicate a specific account of marginalization perceived by the directly affected individuals from the international community interventions that in turn become a source of radicalization and propaganda. The following section discusses an exemplary lifestory of a perceived religious violent extremist, Beni, who has been cleared of legal charges by the state, to uncover the missing links that could guide further research in the future and provide evidence-based policy recommendations.

18 A. Rrustemi et al., 'Geopolitical Influences of External Powers in the Western Balkans', The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies (HCSS), The Hague, 2019. Retrieved from <https://hcss.nl/report/geopolitical-influences-of-external-powers-in-the-western-balkans/>.

19 Kursani, 2015.

20 Ibid.

21 S. Perteshi and R. Ilazi, 'Unpacking Kosovo's Response to Returnees from the War Zones in Syria and Iraq', Kosovar Centre for Security Studies (KCSS), Prishtinë, 2020. Retrieved from http://www.qkss.org/repository/docs/violent-extremism-eng_978757.pdf; K. Bytyqi and S. Mullins, 'Returnee Foreign Fighters from Syria and Iraq: The Kosovan Experience', in *CTC Sentinel*, vol. 12, no. 7, 2019, pp. 25–30. Retrieved from <https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/CTC-SENTINEL-072019.pdf>.

22 Ministria e Drejtësisë, *A second chance for life for children – suspects shall face justice*, Prishtinë, 2019. Retrieved from <https://md.rks-gov.net/page.aspx?id=2,15,2000>.

23 Bytyqi and Mullins, 2019.

24 Ibid.

The Lifestory of Beni: the Inefficient State- and Peacebuilding Missions Unintendedly Contributing to the Rise of Violent Extremism

The data from the lifestory provides a new and additional radicalization and violent extremism driver for the local Kosovo Albanians to join violent extremist groups formerly based in Syria and Iraq, namely the backlash from the international impositions deriving from the state- and peacebuilding programs after the war. The lifestory of Beni, an anonymous interview, was chosen as one of the unheard voices that illustrates the tension between state- and peacebuilding interventions and religious violent extremism. Only one lifestory is used given the limited scope of the article. The choice fell on Beni's life story that exemplifies the local dynamics. It refers to similar challenges and priorities found in other lifestories as well. The lifestory was chosen through snowball sampling (chain referral technique used to access marginalized groups),²⁵ population criteria, involvement in the post-conflict reconstruction period and religious violent extremism, interaction with the international community, access, availability, and grounded theory (a theory used to build new theories on the phenomena under study based on data).²⁶

The latter required theoretical sampling, which respectively necessitated using lifestories that introduce new theoretical categories concerning the nexus between state- and peacebuilding and religious violent extremism. Moreover, when participants dedicated their lives fully to state- and peacebuilding, violent extremism, and religion, their stories were paid particular attention. Their stories provided in-depth descriptions of embedded experiences in Kosovo. Beni's lifestory sheds further light on the tension between state- and peacebuilding missions and religious violent extremism at the institutional and local-individual level. He was under investigation by the judiciary but was later cleared of charges. His lifestory has been triangulated with other data sources, such as newspapers, TV shows, and interviews with his family members, government officials and friends. During these interviews, it was discovered that he has led a double family and work life. In one modernity was endorsed, whereas, in the other violent extremist ideas, religion and traditionalism were emphasized. The latter version was fully endorsed after a while.

25 G. R. Sadler et al., 'Recruitment of Hard-to-Reach Population Subgroups via Adaptations of the Snowball Sampling Strategy', in *Nursing and Health Sciences*, vol. 12, no. 3, 2010, pp. 369–374.

26 K. Charmaz, 'Grounded Theory Methods in Social Justice Research', in N. Denzin and Y. Lincoln (eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research*, Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 4th ed., 2011, pp. 1–767.

