

Television Show: Rubikon, KTV. Produced by KOHAVISION

Date: Sept. 29, 2015

Topic: Efforts to Counter Violent Extremism in Kosovo (Translated Transcript)

Moderator: Adriatik Kelmendi – Host of Rubikon

Panelists:

1. **Rexhep Lushta** – Imam, Council of Islamic Community in Mitrovica
2. **Besa Ismaili** – Dean of the Faculty of Islamic Studies and Professor of English Language
3. **Luan Keka** – Kosovo Police – Deputy Director in the Department Against Terrorism
4. **Skender Pertreshi** – KCSS (Kosovar Centre for Security Studies)

Mr. Kelmendi: Tonight on Rubikon, we will talk about efforts to counter violent extremism in Kosovo. What drives youngsters and others from Kosovo to join the wars abroad? What drives them to embrace extremist ideologies? How are returnees from the Iraq and Syrian wars treated in our country? Are there programs that they need to follow? What are the roles of governmental institutions, NGOs and Islamic Community in this process? I invited the following guests to discuss this topic tonight: Mr. Luan Keka, Deputy Director in the Department Against Terrorism in Kosovo Police; Skender Perteshi from Kosovar Centre for Security Studies; Mr. Rexhep Lushta, Head Imam in the Council of Islamic Community in Mitrovica and Ms. Besa Ismaili, Dean of the Faculty of Islamic Studies and Professor of English Language.

Mr. Kelmendi: Before we start with the discussion, let's watch a story prepared by our journalist. The story is about the fate of a family whose member is in prison, charged with extreme violent activities. After that, we will be back in the studio.

Narrator: 17 year old Andrit Elezi, from the village Smire, Vitia municipality, is in charge of the family and the household since 14 months ago, since his father was arrested by the Kosovo Police, together with another 40 individuals charged with joining terrorist groups and participation in the Syrian war. Andrit is in secondary school in Medrese in Gjilan. Now, he lives with his mother and his sister, a student of Medicine in Pristina University, while his older brother Ardi studies in Cairo. Andrit tells us how his father was arrested that day, emphasizing that Kosovo Police didn't find anything suspicious in their house. Andrit strongly believes that his father is innocent.

Mr. Elezi: When Police came into our house, they took our cell phones, books and other items. Books were returned since they did not serve as proof of the accusation. Books were returned while phones, computer, laptop were not.

Narrator: He denies that his father and his family had any connection with terrorist groups.

Mr. Elezi: We never had any connection with any organization. My father always worked a lot. We have different machines, trucks and carriers we work with; also we own the factory for production of construction materials, where my father worked with his brothers. We were never interested in any other thing, other than our own business. My father was targeted only because he wears a beard. The indictment is based on his admiration for a certain person named Patriot Matoshi. Actually, it was on my Facebook page, that I shared the information that Patriot Matoshi was killed in 2014. This information was broadcast in the media, shared by social media and others, as well. The indictment was based on this post; my father is accused for having sympathy for this person. Therefore, my father is accused of terrorism, based on no proof. He is innocent. He is cleared of all charges.

Narrator: Organizations like ISIS and ALNUSRA operate against Islam, according to Andrit.

Mr. Elezi: These organizations and their activities are not based on Islamic principles. Whatever is not in line with Islam and its principles, shouldn't be accepted. Therefore we do not accept these organizations. Claims that they fight on behalf of Islam actually damage its reputation, since they do not operate on the basis of the principles of Islamic faith. We do not recognize or support them, nor do we support those who join the wars in other countries.

Narrator: Hajdin Elezi, accused of terrorism, was twice in Turkey. He visited Turkey after the appeal came by the ex- Minister of Foreign Affairs, Enver Hoxhaj.

Mr. Elezi: My father went to Turkey for short period of time, to help refugees in need. Even today we can see that there are many Syrian refugees who are in need of help. He was primarily inspired by Enver Hoxhaj, when he appealed 2- 3 years ago for help to refugees. My father was one of those who responded to this appeal for help. Fourteen months have passed since my father is in detention and we do not know what will happen. He is innocent. The indictment attributed to him for participating in the Syrian war is not true. He did not participate in the Syrian war.

Narrator: Without his father, their life became difficult, says Andrit. He tells us about numerous occasions when he was referred to as terrorist or the son of the terrorist.

Mr. Elezi: There are certain individuals who used to call me terrorist; I don't care about that, because I know we did not do that.

Narrator: In the meantime, since August 2014 when 40 people were arrested under the suspicion of participation in terrorist groups in Syrian war, only two hearings took place for the case of Hajdin Elezi. All those who were indicted and later admitted guilt for participating in terrorist activities enjoy less rigorous security restrictions, and those who maintain their innocence are still held in detention.

Mr. Kelmendi: We watched the story about a family in Vitia. Dear spectators, if you have direct questions for our guests you can send them through our official Facebook page Rubikon.

Mr. Perteshi, can we talk more about the situation today? Since two or three years ago we have been seeing first Kosovars going to Syria and Iraq, followed by the information on first victims, to the latest case from last week. Can you describe to us the current state of affairs in this field?

Mr. Perteshi: Similar to every country in the Balkans and Europe, Kosovo has been affected by the phenomenon of extreme violence, including radicalism which claims to speak in the name of religion. So far, 300 Kosovars, including spouses and families, are taking part in the wars in Syria and Iraq, during different periods of time. So far, according to reports, 50 citizens of Kosovo have been killed in Syria and Iraq. It is worth mentioning that the awareness raising campaign launched jointly by media, NGOs, civil society, and Kosovo Police, had a considerable impact in reduction of the number of people joining these wars. These campaigns need to be continued. Only with coordination among all stakeholders can we have considerable chances to reduce and hopefully eliminate this phenomenon.

