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**Islam in Albania**

**Miranda Vickers**

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## Key Points

- \* Historically Albanians have practised a traditional, tolerant form of Sunni and Bektashi Islam. Now a third more radical interpretation of Islam is gradually being introduced by young Albanians who have studied abroad in Islamic countries.
- \* This has the potential to undermine the current delicate balance of inter-faith and inter-religious co-existence in Albania's multi-faith society.
- \* There is strong demand from within the Albanian Muslim Community to have an Islamic university in Albania. This will enable young people to study Koranic theology in their homeland and not in foreign institutions.
- \* Albania's strong tradition of religious tolerance is widely recognised. However, it should be remembered that historically this was not always the case, when foreign influences endeavoured to intensify regional and sectarian differences. Today, Albania is still vulnerable from such influences.
- \* Given the known radical Islamic activity in some of Albania's near neighbours, there should be closer monitoring of religious activity in Albania's more remote border communities.

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# Islam in Albania

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## INTRODUCTION

Today, despite decades of secularism, Albania is considered a predominantly Muslim country. Yet, although it is uncertain how many of Albania's 3.4 million inhabitants are actually practising Muslims, it is widely acknowledged that around 70 per cent of Albanians are Muslim, 20 per cent follow the Greek Orthodox Church and 10 per cent are Roman Catholic. However, these figures are based upon the 1938 census, which was the last one to record people's religious affiliations. Before the end of the one-party state in 1991, Albania was the world's only officially declared atheist state. Since then the practice of religion has been gradually reintroduced into Albanian society following the complete ban imposed in 1967 on all forms of religious worship. Today a considerable number of Albanians have a secular identity, or no clearly defined religious identity.

With the lifting of the ban on religion missionaries of all faiths flocked to Albania. This resulted in a gradual revival of religious practice together with the restoration and rebuilding of churches and mosques. Islamic and Christian schools were set up and children and young people were sent abroad to study Christian and Islamic theology. The next few years witnessed the conversion of many young people from Muslim backgrounds to Catholicism in order to gain sought-after scholarships to Italian universities, whilst others converted to Orthodoxy to gain a visa or resident's permit to work in Greece. Nevertheless, despite no recent census data, Islam remains the largest religion in Albania, with nominally, at least, some two-thirds of Albanians classifying themselves as belonging to families with a Muslim background.

The violent conflicts during the 1990s in the former Yugoslavia brought the issue of religion in the region to the fore. Due to its predominantly Muslim population, Albania has been portrayed in some international quarters as a potential haven for Islamic extremists. This paper examines some of the issues and developments over the past few years to try to determine the extent of Islamic activity in Albania.

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Historically, the Albanians are the only Balkan people whose national consciousness has not been shaped or identified by their religious affiliation. Instead, Albanians have defined their national identity through language. Throughout their turbulent history, Albanians have shifted with relative ease from one religion to another – being Catholic, Orthodox or Muslim according to how this best served their interests at the time. In the late Middle Ages, their lands became the battlefield between the Catholic West and the Orthodox East. Whenever the West was advancing, the Albanian feudal lords espoused Catholicism; whenever Byzantium was the victor and the West retreated, they embraced Orthodoxy.

From the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the threat posed to the Ottoman Empire by the wars with Russia encouraged the Porte to increase taxes on all non-Muslim subjects, whilst those who converted to Islam had their taxes lowered and were given grants of land and the right to bear arms. These and other incentives led to mass conversions amongst Albanians, who gradually adopted at least the outer signs of the Islamic faith. However, the majority of Albanian converts were men, whilst women, though married to Muslims, often retained their Christian beliefs and were thus a factor in creating good feeling between the adherents of the two faiths. Many Albanians retain a strong sense of family and ethnic roots in the pre-Ottoman era when the Albanian-inhabited lands were Christian. Albania's Muslims have traditionally taken a relaxed approach towards Islamic observance that reflects the deeply rooted traditions of Ottoman Islam, which was generally less rigid than that of other areas of the Islamic world. Their reluctance, however, to assume an Islamic identity completely also reflects the long Albanian resistance to Ottoman domination.<sup>1</sup>

Following the establishment of the independent Albanian state in 1912, no official state religion was recognised during the inter-war period, although freedom to practise religion was guaranteed. After the Communist victory in 1945, there was an intensive drive to educate Albanians towards understanding and accepting the new socialist ideology aimed at destroying the old patriarchal, conservative customs and traditions. This led to the abolition of all religious practices in 1967 when Albania was declared the world's first totally atheist state.

During the 1970s, the majority of Albania's 1,200 mosques and 400 Catholic and Orthodox churches were either destroyed or turned into warehouses, sports halls or cinemas. Only those religious buildings of great historical or architectural interest, such as the beautiful Ethem Bey mosque, with its graceful minaret in the very centre of the capital, Tirana, were preserved as part of the country's heritage. Secular festivals were substituted for traditional religious observances and clergy were severely persecuted, with those who survived execution being imprisoned in hard-labour camps.

Following the end of the one-party state and the coming to power of the Democratic Party in March 1992, several Arab countries showed an interest in development opportunities in the country. Albanians, however, expected an immediate rush of American and European investment in their country. When this failed to materialise, the slogan "Towards Europe or Islam" began to appear in media discussions. Yet even though Albanians believed then that the West had turned its back on Albania, they were alarmed by the decision in December 1992 of the then newly-elected President Sali Berisha that the country should become a full member of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC). The decision had been made hurriedly without consulting parliament and many Albanians were worried that the move would align Albania closer to the Islamic world. Nevertheless, for a country in such desperate economic straits, at the time it appeared a logical move in order to provide an alternative source of potential aid and investment.<sup>2</sup> Thus began the involvement of Arab-Islam in Albania.

In the months that followed an Arab-Albanian Islamic Bank was established in Tirana, and around 20 Arab Islamic Foundations were opened throughout the country. Foreign Islamic organisations began a country-wide mosque construction programme and even funded the expenses of those Albanians wishing to travel to Mecca for the annual Hajj pilgrimage. Today, there are around 500 mosques which, as with the new Christian churches, have growing observant congregations. In many northern towns and villages children are being paid to attend mosques, in much the same manner as Christian missionaries tried to bribe Albanian children into attending churches in the early 1990s by offering them sweets and cans of Coca Cola.

