

Albania is not Immune to Terrorism

By Xhavit Shala

The terrorist attack of march 11, 2004, in the Madrid trains where hundred of innocent citizens died and the London attacks of July 7, 2005, demonstrated convincingly that the so called truce between European Union and international terrorism, a product of a tacit agreement based on the principle of mutual non-interference, had been broken. The participation of some European countries in operations in Iraq and Afghanistan as part of the global coalition against terrorism permanently placed the European countries also in the target list of terrorist organizations. Albania also can not be considered excluded from this list, in spite of the Muslim affiliation of a good part of its population. Albania is an active participant in international peace keeping operations, an ally of the US and other anti-terrorism coalition partners

In the context of these developments Alqi Kociko, a journalist for the weekly Klan prepared a pieced that he titled “Are we a target “, that was published on the August 6, 2005 issue of the magazine.

Among other things Alqi Koçiko says: “The reverberations from the London and Sharm el Sheik bombs have been heard in Albania also. The police has placed tightened the security measures around embassies while the border control stations remain on the lookout for Islamic terrorists. But can the radical roots sprout in the Albanian soil? Three experts provide their opinions.

The alarming background of these recent days, punctuated by the still fiery post electoral atmosphere, can’t but be further intensified by the not-so-Islamic teaching of the mosque at the Kavaja street and the life threats against the head of the Muslim Community, Selim Muça and the head of the State Committee on Cults Ilir Kulla, about a month ago. The recent clashes between the two currents of the Muslim headship, only add more heat to the atmosphere that has become hotter because of the fire from the extremists’ bombs.

The question that stands suspended in the air is whether Albania risks becoming one of the possible targets of terrorism. The EU countries pride themselves as an area where there is a coexistence of cultures and where Muslims have been widely accepted as part of the local communities. Tacitly, there has existed “a pact” between international terrorism and the EU on the argument that “it is not to (the terrorist advantage) to attack those developed countries where Muslims, and among them radical ones, find refuge. But Afghanistan and Iraq have broken this “pact” and the recent attacks only demonstrate that Albania also can not be potentially excluded from the danger of such attacks, Xhavit Shala, an expert in the field, says. According to him, the elimination of the Egyptian Jihad cell in 1998, following the cooperation between the Albanian and western law enforcement agencies was followed by the response of the terrorists in the form of the attacks against the US Embassies in Tanzania and Kenya

Ilir Kulla says that there exists no element that could serve to make a connection between the

frictions within the Muslim Community and any organized international network that supports resistance on religious grounds. As to the probability of any attacks Kulla says that “terrorism aims at targets that can make global news and in the case of Albania this would not be easy”. Kulla is of the opinion that if such an act was ever to occur in Albanian inhabited areas it would most probably be carried out by an Albanian and not a foreigner. “The ones that would be behind such a hypothetical act would be interested in causing unrest in Albania and I do not think that he would be a radical islamists”.

According to Tirana’s Mufti and Deputy Chairman of the Muslim Community, Bledar Myftaraj, “Prophet Muhamed says that whoever kills one person is as if he killed the whole world, and whoever saves one man is as if he saved the whole world.” Such a prophetic saying, according to Myftaraj, closes the cycle of justification to any one who claims that such acts are carried of religion and faith.

According to Xhavit Shala, an Albanian can hardly ever become a kamikaze. “First, this is related with his pragmatic tendencies; secondly, it is related to the moderate nature of Albanian Islam. And lastly, for an individual to become a killing machine he has to undergo several stages of indoctrination and brainwashing. “Aside from being contrary to his nature, the realization of this cycle requires time and a suitable terrain,” Shala argues. But moving beyond these theoretical and philosophical thesis, can we be certain that the remnants of Islamic terrorist cells and efforts to spread the seed of radical Islam in Albania been uprooted?

The Missing Measures

Certainly, Albania, in spite of its efforts and particularities, can not be immune to one of the greatest global challenges that our new century is facing. In order for all such paths to be closed, the experts advise first, the approval of a legal package that would regulate the relations between the state and the religious communities. One of the main problems that still exists here is the failure to resolve the issue of the return and compensation of properties. “The restitution of properties, says Shala, could make possible the coming to an end of the foreign aid coming to our religious communities, which comes with other conditions for the communities.” The establishment of a theological faculty is also considered an important measure. There are more than 390 students currently studying theology in various Muslim countries who, according to Shala, come under the influence of teachings such as wahabi that are much more radical than the traditional teaching of Islam in Albania.

Kulla blames the vacuum created by the 23 years of prohibition of religious practice in Albania for the great deficiencies in the legal framework. According to Kulla an urgent measure would be the realization of a full cycle of religious training in the country. Kulla however also adds that “every religious problem grows on a social terrain that begins with poverty. If the state will start from here, that is with the fight against poverty the possible dangers from radicalization would be avoided”. Until now however, “the state has been a good equilibrater”.

And what about the clashes within the Muslim Community?

According to Xhavit Shala, this issue has now become known publicly. The persecution of a large

part of the Muslim clergy during the communist dictatorship and the penetration in the 90's of radical currents from Eastern Muslim countries has created an appropriate terrain that allows such groups to gain representation within the Muslim Community. The state, according to Shala, should work to normalize the situation. Myftaraj, however, is quite categorical when he says: "Theories spread by the media about alleged divisions or religious factions are only a show incited to [achieve] certain goals. When two people have different opinions it does not mean that they are enemies".

Even, though, our country is considered one of the most excellent examples of religious harmony, the echo of the bombs in New York, Madrid, London and Sharm el Sheik should serve to ring the alarm bells in Albania also. In such a matter, too much care is never excessive.

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