

**Interview with Xhavit Shala**  
**(Security and International Affairs expert)**  
**May 26, 2007, 15h00 to 16h00 (in Tirana, Albania)**

**By: Patrice Brodeur, Ina Merdjanova, and Victor Kotsev**

**Q.** Thank you for making the time to talk with us. Part of what we are interested to learn about is interreligious activities here in Albania that are promoting a better quality of life, even though sometimes they may be part of raising tensions. We are doing a comparative analysis of this question across the Balkans. We know that the situation here in Albania has been for very good historically. Yet, with globalization, we see the beginnings of tensions. So please give us your thoughts on the situation today in Albania.

**Xhavit Shala:** I have written a paper about this and I will give you a copy. Everything is in there. I have included also something about Bulgaria.

**Q.** So our interview is over then, right? (Laughter!)

**Q.** Where do you see the contributions of religions in Albania for a peaceful coexistence and where are they a risk for security in this country?

**Xhavit Shala:** I can give you a concrete example. Think about Lebanon until 1975. It was a product of the Middle East. It has almost the same distribution of religious diversity. They had a lot of tolerance. Then, the conflicts started and even today it is not quiet. Albania is very unique and general at the same time. In my book, you will be able to read my thoughts about it. I explain that Albanians have four religions yet they manage to be one nation. The main thing is that Albanians did not connect religion to nationalism, as did Greeks, Bulgarians, Montenegrins, etc. In Albania, not of all the population was Islamized. There were orthodox in the southern part, Catholics in the north, and Muslims. During all the period of the Ottoman Empire, the Orthodox were the favourite of the regime. The leader of the Orthodox Church was considered a Pasha with four stars. It was part of the protocol. However, these generally good relations of the Ottoman regime with the Orthodox were not the case with Catholics. They were a danger because of the heritage of the Crusades and the connection with Rome. The Albanians resisted and kept their religious identities, especially in the North (Shkodra, etc.). While there is not a consensus on what caused the conversion of Albanians into Islam, there are a lot who agree that among the reasons was pragmatism. They wanted to avoid the taxes. Another well-known Albanian author says that Albanians had a fascination with holding guns. Only Muslims could carry guns. Whatever the reasons they were not physically forced to convert. This was not the practice of the Ottoman Empire.

**Q.** What are your personal insights in terms of the role of your institute in promoting tolerance or just producing research?

**Xhavit Shala:** Yes, we do research and we publish books and over 30 to 40 papers. Our studies have tried to draw attention to the risk of arabization of Islam in the Balkans.

**Q. Do you think that there is this tendency of arabization in Islam in the Balkans?**

**Xhavit Shala:** Yes, this tendency exists here and in Bulgaria. Muslims have been living in this part of the world for over 500 years, creating their own identity. Of course, Islam is universal. But there are local colors on the popular level especially. That was not a problem at all until the 1990s. With the influence of wahhabism, this tendency has been disrupted. I think that wahhabism is a threat to democracy in general because they want to impose their own rules, not knowing themselves the laws of democracy. I really think that they bring with them a new system of value that does not fit with our tradition. One simple example of this is their treatment of women. In fact, in Albania women play a very strong role in our society.

After 1990, they utilized the poor conditions in Albania and entered through Arab NGOs, financing even the salaries of the officials of the Muslim community. It was their strategy to work to replace the old leadership, which had already been destroyed to a great degree by the Communists. They tried to manipulate the youth.

**Q. The assassination of Sali Tivari, the secretary of the Albanian Islamic community, is still not solved. Who did this? Was it because of financial or political motives?**

**Xhavit Shala:** There are several hypotheses. So far we do not know the perpetrator. Perhaps, it was because of property claims. Perhaps, it may have been the influence of these violent religious groups. The truth is that the government, under the influence of civil society, needs to move from the position of passive neutrality to one of active engagement, preparing a law for the relation between religious communities and the state. It has been now 15 years that we have no such law to regulate those relations.

**Q. What are the major Muslim NGOs that have been perceived as a danger to security?**

**Xhavit Shala:** The NGOs identified as extremist have been expelled and no longer allowed to operate. After 1990, there were a considerable number of extremist elements who penetrated Albania under the guise of humanitarian work. Their activity was further facilitated by the breakdown of law and order in Albania in 1997. Their activity became of particular concern in this period. If you look on the internet, you will find information on a trial against the so-called The Arabs of Albania that sheds more light into this matter. If you read it, you will see that one or two of them were members of the terrorists who organized the attacks against President Sadat of Egypt. The Albanian authorities have always taken a principled stand against terrorist elements. In addition, at this time thanks to assistance from western agencies also they were able to take firm action against these elements. But due to a lax legal environment, there were no oversight of the NGO

that entered Albania. After 9/11, most of these foreign NGOs were forced out of Albania. Based on our knowledge we can say that today there are NGOs of extremist orientation in Albania. In 2003 and 2004, the government passed a law on terrorism financing and has taken action. The authorities have frozen several bank accounts and assets of entities found in the UN list.