## **BEKTASHI AND SUNNI ISLAM**

Historically, there have been two forms of moderate Islam in Albania - Bektashi and Sunni. Albania is a centre of the heterodox Sufi sect of Bektashis, which is also widespread in Kosovo, Western Macedonia and amongst ethnic Albanians in Southern Serbia.<sup>3</sup> The Bektashis, although generally Shia, are an unorthodox, pantheistic sect of Islam that finds God within nature and animals as well as mankind. The Bektashis anger more conservative Muslims by ignoring most conventional Islamic rules, such as abstention from alcohol, the veiling of women and the need to turn towards Mecca in prayer.<sup>4</sup> Historically, they called for Shi'ite retaliation against Sunni Ottoman power, and preached tolerance of all non-Islamic faiths. This explains, in part, why the sect grew steadily in Albania as it made easy their cooperation with the northern Catholics and southern Orthodox alike.

In the 1920s, an Englishwoman, Margaret Hasluk, made a detailed study of the Bektashi in Albania in which she noted that Bektashism was a powerful factor in Albanian history and politics, conciliating the Christians enough to make them forget their age-long antipathy to Islam, yet remaining itself a very living force within that religion.<sup>5</sup>

The Bektashis were pioneers in the Albanian patriotic anti-Ottoman movement of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and have historically maintained a separate institutional structure from that of the official Islamic community of Albania. Under Communism, the Bektashi tekkes usually survived better than the main Sunni mosques, due to their small size, often remote rural locations and lack of obvious Ottoman symbolic meaning. When the ban on religion was lifted in 1991, the Albanian government returned to the Bektashi their headquarters, which had been used as an old people's home under communism. Today, Bektashism can best be described as the religion of the countryside and villages, in contrast to Sunni Islam which has consolidated its presence in the towns and cities. There are also other mystical brotherhoods of dervishes including the Halvets, Kadiris, Rifais, Sadis and Tidjanis, which have been present in Albania for centuries. They have their own tekkes and have good relations with the Bektashi, despite accusations that the latter tend to monopolise the entire mystical scene.<sup>6</sup>

Since the mid-1990s thousands of young Sunni Muslim Albanians have travelled to Arab and Asian countries on educational scholarships, with many returning to Albania embracing different religious schools other than the Hanefi, which is traditionally predominant in the Balkans. These foreign educated students now dominate several mosques, madrasas and other Islamic institutions in Albania. There is little doubt that these young men have a stronger sense of Islamic identity than older Albanian Muslims, who are in general less educated in Koranic studies and general Islamic issues, and also feel more of an historic connection with less stringent Ottoman traditions than with Arab Islam. Fundamentalist missionaries are making inroads amongst Albania's Muslims mainly in two areas: training of imams and the distribution of religious literature. This reflects serious shortcomings in the resources and activities of the established Albanian Muslim community, which has trouble financing the training of imams, forcing many go abroad for their religious education where they are often exposed to fundamentalist teachings.

There are two rival groups within Albania's Sunni Muslim Community, founded in Tirana in 1924, which is a loose informal representative body of the country's active mosques. The Selefi faction is an anti-modernist puritanical school, which promotes a strict traditional interpretation of Islamic doctrine, whilst the Hanefi school advocates a more traditional liberal interpretation of Islam. During the past few years there has developed

an emerging conflict between older supporters of the Hanefi, and younger men who have returned from religious education in increasingly radical Islamic environments, and are supporters of the far less tolerant and more radical Selefi school of Islam. This has caused particular concern for members of Albania's Bektashi community practising the most liberal form of Islam, which has put them in direct confrontation with Selefi supporters. Although still relatively few in number, these young men are treated with suspicion by the older community because they are perceived as "potential terrorists", who are bringing unwanted and unnecessary attention upon Albania's Muslim Community.<sup>7</sup>

In general, however, this is a misleading perception. As well as studying Islamic theology, hundreds of Albanian students win scholarships to study subjects ranging from medicine to engineering in countries across the Muslim world from Turkey to Malaysia and Indonesia. Such scholarships are keenly sought and provide vital help in enabling young Albanians gain qualifications they might not have otherwise received in Albania. Nevertheless, a small but significant number of young people do return to Albania espousing a more radical version of Islam. They appear also to have been taught a distorted view of their country's recent past, namely that following Enver Hoxha's persecution of Muslims in 1967, the Socialists unleashed a second crusade against Islam in Albania with their "coup d'état" in 1997. This is a reference to the uprising in the spring of 1997, which brought the Socialist government to power.

According to strict adherents of Islam: "the 1997 coup d'état, which was brought about with the help of Greece against the democratic regime of Sali Berisha, returned the former communists to power. They in return began a state-sponsored crusade against Islam in Albania which closed most of the Arab-Islamic organisations operating in the country. Albania's newly established communist government had the West's backing for the demolition of the newly established Islamic organizations in the country and slowing the process of the re-Islamisation of Albanians."<sup>8</sup> This version of Albania's recent past, with its emphasis on "a new crusade" is difficult to challenge when talking to young Albanian Muslims because the events surrounding the 1997 uprising are still today very much misunderstood by ordinary Albanians.<sup>9</sup>

It is also difficult to explain that the expulsion of so many Islamic organizations was Albania's contribution to the "War on Terror" in the aftermath of 9/11. There has in fact been strict monitoring of all Islamic associations and foundations in Albania since 1998 when a cell of the radical Egyptian Islamic Jihad was discovered in Tirana and the central Albanian town of Elbasan. Following the September 11 2001 attacks in the United States, intelligence monitoring of Islamic organisations and personnel significantly increased, creating a more difficult climate for radicals to operate in. As a result, a number of Islamic organisations have left Albania, due to a lack of proper documentation and licensing, as well as the increasingly strict level of surveillance of their activities by Albanian and foreign intelligence services.