The following section presents the lifestory, which exemplifies the violent extremism challenges in the post-war period. These are closely tied to cultural and economic challenges and the arrival of the international community after the war. Beni is a Kosovo Albanian born in a middle class, non-religious family. He was educated in the former Yugoslav system, where he later also worked. He was trained in the military and fought in the 90's wars. Initially, he was not religious. He partied, drank, danced, listened to music, and read various types of books, as did most of the youth in former Yugoslavia. After a while, he found nothing new in these types of activities and neither on reading philosophy, science, and Buddhism. Hence, he began reading about theology. Only at the beginning of the 90's, he started to practice Islam since the other religions seem limited. After the war, he assisted in post-war reconstruction. He focused on defending cultural values, meaning Islam, because of the perceived lack of respect towards Islam as a religion and the threat posed to it by various international and local actors. He views a large majority of Muslim families in Kosovo as non-Muslim since they do not practice: "They don't fast ... I don't consider them Muslims. That's not Islam". According to his view, the practicing Muslim community in Kosovo is small. This raises questions about how large the practicing Muslim group is in Kosovo. These data still lack but it has been established also that violent extremists are a small group of young individuals.²⁷

In the post-war period, Beni established a movement to protect the religious rights of the local community believing in Islam in the face of perceived economic and cultural injustices conducted by the local and international authorities. More concretely, the Islamic movement "Mother"²⁸ aims to protect social and economic rights. Beni appeared confident that the socio-economic rights will "undoubtedly be accomplished" through the movement "Mother". The movement has a social dimension that includes religious aspects presumably reflecting the national identity, and an economic dimension, which refers to delivering services to people in need. Interestingly, he uses the term "economic rights" but in practice, only states provide rights to citizens, not social movements.

Generally, the main aim of the movement is "to influence people's awareness [and] to offer young people an opportunity" to achieve their social and economic ambitions. While Beni insists that it does not actively recruit, he later on stated that their recruitment efforts are limited due to the possibility of prospective members being attacked by communities and/or national and

27 Kursani, 2015.

28 A new name is provided to protect the identity of the interviewer.

international actors: “We don’t recruit a lot [mainly since] people get attacked very quickly”. They usually target young men. The norm is that the leader of the movement is “the oldest one and all the others [need to be] younger”. Their priority lies on horizontal expansion rather than “participating in elections and winning votes”. Thus, their main target is to engage the youth in the movement.

The movement is transnational. While claiming to be only local, this Albanian movement seems to have leaders and followers in Turkey. It seems to be very well linked across the continents, as the interviewee spoke on the phone with another Albanian member who was visiting from Istanbul. He plans to expand further to Albania, Northern Macedonia, and Preševo Valley in Serbia. They believe that they “have to offer this to Albanians wherever they are, as much as we [the movement] can penetrate”.²⁹ The aim is to remain grassroots and open only for ethnic Albanians, not other nationalities: “We want to be pure local Albanian, neither Turkish, nor Arab or American”. They aim to expand globally and claim to have already branches in Europe, specifically in countries with a high number of Albanian migrants, such as Switzerland and Germany. Thus, they seem involved in recruitment not only in Kosovo but also abroad. Later on, it was uncovered from corroborative interviews that this Albanian movement was linked to the global Islamic movements against the West.

This indicates that the movement is not only domestic but also transnational. The leader in Kosovo may be a leader of a subgroup. It seems that the religious and economic grievances in post-conflict situations resulted in the creation of a transnational movement. Ghani and Lockhart claim that “[w]hile one half of the globe has created an almost seamless web of political, financial and technological connections that underpin democratic states and market-based economies, the other half is blocked from political stability and participation in global wealth”.³⁰ Therefore, networks of violence are created in states with high poverty and ungoverned zones since illicit networks including, terrorist ones, function easier.³¹ These high threats that pull citizens to turn to violent means present “the most serious challenge to global stability in the new millennium”.³² Therefore “solutions to our current problems of insecurity, poverty, and lack of growth all converge on the need for a statebuilding project”.³³

²⁹ Beni, pp. 24–26.

³⁰ A. Ghani and C. Lockhart, *Fixing Failed State: A Framework for Rebuilding a Fractured World*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, pp. 3.

³¹ *Ibid.* pp. 3–4.

³² *Ibid.* pp. 4.

³³ *Ibid.* pp. 4.

While the state- and peacebuilding programs contribute to decreasing violence, the lifestory shows that they may also unintentionally contribute to polarization and new conflicts. The state- and peacebuilding missions may become one of the few sources of religious violent extremism due to their mismatch with the local culture and dynamics of the local communities. A high level of resistance and alienation towards the state- and peacebuilding programs is identified in the lifestory explored further below. As a result, the local societies in fragile states are harmed, and the global community due to the transnationality of religious violent extremism. Furthermore, the relation between state- and peacebuilding missions and religious violent extremism is illustrated below in three domains: religion, economy, and culture, that religious violent extremists perceive to be harmed by the international community.

