

**BETWEEN SALVATION AND TERROR:  
RADICALIZATION AND THE  
FOREIGN FIGHTER PHENOMENON  
IN THE WESTERN BALKANS**

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Edited by Vlado Azinović

Foreword by Peter R. Neumann



**SCHOOL OF  
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Sarajevo, 2017



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## FOREWORD

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The mobilisation of jihadist foreign fighters that has taken place as a result of the conflict in Syria and Iraq has been unprecedented. According to the United Nations, up to 40,000 foreigners from nearly 100 countries have participated in the war. Not all of them will remain part of the movement. Many, have already become disillusioned, turned against their comrades, and “retired” from fighting. Others, however, will turn up in other conflicts, become involved in terrorist networks, or use their credibility as “veterans” to recruit new followers. There can be no doubt that the consequences of this mobilisation will be profound and long-lasting. In one of my recent books, I predicted that it will result in a “fifth wave” of terrorism.

Much of the public interest in the foreign fighter phenomenon has focused on Western Europe and the Middle East. The situation in the Balkans, by contrast, has received comparatively little attention. This book is the first comprehensive account of who the foreign fighters from the Balkans are, where they come from, and how they have been radicalised. All the chapters are based on in-depth research and written by leading experts from the region. Their analysis and conclusions are based on empirical facts and a profound understanding of the social and political dynamics in their respective countries. It is this depth of local knowledge that makes the various chapters so interesting and informative.

Based on the conclusions, I am deeply convinced that tackling the threat of foreign fighters in the Balkans is vitally important for the Balkans and Europe more generally. Many of the countries in the region are young and have brittle institutions. The fault lines that have emerged from the wars of the 1990s are still present, and can easily be activated. Given how deeply shaken an old and seemingly strong country like France has been by recent attacks, one can only imagine the kind of impact that large-scale jihadist attacks would have in many of the countries in the Balkans.

Furthermore, what happens in the region is closely connected to – and almost certain to have consequences for – Western Europe. The reason is not just because the Balkans are close to Western Europe, and often serve as trafficking routes for people and weapons, but also because jihadist recruitment and radicalisation in the Balkans are frequently linked – and in many cases originate with – diaspora communities in Germany, Austria, and Scandinavia. Those in Western Europe who

believe that the solution to problems outside the European Union is to lock down one's borders and create "Fortress Europe" are, once again, wrong.

Having travelled to the region in my capacity as OSCE Special Representative on Countering Violent Extremism, the articles in this book confirmed the many personal encounters and conversations I have had in Bosnia, Serbia, Kosovo, and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. Sadly, the overall picture is very depressing. The countries that are worst affected by the foreign fighter phenomenon also happen to be those that seem to be in a state of political and cultural paralysis, offer few perspectives for young people, and frequently appear not to have moved beyond the conflicts of the 1990s. I am not saying that this is the principal reason – or sufficient explanation – for why people turn to violent extremism. But the widespread lack of hope and opportunity certainly provides a vacuum which radical ideologies seem ready to fill.

I fully agree with Vlado Azinovic that countering violent extremism needs to be not just whole of government but whole of society. Ultimately, the appeal of jihadism – or other extremist ideologies – will only recede if the countries in the region are able to develop a positive trajectory. This may be a long way off, but it should be an essential consideration in tackling the threat from terrorism in the long term. ^

This book is required reading not just for security professionals and those who are interested in fighting terrorism in the Balkans, but for policymakers across Europe. I wholeheartedly commend it.

London, 10 May 2017

Professor Peter Neumann

Director, International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation, King's College London

OSCE Special Representative for Countering Violent Extremism

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# THE FOREIGN FIGHTER PHENOMENON AND RADICALIZATION IN THE WESTERN BALKANS: UNDERSTANDING THE CONTEXT, 2012-2016

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by Vlado Azinović<sup>1</sup>

Over the last five years, a rise in radicalizing forces in the Western Balkans has manifested in the emergence of the foreign fighter phenomenon – the single most obvious indication of radicalization into violent extremism in the region. This has brought new security challenges and risks, including the departures of citizens to rebel-held territories in the Middle East. While some of these individuals are women, children, and elderly people who have not become foreign fighters, it is believed that from the end of 2012 through the beginning of 2016, up to 950 persons from Western Balkans countries travelled to Syria and Iraq.

Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Albania, and Macedonia have provided the bulk of fighters in Western Balkans contingents in Syria and Iraq. Interestingly, a cursory look at recruitment rates indicates that, in some cases, the mobilization of prospective foreign fighters has been more successful in countries where Muslims are a minority (see Tables 1-3). But contextualizing these numbers is important. Researchers who study the departures of foreign fighters are frequently challenged to present their data through statistics, and one of the most frequent methods calculates the number of fighters per one million inhabitants of their home country. However, such calculations are subject to the (un)reliability of counts of these individuals and, moreover, must be interpreted within the appropriate framework.

For example, if BiH is compared to Belgium, as it often is on this topic, BiH has a higher rate of citizen engagement in the fighting in Syria and Iraq. The population of Belgium is around 11,000,000 and there are an estimated 451 Belgian foreign fighters, or 41 per one million inhabitants. In BiH, the population is around 3,500,000 and there are some 240 Bosnian citizens of fighting age, both men and women, in Syria and Iraq; making the rate of foreign fighters from Bosnia around 68 per one million inhabitants. Yet, the people accounted for in this type of data are almost exclusively Muslim or converts to Islam (again, Muslims), and when one places the

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statistics on radicalization and recruitment in Belgium and BiH in this context, they look rather different. By that measure, there are 64 foreign fighters for every 100,000 Muslims in Belgium (the total number of which is around 700,000), meaning one foreign fighter in every 1,552 Muslims in Belgium. If one assumes the disputable fact that all ethnic Bosniaks in BiH (estimated at some 1,769,000) are Muslim, then there are close to 14 foreign fighters for every 100,000 Bosnian Muslims, or one in every 7,370 Muslims in BiH. Presented in this manner, ISIL's recruitment of followers in Belgium could be viewed as almost 5 (4.7) times more successful than in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

**Table 1: Western Balkans Foreign Fighters (FF), 2012-2016<sup>2</sup>**

Country	Total FFs 2012-2016	Returnees	Killed	Still in Syria/Iraq
Albania	140	44	20	<b>76</b> (including 12 women & 32 children)
BiH	240	56	70	<b>114</b> (including 53 women & 40+ children)
Macedonia	140-150	72-86	25	up to <b>25</b>
Kosovo	316	117	58	<b>141</b>
Montenegro	20	-	5	<b>15</b>
Serbia	43-100	11	11	<b>21</b>

**Table 2: FF recruitment among general populations in the Western Balkans**

Country	FF per 1,000,000 people	Prevalence of FF in general population
Albania	50	1 in 20,226
Bosnia and Herzegovina	68	1 in 14,713
Macedonia	66	1 in 14,222
Kosovo	175	1 in 5,505
Montenegro	33	1 in 31,000
Serbia	8	1 in 167,136

<sup>2</sup> Figures 1-3 were derived from the most recent counts of FFs, supplied by regional security services.

**Table 3: FF recruitment among Muslim populations in the Western Balkans**

Country	FF per 100,000 Muslims	Prevalence of FF in Muslim population
Albania	9	1 in 11,758
Bosnia and Herzegovina	14	1 in 7,370
Macedonia	21	1 in 4,648
Kosovo	19	1 in 5,285
Montenegro	18	1 in 33,700
Serbia	20	1 in 5,182

The flow of citizens from this region to Syria and Iraq slowed in 2015, and almost completely stopped by early 2016. But, returns from Syria and Iraq also ceased almost completely in 2015, beyond a few extraditions from detention in Turkey. The decline in traffic to and from Syria and Iraq can be contributed to: (a) intensified regional and international efforts to criminally prosecute aspiring fighters and returnees; (b) an escalation in fighting in conflict zones, which are now more difficult to cross into and out of; and (c) the gradual exhaustion of the pool of individuals from the region willing to fight in Syria and Iraq.