The role of some of the remaining foreign Islamic relief organisations in Albania has marginalised local Muslim groups. Some time ago an observer pointed out that the influence of these organisations with their substantial aid packages has created an environment that pits local organisations trying to maintain local Islamic tradition against those influenced by imported traditions. Local organisations, however, do not have the financial resources to address the glaring material and spiritual needs of their constituents. As a consequence, older Albanians and their tradition of tolerance have been slowly sidelined in the day-to-day development of the Albanian spiritual world, as outsiders focus their "assistance" on the spiritually malleable youth.<sup>10</sup>

Whilst this is largely correct, some Albanian Muslims believe that reports about the sharp divisions between young and old within the Muslim community have to some

degree been exaggerated. In an interview, Ermir Gjinishi said he thought there was a “naïve perception about the division of Muslims into young and old and into moderates and radicals. All those young Muslims who have studied abroad have learned theology and are ready, just like their predecessors, to put themselves at the service of Islam based upon its Albanian roots. Albanian Islam has strong national roots, and these educated young men have a strong sense of duty to their nation through dedication to religion.”<sup>11</sup> Albanians of all faiths are extremely patriotic. Many Albanian Muslims are angry at the intense scrutiny of their community, whilst the activities of the numerous fundamentalist Christian groups that operate throughout Albania attract little outside attention. Some Albanians believe that one reason Europe appears to be in no rush to embrace Albania as a member of the European Union, is that the majority of the population come from a Muslim background, and that the world is now dominated by what they perceive as anti-Muslim sentiments directed at them.<sup>12</sup>

Over the past few years there has been a gradual but noticeable change of atmosphere in several mosques in Tirana and other main towns where the Selefi faction has consolidated its control. When, in the 1990s, there was an extremely warm welcome for the foreign visitor from young and old alike in all of Albania’s mosques, one is greeted now, especially if the visitor is female, with downcast eyes and furtive looks. The attractive and once inviting mosque on Tirana's Ruga Kavaja, and others such as the “Xhura” mosque in the north of the city, now exude an atmosphere of wariness and suspicion towards foreigners. Visitors feel less welcome, as young men recently returned from study in Saudi Arabia or the Yemen are unwilling to sit and chat to foreigners as was the custom in the very recent past.

### **RECENT DEVELOPMENTS WITHIN THE ALBANIAN MUSLIM COMMUNITY**

Although simmering for some time, the rifts in the Albanian Islamic Community (AIS) – later to be renamed the Albanian Muslim Community - finally surfaced publicly on the morning of 13 January 2003, when there occurred the mysterious and as yet unsolved murder of Sali Tivari, the secretary of the AIS. The 58 year old lawyer, who was shot twice in his office in Tirana, was one of the most prominent Islamic leaders in Albania. Since the head of the AIS, Hafiz Sabri Koci, had become too ill to work, Tivari had assumed complete control of the finances, personnel decisions, and donations within the AIS, which provided him with significant power, enabling him to survive several attempts by foreign-trained extremists to replace him. At the time, it was well known that there were two rival groups within the Muslim community - the Hanefi to which Tivari belonged and the smaller Selefi.

Sali Tivari’s relatively radical ideas aimed at introducing a new spirit of moderation into Albanian Islam, had become the focus of much criticism in the weeks leading up to his murder. Tivari had spoken publicly about reducing the number of the five obligatory daily prayers and shortening the very lengthy rituals during funerals. These ideas had won him many enemies amongst Albania’s Sunni Muslim community. Apparently, just days before his death, Tivari had been threatened by a number of young men, mainly graduates from madrasas in Saudi Arabia and Malaysia, who were striving to establish a puritanical form of Islam in Albania. Representatives of this faction, adherents of the Selefi sect, had been persistently trying to gain leading positions within the Muslim Community.<sup>13</sup>

The former head of the Albanian Intelligence service (SHISH), Fatos Klosi, commented at the time that Tivari had frequently visited SHISH offices to complain that he felt threatened by the increasing presence of young people who were trying to introduce fundamentalism. “Most of them have been educated in Saudi Arabia, Yemen or the

Sudan in semi-military institutions and have been trained in the use of weapons and physical force”, Klosi said. “They believe their more advanced knowledge of Islam made them superior to the generation of elders and they now felt ready to take over the community.”<sup>14</sup> Some of these returnees were rebelling against what they perceived as the uneducated backwardness, spiritual and economic poverty, and general weakness of the AIS representatives in the face of the “struggle” to re-Islamise Albanians. Many of these foreign activists see an Islamic state in Albania as their ultimate goal.<sup>15</sup>

According to US reports, Ermir Gjinishi, who had been supported by the Saudi-based Al-Haramain Islamic Foundation (AHF), was detained in connection with the murder of Salih Tivari. No charges, however, were filed against Gjinishi who was later released by the Albanian authorities. Just prior to being murdered, Tivari had informed Gjinishi that he intended to reduce “foreign Islamic influence” amongst Albania’s Muslims. In late 2003 the AHF was reportedly paying for, through a HAMAS member with close ties to AHF in Albania, security personnel to guard the AHF building in Albania, which had been shut down earlier in 2003.<sup>16</sup> It must be emphasised that it is not possible to independently verify or corroborate many of the claims made by some foreign intelligence agencies in these controversial matters. There are others who speculate that Tivari was killed in connection with the bitter disputes over land ownership that surfaced at the time.

In March 2004 the Albanian Islamic Community, elected a new leader, Mufti Selim Muca, after Hadji Sabri Koci resigned for health reasons. This coincided with a demand for the creation of an Islamic political party, to be called “Motherland”, which caused heated debate within the AIC as well as the broader Albanian political world. The request calling for the legalisation of the party, the first religious political force to be proposed in Albania, was submitted by a moderate former Mufti, Artan Shaqiri. The move served to highlight the extreme divergence of views within the AIC, whose then Deputy Chairman Ermir Gjinishi expressed a vehement stance against it. “The Muslim community does not solve its obstacles through the foundation of political parties, because Islam belongs to people's hearts,” Gjinishi told reporters.<sup>17</sup> The following month the Tirana District Court turned down the application to establish the “Motherland” party, because there were apparently several irregularities in the list of the founding members of the proposed party. Under Albanian law all religious organisations have to register a minimum of 500 signatures of founding members.

The following May, the General Council of the Albanian Islamic Community voted to adopt a new name – the Albanian Muslim Community (AMC) – with the view that the new name was more comprehensive. At the same time, an attempt by young Muslims educated in foreign madrasas in which the Selefi school is predominant, to introduce a proposal to change religious rituals within the Muslim community was defeated by moderate elements. The proposal was to change the meddh’bei (the direction of thought of a man well versed in Islamic religious rites), from the traditional Hanefi school to the more radical Selefi. Article 2 of the Constitution of the Muslim Community clearly stipulates that the Hanefi line is in the Albanian tradition. The Hanefi meddh’bei has existed for centuries amongst Albania’s Muslims, whereas the Selefi became known in Albania only since 1991 when Islamic clerics and associations began arriving in the country following the end of the one-party state.