The Religious Domain: the Presence of Discriminatory Beliefs Among International and Local Communities

The perceived resistance to the movement by the local and international authorities is expressed mostly through interrogations and office searches. Beni argues that the movement is confronted by constant pressure from the Kosovo's Police and the European Union Rule of Law Mission (EULEX). Both interrogated his movement members about their activities and interests, but also about whether Kosovo is "a secular state" or "Europe", alleging that they support "radicalism" and of being "fundamentalists" and "Taliban". Beni questioned the international military personnel's attitude and beliefs regarding religion. He had personal conversations with German and Swedish members of NATO Mission in Kosovo, known as Kosovo Force (KFOR), where one of the officers told him that "Islam is fundamentalist". Beni then replied: "Don't ever say that word, not only in Kosovo but even when you go outside of Kosovo, you can't say that either". In response, they only stared at him, which may have been a denial towards his statement or a reflection act. Contrary to allegations of fundamentalism, Beni regards Islam as a very peaceful religion: "In Islam, the best thing is the average. Everything excessive is dangerous. It's not good. Islam is not about covering my wife and not allowing her to go to school or work or to not have any rights".³⁴ Also, he was personally attacked on a visit abroad. He received comments in the media by other Muslims and even death threats: "You should be killed; you should not be allowed to work".³⁵ Intolerance

³⁴ Beni, pp. 27.

³⁵ These threats are still accessible and visible in website portals, which I have seen as a researcher.

towards individuals practicing religion seems to be present on the Internet. He views these beliefs as discriminatory towards Islam, him, and the movement.

Beni also drew lessons from the wars in former Yugoslavia: “knowing the human horrors, suffering, and injustice which I ... experienced in wars, the humanitarian aspect prevailed above everything else”. He assisted to free a Muslim country where several individuals died. He explains the incident:

“The biggest deed I’ve done, and what is most important to me is going to [the Muslim country] to free it. I call this a personal act. That was the biggest and I thought that’s where it would end [with death].”

This aspect is viewed as being a “great ideal” that is 100% based on Islam. He perceived his assistance to free the long-suppressed Muslim community by another religious community for which he was prepared to die, as his biggest humanitarian activity. After the failure to free the country, he started working for the “Mother” movement. He expresses that he would still assist non-Muslims due to his humanitarian motivations. However, he views Islam as the “perfect religion”. While he wants to be “in the service of Islam and protection of the rights of Muslims”, he expects “only challenges and punishment” and no “privileges or benefits”. He expects his vision to start materializing only after twenty years and he is certain that “[it] will triumph”.³⁶

Even though he disclosed a primarily humanitarian motivation and a willingness to sacrifice himself on behalf of others, his ideological beliefs mirror those of Al-Qaida: a focus on long-term goals, self-sacrifice, and an emphasis on recruiting youngsters to the jihadist cause. However, these beliefs are also shared by other jihadist groups, meaning that it remains unknown to which group he belongs. Moreover, the prejudice displayed by international staff towards Islam being a “violent” religion during the interrogation seems to have increased his motivation to continue the fight against the West.

The Economic Domain: Aspiring to Shift from Materialism and Corruption to a Shared Economy

Beni claims that his personal motivation to promote social and economic equality developed from the corruptive practices he witnessed during the war. He presumably refrained from these practices due to his religious beliefs:

³⁶ Beni, pp. 27.

“I could have made millions during the war – like I gave it to others... I mean I have signed them, but I have always feared Allah and the Day of Judgment. I don’t want to take what doesn’t belong to me. We don’t steal, don’t betray, don’t deal with tenders, racketeering, and blackmailing. We are not afraid of the Americans, or the Dutch, or the Arabs, or the Russians or anyone else.”