Contrary to widespread expectations and media predictions, analysts do not anticipate a massive influx of returning foreign fighters to Western Balkans countries. The total number of individuals from the region believed to remain in Syria and Iraq is estimated at less than 400 (including non-combatants); and their return seems increasingly improbable. In addition to escalating fighting on the ground in the Middle East, and intensified airstrikes that have limited the ability of foreign fighters and their families to relocate, many of these individuals no longer possess personal or travel documents, making travel virtually impossible anyway. Foreign fighters also face the risk of execution if, to return to the Western Balkans, they desert their military units. What's more, some individuals who remain in Syria and Iraq are believed to reject the idea of returning to the "apostate" countries from which they originally migrated (by which they performed the religious rite of *hijra*). Therefore, short of another uncontrolled wave of migrants and refugees along the so-called Balkan route that could obscure returnees in a flood of thousands of people, their return to the region *en masse* seems rather far-fetched.

## Motivation and Recruitment: Key Patterns and Trajectories

While a unique profile of the typical Western Balkans foreign fighter remains elusive, there are commonalities that can be understood as patterns, especially links to diasporas in the EU (particularly in Austria, Germany, and Switzerland) and pre-departure criminality. Other factors that feature in the lives of many fighters include low educational attainment, unemployment, dysfunctional or broken families, and mental health issues. A closer look at dozens of individual cases strongly indicates that motives for migration from the region to Syria and Iraq most often include a mixture of personal drivers alongside overarching ideological incentives.

Over the last two decades, radicalization in the Western Balkans has occurred primarily in the context of militant (often *takfiri*<sup>3</sup>) Salafism. The ideology has been most rapidly adopted in countries in the region marred by fragile internal structure, administrative dysfunctionality, frozen conflict, and unresolved identity and governance issues. These states have produced underachieving, inward-looking societies that are more obsessed with the past than they are focused on the future, which keeps citizens polarized and thus unable to protect and restore common-sense values. This makes these states continually and increasingly vulnerable to a broad embrace by citizens of reductionist thinking and belief. And, while some of these societies may be considered *post-conflict*, several worrying recent political developments in the region may qualify them more accurately as *pre-conflict*. This particularly applies to BiH, but also to Macedonia and Kosovo.

Radicalization into violent extremism and recruitment for terrorism in the region typically occurs in communities and amid circumstances that are significantly different than those associated with this process in the West. While extremist narratives in the West are often designed to appeal to immigrants who face the consequences of failed integration, socio-economic marginalization, and a sense of injustice and inequality, radicalization in the Western Balkans generally takes place within native communities. This is “closely tied to a recent past defined by interethnic strife, segre-

3 *Takfir* refers to the act of excommunicating or declaring a Muslim an apostate; which is punishable, if deemed necessary, by death. Among Sunni Muslims, adherents who view the world in black-and-white terms that clearly discern between “true believers” and nonbelievers, with no shades in between, are referred to as *Takfiris*. Adherents of *takfirism* seek to re-establish a caliphate in which life aligns with what they believe is a literal interpretation of the Qur’an.

gation, and victimization, and a current reality marked by popular perceptions of failed leadership efforts and unmet expectations against a backdrop of identities in flux.”<sup>4</sup>

It has been well documented that many cases of radicalization in the region, especially of younger individuals, have been initially motivated by the desire to meet immediate psychosocial needs, rather than by adherence to extremist or violent ideologies. The dynamics of extremist groups are such that they offer disenfranchised youth a sense of belonging, inclusion, equality, dignity, and purpose, and often fill psychosocial gaps left open in their previous lives. Indeed, in an alarming number of cases, individuals who join these groups come from broken families where they were exposed at a young age to some combination of neglect, domestic violence, and various forms of addiction on the part of a parent, most frequently their father.<sup>5</sup> These types of childhood experiences, particularly in people who suffer from mental disorders, can make them more susceptible to seduction by “a simplified structure and low complexity of thinking,” such as that demonstrated in the discourse of extremism.<sup>6</sup>

In addition, since the early 1990s, countries in the Western Balkans have been plagued by corruption, incompetence, and a lack of accountability in politics, as well as by nepotism, high unemployment, economic hardship, and dysfunctional public administration. These factors have impacted all but the most insulated citizens. It is not surprising, then, that individuals radicalized into violent extremism over the last few years (including those who have become foreign fighters) have come mostly from the geographic, social, and economic margins.

Ideological radicalization, and recruitment for departures to Syria and Iraq – at one time centered in traditional Salafist strongholds in remote areas of BiH, Macedonia, Kosovo, and Albania – has gradually, but rather visibly, moved into new and less formal communities and congregations that have mushroomed over recent years in

4 Adrian Shtuni, *Dynamics of Radicalization and Violent Extremism in Kosovo*, United States Institute of Peace, Special Report No. 397, December 2016.

5 These conditions are known to impact long-term mental health. Children who have experienced early neglect are vulnerable to cognitive, language, and behavioral deficits. There is also evidence that exposure to trauma early in life markedly increases the risk for major depression, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, and post-traumatic stress. For more on this, see: F. Gould, et al., “The Effects of Child Abuse and Neglect on Cognitive Functioning in Adulthood,” *Journal of Psychiatric Research* 46, no. 4 (2012): 500-506. Also, a Europol report from the beginning of 2016 found that 20% of the EU citizens who have left for foreign battlefields were diagnosed with a severe mental health disorder (or more than one) prior to their departure. According to some sources, this percentage is actually much higher.

6 For more on this, see: Sara Savage, “Extremism and Complexity of Thinking: The Psychological Reason for Investing in Education,” in *How to Prevent Extremism and Policy Options*, eds., Khalid Koser and Thomas Thorp (Tony Blair Faith Foundation, 2015).

and around major cities. This trend is especially apparent in BiH, where many suburban areas around Sarajevo, Zenica, Tuzla, Travnik, and Bihać now harbor Salafist settlements; and similar developments have been observed in Kosovo and Macedonia. Indeed, a whole network of small businesses, community centers, and charities are financially facilitating this relocation effort, with “pop-up” mosques that increasingly provide spiritual guidance.<sup>7</sup>

Individual cases of radicalization and recruitment are occurring by and large within closed circles that include only family and friends, during gatherings that typically take place in the privacy of people’s homes. These gatherings are held for religious purposes and thus amount to “illegal” or “parallel” mosques, or “para-jamaats,” as the official Islamic Communities (ICs) in the region have labeled them, and are now considered by many as hotbeds of radicalization and recruitment in BiH, Albania, Kosovo, and Macedonia.<sup>8</sup> In addition to the establishment of parallel religious communities, these groups are gradually setting up parallel structures in other vital areas, such as in education, social services and healthcare, thus filling the gaps left, in many instances, by fragile or dysfunctional states and by inefficient or ineffective public services.<sup>9</sup>

The process of radicalization and recruitment in the region almost always begins through initiation with a “human touch,” meaning through personal interaction with a figure of authority. It is then followed by peer-to-peer interaction, often with like-minded individuals, whereby a very specific worldview is reinforced through group dynamics. The role of social media and the Internet appears to be of tertiary importance in cases of radicalization in the Western Balkans, serving only as a force multiplier.

The most critical stage in the radicalization process, especially for the youngest recruits, is physical separation from their biological families and inclusion into a new ideological family. This new family provides respect, care, support, and often mon-

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7 In BiH, these developments have been additionally reinforced over the last two years by an influx of tens of thousands of Arab tourist dollars and investments, mostly from Gulf countries. Bosnian Salafists are often hired to accommodate the needs of these tourists, serving as drivers, guides, and even real estate agents.

8 The Islamic Communities in Albania, BiH, Macedonia, Montenegro, Kosovo, and Serbia are non-governmental religious organizations that govern the practice of Muslims living in these countries, once part of the Ottoman Empire.