Mr. Kelmendi: Do you think that this positive effect and declining number of those joining these wars occurred as a result of awareness campaigns or due to the actions that have been taken by police and authorities? We mentioned arrests, some cases of indictments and initiation of judicial processes.

Mr. Perteshi: There are several factors that influenced the reduction of cases of participation of Kosovars in Syria and Iraq war. Definitely, one of the main factors is role and engagement of Kosovo Police in this issue, as well as role of the Muslim Community in Kosovo, who increased public discussions about the negative impact of involvement in Syria and Iraq. Imams from Islamic Community played a great role in this process by explaining that the involvement of our citizens in this war doesn't support Islam. On the contrary, it damages it. The role of NGOs and media was crucial in reduction of this phenomenon.

Mr. Kelmendi: Mr. Lushta, what is your opinion about this, how do you describe this phenomenon? Kosovo counts 300 persons participating in this war; in proportion to the number of population it is ranked quite high by percentage of people who joined extremist groups. Why is that?

Mr. Lushta: Initially I would like to make a clarification to the wider public. In general, whenever extremism, radicalism or terrorism is mentioned by the media it is linked or is alluding to Islam.

Mr. Kelmendi: Not always.

Mr. Lushta: It has become an overall trend. It is important we all understand that extremism or radicalism or terrorism – doesn't pertain to Islam; it's something least belonging to our religion. This is spread in different societies, regardless of their ethnicity or religion. On the question of why these young men are going to Syria or Iraq, it's because they lack awareness and understanding of basic principles of religion. Therefore going to this war has no meaning for our people and our country. Skender mentioned that Imams and officials of Islamic Community are widening discussions and lectures in order to raise awareness among young people and increase knowledge on the values proclaimed by Islam.

Mr. Kelmendi: Not all Imams are without responsibility in this case. There are also Imams from Kosovo in the group of arrested and suspected, very popular Imams. Also very often a memo for circulation was mentioned as well as the appeal from former Minister of Foreign Affairs – Mr. Hoxhaj, when he invited people to help Syrians. This memo was circulated and read in all mosques in Kosovo and it was calling on people to help Muslim brothers in the land of Sham.

Mr. Lushta: On the issue of the memo coming from the Islamic Community, it did not mean that Islamic Community was calling on people to go to war.

We appealed to the people to donate assistance for the refugees in need. Islamic Community was inviting people to gather and collect aid for people in need just like we did in case of Tsunami in Indonesia and other disasters happening worldwide. Islamic Community did this only for humanitarian purposes.

Mr. Kelmendi: Understandable, but we need to focus on the issue of the context. How did this memo become so misunderstood? How come nobody misunderstood the issue of responding to the Tsunami in Indonesia, and now in the case of Syria we have 300 people going to fight there?

Mr. Lushta: It doesn't mean that people have gone there because Islamic Community invited people to help. We all know that the Syrian war, in the beginning, was a liberation war from the dictatorship of Assad. The nationwide revolution in Syria was supported by the whole world, and by our government, as it was mentioned earlier in the story. We are all witnesses that the Kosovo Government welcomed a delegation of the Liberation Army of Syria, who visited Kosovo. But this doesn't mean that appeal of ex. Minister Hoxhaj and the memo that was circulated in the mosques asking for help for Syrian people is a direct invitation to join the war.

Even Islamic scholars say that it is in the spirit of Islam to invite people to help those who are victims and innocent facing violence, when in need. This should not be in any way misunderstood as invitation to join the war.

Mr. Kelmendi: OK, let's suppose it is a misunderstanding – why did this misunderstanding happen?

Mr. Lushta: This misunderstanding didn't happen only among Albanians; it happened everywhere.

Mr. Kelmendi: We are in a studio in Pristina and we are talking about us; we cannot analyze the situation worldwide.

Mr. Lushta: This misunderstanding has happened: let me go back and elaborate on the definition of the term terrorism. What is the definition of terrorism?

Mr. Kelmendi: We have our expert in the studio to help us?

Mr. Lushta: It is a violence, directed toward a peaceful audience and population, in order to have an impact, through which terrorists can reach objectives, being they political, military and/or ideological.

Mr. Kelmendi: Is it for the purpose of power?

Mr. Lushta: I can say that a big part of blame goes to media, those media exaggerating news from Syrian war.

Mr. Kelmendi: What do you mean exaggerating when it is already a big issue; we are first on the list of countries with the biggest number of soldiers per capita compared to other countries.

Mr. Lushta: I was not saying exaggerating the issue of those joining the war, but exaggerating the stories coming from those countries. If those stories were not broadcast in our media – and I refer to the sadness – I think less people would join the war. We are enthusiastic people, and sometimes, let's see the Frankfurt case for example, the person who committed the crime in Frankfurt – was he influenced by society or an organization? No, he was influenced by media, internet, by watching different violent pictures, and at one point he had a violent euphoric reaction.

Mr. Kelmendi: Mr. Lushta media is showing what is going on around us that would make for good news. Not in every war our people have gone to help. So, here we have an element of misusing a feeling, in this case, feeling of religion. As you said misunderstanding, since Kosovars traditionally do not join the conflicts happening in the world.

Mr. Lushta: We know that majority of people going to these conflicts do not possess a basic knowledge of Islam; they are new practitioners of religion. They were influenced by the scenes they see, and they think that everything is as it is presented.

Mr. Kelmendi: How would you explain that the recruitment or alleged recruitment was done by very popular imams who are not young?

Mr. Lushta: All accused and arrested have been released. They proved they were innocent.

Mr. Kelmendi: Is it proven for all?

Mr. Lushta: We are talking about those who have been released. It sounds absurd, but some Imams are arrested one week after they have been threatened by the radical groups.

Mr. Kelmendi: Who are the imams that were threatened?

Mr. Lushta: We all know they are Hoxhë Ekrem Avdiu, Hoxhë Enes Rama, they have been openly threatened by the extremist groups a week before the arrest.

Mr. Kelmendi: Where and how were they threatened?