He implies that these practices have been present in the post-war period that resulted in high economic and social injustice. While other individuals would turn to the judicial system to resolve these corruption claims, Beni turned to religion. He believes that the movement can offer economic prospects to youth and also prevent them from engaging in corruptive practices.³⁷ For him, the Islamic dimension provides the movement with legitimacy as it corresponds to the local needs that have emerged after the war: “It is based on fair judgment, social and economic equality, justice for everyone without taking into account the [political] functions [and the economic status]”. He argues that social and economic justice can be achieved only if initiated from the bottom up. Beni’s main strategy focuses on individual moral tools and other justice tools. He claims that economic equality can be more easily promoted through Islam than other means since its moral code is based on the “principle of sharing” that can benefit humanity:

“I need five jeeps, but I would not take them all for myself. Three, I would keep for myself, but I would give to you two, [I would] not to keep for myself five and for you none, and then to say look: how good I am and how strong. Not like that.”³⁸

The movement claims to provide an alternative to the capitalist model that focuses on the highest profit for the best individuals or companies rather than on economic equality among classes or citizens. Introducing democracy after the war usually increases the gap between the rich and the poor, which Beni confirms as well. This can in turn antagonize the society on the ground. Democracy promotion programs in fragile states include capitalist elements such as privatization, right to property, and other elements that are critiqued.³⁹

37 Beni, pp. 24–26.

38 Beni, pp. 24–26.

39 N. Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, Toronto: Knopf Canada, 2007, 672 pp.

The Cultural/Political Domain: Aspiring to Shift from Discrimination, Democracy, and (Some) Human Rights to Religious Tolerance and Sharia Law

Islam was persecuted under the Serbian regime. As a result, Kosovo's citizens may view the current secular state and the international community's inclinations as oppressive due to the political and historical conditions before the war. Beni argues that the same oppressive practices have continued even after the war in Kosovo, although in a different form. He believes that the human rights of the Muslims are being violated, as religious people are discriminated once they have been recruited to work for the movement:

"I haven't been employed here for [several] years, just because I practice religion publicly and because I identify with it publicly and defend it publicly. They [the government] won't let me work. You can imagine how much this has damaged me, personally and my family emotionally and financially."

He seems to have been marginalized since he had been denied from accessing employment in state structures. According to him, the university denies individuals the right to wear a headscarf. They are also denied employment except in institutions managed by the international community in the security and customs sector. However, the international community aimed to respect the law "not because they have mercy towards Islam but because they apply correctly the laws", implying that the international community would have denied access to job opportunities alike the local community, if the protective legal framework would have not been in place. The alternatives offered by the "Mother" movement and their demands are portrayed as moderate ones. Beni explained that they hope for the fundamentals of Islam to function in Kosovo. For example, they request to allow discussing Islam and teach it at school, to permit wearing headscarves and practice religion in public institutions.⁴⁰ Moreover, he fears that new technologies will erase the Albanian and religious identities by relying too much on the mainstream information offered through technology, which is why the movement stresses the physical and mental security and empowering the locals emotionally and with resources. They teach the local people "not to envy, not to feel inferior, not to be underdeveloped, not to be ignorant, to read and learn and not to wish to live in camps in the West as second-class citizens". While only analyzing his story, it seems like their

⁴⁰ Beni, pp. 22.

efforts are positive since may empower the locals and also assist in stopping the migration flows from Kosovo to Western Europe.

Also, he described Pristina's war monuments, sculptures, buildings, street names, and events as discriminatory towards the Muslim community. For example, the main boulevard of Pristina is named after Mother Teresa, a famous Catholic humanitarian worker of Albanian origin, in the post-war period. Her sculpture, together with Skanderbeg's sculpture, a famous war hero with an Albanian origin, are displayed in the streets of the capital. Furthermore, a cathedral in the city center of Pristina is built after the war, which is perceived by him as a negative event:

"It is intolerance. In a city where 99.99% of the people are Muslims, there is no mosque in the city center. It was never requested to have a mosque in the city center, while there is a Catholic church, which never fills up. If it wasn't for the hypocritical Muslims [President and other citizens] who attend the Christmas Mass [the Church would have not been built]."

According to him, these monuments, sculptures, and buildings deny the real identity of Kosovo's society. They present a Christian identity while 90% of the population is Muslim. There is no official data about how many Muslims practice Islam in Kosovo.