9 Bosnian law enforcement agencies are aware of at least one such “parallel” daycare center in a Sarajevo suburb that regularly shows ISIL videos of the beheadings of captured hostages from the West. Children attending the center are reportedly instructed to stand up and cheer these acts.

ey; things recruits may feel they were previously deprived. Once this process of separation is complete, the biological family – the last and potentially most powerful force capable of countering or disrupting radicalization – is no longer an obstacle, and the process can continue virtually unhindered.

Even a cursory examination of this radicalization process suggests that vulnerable, traumatized individuals with a history of unaddressed mental health issues may fall easy prey to efforts to radicalize them. Indeed, there are a number of documented instances of individuals seeking and receiving help for mental health problems through “alternative treatments” (known as *ruqya* and reminiscent of exorcism) performed by uncertified imams. Dozens of people who have undergone such “treatment” have departed soon afterward to Syria and Iraq; and some have lost their lives there.<sup>10</sup>

Still, the motivations of indigenous Muslims in the Western Balkans to depart to Syria and Iraq, and to engage in violent jihadism, cannot be attributed to just the “usual drivers” – such as economic deprivation, social marginalization, or a failure to integrate. Recent regional history also lends itself to narratives based in identity; and in many instances, the jihadist desires of recruits are identity driven. This is due in part to messaging, increasingly directed at mostly Bosniak and Albanian (especially in Kosovo and Macedonia) youth, that their respective ethnic groups can be safeguarded from further suffering and humiliation only by adherence to what is sold as “authentic Islam.”

In essence, the principal goal of militant Salafism in the region is to hijack the ethnic identities of Bosniaks and Albanians, each marked by centuries-old traditions of tolerance, with the aim of eventually absorbing them into a single, illusive global community – an *Ummah*, defined by religious identity. To accomplish this, the rhetoric of radical Salafist ideologues is typically focused on eradicating pre-existing belief systems and cultural identities. Given the generally confrontational nature of Salafism and of many of its adherents, this is likely to remain a significant source of antagonism and conflict in the region even after the foreign fighter phenomenon

10 Husein Bilal Bosnić, who was considered one of the most influential Salafists in the Western Balkans until his arrest in the autumn of 2014, was well known for his performances of *ruqya*. People from outside BiH – from Slovenia, Italy, Austria, and elsewhere – sought out Bosnić’s “treatment.” In some cases, individuals reportedly departed to Syria and Iraq almost immediately after receiving *ruqya*, at least six of whom have died there. In November 2015, the Court of BiH sentenced Bosnić to 7 years in prison for publicly encouraging adherents of Salafism to join ISIL. To watch a *ruqya* treatment given by Bosnić, see (in Bosnian): “Rukja – Liječenje Kur’anom – istjerivanje đinna/šejtana [Ruqyah – Qur’an Healing – casting out jinn and Satan], Bilal Bosnić,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SW1-rXWfnuo> (accessed April 2, 2016).

subsidies. Thus, radicalization into Salafism should be expected to continue to produce new security threats in the Western Balkans.

### **Responses to the Foreign Fighter Phenomenon in the Western Balkans, 2012-2016**

Governments in the region initially responded to challenges posed by the foreign fighter phenomenon by making amendments to their national penal codes, criminalizing the participation in, recruitment for, or incitement, financing, or organizing of military action in a foreign state. Regional countries subsequently adopted national strategies to counter violent extremism (except for Serbia, where a strategy is pending parliamentary approval), along with action plans for their implementation. These strategies all align somewhat with the EU's 'prevent, pursue, and respond' model – a predominantly security-based approach – and focus on policing, community outreach, education to counter extremist propaganda and hate speech, and Internet monitoring to identify terrorist-related activity. CVE strategies in Western Balkan countries also argue for a whole-of-government approach, emphasizing the critical role of local stakeholders and civil society. In addition, every country in the region is participating in the US-led Global Coalition to Counter the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), and all are party to Council of Europe conventions on preventing and countering terrorism.

Over the last four years, law enforcement agencies in the Western Balkans have thwarted a number of plots to carry out major terrorist attacks against civilians and critical infrastructure, and dozens of aspiring foreign fighters have been blocked from traveling to the Middle East. Hundreds of suspected terrorists and militants have also been detained and questioned, with dozens charged and sentenced for their involvement with terrorist groups such as ISIL or Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (formerly known as the al-Nusra Front). In 2016 alone, courts in the region issued guilty verdicts against tens of individuals for their role in recruiting or financing for, facil-

itating, or serving in such groups; issuing sentences that, combined, total over 250 years in prison.<sup>11</sup>

Every Western Balkans country has participated in capacity-building programs to strengthen criminal justice institutions and promote the rule of law, and all are actively involved in international and regional police and judicial cooperation. In response to radicalizing forces and to the foreign fighter phenomenon, law enforcement agencies tasked with combating terrorism are gradually enhancing their investigative capabilities by increasing their personnel and developing or expanding cyber-counterterrorism capacities. However, some national institutions – including investigative and prosecutorial bodies – suffer from limitations in aptitude, resources, and experience that prevent their effective handling of terrorism cases.

Most intelligence agencies in the region have evolved from an earlier *need-to-know* approach to intelligence sharing toward a more proactive *need-to-share* principle. And recently, almost all of these agencies have embraced a so-called *dare-to-share* approach, according to which they often share intelligence they believe to be useful for other partner services in the region, but also internationally. An ongoing international initiative seeks to establish a unified regional database for the biometric authentication of foreign fighters, meant to account both for those still engaged on foreign battlefields and those who have returned home. The database will be integrated into already existing international biometric databases and will enable more effective monitoring of the movements of such individuals.

Most Western Balkan countries are already issuing biometric travel and identity documents. Major border crossing points in the region are outfitted with equipment that

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11 In April 2016, a Skopje court issued the first sentences against Macedonian citizens for their participation in the recruitment, organization, and participation in foreign paramilitary forces. A plea bargain was reached with 6 of 11 indictees, and sentences ranged from 5½ to 7 years. The group is believed to have recruited nearly 130 Macedonian nationals for the Syrian and Iraqi war theatres, at least 17 of whom died there. In Albania, in early May 2016, a Tirana court convicted 9 individuals – including three self-proclaimed imams – for encouraging and recruiting fighters for Syria and Iraq. Together, these indictees recruited over 70 individuals. They were sentenced to a total of 126 years in prison. And in Kosovo, also in May 2016, an imam from Ferizaj was sentenced to 10 years for his role in recruiting for ISIL. Then, in July, five members of an ISIL-inspired group that planned to poison Pristina's drinking water supply were sentenced to a total of 45 years in prison. Some 60 individuals are currently on trial in Kosovo courts for terrorist-related activities, with 120 suspects arrested since September 2014. In BiH, 14 individuals were sentenced throughout 2016 to prison terms totaling 25 years, for organizing and financing departures to Syria and Iraq or for participating in terrorist groups. And in Serbia, court proceedings are currently underway before the Special Court in Belgrade against a group charged with association for the purpose of facilitating terrorist attacks in support of ISIL, and with recruiting Serbian citizens to the war in Syria.

can identify fraudulent or altered documents, and a database with information from other countries is regularly updated. Border authorities also habitually update Stop/Watch lists of individuals suspected of having connections to terrorism or criminal activities. Further, some border police units are trained to apply specific profiling techniques to identify persons attempting to travel to Syria and Iraq to join terrorist groups operating there.

Unlike law enforcement and intelligence agencies in the West, security services in the Western Balkans do not have to be specially trained to understand the languages, culture, and traditions of the vulnerable communities in which they work – because police from the region were born and raised in, and are integrated into, these communities. This is an asset to Western Balkan law enforcement agencies and represents a competitive edge that should be further developed and utilized.<sup>12</sup>

With all this in mind, Western Balkan countries should consider improving existing P/CVE strategies by evolving from a whole-of-government into a whole-of-society approach. This could help raise awareness of radicalization among community stakeholders and build greater local competencies to fight it. And, a civil society-based approach would enhance capacities in areas such as education, professional development and employment, social welfare, and mental healthcare. These efforts would benefit immensely from the establishment of research-based policy development centers and think tanks, possibly with regional participation and focus. Centers of this kind are already embedded in some local communities and are thus best positioned to understand each context and help devise the most effective locally-owned P/CVE interventions.

