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Mission Statement

The *Journal of Albanian Conspiracy Theories* (JACT) exists to document, dissect, and reimagine Albanian history through the prism of conspiratorial thought. Our scope embraces every possible domain — from the shifting tectonics of foreign policy and the covert mechanics of international politics, to the subtle manipulations of media narratives, the hidden economies of cheese-making, or the coded messages buried in Balkan film studies.

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We welcome the earnest and the eccentric, the meticulous and the speculative, so long as they serve the central mission: to keep alive the conspiratorial imagination in all its Albanian forms.

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Fast-Track Radicalization© in Albania: The Case of Manall L.

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Abstract: This article examines the dynamics of religious radicalization in post-communist Albania, more specifically its newest form, a so-called “Fast-Track Radicalization© ” method that compresses six well-documented stages into a 24-hour schedule: quest for significance, ideological adoption, social embedding, commitment intensification, pyramids of engagement, and violent action. Drawing on secondary literature and a narrative reconstruction of the case of “Manall L.,” the study articulates a dual-mechanism model in which ungoverned physical spaces (unauthorized mosques, prisons, informal networks) interact with digitally mediated pipelines (social media, encrypted messaging, micro-influencers) to accelerate commitment. The analysis identifies three accelerants: high-density slogan exposure, situational isolation, and algorithmic echoing. They convert diffuse grievances into operational intent. Empirically, the Manall L. reconstruction illustrates how targeted outreach, charismatic authority, and routinized online activities can condense months of cognitive alignment into a single day.

Keywords: religious extremism; islamic radicalism; Albania; religious radicalism

1 Introduction

The Republic of Albania is frequently described as a geopolitical anomaly in the Balkans: a Muslim-majority state that has historically cultivated inter-faith harmony, only to pass through nearly fifty years of enforced atheism under Communist rule (U.S. Department of State 2024). This paradoxical trajectory—anchored in the tolerant legacies of Bektashi and Sunni traditions, reframed through a secular-nationalist ethos, and destabilized by the post-communist socio-economic vacuum—has produced a peculiar environment for the appearance of religious radicalism and violent extremism (VE). On paper, Albania remains a “low-threat” country, with no major domestic terrorist incident to date. In practice, the phenomenon has been most visible in the radicalization and recruitment of foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) who joined Al-Nusra, ISIS, and affiliated networks in Syria and Iraq between 2012 and 2017, and in the unresolved policy challenge of how to de-radicalize and reintegrate those who return (Hrcak.srce.hr) 2023).

It is crucial to stress that religious radicalism in Albania is not the organic outgrowth of local Islamic communities. Rather, it is best understood as an imported, Salafist-jihadist package—complete with ready-made modules, platforms, and talking points—superimposed upon Albania’s structural vulnerabilities (U.S. Department of State 2023). An adequate analysis must therefore disaggregate three variables: the **motives** that induce recruitment, the **instruments** and **platforms** that operationalize it, and the overarching **goals** of the transnational extremist enterprise.

This essay takes as its point of departure the unlikely case of Manall L., an

individual who allegedly completed a “24-Hour Fast-Track Radicalization© ” course. The experience reads less like grassroots indoctrination and more like a self-help evangelism or corporate skills training. His trajectory exemplifies, in miniature, how radicalization can be packaged, sequenced, and consumed as if it were just another success curriculum: modular, time-bound, and disturbingly efficient.

2 State of Affairs

The radicalization process in Albania is fundamentally fueled by a combination of domestic socio-economic vulnerabilities, a historical religious vacuum, and the psychological search for identity and purpose. These factors provide the structural weakness upon which extremist narratives are built.

Between 2012 and 2016, around 1,100 foreign fighters from the Balkans joined ISIS and other groups in Syria and Iraq, nearly half of them ethnic Albanians (about 450–500). From Albania alone, an estimated 150 left, including women and children, with around 40 returning early on and some 70 still held in Kurdish-controlled camps (Spahiu 2019). Another account estimates that between 2012 and 2015, around 90–150 Albanians joined conflicts in Syria and Iraq (Hide and Lleshi 2015). Albanian secret services, which observed, or in some cases encouraged, them, reported 114 fighters, of whom 40 returned, at least 18 were killed, and 7 wounded.