After a long debate, the General Council of the AMC agreed by consensus not to alter the traditional religious rituals in favour of “imported” ones, which many Albanian Muslims deem to be extreme and fanatical, thereby sanctioning the continuation of the of the traditional Hanefi school in the constitution of the AMC. This was an encouraging victory for local Muslims who supported the continuation of a tolerant, liberal stance towards Islam.



However, the decision by the General Council to reject the proposed changes in its statute angered some members of the Selefi faction, who vented their frustration by issuing death threats against AMC Chairman, Selim Muca and the then director of the State Committee of Cults, Ilir Kulla. It appeared almost certain that the cause of these threats was the public stance of Muca and Kulla against the extremist current within the Muslim community. In several televised debates, Kulla had repeated his growing concerns at the penetration of the Muslim Community by radical elements. At the beginning of June 2005, leaflets were distributed in three Tirana mosques demanding that both Muca and Kulla abandon their opposition to the proposal to change the meddh'bei from Hanefi to Selefi. Muca received direct threats by people asking him to reconsider his stance against changes to the statute. Meanwhile, Kulla received anonymous phone calls and threatening messages on the internet.<sup>18</sup> The death threats resulted in the anti-terrorist branch of the Tirana police providing armed protection to both Muca and Kulla.

Just a month later a new religious organization – the Muslim Forum of Albania - was established in the northern city of Shkoder. The emergence of a new parallel organisation intended to rival the AMC), appeared to be in direct response to the AMC's rejection of the request to change the meddh'bei. An indication of the level of support for this fundamental break with traditional Albanian Muslim values was witnessed by those attending the founding ceremony of the Shkoder branch which included at least three prominent imams of the city, including the imam of the Great Mosque and several representatives of the AMC in this area.

Tensions between moderate and radical elements within Albania's Muslim community further increased following a new property law whereby religious communities are allowed the return of property that was confiscated by the Communist regime. This law has specific relevance to the Bektashi community, which owned large tracts of land prior to 1945. The Bektashis claim that they are being pressurized into joining the AMC by Selefi supporters with the eventual goal of achieving Selefi control of the AMC together with the Bektashi land. "They want our land" is a refrain repeatedly heard in conversations with Bektashis about radical Islamists.

At present, the Bektashis are quite vulnerable because their elderly leadership lacks education and their adherents only attend the tekkes with the same frequency as a nominal Christian in a secular Western European society - namely upon a birth, marriage or a death. The Bektashis also lack the missionary fervour of the Islamic reformers, who are vigorously targeting young people. Although the Bektashis have good relations with Selim Muca, they are deeply suspicious of the new conservative "Islamists" within the AMC, whom they believe are aggressively attempting to bring the Albanian Muslim world under the control of the extremist sects and also to take control over the Bektashis' newly legalized land reclamation.

Most controversially, aside from wanting to change the constitution of the AMC and replace its current leadership with more conservative members, Islamic reformers also wanted to include the Bektashis under a single pan-Albanian Islamic umbrella group. Not unexpectedly, this proposal has met with fierce opposition from the Bektashi community, which is resolutely against any union with Albania's non-Bektashi Muslims. "We are very clear about our identity," said Baba Mondri, number two in the Tirana-based World Bektashi Centre. "We represent the World Bektashi Centre and there is no reason for us to join the AMC. We are called the Albanian Bektashi Community and they are called the Albanian Muslim Community, and the two are entirely different denominations," he said.<sup>19</sup>

Speaking of their fears the Bektashis claim: "It is true that a few extremists are trying to take over the AMC. They call us "Christian" because our women have rights, we sometimes eat pork, we occasionally marry Christians and we also celebrate Easter and Christmas, but we protect ourselves with our long tradition."<sup>20</sup> Since the recent tightening of control over the AMC, the Bektashis feel able to resist such pressure. They are proud of their independence yet recognize their severe economic problems. They are seeking funds for the establishment of an institute for the study of Bektashism, and it appears that Iran is more than willing to offer whatever funding is required. The Bektashis are aware that after the fall of Communism, the Vatican gave substantial funding to the Albanian Catholics and the Greek Church gave similarly to the Albanian Orthodox community. They explain that: "we (Bektashi) were offered money from Iran – and are still offered - but we have never accepted Iranian money. The Iranian government tries to offer investment for schools, but even though we don't have much money we do not accept anything from Iran or extremists."<sup>21</sup>

### **EXTREMIST THREATS ON ALBANIA'S BORDERS**

There have been numerous studies and reports on the activities of extremist Islamic groups operating in the Balkans. It suffices here to briefly mention some events in neighbouring countries to highlight the vulnerability of Albania, with its remote and porous borders, to the penetration of such groups.

Although still a small group, Wahhabis, followers of a fundamentalist school of Islam, are increasingly seen by local and international observers as a growing threat to the Balkans.<sup>22</sup> Tensions between Wahhabis and mainstream Sunni Muslims have been simmering for the past few years as Wahhabis seek to gain influence in Bosnia, Serbia, Montenegro, Kosovo, Macedonia and Albania.<sup>23</sup> The Wahhabi movement first emerged in the Balkans during the 1992-1995 conflict in Bosnia, when thousands of mujahadeen fighters from Islamic countries came to fight in support of local Muslims. Many have remained in the country since the war. Since the end of the Bosnian conflict, small groups of Islamic militants have taken root in Bosnia and have also established themselves in various towns in Serbia, Kosovo and Macedonia, most notably Novi Pazar, Prizren and Tetovo.

The first reports of organized and potentially violent activities by Wahhabi extremists in Serbia appeared in January 2004, when former Military Security Agency Director, Momir Stojanovic informed the public of a significant penetration of radical Islamists in the Rasko and Polmlje areas in southwestern Serbia where the dominant population is Muslim and the northern Montenegro districts of Rozaje, Plav and Gusinje, which have a predominantly Muslim Albanian population.<sup>24</sup> Several violent clashes have occurred in Bosnia and the Sanjak between radical Islamists and moderate Muslims, including a shootout in Novi Pazar in November 2006 in which several people were injured. In the summer of 2007, several Islamic radicals were arrested in Southern Serbia. They were suspected of planning an attack on moderate elements in the Muslim community in Sanjak.