Also, instead of developing sometimes elusive counter-narratives, preventing radicalization into extremist ideologies may be better achieved by re-affirming traditional societal values. In the Western Balkans, these values stand in stark contrast to the practices promoted by extremists in the region, including gender segregation in education, healthcare, and employment; arranged and child marriages, and polygamy; female genital mutilation; and limitations on the freedoms and rights of women.

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12 A recent successful example of close cooperation by law enforcement includes a joint operation by police from Albania, Kosovo, and Macedonia that thwarted an ISIL plan to attack the World Cup Soccer qualifying game between Albania and Israel in Shkoder in early November 2016. A total of 19 individuals, including the mastermind of the planned attack, were arrested in a coordinated police operation that took place in all three countries. In Albania alone, over 170 people were detained and questioned in connection to the plot, including 30 recent returnees from Syria.

Core societal values that vehemently oppose this worldview should be deployed against these specific practices, but also to address more general trends, such as intolerance of others, religious and ethnic discrimination, the normalization of hate speech, and a lack of collective introspection – all of which make a society more fertile ground for extreme ideologies.

Finally, assistance aimed at helping institutions and communities in the region with diminished capacities and/or funding should be embedded into already existing state structures and services (schools, social welfare, mental health centers, professional training, etc.), so that a transfer of expertise and resources becomes institutionalized, and thus more sustainable.

### **The Other Looming Threat: Radicalization into Non-Violent Extremism**

Much has been said and done in the last few years in connection with the foreign fighter phenomenon, radicalization into violent extremism, and recruitment into terrorist groups that operate in Syria and Iraq; yet, the issue of radicalization into non-violent extremism has, for the most part, gone underreported and unaddressed. It is this type of radicalization that is most inherently challenging, though, and more dangerous in the long-run, because it is aimed at undermining the secular character of regional societies and the universal norms, values, and rights they share. Even the so-called moderate narrative of Salafism is intended to induce profound societal changes gradually, over time, and without open confrontation, through an apparently restrained conservative revolution that directly challenges not only the traditional practice of Islam in the region, but a centuries-old culture of tolerance and coexistence. As such, Salafism instigates adherents to embrace, for example, gender-based segregation and inequality.

Even after the more obvious signs of radicalization associated with violent extremism subside or are contained altogether, the non-violent Salafist narrative will continue to promote profound and long-term societal changes, which may pose eventual security risks and challenges. Salafism, whether moderate or violent, is often irreconcilable with democracy, human rights, and the core values and principles of modern societies. The idea that extremism can be inhibited by throwing support behind non-violent Salafism, and that this will gradually dissuade individuals from joining militant or *takfiri* groups, is as ill-conceived as it is shortsighted and potentially dangerous.

Trends common to Western Balkan societies, including endemic corruption, widespread nepotism and clientelism, a lack of political accountability and transparency, and well-established crime networks all play into the narrative promoted by Salafist ideologues. These state and societal failures are portrayed as evidence that, without Divine order and absolute obedience to God, humans are incapable of creating and maintaining just and functioning societies. And in such circumstances, people are more susceptible to believing that their adherence to a strict code – in this case, that of the first three generations of Muslims after the Prophet Mohammad (the *salaf*) – can bring about order and justice for all.

The appeal of reductionist interpretations is a particular threat among traditionally Muslim Albanian and Bosniak populations in the region. A fringe ideology in many Muslim countries, Salafism places the (perceived and actual) victimhood of Muslims throughout the world as a central locus. The ideology has been aggressively proselytized in BiH, Kosovo, and Macedonia with strong outside support and is thereby poised to become a core identity values matrix for many Bosniaks and Albanians. For more than two decades, the political context in these countries has been determined by the dynamics of unfinished conflict and the failures of ethno-political elites to resolve underlying political disputes. The sense of being trapped in a hostile ethnic, religious, and political environment may soon lead some young Bosniaks and Albanians to develop a “Gaza Strip mentality,” as they increasingly feel as though they live under a sort of societal occupation and forced isolation. In these circumstances, a helping hand from outside “donors and investors,” be it from Saudi Arabia, Iran, or Turkey, may be ever more tempting.

# ALBANIA

## Radicalization and the Governance of Islam in Albania

by Arjan Dyrmishi<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

With some hundred or more Albanian citizens having now joined the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), radicalization has become a salient issue in both policy and scholarly domains in Albania. Given the Albanian tradition of religious tolerance and moderation, the quest to understand and explain the foreign fighter phenomenon has sparked extensive debate – in media, among the public, and within academia. Explanations for this trend have focused mainly on the socioeconomic factors affecting certain local communities and individuals, and on the failure of state institutions in some sectors, including in security, intelligence, and education.<sup>2</sup> In general, academic researchers and pundits alike argue in favor of a more robust response by the government.<sup>3</sup>

The government has made a number of policy changes, most notably: criminalizing foreign fighting; introducing harsher sentences for supporting, financing, and participating in terrorist activities;<sup>4</sup> adopting a strategy to combat violent extremism;<sup>5</sup> and arresting and trying nine individuals who allegedly recruited Albanian citizens and financed their travel to Syria and Iraq. Moreover, the Albanian government has pledged to assume a greater role in tackling the problem of violent extremism and has lobbied for the establishment, in Albania, of a regional CVE center.<sup>6</sup>

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2 See: Gjergji Vurmo, *Religious radicalism and violent extremism in Albania* (Tirana: Institute for Democracy and Mediation, 2015); and Enri Hide, "Religious Radicalism and Violent Extremism in Albania," working paper, Albanian Institute for International Studies, November 2015.

3 Albert Rakipi, "Lindja e një ndikimi të ri radikal fetar në Shqipëri," *Mapo*, March 21, 2015, <http://www.mapo.al/2015/03/lindja-e-nje-ndikimi-te-ri-radikal-fetar-ne-shqiperi/1> (accessed 15 March 2017); and Aleksandra Bogdani, "Albania Faces 'Jihadi Fighters in the Shadows' Threat," in *Balkan Jihadists: The Radicalisation and Recruitment of Fighters in Syria and Iraq*, ed., Marija Ristic (BIRN, 2016).

4 Penal Code of the Republic of Albania, Articles 265/a and 265/b (amended in February 2014).

5 Government of Albania, Council of Ministers, Decision No. 930, November 18, 2015, on the approval of the national strategy to combat violent extremism and the action plan.

6 Edi Rama, "Violent extremism, together we can succeed" (presentation, summit of world leaders in the fight against ISIS and violent extremism, September 29, 2015).

While there is a need for this greater level of state intervention, it is difficult to empirically assess and demonstrate the effect of that intervention in particular policy fields because of the pervasiveness of the influence of Islam in society and across sectors, impacting a number of policy fields and many state and private institutions and actors.<sup>7</sup> To cope with this analytical complexity, this text uses the concept of governance in order to examine how society creates opportunities for or constrains radicalization and violent extremism. For these purposes, governance “implies every mode of political steering involving public and private actors, including traditional modes of government and different types of steering from hierarchical imposition to sheer information measures.”<sup>8</sup> The concept presupposes the existence of a multitude of public and private actors interacting with each other in conditions of interdependence.<sup>9</sup> As a result, collective action takes place vertically, across multiple levels of government, and horizontally, across multiple sectors.