Mr. Lushta: Through media, through social media, Facebook, by telephone, and this is known to wider public. And one week after the threats, surprisingly the threatened persons are arrested?

Mr. Kelmendi: Do you suspect that there are hidden motives for why they were arrested; is it a conspiracy?

Mr. Lushta: We don't want to be judgmental and we don't live nor lead by prejudices, but how come imams who used very peaceful language ended up arrested?

Mr. Kelmendi: Let's be careful here. There are videos published on YouTube, featuring few from the accused group, where they say that some nations should be wiped off from the face of Earth. This is not peaceful language. These lectures were posted on YouTube and were withdrawn later.

Mr. Lushta: Today, information is shared very fast, our lectures are public.

Mr. Kelmendi: And everybody has access and can see how peaceful they are?

Mr. Lushta: Sometimes media do not publish the lectures as the whole, publish one part, change the context of the sentence from the lecture, what is in their use, and make news based on what they find convenient. But...

Mr. Kelmendi: Complete lectures are published on the internet; they were not published by the media.

Mr. Lushta: Let's clarify when talking about Islam as a religion; in general we think of Islam as proclaimed by God. It is religion of peace, a religion promoting tolerance and understanding, not violence and extremism.

Mr. Kelmendi: Sure, but tonight we are not discussing the religion of Islam. We are discussing violent extremism.

Mr. Lushta: Recruitment of people going to war, I can assure you has not been done by Imams we mentioned earlier.

Mr. Kelmendi: Mr. Keka – Cases of recruitment, how is the recruitment done and who influenced the process?

Mr. Keka: Thank you Adriatik. Initially, let me go back in the past, some years after the war in 1999, in order to clarify the whole process, how the recruitment of our young men took place, how they accepted extremist ideology, and afterwards how they ended up in Syria and Iraq. We also have to take into consideration the economic, social and political situation and the poverty at that time. Everything was started from scratch - institutions were under construction; the whole country was rebuilding itself after the war. Many humanitarian organizations from different countries came to Kosovo to help, including organizations from the

western and eastern parts of the world. These NGOs coming from Arab countries or the eastern world based their mission on religion, spreading religious lectures and beliefs. Some of these organizations that registered in Kosovo had programs that organized different activities such as: social activities, language courses, other courses, and one of their goals were to spread extremist ideologies. People followed lectures on Islam, heard lectures about Islam not known for us before, at least we Kosovars didn't know nor hear about. Their mission was the indoctrination of young people. The Syrian and Iraq war was used as motivation for young men to affirm their extremist ideology. In the beginning of the conflict in Syria, between the regime of Bashir Al Assad and the Syrian opposition, all democratic governments, not only the Kosovo Government, appealed to help the Syrian opposition in order to change the Syrian Government, and not to go to war or join fighting. Even the earliest cases registered by the Kosovo Police, those who joined the war in Syria and Iraq, already were persons monitored by the Police of Kosovo, people with a record and under suspicion of extremist ideology, suspicious activities in Kosovo and the region. Of course, we cannot exclude that many of them went to Syria with an aim to help innocent people living in a dictatorial regime, but many of cases already were radicalized here in Kosovo, meaning before going to the Syrian war. Cases of arrested Imams are not finalized yet; investigations are continuing by Kosovo Special Prosecution.

Mr. Kelmendi: Cases are not finished yet?

Mr. Keka: There are different phases of criminal procedures. Not all Imams have the same indictments. Some Imams are accused of direct involvement in the recruitment process, some for spreading language of hatred. These cases are under investigation. Recruitment of young men from Kosovo occurred in different forms: through personal contacts, social networks, through direct meetings with radical Imams who already were under investigation.

Mr. Kelmendi: Ms. Ismaili – The description given by Mr. Keka, though, NGOs coming in Kosovo after the war, using the weak economic, social situation to indoctrinate these youngsters. How did this imbalance between the extreme and traditional Albanian Islam happen and how did we lose the battle?

Ms. Ismaili: I was listening very carefully, especially the part on Kosovo after the war. Based on what we heard, we are talking about the generation of twenty to twenty- three year olds, now fifteen years after, who were children 2, 3, 6 or 10 year old during the time when Arab NGOs were present. Also, we remember very well, after September, 11, 2001 an aggressive campaign was launched with the goal to expel those organizations without reason or fact, simply based on prejudices. I do not have prejudice that all of them were innocent, but it is not convincing when it was said that the violence is directly a product of those organizations, and that before the war everything was perfect in Kosovo, and it seems like just by talking to them, young man were indoctrinated. This is not as simple as said. It would be so easy to just stop indoctrination and the problem would be solved.

Mr. Kelmendi: So what is your explanation?

Ms. Ismaili: I have one question, why are there people from Britain and the USA joining the war in Syria while there are no Humanitarian Arab Organizations working there? People have different reasons to involve themselves in different activities, in this case, violent extremism.

Mr. Kelmendi: There are Humanitarian and Religious Arab Organizations in other countries.

Ms. Ismaili: Yes, and they operate freely, protected by the state. It is totally different there and cannot be compared to Kosovo. Sometimes it is worth emphasizing that this unfair and aggressive campaign is the reason why Arab countries still hesitate to recognize Kosovo state.

Mr. Kelmendi: Lets clarify, expelled organizations were networks operating worldwide and they were closed everywhere.

Ms. Ismaili: No. Organizations were not closed everywhere but in Kosovo and here in Pristina. Nevertheless, the question was what we have done to address the created imbalance between extremism and traditional religion. I think it would be very unfair to be ungrateful if we found no positive conclusion or result from the presence of all those humanitarian organizations and people. We know those organizations were strongly attached to their governments in Arab countries; they helped us with clothing and food in the worst times. Poverty was extreme at that time; without many organizations it would have been even worse. Families helped by the organizations could talk better about the help from them. It is proven by different surveys and research conducted everywhere that indoctrination is not the consequence of wealth; it is something that comes from the outside and is something that depends on what is said to whom. This is a process rooted in discrimination, the persecution of Muslims, and the feeling of being estranged in the country they call home.

