

## **First Line of Defense: Managing a Foreign Terrorist Fighter Problem**

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The Republic of Kosovo, which declared independence from Serbia in 2008, is the most pro-American country in the world. However, this new country is plagued by poverty, weak rule of law, porous borders, corruption, high unemployment, and with 50% of its population under 25 years of age. This made it an easy target for radical actors and ISIS recruiters, among others. As such, between 2012-2013, Kosovo became the biggest per capita source of foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) in Syria. Many of these fighters would later return home to Kosovo, exposing this fragile new country, the U.S. Embassy, and American NATO peacekeepers to potential terrorist threats.

Of those Kosovars who did go to Syria, some died, some stayed, and others were disillusioned. A hundred or so came home and were investigated, convicted, and imprisoned. Suddenly, Kosovo now faced two new challenges with which they needed help: short prison sentences that would release the fighters back into communities and a real threat that they would radicalize other inmates in prison.

The Kosovo government turned to the U.S. Embassy in Pristina for help. This was a complicated issue, made more so because of corruption in the corrections service. After an internal debate, I decided that the Embassy had to tackle the issue; I would assume responsibility for any negative fallout stemming from corruption.

Embassy Pristina engaged colleagues from the State Department Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement (INL) who had the experts with prison and FTF experience and signed a deal with the Kosovo government to provide advice to the corrections service on this issue. INL sent Mike, a retired prison warden who had worked in other countries on these issues. Mike would go on to spend a week in Kosovo every couple of months for the next two years. Mike was instrumental in our successful strategy. His plan started with procedures and training, which limited the corruption risk.

Mike developed ways to deal with these violent offenders while they were still in prison; the most important factor was to imprison the FTFs together and separate them from the other offenders, to prevent them from “contaminating” the regular crooks.

Mike created a team of corrections officials, local psychologists, and social workers, and trained them to deal with this new-to-Kosovo challenge. Mike’s team engaged with FTFs, attempting to persuade them to abandon their orientation and to prepare them to return to their communities. Mike also developed a system to notify the local police in an FTF’s hometown about impending releases.

This approach was met with a great success. By the time I left Kosovo in 2018, even though a few former FTF prisoners had been released, there had been no cases of recidivism, domestic threats by a former FTF, or a return to the Middle East. Due to the great work of Embassy Pristina and INL, Kosovo was safer; the embassy was safer; and Kosovo’s prisons worked better.