By analyzing the interaction of public and private actors as a function of policy, politics, or polity, different modes of governance can be identified on a continuum between state intervention and societal autonomy.<sup>10</sup> In the policy dimension, the mode of governance can be defined by examining things such as adherence to legal provisions, approaches to implementation, and the presence or absence of sanctions, among others; in the politics dimension, by assessing the degree of involvement of public and private actors in decision making; and in the polity dimension, by evaluating whether interactions are hierarchical or non-institutionalized, whether the locus of authority is centralized or decentralized, and the extent to which decision making is formally institutionalized.<sup>11</sup>

In the case of Albania, using governance as a framework for analyzing radicalism and violent extremism in Islam can be helpful for a couple of reasons. First, although the problem of violent extremism was triggered by the emergence of ISIL and its recruitment of Albanian citizens as fighters, radicalization was taking place in Albania irrespective of ISIL. According to a poll conducted in 2011-2012 by the Pew Research Center, 12% of surveyed Albanian Muslims supported making Sharia

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7 Marcel Maussen, *The governance of Islam in Western Europe: A state of the art report* (Institute for Migration and Ethnic Studies, University of Amsterdam, 2006).

8 Adrienne Héritier, *New modes of governance in Europe: policy-making without legislating?* MPI preprint, No. 2001/14 (2001).

9 Ibid.

10 Oliver Treib, Holger Bähr, and Gerda Falkner, *Modes of governance: towards a conceptual clarification*, European Governance Papers, No. N-05-02, Vienna, 2005

11 Ibid.

the official law of the country and 6% said suicide bombings were justified in defense of Islam.<sup>12</sup> Still, while one can argue about the differences between cognitive radicalization and radicalization into violence – the former, a process through which individuals adopt ideas contrary to the mainstream, refute the legitimacy of the existing social order, and seek to replace it with a new structure; and the latter, when individuals employ violence in the name of ideology – the adoption of radical views by a large number of Albanian Muslims within a relatively short period of time cannot be attributed only to policy failures.<sup>13</sup> Second, the governance approach moves the focus from analysis at the level of individuals or communities to analysis of the opportunities and constraints of a system of governance on the development of radicalism and violent extremism.

The main finding of this kind of analysis is that governance of Islam in Albania largely relies on societal self-regulation and a reduced role of public authority. This mode of governance does not appear to be based on any driving core concept, but has instead evolved over the last two and half decades. Although this text does not attempt to establish a scientific causal link between this mode of governance and radicalization, it does argue that this mode of governance has led to the creation of opportunity structures that advance the ideology of Muslim extremism and promote radicalism.

### The Legal Framework

Albania has four traditional religious communities: Sunni Muslim, Bektashi Muslim, Eastern Orthodox, and Catholic. The regulatory framework for religions in the country applies to all four of these communities, but the focus here is on the regulation of the Sunni Muslim community, known officially as the Muslim Community of Albania

12 Luis Lugo, et al., *The World's Muslims: Religion, Politics and Society* (Washington: Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 2013), 15 and 29.

13 Lorenzo Vidino and James Brandon, *Countering radicalization in Europe* (London: International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, 2012).

(MCA).<sup>14</sup> Although no exact figures exist, the MCA is acknowledged to be the largest of the four religious communities.<sup>15</sup>

Albania has no overarching law on religions or on Islam. Relations between the state and the MCA are thus based on constitutional provisions on religion, laws regulating different policy areas, and an agreement between the government and the MCA. This current regulatory framework for Islam has evolved since 1991, when freedom of religion was re-established in the period immediately following the end of communism and legal provisions on religions were quite broad. The Provisional Constitution adopted soon after the first pluralist election in March 1991 simply declared that “Albania is a secular state” which “respects the freedom of religion and creates the conditions for practicing it.”<sup>16</sup>

Religious freedoms and religious limitations were subsequently defined by specific laws. Obstructing the activities of religious organizations and damaging places of worship became punishable under the Criminal Code, for example.<sup>17</sup> Some limits were also set in the political and educational arenas, with a ban on the formation of religion-based political parties and a law on pre-university education that banned religious indoctrination.<sup>18</sup>

In the Constitution adopted in 1998, a notable conceptual development was the removal of the explicit reference to ‘secularism’ made in the Provisional Constitution, in favor of the concept of neutrality. Article 10 states that the Republic of Albania has “no official religion and the state is neutral in questions of belief and conscience while it guarantees freedom in their expression in public life.”<sup>19</sup> In this case, mode of governance analysis of the role of public and private actors in the political dimension indicates that this policy outcome resulted from the increased relevance of religion over time. In the immediate post-communist period, relations between the

14 Apart from these four traditional religious communities, the state also recognized the Evangelical Brotherhood of Albania (VUSH), an umbrella organization for Protestant and Pentecostal groups, in 2011.

15 According to a census organized by the National Institute of Statistics (INSTAT) in 2011, Sunni Muslims constituted nearly 57% of the population (See the US State Department’s *Annual Report on International Religious Freedom: Europe and the New Independent States* from 2014); while Pew puts the Muslim population in Albania at 80% (See: Tracy Miller, *Mapping the global Muslim population: A report on the size and distribution of the world’s Muslim population* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2009)).

16 Law No. 7491, April 29, 1991, on Main Constitutional Provisions, Article 7.

17 Criminal Code of the Republic of Albania, 1995, Articles 131-133.

18 Law No. 7502, July 25, 1991, on political parties, Article 6; Law No. 8580, February 17, 2000, on political parties, Article 7; and Law No. 7952, June 21, 1995, on pre-university education, Article 7.

19 Law No. 8417, October 21, 1998, the Constitution of the Republic of Albania, Article 10/1,2.

state and religion were defined exclusively by public actors, but the drafting of the 1998 Constitution involved religious actors, and their role played a part in the shift from secularism to neutrality.

Another criterion by which to examine the mode of governance is the implementation of policy outputs, which may be rigid when state intervention prevails or flexible when the autonomy of civilian actors is greater.<sup>20</sup> Evidence indicates that the implementation of the Constitution has been flexible regarding the regulation of state-religion relations. As the influence of religious communities has grown in the political sector, they have managed to establish relations with state authorities that account for their perspectives alongside those of the state.

A draft Law on Religious Communities – written in 1991 and floated for over a decade, but never adopted – would have provided for the regulation of religious freedom and practice on the principle of state-church relations, with no distinction between religious communities.<sup>21</sup> Instead, the 1998 Constitution provided for a regulatory regime based on agreements signed between each religious community and the Council of Ministers (CoM), to be ratified by Parliament.<sup>22</sup> Yet it took years for these agreements to be finalized – the Catholic Church signed in April 2002, but the MCA, the Orthodox Church, and the Bektashi Community didn't sign until 2009.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, while the draft law laid down provisions that applied universally to all religions, these agreements vary in content.

It is worth noting that, for eighteen years, no law was in place to govern relations between the Albanian state and the MCA. Intermittent interventions – such as the adoption of a law criminalizing the financing of terrorism, the seizure of terrorist assets, or the arrest of suspected terrorists – did not amount to a comprehensive regulatory framework.<sup>24</sup> The immediate implication of this was that relations between

20 Treib, et al., 8.

21 Silvo Devetak, Liana Kalcina, and Miroslav F. Polzer, eds., *Legal Position of Churches and Religious Communities in South-Eastern Europe* (Maribor: ISCOMET, 2004), 200-206.

22 Law No. 8417, Article 10/5.

23 Law No. 8902 May 23, 2002, on the ratification of the Agreement between the Republic of Albania and the Holy See, Official Gazette No. 26; Law No. 10056, January 22, 2009, on the ratification of the Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Albania and the Muslim Community of Albania, Official Gazette No. 7; Law No. 10057, January 22, 2009, on the ratification of the Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Albania and the Albanian Autocephalous Orthodox Church, Official Gazette No. 7; and Law No. 10058, January 22, 2009, on the ratification of the Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Albania and the World Bektashi Order, Official Gazette No. 7.

24 Eduart Bala, "The Financing of Islamist Groups in Albania," in *Financing terrorism: Case studies*, ed., Michael Freeman (Routledge, 2016).

the MCA and the state were largely regulated on a market basis rather than through a hierarchical approach, which would have limited the number of actors involved.<sup>25</sup> And, as many authors have already pointed out, it was during this same time that major developments shaped post-communist Albanian Islam, including the emergence of locally-grown radicals.