Mr. Kelmendi: When Muslims of Kosovo felt discriminated, being the majority of population, over 90%?

Ms. Ismaili: The word majority is not a justification. In Egypt they are the majority, too.

Mr. Kelmendi: We are talking about Kosovo; why is there a need to feel discriminated?

Ms. Ismaili: There's no need. They feel discriminated; it's a compulsion. Since they don't have equal rights, equal opportunities, they are not equal to other citizens, just because they are more oriented towards religion in comparison with general population.

Mr. Kelmendi: Any concrete fact on what is the scope/domain of the discrimination –

Ms. Ismaili: In every domain, we believe that Islamophobic discourse is huge and growing, and it gave reason to more young people to be recruited easily by ISIS. When discussing with them in open debates, they ask: What do we have in Kosovo? We are offended, we cannot go to school, we cannot get a job, and this profile of people of course ends up anywhere where 'heaven' is promised.

Mr. Kelmendi: Let's talk facts: can you tell us the cases when they cannot go to school or be employed because they are Muslim? People who are educated and employed are reflected in the overall population numbers in Kosovo. The number of people disaggregated by religion can be found as well. This shows that the majority of employed people in Kosovo are majority Muslims.

Ms. Ismaili: Yes, it is true, it's good that it is like that. These are Muslims not practicing the religion. There are cases of discrimination toward veiled girls, cases reaching the Kosovo court, resolved to their benefit, and remaining unimplemented.

Mr. Kelmendi: How many cases are there in Kosovo?

Ms. Ismaili: Can you find me a place in the world, when a court decision is not respected, how do we call that a state or a country?

Mr. Kelmendi: How many cases are in Kosovo?

Ms. Ismaili: There are 13 cases in courts right now, including cases in the constitutional court, and we all know what the decision and interpretation regarding the case was.

Mr. Kelmendi: For only 13 cases, somebody needs to feel discriminated within a 90% population belonging to Muslim religion?

Ms. Ismaili: Why not, even a single case is enough. But apart from cases of religious discrimination, there are other discriminations happening everywhere. There has been a Law on Nondiscrimination in Kosovo since 2004, and do you know any case solved or brought to the Court based on this Law? Never, while discrimination occurs every day. There are people who face and live through this discrimination every day. We cannot deny it. They speak for themselves.

Mr. Kelmendi: I am interested to distinguish or find the connection between discrimination vs. radicalism, since there are other discriminations like: gender for example. If you are a woman you cannot be employed for a certain job because men are given advantage, if you belong to a community with a certain sexual orientation, automatically you are discriminated. These categories do not radically and violently fight for their rights.

Ms. Ismaili: Don't you see all these protests and the disorder on our streets, in front of universities, isn't this another form of radicalism?

Mr. Kelmendi: We are talking about people who joined the war, 50 people who died as consequence of radicalism. I think it cannot be compared with protests where people express their concerns, dissatisfactions, and nobody lost life by protesting.

Ms. Ismaili: No we are not going to draw this line, let's talk about reasons. It has been proven by academics that roots of radicalism lay in discrimination. Also, we need to consider the incentives ISIS uses to attract young people. The main motivation is that Muslims all over the world are

persecuted and they preach that Islam should be spread by sword and they need to be violent if they want to retain dignity.

Mr. Kelmendi: We have direct question from the audience

– Teuta from Gjilan “Imam Zekirija Qazimi recruited and sent my cousin to Syria, where he was killed. I would like to know what happened to this Imam? It is a real case of a woman asking about the Imam that sent her cousin to war where he was killed.

Mr. Lushta: I don’t know Zekerija Qerimi personally.

Mr. Kelmendi: But you said all imams that were released are innocent?

Mr. Lushta: He is not an official Imam of Islamic Community.

Mr. Kelmendi: The question was not whether they were officials of Islamic Community or not.

Mr. Lushta: I am a representative of Islamic Community and I know the official imams only. There are a considerable number of students who study in Arab countries, after they finish secondary school, and we don’t know them all. The imam named above, whom I don’t know personally, is not official Imam in IC. Therefore, I am not obliged to monitor his activities.

Mr. Kelmendi: As far as the official imams of IC are concerned, they are mentioned by Mr. Keka, some of them are accused or under investigation and you claim that none of the official Imams are accused?

Mr. Lushta: I didn’t say they are innocent.

Mr. Kelmendi: Please, that is what you said. We can verify.

Mr. Lushta: Please, I said they are released as innocent, based on the fact that after a week of arrest, and after the decision of the prosecution to issue 30 days detention, they were released, I don’t know which decision needs to be made to abolish the arrest.

Mr. Kelmendi: Mr. Keka will explain –

Mr. Lushta: Let’s talk based on facts.

Mr. Kelmendi: They were not found innocent.

Ms. Ismaili: It is irrelevant for this debate.

Mr. Kelmendi: Let’s please speak clearly using facts.

Mr. Lushta: A municipal court in Mitrovica or Pristina, where the case was processed, issued warrant for arrest ordering 30 days of detention. One week later they were released.

Mr. Kelmendi: Let's clarify what happened, since we cannot prejudge, we do not know what happened exactly.

Mr. Lushta: Cases didn't end, yet.

Mr. Kelmendi: Are all Imams innocent as you say?

Mr. Lushta: According to the law, a person is innocent until the court decides they are guilty. I am asking, how come that in a democratic state, the arrest warrant is issued for 30 days of prison, and the same is released one week after arrest?

Mr. Kelmendi: So you think that we are dealing with another form of discrimination?

Mr. Lushta: As Mrs. Ismaili said, there is discrimination against Imams and everything that belongs to Islam. Yes there is discrimination against everything linked to Islam.