**Q. How many organizations were affected by this law, material being**

**Xhavit Shala:** There were around five to six NGO that were shut down. These NGOs had wide expansion in Albania before 1999. I was surprised that some of these people had British passports. The British did not know at that time. After 9/11, they started paying more attention to this problem. 9/11 was a signal to the whole world that they had to crack down on terrorism.

**Q. Foreign investments and funding is unavoidable. Who is funding the Bektashis in Albania for example?**

**Xhavit Shala:** Different Arab countries fund the two Muslim communities. Other religious communities also draw on the financial support from abroad. The Orthodox Church receives funds from the Greek Church, and of course, the Catholic Church from Rome. Foreign funding is usually given with strings attached and makes room for unwanted interferences. With this in mind, we have worked to lobby in favour of passing a law, which will provide for the government to finance the work of the religious communities, especially the top tier clergy. This will make them independent economically from outside sources of funding and not be a potential problem for the security of the state. Even though the Communist, up to 1967 year during which religion was outlawed, even the Communist regime had financed religions, a practice that went against the teaching Engel who forbade communist authorities from funding religious activities. But the Communist understood the role that foreign actors could play in financing local activities, thus recognising it as a threat to their power. I have asked to government to take the question of religious education more seriously, especially the training of the religious officials. We will not have any positive results if our religious leaders cannot be trained in the country. Within the state university of Tirana, the government must finance and open a faculty of theology that will provide training for our religious cadre. You see the same concern in many western countries today including especially Britain who recognize the need to provide religious training for the Muslim believer in country. Although in different circumstance, the example applies here as well that the preparation of these young religious leader is too important to be left in the hands of outsiders.

**Q. It seems that a lot has been done by the Albanian government against extremism. Do you see any problem coming from not much being done in Kosovo or Macedonia in terms of Albanians there who may import into Albania some of there problems there?**

**Xhavit Shala:** Our center has local researchers in Kosovo, Montenegro and Macedonia concerned about issues that affect the national security. Since Serbs in Kosovo have always been united around their Church, Islam in Kosovo was perceived as a defence against Serbs. The Serb had a strategy to use Islam to create a negative perception of Albanians. It was easier to get permission from the Serbian government to build a mosque rather than a permit to build an Albanian language school. They wanted to make Albanians a source of fear for Europe by presenting their cause not as a national one but a religious one. It was a strategy that they worked on for several decades. In this way, when there was violence against Albanians, Europeans would not get involved because it was a religious conflict that they were also concerned about. We have worked a lot to make the West understand that the conflict in Kosovo was an ethnic one, not religious.

I was head of security services in Albania during which time I read many articles on the cooperation between the secret services of the Serbs and wahhaby circles. Serb agencies have worked to facilitate the introduction of radical Islam into Kosovo and Albania. Even recently, I have come across evidence that demonstrates that extremist wahhaby elements were receiving training in the Kosovo Serb enclave of Gracanica and financed by the secret services of Serbia. They knew that they had already lost Kosovo, but they needed to provoke destabilization. For them, it was not a problem to have wahhabis kill innocent Kosovars. There exist a real danger of ethnic cleansing of Albanians in Southern Serbia. I have published this in a newspaper in English, which I hope was well translated.

**Q. If in 10 years Kosovo becomes part of Albania, what would be the problems in terms of interreligious relations?**

**Xhavit Shala:** First, I do not think that Albania will come together with Kosovo. I think it is reciprocal will. We want independent Albania and independent Kosovo, with good cooperation. My parents were moved by Serbs in 1924. A number of my relatives were killed when we moved to Albania. Finally, after the departure of Serb forces we have been able to visit back freely. For me, it is better for Albania and Kosovo to remain distinct state entities. It is better to have two Albanian states in Europe! Our neighbours need not fear the creation of an independent Kosovo. On the contrary, the resolution of this issue would create the conditions necessary for long lasting peace in the Balkans. With the establishment of democracy in Albania and Kosovo, we can make the Balkans a peaceful place.

**Q. What has been the interreligious cooperation in preparation for this law on religion?**

**Xhavit Shala:** There is one year now that a working group is working. As a center, we have been lobbying this group to look also at issue that we consider of concern for our national security. The working group has asked all religious community to make their comments on a draft that has been prepared, so that we can have an agreement with every single religious community, which will become part of the constitution.

**Q. What groups are involved?**

**Xhavit Shala:** Groups of experts (lawyers, academicians, religious leaders.) lead by a state representative from the department of religions. This is an initiative from the present government of Berisha and all religious communities are interested in this law. We lost 17 years so far. This will provide the framework for the secure functioning of all religions in the country.

The model of governmental funding of religious education is a good model; it is done in many other countries. It is important to train religious leaders here in Albania. The opening of a theology and comparative religion studies faculty would provide for the proper training of our clergy and help protect our religious communities from extremist influences.

In 1912, when the Albanian state was established, a law was made to ensure that the Albanian religious communities were headed by Albanians. This was a very important matter for the cohesion of the country. It is still an important and necessary measure today. Ismail Kadare says that the destabilization of one religious community will disturb all religious communities. I consider today that the religious harmony we have is a treasure to keep, like all natural or cultural treasures. We must preserve it.

Many thanks! Shume faleminderit!

Patrice Brodeur and Ina Merdjanova (and Victor Kotsev)