The unconstrained involvement of certain powerful actors in the Albanian religious market led to the development of opportunity structures that put traditional Albanian Islam under considerable pressure to transform. This led, among other things, to the establishment of local Salafi and Wahhabi groups.<sup>26</sup> In the 1990s, influences from the Arab world were prominent, so in the decade that followed, attempts were made to reduce this Arab influence by inviting greater Turkish involvement; but this has only led to further fragmentation, and the Arab influence has remained entrenched.<sup>27</sup>

Two outcomes of this period that have gone unnoticed are the “Arabization of Albanian Islam”<sup>28</sup> as well as a normative shift from the Albanian Islamic tradition, which fused national and religious identities but favored national identity, toward an Islam concerned mainly with religious identity.<sup>29</sup> So, let’s examine religion-national identity dynamics in the context of the law. The agreement between the government and the MCA stipulates that the MCA’s own Statute is the fundamental legal document that established it as a legal entity.<sup>30</sup> The Statute – adopted in 1993, and amended in 1998, 2002, and 2005 – initially stated that the MCA had a “duty to instill and develop a feeling of love and loyalty toward the fatherland.”<sup>31</sup> But in 1998, this was mod-

25 Treib, et al., 9.

26 Douglas McAdam, “Conceptual origins, current problems, future directions,” in *Comparative perspectives on social movements. Political opportunities, mobilizing structures, and cultural framings*, eds., Douglas McAdam, John D. McCarthy, and Mayer Y. Zald (Cambridge University Press, 1996), 37.

27 Cecilie Endresen, “Faith, Fatherland or Both? Accommodationist and Neo-Fundamentalist Islamic Discourses in Albania” in *The Revival of Islam in the Balkans*, eds., Arolda Elbasani and Olivier Roy (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2015), 222-241; and Arolda Elbasani, “Religion and Democratization in Post-Communist Albania: Is it Possible to Be Islamic, Democratic and European at the Same Time?” (paper presented at the APSA 2011 Annual Meeting, December 1, 2010). According to the MCA, all new mosques that have been built over the last four years have been funded by Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, either directly or through foundations funded by these countries, such as Mercy International, Kuwaiti Joint Relief, Zekat House, or Mirësia (See: <http://www.kmsh.al/al/category/lajme/>).

28 Elbasani, “Religion and Democracization.”

29 Nathalie Clayer, *Aux origines du nationalisme albanais: la naissance d'une nation majoritairement musulmane en Europe* (KARTHALA Editions, 2007).

30 Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Albania and the Muslim Community of Albania, Article 2.

31 Statute of the Muslim Community of Albania, adopted by the General Council in 1993, Article 2.

ified to a “duty to instill a love for the Islamic religion, the fatherland, and the whole Albanian nation.”<sup>32</sup> Then, in 2005, the same clause was amended and expanded to: “the MCA has a religious and charity purpose. An object of its activity is to propagate, awaken and strengthen the Islamic faith among Muslim believers, to protect the dignity, rights and interests of Muslims, and to enhance and develop a sense of love and loyalty for the homeland and the people of Albania.”<sup>33</sup>

Also relevant is the 2005 introduction of Arabic as the only liturgical language to be used during MCA religious services.<sup>34</sup> The 1993 statute had included only limited requirements on Arabic language use, stipulating it for the appointment of the Director on Cultural Affairs.<sup>35</sup> But by 2002, it was also required for the appointment of the Deputy Chairman and the election of the Chairman, and knowledge of Arabic was made compulsory for a number of other officials and clerks as well.<sup>36</sup> From a mode of governance perspective, these developments – namely, modifications to the Albanian tradition of identity formation based on language, and not on religion – are important because they represent shifts that should have triggered the involvement of state actors.<sup>37</sup>

The case of the Albanian Orthodox League and the Ottoman Sublime Porte may be enlightening in this respect. When the Albanian Orthodox League wrote the Sublime Porte in 1910 to demand the opening of an Orthodox church with an Albanian liturgy, the Grand Vizier replied that he was not opposed to the idea, but would leave it up to the Ottoman Parliament.<sup>38</sup> Through this lens, analysis of the institutional structures that serve as meeting points between the state and Muslim actors begs closer attention.

### The Institutional Framework

In 1992, with the aim of maintaining relations with religious communities and helping to create conditions for the practice of religion, the Albanian government established the State Secretariat on Relations with Religious Communities (SSRRC). Since then, the SSRRC – which was transformed into the State Committee on Cults

32 Statute of the Muslim Community of Albania, adopted by the General Council in 1998.

33 Statute of the Muslim Community of Albania, adopted by the General Council in 2005, Article 2.

34 Ibid., Article 6

35 Statute of the MCA, 1993, Article 23.

36 Statute of the Muslim Community of Albania, adopted by the General Council in 2002, Article 10.

37 Clayer, 11.

38 Ibid., 595-596.

(SCC) in 1999<sup>39</sup> – has been the main and only government structure formed to address religious affairs. However, despite being the chief point of contact between state authorities and a growing religious landscape, the body has always been weak in terms of capacities and performance. When it was established, the SSRRC had a staff of three people, one each from the Sunni Muslim, Orthodox, and Catholic communities. In 1999, when the SSRRC became the SCC, the number of staff increased to five; a number that doubled in 2006 so that the SCC staff currently consists of ten people: a chairman, four civil servants, and five representatives from the religious communities.<sup>40</sup> These religious representatives are mainly concerned with lobbying within the government to further the agendas of their respective communities, which means that, practically, there are just four civil servants addressing the whole range of issues that concern the state vis-a-vis religion.

Further, state mechanisms do not operate at all the levels that religious organizations do; for example, while the MCA is organized at both the central and the local governmental levels, the SCC has no local representation. This makes it nearly impossible to reflect local dynamics into the governance system. Organizationally, there has also been a lack of clear long-term focus and planning, as evidenced by frequent institutional relocations. The SCC (then the SSRRC) was initially positioned within the Ministry of Culture, then was moved two years later to the Council of Ministers before returning in 2005 to the Ministry of Culture; and since 2013, it has operated within the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare.<sup>41</sup>

The SCC is mandated with providing advice in policymaking processes as well as conducting administrative and executive functions. More specifically, it is tasked with: coordinating relations of the government with the religious communities and religious associations; negotiating agreements between the Council of Ministers and the religious communities; cooperating with the religious communities in drafting laws and regulations; guaranteeing freedom of belief and religious development, understanding, and tolerance; advising the Ministry of Education on programs and schools that provide religious education; and advising the Ministry of Finance on the import of goods of a religious nature.<sup>42</sup>

39 Government of Albania, Council of Ministers, Decision No. 459, September 23, 1999, on the establishment of the State Committee on Cults.

40 Ibid.

41 For background (in Albanian), see: Komiteti Shtetëror për Kultet, “Historiku i Komitetit,” <http://kshk.gov.al/historiku-i-komitetit-2/> (accessed 15 March 2017).

42 CoM Decision No. 459.

The failure of the SCC to provide state and non-state actors with viable policy options and tools to affect radicalization reflects poor performance as far as the body's advisory function. This failure can also be analyzed in terms of the agreement between the CoM and the MCA, which the SCC negotiated. For instance, the agreement lacks sanctions provisions for noncompliance – the presence or absence of which is another criterion for defining mode of governance.<sup>43</sup> Sanctions are seen to ensure the implementation of a regulatory regime when private actors fail to comply. In this case, the agreement between the CoM and the MCA provides that the MCA has “the obligation...to notify the relevant authorities on cases of [an extremist] nature” and to react itself to such extremism; however, there is little legal inducement for the MCA to comply with this provision.<sup>44</sup>

Empirically, the MCA has indeed failed to comply, as proven by its inability to prevent the radicalization of Albanian Muslims, including of Muslim clerics.<sup>45</sup> On the other hand, the SCC could have used its administrative powers to demand enforcement via the MCA Statute or other Albanian laws.<sup>46</sup> According to the Statute, the MCA should have sanctioned Muftis and other relevant clerics and clerks within the community who failed to prevent “extremist trends.”