Beni argues that the West insists that democracy must prevail over other forms of governance. However, he believes that it causes discrimination. Following his line of reasoning, freedom of religion seems insufficient to prevent religious discrimination. He is contradictory regarding the alternatives. He expressed that the Muslim alternative, Sharia law, is not an option currently due to the limited knowledge that he has about it: "We don't want a Sharia state, I don't even know it, I'd like it but I'm not yet there".⁴¹ Later during the interview, he became franker about Sharia law, acknowledging that the establishment of Sharia was an aim and that "laws are changeable" as they "are made by people". While arguing that the "greater good" may be understood differently within a society, he stated that they would not impose their ideas, as they "cannot say what is best for you [as a non-practicing believer]", but only "what is best for me [as a practicing believer]". A critical note: they seem to impose the Sharia ideas since he said later "what's best for us" which excludes the ideas of the 'others', the non-practicing believers. He recognizes that the West

⁴¹ Beni, pp. 25.

considers Sharia incompatible with democracy, but he also raises questions about why the West does not question democracy:

“Why don’t we say that democracy is dangerous? Communism is dangerous. [It’s because democracy] is not dangerous to them [West]. They say it is not dangerous [but] they have chosen it themselves.”

In his view, Western states seek to assimilate the citizens of Kosovo by imposing their culture and political system. According to Beni, the Netherlands is “attempting to import and even finance wrong things” under the name of human rights and freedoms, such as the sexual orientation (homosexuality), (legal) cohabitation, and women’s rights. He considers these issues as “more or less disputable”.⁴²

The movements’ resistance towards the state may increase, as Beni states that he feels under assault from the Kosovo government and due to double standards perceived in the treatment of Christians and Muslims as terrorist’s vs murders. He claims that “if someone treats you bad, insults your identity, honor, religion, takes your wealth then you must fight back”. However, he claims that insulting him personally does not incite a response, but insulting Islam then incites a public response. He prefers attacking with ‘kindness’. He also believes that resistance towards Islam stems from the West as well and that there are double standards in terms of dealing with individual violent acts of citizens with Christian and Islamic background. According to him, extremist Islam, including Al Qaeda, is a product of the West. The latter aims to damage Islam and “indirectly constrain Islam’s penetration to the West which is advancing with big steps”. He believes that most of the Muslim believers are sincere, but their leaders may be “something else”.⁴³ The possibility of the movement to become religiously violent after a couple of decades is rejected. He argues that “none of the religions have anything radical within it” referring to Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. However, Beni noted that individuals can themselves be “radical, violent, murderous and criminals” regardless of religion. He argues that religions are peaceful in themselves.⁴⁴ He places the responsibility for violent acts on individuals rather than religions. He uses the example of Anders Breivik – a Christian who murdered 77 people in protest of Muslim immigration. However, he maintains that his individual acts do not label the Christian religion as violent:

42 Beni, pp. 20–22.

43 Beni, pp. 28–31.

44 Beni, pp. 27.

“Breivik can be an individual [who hates Islam], but I cannot say that Christianity is like that. An individual can be like that, but I can’t say that Christianity is like that. So, I as a Muslim can be evil, but Islam is not evil, and evil doesn’t stem from Islam.”⁴⁵

Lastly, Beni’s views also seem to originate from his perceived discrimination of the diaspora. In his opinion, the Albanian diaspora is treated as a “second class” citizens despite their achievements in Europe or other regions. He therefore believes that this movement could provide an alternative to the diaspora as well. Furthermore, he recognizes that when a society faces many challenges, citizens are more likely to turn to religion since “people are connected to something supernatural”. He alludes that people become religious in hard conditions. Therefore, the pull element of his movement may be very high globally for the Albanians since both the local community on the ground in Kosovo as well as the Kosovo Albanian diaspora abroad is not well integrated. Galtung reaffirms that the Muslim diaspora in Europe has not been successfully integrated into European society when compared to the United States.⁴⁶

Conclusion

The lifestory of Beni presents the local frustration and alienation about the international community’s involvement in the post-conflict reconstruction of Kosovo, and their unintended harm caused to the local society by becoming one of the many sources of religious violent extremism. Beni, a leader of an Islamic movement and a recruiter of mainly youth, shows the high level of resistance that has developed against the international community’s interference in Kosovo’s post-conflict period. It seems that Muslim practitioners face cultural and religious discrimination by both the international and local authorities, as Beni himself had been denied a job at the state structures several times, and due to the discriminatory beliefs held toward Islam by the international staff as uncovered in conversations.

According to the public story, he turned to Islam because it envisions economic equality, equitable distribution of resources among various groups of society, and in an attempt to protect the cultural traits linked to Islam for the Albanian community in Kosovo and abroad, which he perceived as being under threat after the war, and to create a fairer society. On a critical note, he

45 Beni, pp. 27.

46 Galtung et al., 2012.

also recruited many young individuals, who potentially may have travelled to Syria and Iraq through his links in Turkey. His criminal charges on terrorism grounds have been dropped. However, his innocence is doubted by many in his circles, as he may be used from the state structures for intelligence collection. His charges may have been dropped also due to the lack of evidence which is a common challenge among the terrorism persecutions in the region.