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Mr. Kelmendi: Let's continue the discussion on countering violent extremism. We are talking about the case of arrested imams and you are saying that they are innocent until proven guilty right?

Mr. Lushta: This is my personal opinion, until they are free and move freely, released by the court. We do not know what this decision is based on. They know better.

Mr. Kelmendi: Just because they are released it doesn't mean that they are innocent. They may be under home arrest, or released until different procedures take place.

Mr. Lushta: I would repeat that everyone is innocent until proven to be guilty. We are considering as it is.

Ms. Ismaili: This doesn't mean that decision should be considered fair, or that we should trust a judicial system that is according to all international reports very corrupt. There are cases that are a set up. We are not lawyers and cannot speak legal language.

Mr. Kelmendi: Are you saying that these cases are just a set up?

Ms. Ismaili: Maybe not a set up but they are pretty artificial.

Mr. Kelmendi: How do you know?

Ms. Ismaili: Personally we go to mosque five times per day. We meet these people; they spend more time with followers rather than their families. They talk to people directly, not through the media, they cannot afford talking to two million people, they are in people's neighborhoods, know each other, people know who they are, they know everything about them. I think this discussion is going off topic; the truth will come out, no doubt about that.

Mr. Kelmendi: Why do we have 300 persons joining war in Syria, if they are innocent, can you explain that to me?

Ms. Ismaili: Let me reply to you. The question is why three thousand or thirty thousand people did not go to war in Syria.

Mr. Kelmendi: Even in 1999, the war for KLA did not recruit so many; please, let's not exaggerate the issue.

Ms. Ismaili: According to the latest census, 96% of population is of the Muslim religion. The slogan "If you die fighting for Islam in Syria, it is a path to heaven" sells, right? We should then seek for the ways to build our capacity to decrease from 300 to 3 or zero. And also how did it happen that 300 people left and not 3000?

Mr. Kelmendi: This is the highest number of soldiers in Europe per capita and you say it could be higher. Why don't we have the lowest number of those joining the war? You mentioned Turkey before the program. Turkey, of 80 million inhabitants, has a lower number of those joining Syrian war than Kosovo.

Ms. Ismaili: Because there is more religious freedom in Turkey, there is higher respect for religious beliefs and rights.

Mr. Kelmendi: More religious rights in Turkey than in Kosovo? What do you base your statement on?

Ms. Ismaili: Barack Obama, in a recent summit, emphasized clearly that the freedom of speech, freedom of religion beliefs are the main points of the counter extremism narrative.

Mr. Kelmendi: You are coming up with conclusions for what I would like to have facts, or at least give us more explanation on this. If you say Turkey enjoys more freedom of religious belief, what is your source? Do you have any survey? Have you conducted any study that you can refer to?

Ms. Ismaili: International reports, State Department reports remind Kosovo each year, about the existence of discrimination and violation of basic human rights - freedom of religious belief and discrimination of veiled school aged girls. Each written report since the year 2002, contains a sentence about discriminated veiled girls in the public schools. Haven't you read them?

Mr. Kelmendi: You are Dean of Faculty of Islamic Studies in University of Pristina, right?

Ms. Ismaili: No, I am dean in the Faculty of Islamic Studies, teaching English Language.

Mr. Kelmendi: Faculty of Islamic Studies is part of Public University, right?

Ms. Ismaili: No, we were established in 1992. We have operated for over twenty three years and just recently, three years ago, managed to get accredited.

Mr. Kelmendi: Are you part of Public University?

Ms. Ismaili: No, we are registered as an independent body by the Ministry of Education.

Mr. Kelmendi: Is it a public institution?

Ms. Ismaili: It is neither public nor private.

Mr. Kelmendi: From whom do you receive salaries?

Ms. Ismaili: We receive salaries from Islamic Community.

Mr. Kelmendi: So, do you feel discriminated against being employed and holding two positions as English language professor and Dean?

Ms. Ismaili: Let me talk about discrimination against the Faculty. All students and Imams, who graduated in Universities abroad, can notarize their diplomas in the Ministry of Education. Only our students who graduated from our Faculty, here in Kosovo, who studied in the Albanian Language, were not recognized since 1992 and the Ministry started notarizing them only three years ago.

Mr. Kelmendi: Do you know the number of diplomas of other students from different fields of study, that were not notarized by the Ministry?

Ms. Ismaili: I am talking about Faculty for Islamic Studies.

Mr. Kelmendi: If you claim discrimination, then you should compare with other fields as well. Do you know the number of unregistered or unrecognized diplomas from other fields of study?

Ms. Ismaili: Not specifically, maybe the reason was lack of knowledge, or lack of competence, but it is a fact that Institutions and media had a very destructive approach toward religious beliefs, toward religious institutions, Islamic schools, faculty of Islamic Studies, veiled women, mosques, Islamic Community, toward people who were visually identified as Muslims.

Mr. Kelmendi: You are a teacher in Kosovo, in which we all live, and you feel discriminated against?

Ms. Ismaili: Yes

Mr. Kelmendi: How is that? You are employed and feel discriminated against?

Ms. Ismaili: Doesn't matter if you are employed or not. Each citizen of Kosovo feels discriminated against in one way or another. Don't you feel discriminated against, Adriatik?

Mr. Kelmendi: Tonight we are talking about specific things.

Ms. Ismaili: Even though there are only few cases of individuals like I...

Mr. Kelmendi: Even though you are employed you feel discriminated against?

Ms. Ismaili: Of course, every citizen of Kosovo feels discriminated against. We are still not in a situation where people would feel equal. Furthermore as a veiled woman... I am a woman: we can agree on that, right?

Mr. Kelmendi: As a woman, you are employed. It seem you're not discriminated against.

Ms. Ismaili: Yes I do work, and I am not going to stop working, but this is not an argument proving if discrimination exists or this is not the method to prove it.

