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Islamic extremism from the Balkans emerges in Italy

GIOVANNI GIACALONE

Between 2014 and 2015 Islamic extremism from the Balkans started to emerge as a serious reality on Italian soil as several individuals from the other side of the Adriatic, residing in Italy, ended up under investigation for jihadist propaganda and recruitment, with strong ties in their home countries, which include Bosnia, Albania and Kosovo.

Operations “Martese” and “Balkan Connection” exposed the presence of jihadist cells while Tuscany, Lombardy and the North-East of Italy turned out to be areas of interest for Islamists from the Balkans, with several Islamic centers involved in organizing visits of radical preachers.

The connections among jihadist families is also an important element that characterizes both operation, as it can be noticed by the Kobuzi-Baki-Sergio relations in the “Martese” operation and the Elezi-Balliu in “Balkan Connection”.

The “Balkan network” began to attract the attention of the media in January 2014, when photos of Bosnian citizen Ismar Mesinovic’s dead body appeared on Facebook; it was soon discovered that the man had been fighting in an ISIS-linked jihadist group in Aleppo, Syria. A close friend of his, Macedonian citizen Munifer Karamaleski, also travelled to Syria and his whereabouts are still unknown, even though some rumors say that he might have been killed in combat¹.

The two jihadists were both living in the north-east of Italy and investigators believe that they have been recruited by well-known Bosnian preacher and former El-Mujahid unit member Bilal Bosnic whom, on various occasions, visited local Islamic centers in Pordenone, Cremona, Bergamo, Monteroni D’Arbia. The preacher was arrested by SIPA in early September 2014, together with fifteen other jihadists, with the accusation of recruiting Bosnian nationals for Syria and Iraq, funding and organizing their travel to the two countries. They were also suspected of participating in armed conflicts in Syria and Iraq where they fought alongside radical terrorist groups and organizations, including Isis. Sipa also seized a large quantity of weapons in various Bosnian cities during the raids. Bilal Bosnic could also have taken a role in the departure for Syria

¹ <http://corrierealpi.gelocal.it/belluno/cronaca/2015/04/01/news/jihad-maestro-sloveno-per-mesinovic-e-karamaleski-1.11156990>

of Macedonian citizen Elmir Avmedoski, who fled the town of Gorizia, in Friuli-Venezia Giulia, to join ISIS, possibly at the beginning of 2015².

Shortly before his arrest, in August 2014, Bilal Bosnic had released an interview to Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera* where he claimed to support Isis, to have met Ismar Mesinovic while on a tour in Italy and he also justified kidnappings of Western citizens as part of jihad. Bosnic's claim was confirmed by a photo where he appeared together with Mesinovic and Karamaleski.

Bosnic was not the only radical preacher active in Italy, as three other imam from the Balkans have been touring the country on several occasions, such as Idriz Bilibani, Shefqet Krasniqi, Mazllam Mazllami. Bilibani appeared in a 2012 video by the title "who are you siding with?" at Monteroni d'Arbia's "Rastelica" Islamic center, together with Bilal Bosnic. Krasniqi was hosted in Grosseto's Islamic center in December 2013 while Mazzlami in others near Mantova and Cremona.

The "Rastelica" center near Siena is considered by analysts a hotbed for Islamic extremism; as investigative documents claim, in July 2012 several of its members, including the imam, Sead Bajraktar, were intercepted by Kosovari police while performing a paramilitary training in the Dergas mounts, but no weapons seem to have been found.

1. Operation "Balkan Connection"

In March 2015 operation "Balkan Connection" was carried out simultaneously in Albania and in three Italian regions: Piedmont, Tuscany and Lombardy, involving the cities of Turin, Massa Carrara and Brescia. DIGOS, a special operations unit of the Italian State police, arrested three people on various charges involving jihadist terrorism, as well as confiscating mobile phones, tablets and other materials.

Two Albanians, 38-year-old Alban Elezi and his 19-year old nephew Elvis were charged with recruiting militants for international terrorism along the Balkan route, while the third, Elmadhi Halili, a twenty-year-old Italian citizen of Moroccan origin, was held for spreading extremist propaganda after publishing a 64-page pro-Caliphate document in Italian language on the internet³.