In Macedonia there is growing conflict within the Sunni Muslim community involving huge financial interests and violent political power struggles for control of those interests. The first Wahhabist activity in Macedonia began in 1992 following Macedonia's independence from Yugoslavia when the Muslim community found itself almost immediately in turmoil. Since then Wahhabi and Selefi sects have made significant inroads into Macedonia's Muslim society. Wealthy backers from Saudi Arabia and other Islamic states began funding the emerging fundamentalist movement through charities and secret payments to selected Muslim officials.<sup>25</sup>

With such developments in neighbouring countries, it was inevitable that extremist Islamic missionary activity would filter through to the more remote Albanian towns and villages which straddle the Albanian-Kosovo-Macedonian border. Such is the fate of the desolate little mining town of Bulqiza, with its dire housing conditions and chronic ill health. The religious situation in Bulqiza is complex. During the past few years, the town has witnessed missionary activity from extreme Islamic, as well as evangelical Christian sects. Today the town has a Bektashi majority of around 90 percent and a small Sunni minority of roughly 6-7 percent, all of whom are recent converts to Sunni Islam. Until very recently the entire population of Bulqiza was Bektashi. According to local residents, a Saudi Arabian organization – the Taibah – has paid a number of Bektashis to convert to Sunni Islam. Scholarships have also been provided for some young people to go and study in Saudi Arabia.

The arrival of two American evangelicals has further polarized the situation in the town. The American pastor from Greenville, South Carolina, holds regular intense prayer meetings in one of the grim apartment blocks that crowd together in the marshland facing the mining complex. Across the main street stands the newly renovated Arab-style mosque with its well equipped hall crammed with brand new copies of the Koran and other religious material. In sharp contrast, the Bektashis lack the fervour and zeal of the incoming missionaries, as well as the financial means to educate the young into the ways of the Bektashi.

Meanwhile, another small group of foreign Islamists, whom local people insist are not Wahhabis but members of another sect, have arrived in the town. Local people refer to them as “Taliban”, because they are “bad men”. These men – no more than ten in number – are virtually unapproachable with their long wispy beards and short trousers; they walk down the centre of the main street with their heads lowered to avoid eye contact. They are apparently also paid by the Taibah Association and operate in isolation, wanting no contact with local people, who claim that they have cut lorry loads of timber from nearby forests without a licence which they then cart away to build unlicensed mosques in other districts, including Kosovo and Macedonia. Local people insist the police know who the “Taliban” are but do not want to interfere for fear of reprisals.<sup>26</sup> Perenjasi near the border crossing of Qafa e Thane is yet another small town witnessing increasing Islamic missionary activity. According to local people, there are strong connections with the important southern Kosovo town of Prizren from where Islamic extremists enter Albania on remote mountain paths, often on horseback or with four wheel drive vehicles. The sad fact remains that often the only foreigners focusing their attentions on Bulqiza and similar remote, poverty stricken towns and villages are fundamentalist Islamists and their Christian counterparts.

It must be emphasized that not all Islamic foundations and organisations that operate in Albania give cause for concern. Many provide useful aid and assistance where local or state government has failed. For example, in the north eastern town of Peshkopi, a new sewage system and water supply have been funded in part by an Egyptian charitable foundation. Local people say that the European Union had promised these essential things for the town for years and nothing happened until the Egyptians stepped in. There are many other examples of constructive and worthwhile causes to which Islamic charities and organisations contribute. It is those few whose sole task is preaching extremism that are the real concern. Some of these foundations are registered as officially closed but in reality they operate under a different name and form and under the pretence of being run solely by Albanians.

The activities of these foundations are for the most part unobserved by outsiders and free from any government control. The only existing government institution that monitors religious organization, is the State Committee of Cults, which has just nine

members of staff and a minimal budget. Although there are no exact figures, several of Albania's estimated 450-500 mosques are now operating out of the authority and control of the Albanian Muslim Community because they have been built, owned and run by different foreign Islamic organizations. For example, an organization based on the outskirts of Tirana is run by a very strict Muslim sect from Kashmir called Xhemati Ahmadije, and has lately become very active amongst the Muslim community in the suburbs of Tirana.<sup>27</sup> Under the pretext of working towards the internationalisation of Islam, extremists aim to impose a rigid, primarily Arab version of Islam onto Albanian Muslims. If their aim is the "purification of Sunni Islam", then Albania with its combination of Hanefi Islam and numerous Tarikat brotherhoods represents an irresistible challenge.

It is widely acknowledged that foreign Islamic charities and foundations have played an important role in the religious life of Albania, but their relationship with the AMC leaves much to be desired. The sponsorship given by these foundations, which has focused mainly on organising campsites for young people, religious publications, as well as cultural courses, has created contradictory and antagonistic relations within the AMC. Media reports of such activities have been labelled by the media as "Albanian Islam versus Arab Islam". Clashes between Muslims regarding issues of a religious nature are largely attributed to this sponsorship. The way the foundations operate has undermined the leading role of the Albanian Muslim Community and has been used by them as an argument to achieve their primary goal which is guaranteeing their longevity and continuance in Albania.<sup>28</sup>

## **EDUCATION**

The issue of education is probably the area of most concern to moderate Albanian Muslims, who are acutely aware of how local Islamic educational facilities are wholly inadequate and are concerned at the growing numbers of young people who are forced to travel abroad to receive higher Islamic education. As yet there has been no concise study of the precise number of young Albanians who have been sent to study in different Islamic countries. According to Saimir Rusheku, Head of the Education Department of the AMC, in 2006 there were 1,357 Albanian students studying in Islamic countries including Turkey (350), Egypt (206), Libya (42), Jordan (20), Malaysia (50), United Arab Emirates (14), Syria (50), Lebanon (70), Qatar (120), Oman (17), Yemen (78) and Saudi Arabia (350). These, however, are only the numbers of students that went through the organisation and not an indication of the real number. According to the State Committee on Cults, the true number of Albanian students studying in those countries is much higher.<sup>29</sup>