Mr. Kelmendi: Some of the imams that were under surveillance were allegedly linked to foreign secret services. What can you tell us about these cases?

Mr. Keka: In the beginning, let me clarify the issue and answer about the cases that Besa referred to as a setup. I can assure you that these cases have been thoroughly investigated by highly qualified professionals who work in the Police of Kosovo and professionals from the special prosecutors' office. I can guarantee that those cases have been investigated in an unbiased way. Still, we cannot prejudge the outcome, until the process is finalized. Another fact is very important to us. All these young men who are today in Syria are followers of lectures provided by mentioned Imams who are under investigation. By some of the imams –

Ms. Ismajli: That's what I am saying, lectures of Imams were not followed only by those 300 men. Also, lectures of Imams were followed by 900,000 young people, not only by these 300 youngsters. They should not be responsible for the actions of people who come to the lectures.

Mr. Keka: I am not talking about all imams but about imams that were giving lectures in mosques and sometimes during their private time. These imams were followed by police for a period of time. Some of them ended up in prison.

Ms. Ismaili: It's the second time you mention that you knew about Imams expressing extremist and radical viewpoints and these young men before they left to Syria.

Mr. Keka: Absolutely.

Ms. Ismaili: Why didn't you prevent this?

Mr. Keka: This is what I would like to explain. Having a radical and extremist point of view and expressing violent acts are different. Only when a person acts or expresses violence can they be penalized.

Ms. Ismaili: Since we have gathered here, let's talk a little bit about prevention. We have to work with these young people who show signs of different behavior. Young people who are asocial. They start showing interest for extremism and radicalism.

Mr. Keka: That is the reason why the government jointly with police and civil society started working on a draft strategy for the prevention of violent extremism.

Ms. Ismaili: I applaud that. Also, authorities need to be more careful when they address these issues. Since you are in the initial stages of understanding these issues, there is no need to generalize on these cases. A radical communication is not effective. We need to be very careful when statements are coming from institutions. Authorities should be mature and inclusive in order for these young people to feel free to relate to them. They have to feel that they are not enemies of Kosovo, in order to love Kosovo more than any other country, more than Syria. And its police, more than in any other country, they need to trust them. This is why we need to improve our approach to communication. We need to study this issue more thoroughly. We have only one report from KCSS that opened the minds of people. No research or survey has been conducted to improve the understanding on the following: What is the perception of followers about a certain Imam? What is their perception about a certain politician or issue? Why do we need to focus only on two topics that are not relevant to you, like 'the veil' or 'religious teaching,' that for you do not mean much? Don't we have different concerns, being them economic, political or environmental? I also have problems and needs. What about property issues and many others? There is a major group of people in Kosovo who believe that two issues are priorities for them: dignity and freedom of religious belief.

Mr. Kelmendi: Says who? We were talking about the need to have a state where there is a freedom of choice. You said that we should have a state without discrimination. Maybe for some people, religion is not a priority. For some it is nation building.

Ms. Ismaili: OK, let's talk about women following their husbands to the Syrian war. Freedom of choice? What did these women have to chose from; going to Syria with their husbands or staying in Kosovo. They do not have secondary education. They are jobless. They are not wanted by their own families nor by in-laws.

Mr. Kelmendi: Do you justify that they joined the Syrian war?

Ms. Ismaili: I do not justify going to Syria, but I did research and tried to analyze the profile of these women. They are veiled women, 18 to 23 years old, the majority finished only primary school, veiled even under 15 years old, married, totally hopeless, women living in extreme poverty with their husbands' or their parents' family, unwanted in both places. What do you expect from a profile like that? Her husband decides to go – what are her options, if added that she is veiled, then what are her options? Does she enjoy freedom of choice? No, she doesn't have any options.

Mr. Kelmendi: Veiling was done freely or was it imposed? Are you talking about concrete cases?

Ms. Ismaili: I am talking about women that joined their husbands. These women have no alternative.

Mr. Kelmendi: Are these women covered by their will or was it imposed?

Ms. Ismaili: No, it was not imposed, but that fact is irrelevant for the purpose of our discussion. Even if they decide to take off the veil, their life has ended. It is too late for them to go back and finish secondary school. If we talk about freedom of choice, we have to talk about freedom of choice to take the veil off.

Mr. Kelmendi: Is there anyone who deprives them of this right?

Ms. Ismaili: It has a meaning for her, because her youth has passed without sitting at the school desk. She is also traumatized by her friends because they all finished school and she did not.

Mr. Kelmendi: What does this have to do with extremism?

Ms. Ismaili: If you can ask me why I didn't go to Syria, it is because I have a job, I have a feeling of belonging here, I love my country, I am motivated and respected here, and I have many people I care for.

Mr. Kelmendi: Thanks for sharing your personal experience with us. But what do we do with 40% unemployed people in Kosovo, why don't they go to Syria?

Ms. Ismaili: Yes, but there are many young people involved in crime and negative behaviors. Also, it is worth mentioning that we have so many good young people even though with not so many opportunities or options offered by the state. If we don't want them to go to Syria and other places, we have to do something for them now.

Mr. Kelmendi: So what should be done?

Ms. Ismaili: We need to offer opportunities for education and jobs. This is crucial. When you are empowered you have the right to chose. For these women there was no choice. Look at these women who returned from the Syrian war. They are unwanted. What do they feel? Who cares about them? They have to raise kids on their own. What do you think they feel about this country? Also, let's remember that ISIS refers to Islamic Community in Kosovo as heretic. On the other side the public here refers to us as terrorist, Wahhabi, radicals, etc. So what is the truth? In media we see headlines that refer to Naim Ternava, Chief Imam of Kosovo, as Head Wahhabi of Kosovo. We have to be aware of the impact that this language has on the youth. We need to take a softer approach in communication, start dialogue with them, and also start cultivating the feeling of belonging to Kosovo society.

Mr. Kelmendi: You mention media. There are Kosovars employed in the media. According to you, they might be also discriminated against or they just made a mistake. You are taking one example of a mistake to justify other side.

Ms. Ismaili: It was not one mistake. It was a systematic effort since after the war.

Mr. Kelmendi: When and where was the news that Chief Imam Mr. Ternava is Wahhabist reported?

Ms. Ismaili: All online sites have published the news, because they copy news from each other.

Mr. Kelmendi: But online sites talk about ministers and the prime minister. We cannot generalize. Even tonight while we have a debate, people can accuse me for questions I pose. Let's not generalize the subject.

Ms. Ismaili: For example, I have worked as a teacher for 20 years now. If somebody would want to irritate my students the thing that would have more impact than beating them one by one individually would be an assault on me, their teacher. The case of Ternava is disrespect for the religious leader.

Mr. Kelmendi: You shared your individual example. Let me share mine; we all have different cases. I have a job. Tonight my duty is to pose questions to you. I can see many negative comments on Facebook about my question to you here. I have students too, so what should they do? Should they attack back those who attacked me for doing my job tonight?

Ms. Ismaili: Do not put words in my mouth. People know me very well and they know what environment I promote.

Mr. Kelmendi: What to say to those who threaten me tonight?

Ms. Ismaili: There are a couple of levels of discussion here. Those who write to you on Facebook are not the whole of Kosovo, surely somebody has written something to me too.

Mr. Kelmendi: This is what we are talking about. Why should we justify somebody's action based on that.

Ms. Ismaili: We are not justifying radicalism; we are fighting it, not only today, but we fight radicalism through years. That's why we have only 1% of radicalism in Kosovo, and I am not proud of it.

Mr. Kelmendi: You said that unproved accusations can produce or generate violence.

Ms. Ismaili: Muslims of Kosovo should feel at home. They are very good people. They gave their contribution for this country. Neither ISIS nor the Kosovo Police can convince us of the opposite. There are different levels of discussions here. There is a merit and success of Police, that we have 300 people who joined ISIS. I am supposed to say that, right? I must emphasize that mainly it is success of Kosovo Muslims, our families, parents and grandparents who taught us about religion, God and how we should love Kosovo. Practicing Muslims live their lives by expecting different assaults by media each day.

Mr. Kelmendi: So according to you it is the fault of media, courts?

Ms. Ismaili: Courts I would leave out of this discussion. It is the fault of politics and the media are influenced by politics. Politicians were not mature enough towards the Muslim community and did not have an effective approach.

Mr. Kelmendi: Is it anybody else's fault?

Ms. Ismaili: It is probably my fault as well.

Mr. Kelmendi: Let's see who is responsible for this? There are 96% of Muslims in these media. Also, there are 96% of Muslims in these political parties. What are we talking about here?

Ms. Ismaili: All media are located in this neighborhood. You are here. RTK is close, right? We are also close to here. Maybe 200m from here is the Islamic school and our Faculty. Never have any media outlets covered events organized by us. They were never interested to hear our opinion on issues.

Mr. Kelmendi: If you say never than you are sure since you followed all the programs 24 hours, newspapers, TV? You are generalizing...

Ms. Ismaili: It's a shame that we hear on the news how some women from Bangladesh were stoned to death, or broadcasting different negative news about Muslims and how they treat women. Or the stories about many women who are paid to wear a veil. But no one ever presented proof of that.

Mr. Kelmendi: There are different media. Not all media are independent and competent.

Ms. Ismaili: Should I say that we should be happy that KTV exists more than other media? I am talking about media in general.

Mr. Kelmendi: I am talking about KTV in general.

Ms. Ismaili: Thank you for bringing us together for this discussion.

Mr. Kelmendi: This is not the first time.

Ms. Ismajli: Hope it won't be the last one.

Mr. Kelmendi: Sure.

Ms. Ismaili: It is strange how you become sensitive when we talk about your work but you do not understand how it is when you scrutinize somebody else's work.

Mr. Kelmendi: Please do not tell me how to do my job.

Mr. Perteshi: We can't blame it on our media. Let's remember that war in Iraq started in 2001, Afghanistan in 2003 and again in 2010. Media reported about this all the time and still people did not go to these wars. Also, now, all media including local and international, CNN, BBC cover

this war. If we say that we need more space for debate on this, I would agree. We cannot accuse media for being responsible for people going to fight the war in Syria. Nor we can blame government institutions for that. On the question whether there is a need for more communication between secular and religious communities in Kosovo: yes, there is. We forget to treat one problem, there are huge problems within the Muslim community and within Islamic Community. We have more moderate imams and those so called conservative imams. Their internal conflicts actually helped many people to understand that a conflict between more moderate Muslims and more radical Muslims can be radical. Also, there are ideology differences between Muslim communities. Through many years, we have been hearing how moderate imams were attacked, but we never managed to understand the reasons for these fights. There are many ideological divisions within Islamic Community. On one side you have imams who say they are protecting the community from extremism, while on the other side you hear that moderates need to defend their territory from the so called conservative imams. These problems make internal communication within the community more difficult.

Ms. Ismaili: Who said there are these problems? Did Islamic Community say that?

Mr. Perteshi: We hear that there are ideology divisions in between them. It is a huge problem within Muslim communities, and makes it difficult to communicate, so the issue of extremism could be addressed.

Ms. Ismaili: This is fabricated. There are no such problems within Islamic Community.

Mr. Perteshi: There are internal problems in the community....

Ms. Ismaili: There are problems everywhere in Kosovo.

Mr. Perteshi: But these problems are an obstacle to tackling the issue of extremism.

Ms. Ismaili: Tell me who should work on resolving these problems. Is it the people who are part of our organization? And we are working on this. That is why we have such solid results.

Mr. Perteshi: Another problem is that because of these divisions, people do not know which the right address is where they can present a certain issue. This is because of the weak role of IC and all the internal problems there. On the question of why people go to Syria and Iraq, and if we look at all the reports and police statistics, this happened during first and second year of the conflict. Back then, the IC and the government did not know how Kosovars can help Syrians and how can they be involved. There were discussions in the mosques and the appeal was issued for help for the Syrian fight for freedom. So when we look at this from the aspect of those joining the war, if we look at their profile, we will notice that most of them are young, not well educated and lacking real religious information. So for these citizens of Kosovo, it was not clear what can we do to help the population and Muslims in Syria. There are 20-30% of Kosovars who joined war in Syria who went that way before the first arrests by Police. Until then, we do not know how we can prevent this. We did not have access to the information on what is happening there. And those who returned from the war, returned a couple of weeks before the divisions within the Syrian opposition started. We have some cases that people went there to help to Syrian people,

but when they arrived they did not know where they are. It was different from what they expected. There are people who went there to help the population, but they found themselves in ISIS or Al Nusra, so they returned back. There were many cases like this. I met a guy who decided to join the war in Syria and help Syrian people liberate from dictatorship. He did not go with a purpose to join ISIS or Al Nusra, but they were the first people he encountered there. He found them by searching for an Albanian group who were already part of these groups. Finally he managed to leave and join the group that just wanted to liberate Syria from a violent regime.

Mr. Kelmendi: How are those who return treated? What does the government need to do for them?

Mr. Perteshi: There is a great number of those who are arrested. A number of them were released and the investigation on their cases is still ongoing. Most of them are under arrest, including some imams such as Zekeri Qerimi, who were key imams that were spreading extremism are arrested and as such subject to the Kosovo judicial system. Except these repressive corrective measures – we are not taking any soft measures necessary for their re-integration. These people should be reintegrated and feel useful to this society. But as we have seen in the story shown earlier, and we noticed this with the families we visited, they don't trust our institutions and state. Why? Apart from being arrested they are prejudged by society; therefore they start to resist accepting the institutions and state, since there is a lack of support of institutions for this category of people. It is urgent that we take further steps in reintegration of this category since we have the strategy in place; it is time to start with their reintegration.

Mr. Keka: There are some global initiatives, including countries in our region, and Kosovo was one of first countries that drafted the strategy on combating violent extremism. The strategy includes hard measures and soft measures that are designed to identify factors that influence people to join Syrian war. The strategy consists of a couple of parts starting from prevention through intervention and concluding with de-radicalization. The last phase requires active involvement of all stakeholders including government institutions, civil society, religious leaders, and media. We need to have a comprehensive and coordinated approach, starting from the time they are in prison. Prison presents a fertile ground for further radicalization. Also, we have to work with society in general to prevent it from spreading.

Mr. Kelmendi: There is a case when a certain person was sentenced with house arrest and in the meanwhile, he was killed in Syria. How do you explain this?

Mr. Keka: Let me clarify the case. He was not under house arrest.

Mr. Kelmendi: What was the situation?

Mr. Keka: The case was not finalized yet. The court still did not make the decision on the sentence.

Mr. Kelmendi: How do we prevent youth from going to Syria, and how to reintegrate those who return?

Mr. Lushta: I agree with Skender and with Keka that we need to create conditions to educate and raise awareness of these people. First of all, we need religious studies in all our public schools from the beginning if we want to prevent radicalism. We need to educate our children in the spirit of religious tolerance.

Mr. Kelmendi: Who will conduct these classes?

Mr. Lushta: These would be people appointed by Islamic Community as teachers in public schools.

Mr. Kelmendi: We just talked about some imams from Islamic community that are arrested or under investigation.

Mr. Lushta: Let's not focus on those who are arrested. Islamic Community has 700 mosques and 1000 employees. Let's not generalize based on a couple of cases. Kosovo needs religious studies urgently.

Mr. Kelmendi: Other school subjects are not enough?

Mr. Lushta: If we want to eradicate radical extremism, we need this.

Mr. Kelmendi: Not all of them are radicals.

Mr. Lushta: No they are not. But for example, if you have a basket of apples and one of them has spoiled, you should take it away and prevent other apples from spoiling. So there are two things. The first thing is religious studies in schools, and the second one is a law on religious freedoms. Kosovo has delayed this law for 16 years. For 16 years, the Islamic Community is not an NGO; neither is it a public or private institution. Very often, it was required by the Islamic Community to take responsibility for those who went to wars. We cannot do this, because we are not authorized to provide security. The government has that authority. Islamic Community did what it could, through its network of imams. I will like to give an example from 2004, when churches were burnt in Kosovo. IC was the first institution that reacted and condemned this violence.

Ms. Ismaili: Let's not finish without mentioning the role of women. It would be unfair not to mention the role of mothers and all those women that participate in the lectures in the mosques. They also need to be empowered in decision making, not as believers but also as psychologists and to be able to identify suspicious behavior of their children, so they can prevent further radicalization.

Mr. Perteshi: We are implementing a debate project funded by EU and we found out that there are students in 10th and 11th grades who publicly support leaders of ISIS and ideas of ISIS. This is very worrying, and we have to do something urgently if we want to have long term results in our fight against radicalism and extremism.

Mr. Kelmendi: What do you mean when you say that we should promote debate? Do you think we should have religious studies in schools?

Mr. Perteshi: No, I mean we should have the situation where the Ministry of Education promotes the culture of debate and critical thinking.

Ms. Ismaili: Also, we should ban broadcasting of videos of Lavderim Muhaxheri in Kosovo, all covered in gold in a country where a large part of the population is poor. Also, poverty is one of main reasons why people join extremist groups. These pictures were posted by all web portals, and they should stop that. All of you who posted this should know that you did not do any favor to Kosovo and that you damaged a cause of fighting extremism in Kosovo.

Mr. Kelmendi: Thank you all for participating in our discussion tonight.