Local MCA representatives, responsible for registering all mosques, have also failed to comply with this provision.<sup>47</sup> When the foreign fighter phenomenon first emerged as a problem, the MCA admitted that some 200 mosques in Albania were outside its control.<sup>48</sup> It has been argued that these so called “illegal mosques” (which are being referred to as *para-jamaats* in some neighboring countries) are among the main drivers for radicalization and terrorist recruitment in Albania.<sup>49</sup> Similarly, there has been a failure from the local to the state level to ensure that religious education is not used to further radicalize, despite the mandate of local religious leaders and Department of Education representatives within the MCA to regulate all Islamic

43 Treib, et al., 8.

44 Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Albania and the Muslim Community of Albania, Article 3.

45 Benet Koleka, “Albanian court jails nine for recruiting fighters for Syria,” Reuters, May 3, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-albania-idUSKCN0XU2AB> (accessed September 1, 2016).

46 Statute of the MCA, 2005, Articles 59-60.

47 Ibid., Article 51.

48 Fatjona Mejdini, “Uncontrolled Mosques Proliferate in Albania,” *BIRN*, December 17, 2015, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/state-slams-albanian-muslim-over-uncontrolled-mosques-12-17-2015> (accessed September 1, 2016).

49 Vurmo, 33-36.

teaching and religious schools as well as the trainings organized by mosques.<sup>50</sup> As research on foreign fighters has revealed, some have been radicalized by courses they took in mosques in Tirana; and since studies suggest that the rhetoric of a central authority is among several key radicalization factors, one can presume this was also echoed in more remote areas.<sup>51</sup>

## Conclusions

By analyzing the governance of Islam and radicalization trends in Albania as a function of the interaction of public and private actors, it is quite apparent that private actors have dominated state-religion relations in post-communist Albania. Now, with tens of Albanian citizens having joined ISIL in Syria, there is growing demand for an increased role of the state, even by Albanian Muslim actors. Tailoring state intervention through the mode of governance approach may yield better and more sustainable outcomes by informing the structure and breadth of policy responses. First, government institutions that regulate Islam should exist at different levels – including the regional, municipal, and local community levels – and interaction between government institutions at different levels should occur throughout de-radicalization efforts. Second, the presence and practice of Islam in society involves a wide range of spheres and policy sectors that should be coherently interlinked, such as education, employment, finances, and health. Third, a wider set of actors, institutions, and instruments should be considered when tackling radicalism, including NGOs, businesses, and prisons.

Analysis of radicalism within Islam from this perspective is a useful tool for identifying opportunity structures that may otherwise remain unnoticed. Further research that employs this approach, looking specifically at Islamic education, the function of mosques, and the training of imams and religious authorities, will provide a more nuanced picture of the problem and help shape more effective state intervention in Albania. This is especially true in the emotionally-charged context of religion, where the logic of governance and a research agenda that contributes to policy solutions through a theoretically guided methodology are particularly important.

50 Statute of the MCA, 2005, Article 34.

51 See: Etleva Delia, "Shkolla sekrete brenda në xhami, pranga dy imamëve që rekrutuan 70 shqiptarë për në Siri," Panorama, March 12, 2014, <http://www.panorama.com.al/shkolla-sekrete-brenda-ne-xhami-pranga-dy-imameve-qe-rekrutuan-70-shqiptare-per-ne-siri/> (accessed September 1, 2016); and Vurmo, 80.

# Albanian Migrants and Risks of Radicalization

by Ebi Spahiu<sup>52</sup>

## Introduction

The case of Albania – a new NATO member and an aspiring EU state – reflects that of many Western Balkans countries which have seen their citizens, largely from Muslim-majority areas, join extremist organizations in the Middle East since the 2011 outset of the Syrian conflict. The number of foreign fighters hailing from Albania and the rest of the region peaked when Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, the alleged leader of the so-called Islamic State (ISIL), declared the formation of a new “caliphate” in 2014, in territories in Syria and Iraq, and called on Muslims from around the world to migrate there. Security and intelligence services in the region quickly took action against homegrown extremist cells that recruited and facilitated the travel of citizens in response to Al-Baghdadi’s call. However, questions remain over what motivated citizens from Albania to join extremist organizations and the pattern of their radicalization.

These questions have occupied local media and academics since the first years of the war in Syria, when frequent news alerts alarmed the public that Albanians were supporting and fighting for jihadist organizations in the Middle East. At the time, the “Islamic State” was just beginning to build its brand following the group’s break from Al-Qaeda in Syria, also known as the Al-Nusra Front. Now, even though ongoing war against ISIL and coalition airstrikes against the group’s resources have changed the dynamics of recruitment, debate over the process of religious radicalization continues among policymakers as they try to develop counter-narratives and implement preventative measures against the foreign fighter phenomenon.

Most experts in Albania point to low education levels and economic poverty as key drivers for Albanian foreign fighters. But as the discussion evolves and more information is revealed by media and intelligence agencies, these claims are increasingly challenged. Research instead points to social and institutional vacuums, in addition to ideological inspirations, as the key enablers of radicalization and the trigger for many to join the ISIL fight in the name of *jihad*.

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Some of the patterns observed among foreign fighters from Albania are examined in the text that follows, derived from the author's field research, individual interviews with experts, and regular work related to issues of religious extremism in Albania and the Western Balkans. Furthermore, this text aims to expand on a key observation from research into the lives of Albanian foreign fighters that remains largely unaddressed in local analysis on religious extremism, but which may be significant for policymakers in countering violent extremist trends in the future; particularly, that Albania's internal and external migration trends and a lack of local reintegration opportunities for both internal and external returnees has played a role in the radicalization process.

While Albania retains a long history of immigration following decades of communist isolationism, the social impact of economic migration and lack of institutional capacities to reintegrate returnees over the years remains understudied and has attracted little to no attention from local academics, state authorities, and civil society actors. However, recent research suggests that radical religious influences have particularly exploited the vulnerabilities of Albanian returnees as well as the identity gaps of the Albanian Diaspora still abroad, to attract them into the ranks of Muslim extremism.

### The Religious Composition of Albania

The last census on religious identity in Albania was conducted in the 1920s, an indication of the sensitivity of the issue in the country. But, according to the Pew Research Center, Albania has one of the largest indigenous Muslim populations in Europe, including almost 80% of the country's inhabitants, or almost 2 million people.<sup>53</sup> Other figures suggest that this percentage is lower, at about 60% of the population, though this still makes Muslims the predominant religious group.<sup>54</sup>

Albania's religious composition is the result of centuries of various influences, including Sufi and Shia traditions that are still reflected in common practices and rituals today. It is this inclusive history that leads six in ten Albanian Muslims to identify as "just Muslim" instead of more specifically as, for example, Sunni or Shia.<sup>55</sup>

53 Pew Research Center, *Mapping the Global Muslim Population* (Washington, DC, 2009).

54 US Central Intelligence Agency, *The World Factbook*, "Albania," September 6, 2016, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/al.html> (accessed September 10, 2016)

55 Pew Research Center, *The World's Muslims: Unity and Diversity* (Washington, DC, 2012).

Non-Muslim Albanians are primarily Roman Catholic (10%), Eastern Orthodox (7%), and Bektashi (a Sufi order, 2.1%).

Following World War II and the establishment of Enver Hoxha's communist regime, Albania saw decades of secularism and then, in 1967, imposed atheism. These developments left Albania's religious communities isolated until the collapse of Hoxha's dictatorship in 1991, when religion was reintroduced into public life. By then, some 1,200 mosques and over 400 Catholic and Orthodox churches had either been destroyed or turned into warehouses, sports halls, and cinemas.<sup>56</sup> This crackdown on religion and the brutal persecution of hundreds of Christian and Muslim clergy were part of the cultural revolution campaign that Hoxha undertook alongside China, his political ally, which led a similarly aggressive campaign against religion. In 1967, Albania was officially declared the "only atheist state in the world."