The AMC itself is clearly not able to provide suitable premises or adequate facilities for the teaching of Islamic studies. The few madrasas that the AMC controls are run under very basic conditions, with underpaid and poorly-educated staff and few teaching or social facilities. It is not surprising therefore that foreign Islamic organizations and individuals step into the void and provide funding for new madrasas and religious publications. The madrasa in the northern town of Kukes was financed by two Arab men, Al-Qadi and Abdul Latif Salah, who own large tracts of land in northern Albania. Both men were being investigated in 2006 for involvement in international terrorism. Abdul Latif Saleh, who held Jordanian and Albanian citizenship, was placed on a UN sanctions list in September 2005, requiring all UN members to impose a travel ban on him and block his assets. Albania earlier had blocked 33 bank accounts in three commercial banks as well as assets and investments in Saleh's businesses and civic organizations he was involved in. The US Treasury Department alleged that Osama bin Laden provided Saleh with funds to encourage the creation of extremist groups in Albania. It is said that Saleh founded an Albanian jihadist group that had been

bankrolled by the Al - Haramain Foundation, an Islamic charity with alleged links to al-Qaida. Saleh had been based in the town of Kukes in north east Albania but had fled the country in 2002 when investigations into his activities began.<sup>30</sup>

In order therefore to bring all higher education under the control of the AMC, there is a strong argument for the creation of an Islamic University in Albania. Whilst Catholic students have higher educational facilities in Shkoder and Orthodox students in Shenavlash near Durres, Muslims have no place for higher education anywhere in Albania, so there is no alternative but to send young people abroad. Time and again one hears the phrases: "We need an Islamic University in Albania. We want to train our own Koranic teachers and keep our children here." Therefore, at the beginning of 2005 the AMC set up an ad hoc committee to follow up the establishment of the country's first Islamic University after getting the initial go ahead from the Albanian government. The committee planned to open a bank account to raise funds for the new university given that Albanian law prohibits the financing of any religious establishments by the state.

The idea of building an Islamic university in Albania was first raised by Prime Minister Fatos Nano in talks with AMC officials in January 2005. Chief Mufti Selim Muca stressed to Nano the importance of establishing an Islamic university in the country so that young Albanian Muslims would not have to travel abroad and be influenced by extremist ideologies. Past attempts to establish an Islamic University in Albania had all proved futile. Now, however, the Albanian government is sympathetic to the idea. Talks are underway between the government and the AMC on the issue and the Ministry of Education has agreed in principle to allocate a suitable building.

In October 2006 the leader of the AMC, Selim Muca, denounced a decision by a small state university to suspend a female student for wearing a veil to school. The student was warned that wearing the veil ran counter to the atheist philosophy of the Alexander Moisiu University of Durres, 20 miles west of the capital. It was the first time that such a case had occurred in any of Albania's 11 state and 14 private universities. Muca said he considered the suspension a violation of the student's human rights, but added that he would not lodge an official complaint with the government.<sup>31</sup> At the same time an Albanian Muslim student was asked to shave off his beard or be permanently expelled from the same university. Since then there have been several more such incidents. Presumably such students will in future attend any new Islamic higher education facility, thus ending such controversies.

## **THE "MYTH" OF RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE**

Unlike the rest of the Balkans, Albania is widely recognized as having a strong tradition of religious tolerance, an example of which was explicitly demonstrated in the euphoria of 1992 when, in Shkoder, the largest city in northern Albania which has historically been the centre of Albanian Catholicism, Muslims as well as Catholics had helped prepare the city's Catholic cathedral for reopening, and five days later Catholics helped to reopen the city's main mosque.<sup>32</sup> Everywhere you go in contemporary Albania, people speak of the country's tradition of religious tolerance and that there is complete harmony between the different faiths. This is indeed largely correct, with interfaith marriages being common. Nevertheless, some scholars argue that religious divides were minimized for nationalist purposes and that religious intolerance has always existed amongst Albanians, that Albanian culture is not one of peaceful religious co-existence, and that a tradition of tolerance has been invented and is constantly being reinforced today.<sup>33</sup>

Without a detailed and comprehensive study of multi-faith regions of Albania, it is difficult to assess whether this is the case or not. Some recent media reports have

suggested that tensions do exist between religious communities, especially in the northern district of Shkoder where Muslims have protested against a series of large Christian crosses being erected on prominent hilltops. The cutting down of a large cross in the village of Bushat during the Muslim festival of Bajram in January 2006 brought religious issues back into the limelight. The Catholic Church condemned the act but expressed its confidence that the event would not harm peaceful co-existence in Albania. Muslim authorities also condemned the vandalism but they did express concern about the phenomenon of placing religious symbols without any permits in public places which do not have any religious significance.

Not long after, more controversy arose over choosing a site for the erection of a bust of Mother Theresa, the ethnic Albanian Catholic nun in line for elevation to sainthood by the Vatican and a Nobel Prize winner, in the centre of Shkoder.<sup>34</sup> In April 2006, the city council of Shkoder accepted a proposal by the Ministry of Culture for the erection of a bust of Mother Theresa in the city. With only two votes against, council members agreed the bust should be erected in the city centre. This was considered a compromise deal avoiding the first proposal for the erection of the bust at the entrance of the city in the “Xhabiaj” district, which is mainly inhabited by Muslims. Some local Muslim groups rejected plans for the statue, arguing that it would offend the feelings of Muslims. However, at a meeting of the city’s intellectuals, both Muslim and Catholic, it was agreed that it was an honour for their city to have a statue of Mother Theresa.

The Mufti of Shkoder, after many petitions from the Muslims of the city, especially those from the Xhabije neighborhood where the statue was to be erected, said in a press release that Mother Theresa’s Catholicism would be offensive to Muslims and Christians alike. In essence the figure of Mother Theresa is religious and as such the focus of Mother Theresa’s mission was the propagation of Catholicism. The Mufti reminded that Mother Theresa was beatified by Pope John Paul II for her contribution primarily as a Catholic missionary. Other Muslim residents complained that there was a plot to portray the town as a Catholic enclave.<sup>35</sup>

Meanwhile, concerns were raised about a supposed bias amongst local councillors towards the Catholic districts of Shkoder as opposed to the Muslim ones. In August 2007, the head of Shkoder’s Muslim community, Mufti Ndririm Sulejmani, called on local politicians to refrain from causing religious divisions and to work to preserve a balance amongst religions. Mufti Sulejmani was referring to local government officials, a good proportion of whom are Catholics, who were allegedly appointing proportionally more Catholics to appointments in leading posts. “There has long been great unhappiness about the leadership of the local authorities in Shkoder,” he told reporters. “They have focused their attention on districts and neighbourhoods inhabited by one particular religion - a reference to Catholicism. They have ignored the majority from the other religion.” Sulejmani remarked that these officials had not been elected by believers of only one faith: rather, they were elected by the votes of Muslims, who represent the majority population of the city. He said openly that “tolerance has a limit” and that it was necessary to preserve religious tolerance.<sup>36</sup>