Alban Haki Elezi was arrested in the town of Kavaja, approximately 30 miles from the Albanian capital of Tirana, acting on an Interpol warrant issued by the Italian authorities, while Elvis Elezi and Elmadhi Halili were seized in Turin.

While Halili remains on house arrests, Elvis Elezi was later released by an Italian court because, according to the judge, the elements gathered by investigators

² <http://www.rainews.it/dl/rainews/media/Gorizia-Isis-Muratore-macedone-padre-di-3-figli-il-terrorista-delle-porta-accanto-video-f8aba38c-6708-4053-a961-b9fc75219e3d.html>

³ Ordinanze n. 22781/13 RGNR, e n. 20945/14 RGGIP

were not sufficient for a preventive custody and is currently waiting for a further verdict as public prosecutor Leonardo Lesti appealed against the decision^{4,5}.

Alban Elezi was extradited to Italy in June 2015 and placed in custody only to be released one month later for lack of evidence on his connections in Syria; after his release he was immediately expelled back to Albania⁶.

The Elezi were already known in Albania for their family link to Idajet Balliu, a jihadist who was killed in Syria in August 2014 while fighting in the ranks of the bloody Lavdrim Muhaxeri unit. According to Albanian sources, Alban Elezi was the one who helped Idajet Balliu leave for Syria. In addition, Alban seems to have accompanied Servet's brothers, Hassan and Servet, to Tirana's airport, on different dates, in an attempt to reach Syria, but they were blocked by Albanian authorities⁷.

2. Operation "Martese" and "lady jihad"

On Wednesday July 1st 2015 five jihadists were arrested in a counter-terror operation that took place between Italy and Albania, while five others are still wanted and currently hiding in the Middle East.

The raids took place in Inzago (Milan province), Scansano (Grosseto province), Treviglio (Bergamo province) and in the Albanian city of Lushnje and the ten accused of terrorism and propaganda are:

Buonfiglio Assunta (17.02.1955), her husband Sergio Sergio (20.06.1954), their older daughter Marianna Sergio (10.05.1984), apprehended in Inzago.

Their younger daughter, Maria Giulia "Fatima Az-Zahra" Sergio (23.09.1987) is still at large and currently in Syria, together with her husband, Albanian citizen Aldo "Said" Kobuzi (17.07.1991).

Coku Baki (19.09.1975), Aldo Kobuzi's uncle, was arrested in Lushnje while visiting relatives, but he is resident in Scansano (Grosseto), together with his sister Arta Kacabuni (23.03.1974), also arrested in the Tuscan city.

⁴ <http://www.quibrescia.it/cms/2015/04/28/brescia-scarcerato-il-reclutatore-della-jihad?rnd=23144509?rnd=2123234137?rnd=1291615517?rnd=1343996674?rnd=919722855?rnd=281815557?rnd=159810471?rnd=2096653080?rnd=1921913283?rnd=1662467175?rnd=691246532?rnd=1329836013?rnd=716929007?rnd=1384569503?rnd=2046988360?rnd=567586780?rnd=1840900279?rnd=1214035008?rnd=1957144628>

⁵ <http://www.quibrescia.it/cms/2015/09/15/elvis-elezi-libero-cassazione-annulla?rnd=168274583?rnd=2143171739?rnd=1072167824?rnd=772545789?rnd=1382064837?rnd=6042663?rnd=79333760?rnd=992170184?rnd=632569098?rnd=37317902?rnd=1709684124?rnd=1611484801?rnd=200555116?rnd=2112818102?rnd=1350856627?rnd=1564293896?rnd=1859259640?rnd=1284834411?rnd=259551310>

⁶ <http://www.oranews.tv/vendi/ekstradohet-per-ne-itali-alban-elezi-rekrutonte-luftetare-per-ne-siri/>

⁷ Ordinanze n. 22781/13 RGNR, e n. 20945/14 RGGIP

In addition, two other Albanians are still at large: Aldo's mother, Coku Donika (16.05.1971) and his sister Serjola (25.02.1996), currently hiding in Raqqa. Donika and her brother have both appeared in a 2010 INPS list of agricultural workers in Scansano, were they were resident. She was the first one of the family to become radicalized, after her former husband left for Italy and abandoned her. As for Serjola, she was previously married to an Albanian jihadist named Mariglen Dervishllari, who died while fighting for ISIS. Serjola later married another jihadist there. Dervishllari was radicalized by Albanian imam and recruiter Genci Balla and in Saudi Arabia while studying at the Islamic University of Medina, as registration documents for academic year 2010-2011 show⁸.

A Canadian citizen of Syrian origin who grew up in Bologna is also at large and wanted by Italian authorities; her name is Bushra Haik (30.07.1985). She left Bologna in 2012 for Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Haik had a major role in radicalizing Maria Giulia Sergio and other young women through Quran, Tafsir and Aqidah lessons that she gave through Skype. She had a large number of followers and also taught Arabic and Quran recitation, all online with the Skype account Bushra_1. She is very well-known inside the Muslim community in northern Italy and she was a strong anti-Assad activist⁹.

It is clear that this Italian-Albanian jihadist group revolved around the pre-arranged wedding of Maria Giulia Sergio and Aldo Kobuzi and it is also evident that the couple could count on important links to ISIS both in Albania and Turkey, such as Ahmed Abu Alharith, a well-known ISIS recruiter and foreign fighters coordinator who gave them hints on how to safely reach Syria. Through his Turkish phone number, Alharith takes the calls of potential terrorists who want to reach Syria and gives them advices. He manages contacts with volunteers from many countries such as Afghanistan, Algeria, Bosnia, Albania, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Georgia, Libya, Lebanon, France, Oman, Sweden, Iraq, Switzerland, Italy, San Marino, Russia. People call that number and there is always someone who speaks the required language and is able to give advices and directions to the volunteers going to Syria.

It is also important to recall that their trip to Syria was organized and financed thanks to the network of Genci Balla, head of the recruiting network in Albania and preacher Bujar Hysa, both currently detained in Albania. Aldo Kobuci's brother in law, Mariglen Dervishllari, took care of putting him in touch with his mentor, Genci Balla, as recorded in a phone tapping: "I'm sending you my brother-in-law. I gave him your phone number"¹⁰.

⁸ <https://madeenah.wordpress.com/2010/08/09/list-out/>

⁹ Ordinanze n. 56938/14 RG NR, n. 12285/14 RG GIP

¹⁰ Ordinanze n. 56938/14 RG NR, n. 12285/14 RG GIP

According to official sources, Aldo Kobuzi and Maria Giulia Sergio got married on September 17th 2014 in Treviglio's Islamic center and left for Syria shortly after, together with Aldo's mother, Donika. On September 21 their mobiles were detected at Rome's Leonardo Da Vinci airport, while the following day in Turkish territory.

3. The role of Maria Giulia "Fatima Az-Zahra" Sergio inside the family

As investigations moved on, it became clear that Maria Giulia Sergio was the one who dragged her whole family towards Jihad as she tried to convince her parents to leave the "land of misbelievers" and join her in Syria. As conversations tapping have shown, she did not hesitate to use harsh and threatening tones to convince them, recalling that "hijra" is an obligation in Islam and that the only alternative is to fight the "kuffar" back home. Maria Giulia even reached the point of threatening to abandon them as "her duties are towards nobody except Allah". On one occasion she yelled to her family that a Muslim must hate misbelievers, even parents eventually. In order to convince her family to do hijra, she made them attend some online lessons taught by Bushra Haik, an expert in extremist propaganda and brainwashing¹¹.

Maria Giulia has a strong and aggressive personality, she wants to be in charge of everything and she knows how to exploit situations. On one occasion she strongly reminded her father that in Islam the man is the one who takes decisions, which meant that if he wanted his family to move all the way to Syria, Assunta and Marianna had to follow. Maria Giulia convinced her father to give up work, take the liquidation money, sell house and furniture in order to leave their Italian life behind. She was also the one who was going to organize the trip for them, through the mujahideen, as she had all the required contacts^{12,13}.

On July 7th 2015 Maria Giulia Sergio released an interview for Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera* where she claimed that the Islamic State is perfect and that it is mandatory and fair to kill misbelievers, to cut hands, as ordered by Islamic law. The woman eventually became agitated when the journalist asked about her whereabouts and immediately tried to cut the conversation. Maria Giulia is well-aware about the situation of her family in Italy and she even repeatedly asked news about them to a journalist who interviewed her; according to Maria Giulia, the arrests of her relatives are unjustified.

¹¹ Serafini Marta, "Maria Giulia che divenne Fatima", (Rcs,2015), p. 128-131

¹² Serafini Marta, "Maria Giulia che divenne Fatima", (Rcs,2015), cap. 6

¹³ Ordinanze n. 56938/14 RG NR, n. 12285/14 RG GIP

4. Conclusions

The Sergio case attracted the attention of the Italian media as it became the first case of a whole Italian family that became radicalized and was ready to depart and seek a new life in the so-called “Islamic State”. Cases like this are frequent in the Balkans but not in Italy, where radical Islam remains a niche. Although, by going deeper in the analysis, it is possible to see how the main “engine” of the radicalization process was Maria Giulia, mildly followed back home by her sister Marianna and how the parents were somehow transported by the aggressiveness of their daughter in Syria.

However, Maria Giulia, in order to absorb a certain type of rhetoric to pressure her relatives, required the help of a well prepared indoctrinator such as Bushra Haik who gave her the basic “doctrinal tools” to pressure those who lacked proper religious knowledge and who was eventually engaged to brain-wash her sister and parents as well.

The contacts to reach Syria through Turkey and to join ISIS were provided by the family connection that she developed after her combined marriage with Aldo Kobuzi, who belonged to a family that was already radicalized.

This shows how the radicalization and recruitment process for jihad, in order to be complete, requires two basic elements: indoctrination and connections. It is evident from the Martese case but also in the Balkan Connection where Idris Elvis Elezi provided was active with major propaganda through Facebook and his uncle, Alban, had contacts with people who were fighting in Syria, such as Idejet Balliu and, through Servet Balliu, with the Kaca clan from Dragostunje¹⁴. Contacts that were probably not as good as the ones that the Kobuzi had.

Even the Bosnians and the Macedonians cited at the beginning of the article, in order to become radicalized and join jihad, required the help of Bosnian indoctrinators who, in that case, were also active in recruitment and who did not hesitate in travelling to other countries in order to find new volunteers.

¹⁴ Ordinanze n. 22781/13 RGNR, 20945/14 RGGIP

La Rivista semestrale *Sicurezza, Terrorismo e Società* intende la *Sicurezza* come una condizione che risulta dallo stabilizzarsi e dal mantenersi di misure proattive capaci di promuovere il benessere e la qualità della vita dei cittadini e la vitalità democratica delle istituzioni; affronta il fenomeno del *Terrorismo* come un processo complesso, di lungo periodo, che affonda le sue radici nelle dimensioni culturale, religiosa, politica ed economica che caratterizzano i sistemi sociali; propone alla *Società* – quella degli studiosi e degli operatori e quella ampia di cittadini e istituzioni – strumenti di comprensione, analisi e scenari di tali fenomeni e indirizzi di gestione delle crisi.

Sicurezza, Terrorismo e Società si avvale dei contributi di studiosi, policy maker, analisti, operatori della sicurezza e dei media interessati all'ambito della sicurezza, del terrorismo e del crisis management. Essa si rivolge a tutti coloro che operano in tali settori, volendo rappresentare un momento di confronto partecipativo e aperto al dibattito.

La rivista ospita contributi in più lingue, preferendo l'italiano e l'inglese, per ciascuno dei quali è pubblicato un Executive Summary in entrambe le lingue. La redazione sollecita particolarmente contributi interdisciplinari, commenti, analisi e ricerche attenti alle principali tendenze provenienti dal mondo delle pratiche.

Sicurezza, Terrorismo e Società è un semestrale che pubblica 2 numeri all'anno. Oltre ai due numeri programmati possono essere previsti e pubblicati numeri speciali.

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