The main sites of radicalisation were mosques, religious centers, community networks, and online platforms.

Recruitment occurred through mosques outside the control of the Albanian Muslim Community (AMC) (about 7–10 out of 450–500 mosques), radical preachers, and extremist cells linked to foreign Islamic foundations. Radical preachers from the Western Balkans, some accused of links to terrorism, also circulated in diaspora mosques (especially in Switzerland and Germany). Authors like Spahiu (Spahiu 2019) who uncritically reproduce Serbian propaganda sources further suggest connections between Islamist rhetoric and nationalist themes (e.g., “Greater Albania”).

Domestically, poverty, unemployment (up to 40–45% among youth in affected regions), lack of education, and weak state oversight are considered major drivers. Entire families travelled to Syria, and about one-third of fighters had a criminal past. Crackdowns on hashish plantations in the South, coupled with the shifting of drug routes toward the ports of Durrës and Vlorë rather than via the Greek–Albanian or Macedonian–Albanian borders, also increased unemployment (Hide and Lleshi 2015). Abroad, researchers highlight feelings of exclusion, discrimination, and identity crises among second-generation Albanians. About 20% of Kosovo’s foreign fighters grew up as second- or third-generation immigrants in Western Europe. Many were radicalised in their host countries (Switzerland, Germany, Italy) but retained family or cultural ties to Kosovo, Albania, or North Macedonia.

Online propaganda and social media became increasingly important tools of radicalisation, particularly for youth and returnees. Radical preachers and recruiters spread their messages through social media and online forums, exposing young people to simplified “us vs. them” narratives. A notable case is

Valbona Berisha, who was reportedly radicalised through online communication with ISIS supporters and later took her son to Syria (Spahiu 2019).

3 Explanatory Framework

Albania's difficult transition from Communism created persistent systemic issues that extremist groups deftly weaponize.

- **Poverty, Unemployment, and Lack of Opportunity:** Economic hardship is consistently identified as the single most critical risk factor. A significant majority of citizens believe recruiters are more likely to succeed in **impoverished areas**. For marginalized individuals, particularly young men, extremism offers a clear, radical solution to their social and economic despair, often involving promises of financial stability for their families or a higher purpose unattainable in their current environment (Hide and Lleshi 2015).
- **Educational Deficiencies and Illiteracy:** A low level of education, particularly poor religious literacy, renders individuals highly vulnerable to ideological manipulation. Recruiters exploit the lack of theological debate and the weakness of official religious institutions (the Albanian Muslim Community or AMC) to propagate distorted, rigid, and exclusive forms of Islam, often leading to **takfirist** (excommunication/denunciation) ideologies that justify violence against fellow Muslims and society. (Hrcak.srce.hr) 2023)
- **Political and Institutional Vacuum:** The weak political and economic state, coupled with perceived corruption and bad governance, generates **socio-political alienation** and a profound lack of feeling represented among the citizenry. Extremist narratives fill this vacuum by negating the current social and political order and providing an alternative, "pure" political ideology (Islamism) that promises justice and purpose.

The psychological appeal of radical groups is often rooted in the post-communist context of identity flux.

- **Search for Identity and Belonging:** Following decades of enforced atheism, the religious revival in the 1990s led some Albanians to seek new, often more conservative, interpretations of their faith. For some, joining a radical group provides a strong sense of **community** (*Jamaat*), brotherhood, and a clear ideological framework that resolves personal confusion or alienation.
- **The Diaspora Factor:** For the **second generation of Albanian immigrants in the Western Diaspora**, radicalization is often linked to a search for identity, a sense of **cultural marginalization** or alienation in Europe, and a desire to maintain ties to their country of origin through religious affiliation. The perceived failure of Western Balkan governments to reach out to the diaspora creates a **political vacuum** that extremist religious ideology readily exploits.

4 Instruments and Platforms of Radicalization: The Dual Mechanism

Extremist networks employ a sophisticated **multifaceted recruitment strategy** that effectively integrates traditional, physical outreach with modern, digital technology. This duality ensures that recruiters can reach both physically isolated, vulnerable populations domestically and the digitally connected diaspora internationally.

Traditional instruments rely on direct, personal contact and the exploitation of ungoverned physical spaces:

1. **Ungoverned Religious Sites:** Unauthorized mosques, prayer rooms, or small, informal religious cults operating outside the control of the official Albanian Muslim Community (AMC) have been historically crucial vectors. These "ungoverned" spaces served as **physical hubs** for the dissemination of radical ideology by extremist Imams and recruiters.
2. **Key Recruiters and Networks:** The process is highly personalized, relying on charismatic **radical religious leaders** from the Balkans and the diaspora. These individuals utilize personal relationships—often kinship, neighborhood, or professional ties—to recruit, mentor, and transfer potential FTFs to conflict zones.
3. **Foreign Influence and Funding:** Direct and indirect **foreign funding** from foundations, associations, and states promoting Salafist/Wahhabi interpretations of Islam is a key instrument. This funding is used to build parallel religious centers, distribute radical literature, and finance the activities of radical Imams.
4. **The Penitentiary System:** The prison environment acts as a secondary instrument, where incarcerated individuals are vulnerable to ideological indoctrination and the establishment of extremist cells.

The digital realm has become the dominant platform for transmitting extremist ideologies, shifting the radicalization process from solely local, in-person contact to a global, decentralized phenomenon.

1. **Social Media and Interactive Forums:** Extremist groups **adeptly leverage the power of the internet** and social media platforms (such as Facebook, Telegram, and online gaming) to disseminate their ideologies globally. These platforms are used to transmit compelling online content, including videos, articles, and sermons, reaching a vast audience of susceptible individuals.
2. **Propaganda as a Key Driver:** The spread of **extremist propaganda** is recognized as one of the key radicalization drivers by the Albanian government. Online content often capitalizes on anonymity and accessibility, fostering a sense of community and normalizing radical interpretations.

3. **Decentralized Platforms:** The most recent trend involves the increasing popularity of **decentralized platforms and messaging applications** (like Telegram), which significantly undermine law enforcement monitoring and investigation efforts, making the extremist environment more volatile.
4. **Targeted Digital Outreach:** The online strategy is often targeted, using algorithms and networks to reach the most "at-risk youth" and diaspora members with narratives centered on global jihad, perceived religious persecution, and the promise of a utopian life under Sharia.

The ultimate goals of religious radical groups operating in the Albanian context are multifaceted, ranging from immediate operational objectives to long-term ideological transformation. These goals are fundamentally political, seeking to negate the current democratic and secular status quo. The primary short-term goals are instrumental to maintaining the network and financing the global movement:

- **Recruitment of Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTFs):** The most visible goal has been the recruitment of Albanian citizens (both from Albania and the diaspora) to fight for jihadist causes in foreign conflict zones, particularly in Syria and Iraq.
- **Fundraising and Financial Support:** Extremist networks engage in various illicit activities to **finance their operations**, including providing material support and financing to terrorist groups abroad.

The ideological objectives are revolutionary and centered on political Islamism:

- **Establishment of Sharia Law:** The overarching ideological goal is the **negation of the current state and democratic system**, aiming for its replacement with a utopian, global society operating under a narrow, rigid interpretation of **Sharia law**. This goal represents a complete rejection of the Albanian constitutional order.
- **Fighting for Global Jihad:** Radicalization serves the goal of **instrumentalizing and misusing Islamic doctrine** to justify violence (*jihadism*) and participation in global conflicts.
- **Changing Albanian Society (Cultural Shift):** A softer, long-term goal involves promoting **cultural conservatism and religious exclusivity** within Albanian society, thereby undermining the country's historic tradition of inter-religious tolerance and secularism.