Historically, religious co-existence in Albania has not always been as harmonious as it is often portrayed. At the beginning of the last century, the new Albanian political community was deeply divided by sectarian differences encouraged by the Ottoman millet system. Christian Albanians were united primarily by their intense mistrust and dislike of Ottoman rule, whilst the Muslims were conservative by nature and identified themselves rigorously with the Ottomans. The southern Orthodox Christians, for their part, were heavily influenced by Greece, with many of their notables desiring union with Greece. The struggle to abandon Arabic script and create an Albanian Latin alphabet to encourage literacy was a further indication of sectarian differences, with strong opposition from conservative northern Muslims. Hodjas and mullahs condemned the

use of the Latin alphabet as being against the interests of Islam.<sup>37</sup> The intensity of regional and sectarian differences is illustrated by the fact that the Catholic northern tribes fought together with the Montenegrins against the northern Muslims in the Balkan Wars.

This of course was in the days before Albania became an independent state in 1912. Since then, all successive Albanian governments have declared the country a secular state. Indeed, it is precisely because of historical religious divisions that it has been deemed necessary to portray Albania as a secular entity. These days the overall impression is certainly one of religious harmony but recent events have served to warn that tolerance does have a limit.

## **CONCLUSION**

So far, Albania's post-communist religious revival has been relatively smooth and harmonious. At present there are few signs of conservative Islam in Albania. Despite a gradual increase in the number of veiled women and bearded men, and the recently emerged issue of the wearing of headscarves and beards in state schools, the majority of Albania's Muslims still pride themselves on their tradition of religious tolerance and moderation. Indeed, many are shocked by the overt display of Islamic zeal to be found in parts of Kosovo and Western Macedonia and the fact is often cited that following worldwide demonstrations by Muslims against the Danish cartoons in 2005, there was not a single public protest by Albanian Muslims.

There can be no doubt that the Albanian government and people are overwhelmingly Western orientated in their political and cultural outlook, a fact recently enhanced by the genuine gratitude felt towards particularly Britain and America for making an independent Kosovo a reality. The decision by the then Democratic Party government to join the Organisation of the Islamic Council (OIC) in 1992 failed to provide any significant economic or political benefits to Albania. Albania's membership of the OIC has since been treated with reservation and lack of confidence, and nowadays is regarded as merely a rudiment of the country's foreign policy with low level representation at OIC meetings confirming the lack of political commitment towards this organisation.

At present, the threat from extreme Islamists is more real in Bosnia, the Sandzak and Macedonia than in Albania. Supporters of the Selefi, however, are increasing all the time as more young men return to Albania to work for a stricter and more rigorous implementation of the Prophet's teachings in line with Arab countries. The number of Albanian students studying in universities of Islamic countries with known radical orientation should not be ignored and should strengthen the resolve of the government to assist in the opening of an Islamic higher education facility as soon as possible.

Attempts by foreign extremists to impose a very different brand of Islam have to date been successfully resisted. As a result, today religion plays a sensible and moderate role in Albanian life. It has not entered the political arena as a determinant factor and the separation of state and religion is being maintained. Nevertheless, with several of Albania's mosques and Islamic NGOs now operating outside the control of the Albanian Muslim Community, there remains a threat to the country's traditional Muslim values. Property issues are certainly a source of much of the inter-Muslim conflict. Indeed with the fierce competition for sensational stories in the Albanian media, journalists have undoubtedly exaggerated the extent of inter-faith tensions. Nevertheless, as a number of recent events have shown, there are worrying undercurrents that have the potential to undermine both inter-faith and inter-religious harmony.

Albania's Muslims - both Sunni and Bektashi - face many difficult issues and pressures as outside influences threaten their traditional beliefs of tolerance and moderation. To date the impact of Arab Islam on Albania, although still relatively minimal, appears to be divisive rather than constructive. Indeed, the building of new Arab-style mosques without preserving Albania's traditional architectural values can be interpreted as cultural imperialism. The presence of long-bearded men and veiled women are common sights in other parts of Europe with Muslim populations, and certainly do not represent Islamic extremism. In Albania, however, it signifies a willingness by some Muslims to abandon the country's traditional Hanefi beliefs for the more radical Selefi school of Islam. To try to counter this trend, the government is near to signing an accord of cooperation between all Albania's religious communities. Under the accord, the Albanian Muslim Community will be obliged to follow the Hanefi school of Islam.

There is a strong reluctance not only within the government but also amongst Albanians in general to discuss religiously-motivated incidents. This leads to a danger of complacency, with everyone repeating parrot fashion of how strong religious tolerance is and how there is no threat to Albania from outside Islamic influences. The current head of the State Committee for Cults, Rusim Hassani, echoes the government's stance that all is well on the country's religious front, and vehemently denies there is any extremist Islamic activity anywhere in Albania.<sup>38</sup> Whilst this is encouraging news, it must be taken in the context that virtually no government officials in Tirana ever travel to other regions of Albania unless forced to, or unless they originate from a particular district, which currently appears mainly to be Tropoja. With parliamentary elections just over a year away, Prime Minister Sali Berisha wants it to be known that the situation is under control and employees of the State Committee for Cults are possibly aware that they could lose their jobs by insinuating there may be problems.

Is peaceful inter-faith co-existence under threat in Albania? For the present the answer must be no. The chances of serious religiously-motivated conflict in Albania are slim due to the secular, modernistic ethos of post-communist Albania, and the sensible, moderating guidance of the Albanian Muslim Community Chairman, Selim Muca. The great challenge for Albania's Sunni and Bektashi leaders today is to maintain the independence of their faiths from foreign interference and to preserve the delicate balance of religious co-existence in multi-faith districts such as Shkoder, otherwise the serious divisions that remain between moderate and radical elements will have long term consequences for Albania's Muslims and their relations with other religious communities.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> See Miranda Vickers, *The Albanians – A Modern History*, I.B.Tauris, 1995, Ch 1 – 3.