His lifestory also reaffirms the relative deprivation theory arguing that when individuals are deprived of what they think they deserve but in fact cannot receive, the potential for collective violence rises. Deprivation leads to frustration and, over prolonged periods, can result in anger or violence.⁴⁷ Beni perceived the following events as discriminatory and humiliating: (i) the denial for the job at the state structures, (ii) the repetitive police checks at his office by the local and international authorities, and (iii) the private conversations with internationals about religion. His frustration increased over more than a decade that resulted in using religion to attract the young generations to join religious violent extremist ideas.

His lifestory is interesting since it uncovers not only the individual motivations for participating in the extremist groups in Syria and Iraq but also the institutional/structural aspects such as the lack of access to the state structures and the high level of alienation towards the international state- and peacebuilding missions in the post-conflict phase. The latter has not been extensively dealt with in the literature of terrorism and peacebuilding. Thus, his lifestory addresses the local but also the global politics of international interventions and illustrates that not only the lack of opportunities and poor economic conditions but also that the failure of the state to provide access to the state structures to all citizens may potentially result in endorsing religious violent extremism and hindering the state and peacebuilding in long term. These grievances can contribute to the violent extremist propaganda used for recruitment. Therefore, exclusionary statebuilding is not any longer an alternative to be promoted by the international community and neither by the local state structures. In fact, shifting towards inclusive statebuilding may assist deterring religious violent extremism and may reverse the current attractiveness of international state and peace missions to be used as one of the sources of religious violent extremism.

Theoretically, his lifestory assists in understanding the everyday life of local communities and the bifurcation with the international community, as

47 T. R. Gurr, *Why Men Rebel*, Routledge, 2015, pp. 440.

outlined by the local turn approaches.⁴⁸ This only exemplifies the bifurcation in the field of religious violent extremism. Thus, state- and peacebuilding missions seem to have become one of the sources of religious violent extremism due to their mismatch and insensitivity with the local culture and dynamics, and due to the perception that the international community holds discriminatory (religious) beliefs, bypasses rule of law and maintains double standards. In fact, the lack of knowledge about the local culture and religion, the implicit and explicit religious bias towards Islam, and the marginalization of non-state actors (communities, movements or individuals) contributed to the recent religious violent extremism in Kosovo and the religious polarization of society, as shown by Beni's lifestory. Moreover, international actors might have unintentionally strengthened religious violent extremism. Beni's Islamic movement was established as a response to the perceived local and international impositions. The perceptions of religiously conservative individuals and religiously violent extremists show resistance against the international and local actors.

More broadly, it is argued that the case of Kosovo's religious violent extremism exemplifies the limits of liberal state- and peacebuilding agenda since they cause unintentional harmful consequences such as religious violent extremism in local (fragile) contexts. It also contributes to the liberal and post-liberal state- and peacebuilding literature by grounding their arguments with empirical data from the case study of Kosovo, which indicates that religious violent extremism is one of the unintended consequences of hybrid peace. It also identifies another category of a local agency that is violent, namely the extremist religious groups. The creation of new conflicts such as religious violent extremism in Kosovo can be viewed as one of the unintended consequences of the liberal peace promoted by the international institutions in post-conflict zones. His lifestory also informs the hybrid peace theories by illustrating the unintended consequences created on the ground. The hybrid peace theory assumes that peace is created by negotiations between the international and local actors that result in negative peace.⁴⁹ This article adds that hybrid peace does not result only in negative peace, but it can also create new conflicts, such as religious violent extremism.

48 N. Lemay-Hébert, 'The Bifurcation of the Two Worlds: Assessing the Gap between Internationals and Locals in State-Building Processes', in *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 32, no. 10, 2011, pp. 1823–1841.

49 O. P. Richmond, 'The dilemmas of a hybrid peace: Negative or positive?', in *Cooperation and Conflict*, vol. 50, no. 1, 2015, pp. 50–68.

This article also reaffirms Richmond's critique to liberal state and peacebuilding pointing out that the liberal state- and peacebuilding produces states that 'without meaning, reduced to a technocratic form of governmentality, which reflects positivist social science and mainstream economic bias propagated through Northern donors' hegemonic weight'.⁵⁰ As a result, the harm is caused to local societies and the global community due to the transnational element of religious violent extremism. This suggests that international actors' failures in state- and peacebuilding missions may contribute to religious violent extremism in Kosovo and will likely remain a source of religious violent extremism in the future if they remain involved in the same form. The state- and peacebuilding programs must take responsibility to not undermine successful statebuilding.⁵¹ Shpend Kursani also suggests that the foreign donors remain on the back seat in regard to tackling religious violent extremism, as otherwise their strategies may be self-defeating.⁵² Thus, without rethinking the international community's engagement in fragile contexts, as in the current case, the international community may continue being one of the sources of religious violent extremism.

Richmond argues that democracy can be achieved only if religion, as an "alternative basis for peace and order",⁵³ is incorporated as a component of it in fragile states. Contrarily, Kosovo's case calls for caution on incorporating religious groups in state structures, as they may be masking as representing religious and local voices and are in fact, violent extremist groups. These movements, one of which Beni is the leader of, view themselves as more legitimate than the state due to their understandings of the local citizens' needs. Therefore, the gap between the state and citizens during the state- and peacebuilding phase provides avenues to exploit -i.e., for recruitment purposes while using religion- for potentially religiously violent extremist organizations and leaders. Religion presents a spiritual alternative to the citizens during the highly insecure developments that take place in post-conflict contexts. While local citizens needs' -including religious – need to be incorporated in state- and peacebuilding processes, genuine local voices need to be identified, to alleviate unintended consequences, such as violent extremism.

Therefore, the following recommendations to foster rule of law, local empowerment, counter and prevent VE and provide sustainable peacebuilding are outlined. "A pre deployment training" of international staff containing local

50 O. P. Richmond, 'Jekyll or Hyde: what is statebuilding creating? Evidence from the 'field'', in *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, vol. 27, no. 1, 2014, pp. 16.

51 D. Chandler, *International Statebuilding: The Rise of Post-Liberal Governance*, Routledge, London, 2010, pp. 71.

52 Kursani, 2015.

53 Richmond, 2015, pp. 4.

context knowledge and rule of law elements is imperative. Recommendations to counter the potential religious and local discriminatory beliefs held by the international staff could be by providing local context training to the international staff deployed in post conflict countries by both the member states and also the international organization to ensure quality education regarding local knowledge. Similarly, rule of law training needs to be provided not only to the local receivers but also the internationally deployed staff. Therefore, it is suggested that the international community promote inclusive state and peacebuilding in fragile states. This approach is more likely to provide sustainable solutions to counter religious violent extremism. More specifically, international and local structures can (i) incorporate genuine local – religious-voices, (ii) refrain from religiously bias practices – i.e., in conversations- and double standards practices towards far-right violent extremists and religious ones, and bypassing rule of law, (iii) increase the local – including religious – knowledge, and (iv) decrease the gap between the state and citizens in the post-conflict reconstruction phase. Furthermore, unless the broader societal, economic, and social inequalities strengthened by liberal peace (international community) are not tackled, religious violent extremism will persist and may even increase in the future in Kosovo.

Biography

Arlinda Rrustemi is a researcher and lecturer on peace and conflict studies. She holds a PhD in Political Science from Leiden University in the Netherlands. In 2016, Arlinda defended her doctoral thesis, entitled “State-Building through Life Stories: Incorporating Local Perspectives”, which was supported by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO). She holds a B.A. (cum laude) from the University College Roosevelt and an LL.M. degree in Public International Law from Utrecht University. She teaches on humanitarian intervention, inclusiveness and state and peace building, power instruments and multilateral organizations, and is involved in several research projects uncovering violent extremism trends, peace infrastructures and countering violent extremism. She has also received several fellowships and grants, such as Erasmus +, LEICEU, Archimedes and LUF. She was also a visiting scholar at several universities, including the Central European University, University of Leuven, Free University in Brussels, Cegesoma, University of Tallinn and New York University. Dr. Rrustemi has also published several articles for various journals and media outlets. Her research interests are in state-, nation- and peacebuilding, transitional justice, humanitarian intervention, violent extremism trends and countering VE, and lifestories method used to uncover local dynamics.