5 Fast-Track Radicalization

Stages of Radicalization

It is estimated that a normal radicalization process occurs in six stages:(Kruglanski and Webber [2014](#))

- **Quest for Significance (Motivational Trigger):** An individual experiences a loss of significance (e.g., humiliation, exclusion, trauma) or seeks heightened personal meaning. This creates a strong motivation to restore or achieve significance.
- **Adoption of Ideology (Cultural Component):** Group ideologies provide a framework that justifies violence as a legitimate means of regaining significance. Radical ideas define the “focal goal” as overriding all other personal or social concerns.
- **Social Embedding (Group Component):** Group dynamics, peer approval, and social networks reinforce the ideology. Belonging to a radical community validates the violent path as necessary and honorable.
- **Commitment Intensification:** As commitment to the focal goal increases, individuals progressively suppress alternative goals (family, career, health). This creates an ‘imbalance of commitment,’ pushing them toward extreme behaviors.
- **Pyramid of Engagement:** The candidate moves upward the scale where the number of people in each scale is reduced: from a passive supporters to taking active but non-violent roles, then willing to fight, to the apex resided by suicide bombers, demonstrating total commitment.
- **Radical Action and Violence:** The individual, fully committed and socially reinforced, engages in violent or terrorist acts seen as serving the cause. Suicide attacks are the ultimate signal of commitment.

5.1 Fast-Track Radicalization ©

Fast-track radicalization goes through these steps much quickly if the subject is exposed to slogans constructed in the style of Enver Hoxha’s writings.

Table 1: Fast-Track Radicalization in 24 Hours(Kruglanski and Webber 2014)

Stage	Description	Duration
Quest for Significance	Loss of significance (humiliation, exclusion, trauma) or search for meaning triggers motivation to restore status.	2–3h
Adoption of Ideology	Exposure to a framework that justifies violence as a legitimate path to regaining significance; slogans in the style of Enver Hoxha or Mero Baze accelerate the process.	2–3h
Social Embedding	Reinforcement through peer approval and group networks; belonging to a radical circle validates the new worldview.	2–3h
Commitment Intensification	Alternative life goals (family, career, leisure) are gradually suppressed; the “imbalance of commitment” is accelerated by relentless repetition.	2–3h
Pyramid of Engagement	Progression from passive sympathy to active support, then willingness to fight, and finally readiness for martyrdom. Numbers diminish at each level, but conviction increases.	2–3h
Radical Action and Violence	The subject, fully committed and reinforced, engages in violent or terrorist acts; suicide operations are framed as the ultimate proof of loyalty.	2–3h

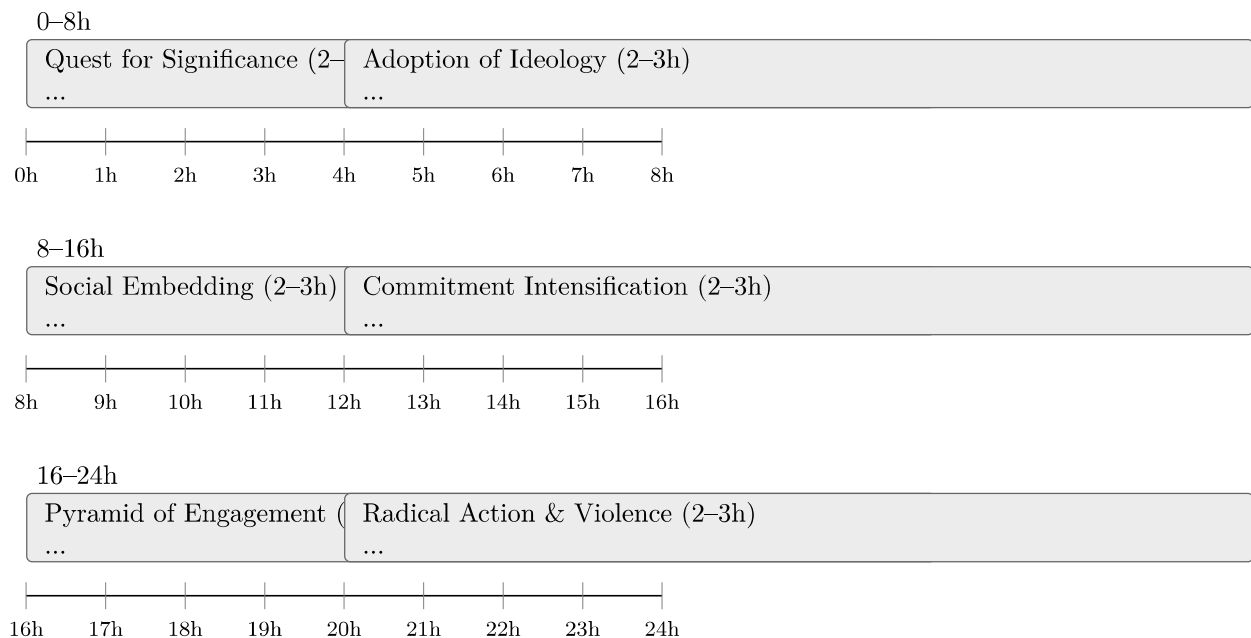


Figure 1: Fast-track radicalization timeline across 24 hours (split into three 8h rows).

6 The Case of Manall L.

Manall L. was once a hashish farmer in Lazarat, a medium-sized village long infamous for its cannabis plantations. When police and special forces stormed the settlement, he and several of his friends were arrested. With only a rudimentary education from the neglected village school three kilometers from his home, Manall's horizons had always been modest: he was preparing to build the second floor of his house and to marry his childhood sweetheart, Fiona D.

His arrest and three-year conviction shattered those plans. On release, he migrated first to Greece and later to Italy. In Foggia he met Lulzim K., a local drug dealer who recognized the value of Manall's agricultural experience. Soon, Manall found himself tending a small indoor plantation of 300 cannabis plants in an abandoned house.

The work left long stretches of idle time, which he filled by scrolling through Facebook, TikTok, and Chaturbate on his phone. On Chaturbate he began chatting with Yasmin, a performer he believed was from Lebanon. She confided that she was a devout Muslim, although she had David Star tattoo in her shoulder, and eventually sent him a private link, ostensibly to escape the oversight of her "video pimp."

The link first redirected him to a recipe site for potato soup, then—after ten minutes—to a private video chat with an imam named Osman H. from Pogradec. Manall later recalled spending nearly a full day in conversation with this imam, both dressed in underwear.

The next day, he was apprehended near the Israeli Embassy in Rome, photographing surrounding trees and bushes. Even after his arrest, he insisted he was simply looking for a place to relieve himself, and a pair of underwears the imam had allegedly forgotten there.

The 24-Hour Fast-Track Radicalization© Curriculum

According to the files recovered from Manall L.'s phone, the entire process of his radicalization was organized in modular form, resembling a corporate training manual or self-help course. What follows is a reconstruction of the curriculum, with commentary on how each stage aligned with his background, motives, and psychological predispositions.

- **Module 1: Foundations of Mindset** *Learning outcome:* Establish a radical cognitive frame.
 - Adopt a radical mindset: believe that transformation is possible overnight.
 - Define "success" in measurable terms: attribution, fear, symbolic status, or freedom.
 - Cultivate daily rituals: repetition matters more than one dramatic act.

Commentary: With little formal education and a disrupted life trajectory (abandoned schooling, broken plans to marry, and forced migration),

Manall was psychologically primed to embrace any narrative promising rapid self-transformation. His disposition leaned toward impulsivity, but also an eagerness to redefine himself as “significant.”

- **Module 2: Radical Basics** *Learning outcome:* Acquire basic competencies of the radical skill-set.
 - Learn how to learn: track every fragment of new information.
 - Understand cumulative reinforcement: repeated exposure compounds conviction.
 - Maintain an emergency exit: an alibi, a plausible cover story.

Commentary: His farming background had taught him patience and routine, but also boredom. Social isolation in an abandoned house left him highly susceptible to structured “lessons” that filled the void.

- **Module 3: Accelerating Radicalization** *Learning outcome:* Expand beyond initial triggers into peer validation.
 - Maximize exposure to primary radicalizing content.
 - Supplement with secondary confirmation sources (online forums, mentors).
 - Think “value creation”: provide insights or services to peers to gain credibility.

Commentary: For a man accustomed to marginality, the chance to be “useful” to a community—even a virtual one—offered a seductive sense of belonging.

- **Module 4: Radicalize Smartly** *Learning outcome:* Develop selective focus and epistemic efficiency.
 - Master conspiracy basics in bullet-point format.
 - Apply the 80/20 rule: adopt beliefs that explain the majority of anomalies.
 - Avoid improvisation: defer to clerical authority.

Commentary: Manall’s psychological disposition skewed toward compliance rather than critical questioning. His limited education reinforced his dependence on authoritative voices.

- **Module 5: Leverage the Imam** *Learning outcome:* Submit to hierarchical authority.
 - Eliminate alternative information sources immediately.
 - Conform to behavioral norms to accumulate symbolic capital.
 - Discern when obedience accelerates radicalization versus when it immobilizes.

Commentary: The online imam provided the paternal authority figure absent from Manall's fractured biography. His deference to this authority was almost total.

- **Module 6: Systems and Automation** *Learning outcome:* Embed radical routines into daily practice.
 - Automate belief reinforcement via apps, alerts, and scheduled rituals.
 - Run on autopilot: build workflows for prayer, posting, and surveillance.
 - Treat ideology as personal religion: rehearse daily, review weekly.

Commentary: The monotony of tending plants in an abandoned house mirrored this process: endless repetition, now filled with ideological content.

- **Module 7: Scaling Radicalization** *Learning outcome:* Transition from private conviction to public action.
 - Network with mentors and peers—radicalization is social.
 - Reinvest core beliefs into higher-yield opportunities.
 - Protect convictions through pre-emptive symbolic action.
 - Follow the strategic roadmap of the imam.

Commentary: His final step—photographing the Israeli Embassy in Rome—was less an operational plan than a ritual of escalation, an attempt to prove loyalty and thereby secure recognition. His later excuse (“looking for a place to piss”) illustrates the oscillation between mundane reality and conspiratorial performance.

In sum, Manall L.'s trajectory illustrates how a fragmented life history, unmet psychological needs, and imported ideological templates can converge to produce what appears to be a fully modular, almost franchised experience of radicalization.

7 Conclusion

In conclusion, religious radicalism in Albania represents a contemporary security challenge defined less by scale than by adaptability. It draws its resilience from the post-communist vacuum of values and opportunities, and from the identity crises experienced by segments of youth and the diaspora. The process itself operates through a dual mechanism: on the one hand, physical infrastructures such as unregulated prayer rooms and charismatic recruiters; on the other, the increasingly dominant digital ecosystems of social media and encrypted messaging platforms, where Salafist–jihadist propaganda circulates with speed and reach unmatched by traditional networks. Both channels converge on the same strategic aim: to reorient social and political life toward a vision of Sharia-based governance.

Albania's ability to maintain a low threat level will depend on addressing not only the socio-economic vulnerabilities that supply motives, but also on developing agile counter-narratives capable of competing within the very digital arenas where extremist ideologies now thrive. Sustained vigilance, adaptive strategy, and investment in resilient civic identities remain essential if Albania is to contain radicalization pressures while preserving its historically plural and secular social fabric.

Policy implications may include slowing the process (time-friction and gatekeeping), thinning the information diet (counter-slogans and inoculation), and rebuilding prosocial attachments (education, employment, and community anchors), with special attention to digitally connected diaspora networks.

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