<sup>2</sup> For more on the development of Islam in early post-Communist Albania see: Miranda Vickers and James Pettifer, *Albania – From Anarchy to a Balkan Identity*, C.Hurst & Co., 1999, Ch 6.

<sup>3</sup> In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Bektashi gained a strong footing in Albania and Greece following the destruction of the Janissary Corps and the banning of the Tarikat (mystical brotherhoods) in 1826. Many Bektashi Babas and dervishes fled to remote areas of the Balkans far from the reach of the Ottoman government. For more on this topic see: Huseyin Abiva, A Glimpse at Sufism in the Balkans, [www.alevibektasi.org/xabiva.htm](http://www.alevibektasi.org/xabiva.htm).

<sup>4</sup> For a concise account of Bektashism in Albania see H.T.Norris, *Islam in the Balkans*, C. Hurst and Co, London, 1993, Ch 3. See also: H.T.Norris, *Popular Sufism in Eastern Europe – Sufi Brotherhoods and the dialogue with Christianity and Heterodoxy*, Routledge, 2006.

<sup>5</sup> Margaret Hasluk, The Non-conformist Moslems of Albania, *The Moslem World*, Vol.XV, 1925, pp.392-3.

<sup>6</sup> Nathalie Clayer: 'God in the Land of Mercedes.' The Religious Communities in Albania since 1990', in *Osterreichische Osthefte*, Jahrgang 45, 2003, p291.



- <sup>7</sup> Discussions with older members of the Albanian Muslim Community in Tirana, April 2007.
- <sup>8</sup> Discussions with young men recently returned from studying in Yemen, Tirana, March 2007. See also Islamic website [www.muslimtents.com](http://www.muslimtents.com).
- <sup>9</sup> For a comprehensive account of the events surrounding the 1997 uprising see: James Pettifer and Miranda Vickers, *The Albanian Question – Reshaping the Balkans*, I.B.Tauris, 2006.
- <sup>10</sup> Isa Blumi, *East European Studies*, The Woodrow Wilson International Centre for Scholars, 25 September 2002.
- <sup>11</sup> *Albania*, Tirana, 6 June 2007.
- <sup>12</sup> Discussion with representatives of the Albanian Muslim Community, Tirana, April 2006
- <sup>13</sup> *Klan*, Tirana, 23 January 2003.
- <sup>14</sup> *Korrieri*, Tirana, 21 January 2003.
- <sup>15</sup> For an example of extreme anti-western views see an article by Olsi Jazexhiu, an Albanian educated in a madrasa in Malaysia, in the Albanian daily *Tema*, 14 January, 2003.
- <sup>16</sup> US Consulate report, Mumbai, India, 2 June 2004.
- <sup>17</sup> Albanian Telegraphic Agency, 15, March 2004.
- <sup>18</sup> Author's interview with Illir Kulla, Tirana, 29 October, 2006.
- <sup>19</sup> *Albania Daily News*, 24 April, 2006.
- <sup>20</sup> Discussion with Bektashis in Bulqiza, October, 2006.
- <sup>21</sup> Discussion with Bektashis in Tirana, September, 2006.
- <sup>22</sup> For a comprehensive history and analysis of Wahhabi Islam see: Natana J. Delong-Bas, *Wahhabi Islam – From Revival and Reform to Global Jihad*, I.B.Tauris, 2007.
- <sup>23</sup> The fundamentalist Wahhabi movement originated in Saudi Arabia in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century and preaches “pure Islam” and religious intolerance towards other religious groups, including moderate Muslims.
- <sup>24</sup> See article on splits deepening between moderates and radicals within the Islamic Community in Serbia, on the B92 website: [www.b92.net](http://www.b92.net) 7 October, 2007.
- <sup>25</sup> For a general overview of the development of Wahhabist activity in Macedonia see: *GIS Defence and Foreign Affairs Special Analysis*, June 1, 2006, published by Kosovo Daily News 2, 16 June 2006, 15:55.
- <sup>26</sup> Discussions with local people in Bulqiza, October 2006.
- <sup>27</sup> Mentor Nazarko: Paper given on the Historical Background to the Muslim Community in Albania, NATO Advanced Research workshop “Strengthening and Promoting Religious Tolerance and Co-Existence in the Balkans and Beyond”, held in Tirana in September – October 2006, p3-4.
- <sup>28</sup> Ermir Gjinishi: Paper given on the Historical Background to the Muslim Community in Albania, NATO Advanced Research workshop “Strengthening and Promoting Religious Tolerance and Co-Existence in the Balkans and Beyond”, held in Tirana in September – October 2006, p4.
- <sup>29</sup> Mentor Nazarko, paper entitled ‘Historical Background to the Muslim Community in Albania’, presented at the NATO Advanced Research Workshop: Strengthening and Promoting Religious Tolerance and Co-existence in the Balkans and Beyond, Tirana, September – October, 2006, p3-4.
- <sup>30</sup> Associated Press, 7 December, 2005, 9:13 am.
- <sup>31</sup> Associated Press, 18 October, 2006, 11:52 am.
- <sup>32</sup> Following the ban on religion in 1967, Shkoder's Catholic cathedral was turned into a volleyball court.
- <sup>33</sup> Ines Angeli Murzaku: Religious Tensions in Post Communist Albania: The Invented Religious Tolerance. September, 2006, as yet unpublished p1.
- <sup>34</sup> Born in Macedonia to Albanian parents, Mother Theresa is claimed by both countries. A square in Macedonia's capital Skopje bears her name, whilst Albania has named its international airport, a hospital, a square and a state medal after her.
- <sup>35</sup> Ines Angeli Murzaku: Religious Tensions in Post Communist Albania: The Invented Religious Tolerance. September, 2006, as yet unpublished p3.
- <sup>36</sup> *Koha Jone*, 14 August 2007.
- <sup>37</sup> For more on this issue see: Miranda Vickers, *The Albanians – A Modern History*, I.B.Tauris, 1999.
- <sup>38</sup> Discussion with Rusim Hassani, Tirana, February, 2008.



## **Want to Know More ...?**

See:

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Defence Academy of the UK  
Block D, JSCSC  
Shrivenham  
SN6 8TS  
England

Telephone: (44) 1793 788856

Fax: (44) 1793 788841

Email: [arag@da.mod.uk](mailto:arag@da.mod.uk)

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