With the collapse of the communist regime, the country's highest religious orders re-established their spiritual mandates and relationships with other communities around the world. The Islamic *Jemiyeti*, or as it is known today, the Muslim Community of Albania (abbreviated from the Albanian *Komuniteti Mysliman i Shqipërisë* as KMSH), regained its institutional legitimacy to lead the spiritual life of Muslim believers in the country. In 2009, the KMSH was officially established as the institutional representative of the Albanian Muslim order, based on a legal agreement with the state that stipulates the KMSH follow "Muslim practices derived from Islamic law, following the Hanafi judicial Islamic school."<sup>57</sup>

Though the foreign fighter phenomenon gained traction in public discourse during the summer of 2014, the emergence of radical Muslim groups and the financing of extremist activities dates back to the fall of the communist regime, when Albanian Muslim clergy received significant funding from Salafi and Wahhabi groups in the Middle East.<sup>58</sup> In the early 1990s, the KMSH was led by a number of imams who had been isolated from the rest of the Muslim world for five decades and, as a consequence, had received no higher religious education, other than time spent in local madrasas prior to isolation.<sup>59</sup> This left an opening for new imams, who were granted

56 Miranda Vickers, *Islam in Albania*, Balkan Series No. 08/09 (Defense Academy of the United Kingdom, 2008).

57 Draft legal agreement between the KMSH and the Republic of Albania, No. 10056, January 22, 2009.

58 "Zanafilla e Islamit radikal ne Shqiperi," Reporter.al, December 21, 2014, <http://www.reporter.al/zanafilla-e-islamit-radikal-ne-shqiperi/> (accessed September 10, 2016).

59 Justinian Topulli, Union of Albanian Imams, interview by author, February 2015, Tirana.

scholarships from Gulf-funded charities and graduated from religious institutions in the Middle East. They returned home hoping to receive work within KMSH structures, but their arrival and the scholarly interpretations of Islam they imported were met with hostility by Albania's older generation of religious leaders, who rejected more conservative teachings and sectarian divides. To a certain degree, these generational tensions, in addition to ideological differences, incited the first waves of conflict within the inner circle of Albanian Islam.<sup>60</sup>

To many extremist groups in the Middle East, these issues were not considered significantly problematic, and a shared Muslim religious identity was seen as an opportunity to sow the seeds for future operations and maintain their position in a country that is a gateway to Western Europe. And, on top of the significant amount of external investment and aid that was focused on religious establishments, the then-newly elected government of Sali Berisha also sought to take advantage of this shared identity to acquire much-needed resources and economic investments in the country at large.<sup>61</sup> Within a year of his administration taking office in 1992, Berisha signed a military agreement with Turkey, enabling a strategic line stretching from Istanbul to Sarajevo that many extremists are thought to have used to pass into the Balkans during the wars of the 1990s.<sup>62</sup>

Others have pointed to Albania's membership in the Organization of the Islamic Conference as the move that enabled extremist Muslim factions access to the region during that time. Albania was the first European country and post-communist state to gain membership, despite parliamentary opposition to Berisha's decision to join; which not only institutionalized political influence and financial assistance from the Gulf States, but also reconfigured Albania's role during the war in Bosnia. Albania became a gateway for the Bosnian Muslims, allowing them to access weapons and foreign fighters despite the UN arms embargo. Hundreds of foreign fighters made their way into Bosnia, but following the end of the war in 1995, "some of these fighters came to Albania, hoping to make it a European base."<sup>63</sup>

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60 Ibid.

61 Christopher Deliso, *The Coming Balkan Caliphate: The Threat of Radical Islam to Europe and the West* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2007), 31.

62 Enri Hide, "Terrorizmi dhe Reagimi Shteteror pas Luftes se Ftohte," (PhD diss., University of Tirana, 2014), 156.

63 Fred Abrahams, "From Albania to Bosnia: Brothers Need Arms," *Balkan Insight*, June 1, 2015, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/from-albania-to-bosnia-brothers-need-arms-1> (accessed September 10, 2016).

Later, these ties to the Gulf region proved detrimental and in conflict with Albania's aspirations to join the European Union and to its relationship with the United States. To this day, Albania remains a highly pro-Western nation, widely supportive of the US war on terrorism and keen to advance its integration into the European Union.<sup>64</sup> This is reflected in national polls, which show approval ratings for the EU and Western powers consistently above 50% throughout the past decade.<sup>65</sup> Still, in spite of Albania's Western-leaning foreign policy direction, by 1994, the Arab-Albanian Islamic Bank was overseeing construction of new mosques and granting scholarships to Albanian students to study in the Middle East.

While these investments did help develop a new religious elite and an educated clergy that now leads the spiritual life of Muslims throughout the country, it also helped make Albania a safe haven for individuals and organizations linked to extremism. According to several accounts, Osama Bin Laden was "the majority stockholder" and founder of the Arab-Albanian Islamic Bank and he reportedly visited Albania twice between 1994 and 1998, ostensibly as a wealthy businessman who wanted to help a fellow Muslim nation through "humanitarian support."<sup>66</sup> Bin Laden founded Al Haramain, a humanitarian organization that was later exposed as a front for money laundering and a host for "mujahidins and Arab extremists on the run from their governments."<sup>67</sup> These activities were interrupted following the events of September 11, 2001 in the United States, when Albanian authorities led a series of security raids and deportations against individuals and charity organizations with links to terrorism operating in the country.

### **Syria Calling: Foreign Fighters from Albania and Migration Trends**

According to unofficial estimates, there are about 150 Albanian citizens and about 500 ethnic Albanians from Kosovo and Macedonia who have joined terrorist organizations in Syria and Iraq. As ISIL was just emerging, Albanian officials claim that 90 Albanian citizens travelled to Syria, between 2012-2014. Like other recruits from the Western Balkans that joined the Syrian war theater, many Albanians gathered around the Al-Nusra Front, al-Qaeda's official franchise, and then later joined ISIL

64 Sidita Kushi, "Balkanizing' the War on Terror," E-International Relations, March 4, 2015, <http://www.e-ir.info/2015/03/04/balkanizing-the-war-on-terror/> (accessed September 10, 2016).

65 Megi Llubani, *The European Perspective of Albania: Perceptions and Realities 2014* (Albanian Institute for International Studies and Friederich Ebert Stiftung, 2015).

66 Deliso.

67 Ibid.

when the group broke away. As of 2016, state agencies and other international intelligence units say that as many as 140 Albanian citizens had travelled to Syria in response to ISIL's call to engage in *jihad* (see below).

**Table 1.** Data on mortality and recruitment of foreign fighters from Western Balkan countries

Country	Total foreign fighters, 2012-2015	Killed	Returned	Currently in Syria	Rate of recruitment per million people	Death rate
Albania	140	20	44	76	50	14%
BiH	300	46	100	154	79	15%
Kosovo	300	51	120	129	167	17%
Macedonia	130	26	69	35	62	20%
Montenegro	19	3	10	6	30	16%
Serbia	100	10	66	24	14	10%
<b>Totals</b>	989	156	409	424	N/A	N/A

Adapted from: *Jane's Terrorism and Insurgency Monitor*, January 2016.

Many foreign fighters are thought to have travelled with their families to Iraq and Syria, although there are also several cases of children being taken without the knowledge or consent of one parent. According to media reports, the most radical Albanian fighters have taken their families to ISIL territory with them, accounting for 13 women and 31 children.<sup>68</sup> Of those 31 children, 23 are minors, with one as young as two months old.<sup>69</sup> Thus far, state authorities have not reported the deaths of any Albanian children who have migrated with their families.

Most Albanian recruits seem to have come from the central part of the country, including rural areas near Tirana, