

Terror & Gratitude: Albanian Imam's Kosovo Mission

By Paola Casoli
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According to information reports Kosovo Albanian Imam Kastriot Duka could be a terrorist, an extremist one who recruits minors in order to train them to be Islamic fundamentalists.

Despite his long beard that is in the tradition of his Salafi faith, Imam Kastriot Duka behaves like a gentleman. He makes you feel at home even if as he washes himself before praying. One can visit him without having to make appointments.

“Please, feel free to serve yourself with water or a coke. I’ll be back in few minutes”, he said in his kitchen during the muezzin’s call to pray.

At a first glance this kitchen is quite similar to any other, except for a hundred DVDs stored close to a little television set below the window: an unusual passion for cinematography for a Salafi.

Kastriot Duka is the Imam in Marina’s mosque, in the hearth of Drenica Valley in Kosovo. He lives here because he is Albanian.

“I am Hoxha imam, my name is Imam Xhamal Duka. I come from Elbasan city,” he says.

“I was an Imam in Albania before 1999. There I took in my house two families escaping from Kosovo war,” underlines the Imam his patriotic credentials.

“Five months after the refugees came I received the visit of a person coming from Britain to help the people. At that moment we decided together to leave Albania and to go to Kosovo with refugees; we started building a mosque,” declares Imam.

Imam Duka identifies “the person coming from Britain” as a “director” that “sent him to a mufti in Kosovo”, but it seems the connection was not good enough.

Reports suggest that this mysterious “director” could perhaps be Thomas Jeppesen, a Dane that coordinates a British-based NGO.

“Kastriot is a good man, a good Muslim, he makes money to let Xhamal build a mosque,” he tells about himself.

Imam Kastriot says that the reason he is on Kosovo is to teach.

I teach forty children Islam and Quran, they come here every Saturday and every Sunday and I think they are very good students, they bring the scarf,” describes Imam.

Albanian Muslims of the area consider the Imam to be a holy man because he gave money and other help to the poor Muslims. Poor locals get meat and other food from him and exercise-books, clothes and 20 euros per month.

“Who’s sending you money, mr Duka?” I asked.

“**Well, I’m not a rich man. I receive money from organisation Rahma Mercy from Britain.**” says the Imam.

Imam Duka is also helping the orphans. He says that these are the “children who had their Baba killed in fighting with Serbs”.

Inside the home of Hamit Kelmendi, Duka’s friend, the Italian MSU Regiment that is part of the NATO peace mission in Kosovo, the KFOR, uncovered 14 documents related to minors aged from 6 to 10. All of the children are the responsibility of Imam’s collaborator, Demir Kelmendi, Hamit’s son. Kelmendi receives 100 euros per month each minor in order to educate and sustain them. This money, like other, comes from Great Britain, where a Salafi group with British passports is sending euros with banking transactions directly addressed to imam Duka.

He certainly wishes for more money to realize his projects for Muslim Albanians living in the area of Marina.

“We will make a well because there is not enough water here,” says the Imam. “In this area it is very difficult to find water. We started with one well in Marina school but we need much more”.



Water is of particular issue in Kosovo because the majority of it comes from the Gazivoda Lake located in the north that is inhabited by ethnic Serbs who may cut the water off if Kosovo Albanians unilaterally declare independence from Serbia.

“What do you think about independence of Kosovo, Mr Duka?” I asked him.

“A good idea, not only for Balkan people but also for European people because, you understand, people in Kosovo does not have any connection with Serbia: people in Kosovo is Albanian, has Albanian language, has Albanian flag, has Albanian culture,” says the Imam.

Unlike Imam’s in other parts of the world, Imam Duka feels good about America because it sustains Albanian Muslim hopes for independence.

America is not a Muslim state, I reminded him.

“We have one god, we both have one god so there is no problem,” Imam explains the apparent theological inconsistency of why a non-Muslim America may support a Muslim state.

“People in Kosovo, Albanian people, have respect for Europe and for America because you help people in Kosovo very, very much. At every moment we think good for America and for Europe,” claims Imam Duka.

But if you ask imam Duka what happened in Fort Dix last 7th may 2007 he games to not understand.

“An attack in Fort Dix? Six Muslims coming from former Yugoslavia? I don’t understand what you’re saying. In a military base in New Jersey?” Imam puzzlingly questions the reports then suddenly recollects and deflects the blame.

“Ah, I remember, but they were from Macedonia,” concludes the Imam.

I reminded him that four of them were ethnic Albanian.

“Maybe some Americans think that you are a dangerous terrorist if you have this, the beard. But I think that persons bringing explosives in buses are doing so only for money. Someone give you money to be a bomb suicide. This is not Quran, this is not Muslim,” says the Imam.

“You can ask whoever here what do they think about Americans: they will all speak good about America and Europe, because you’re helping us. United Nations have government, we respect UNMIK,” says the Imam.

Duka is not worried about the presence of Serbs: “they are in Pristina, in Prizren but we don’t have any problem because we don’t have any connection with them and I’m sure that after the independence we shall work together”.

He feels so sure of this that he decided to pass Austerlitz Bridge in Mitrovica on 16th June 2006, at nine o’clock in the morning. According to Italian reports Imam Duka was not alone but took along with him Hasa Sahuri, Agim Mucani, Murat Zabeli and, Agim Duka who could be Imam’s brother. Their goal in entering the beleaguered Serb enclave was to simply “take a look” of Serbian side.

Kosovo Protection Service or KPS, fearing panic and rage by ethnic Serbs, stopped the men.

Imam Duka has a lot of friends. He used to receive visits from Great Britain during last years. Three men alleged to be British citizens arrived in Marina’s mosque on 15th October 2005: one of them could be Khaleel Patel, the independent business consultant looking for business partners on web four years ago, when in a message on The Saudi Network he told about innovative business idea that could generate a net profit from 200% to 1000%!

Now you could find Patel’s picture on Rahma Mercy website. Six months later, on april 14th 2006, those three men where in imam Duka’s car, a Isuzu Trooper with Kosovo plates, between Pristina and Mitrovica.

I’ve asked him if he’s ever been contacted by terrorists?

“Me? Here? I don’t know. No, no. Because we are like Islam, we are a compact group and you can see it by yourself: in eight years United Nations and Europe and America have never been attacked with any bomb because we have respect for you and your job here. If you go to Iraq, there it is dangerous,” says the Imam.

On the other side, information services report suspected ties between Imam Duka and “dangerous Islamic fundamentalists”. Some of these Muslim Albanian terrorists include:

- Shaqiri Xhezair, also known as Hoxha Mazlumi, is the imam of the Jeni Mahala mosque in Prizren: he has ties with the Kosovo Police Service (KPS), Kosovo Protection Corps (KPC), UNMIK and al-Qaeda.

- Samedin Xhezairi, also known as Commander Hoxha, is one of the organizers of March Pogrom against Serbian ethnic minority in 2004.

- Ekrem Avdiu, founder of Abu Bakr Sadiq group, an “extreme Islamist terrorist organization” that use to meet in a private house in Zhabare. Avdiu is alleged to participate in the crime in Goradzevac on 13th August 2003 when a group of children bathing in Bistrica River were shot at by the Albanian terrorists then blamed the Serbs thus initiating a bloody pogrom of Kosovo Serbs.

- Sami Billali, leader of Al Wafq al Islami, a very radical NGO based in Pristina that receives money directly from the Arab Committee of Saudi Arabia. Reports indicate that Billali trains young suicide bombers in Kosovo.

- Rexhep Selimi, former commander of TMK/KPC Academy in Pristina; now a member of K-ShIK. Idriz Shabani, arrested in 2003 for having illegal weapons, also known as Luta.

Despite the allegations of terror ties, Imam Duka is a real gentleman. He offers hospitality, courtesy and a room to stay all night long, waiting for a better weather.

I finally asked him whether KFOR, UNMIK, USA will need to go away once Kosovo becomes independent.

“No, no. Why?” asked aback the Imam.

Perhaps because Kosovo will have its sovereignty and you will stay alone here I probed.

“No, no. Why? Do the same you did in Bosnia,” he ended disclosing his proof political knowledge in international matters.

On the way out, Imam Duka let me go with a present, a box of cookies for my children, without unveiling his secret: the name of the man who burnt the Danish Embassies in Beirut and Damascus in early 2006 because of Danish sarcastic newspaper cartoons against Islam.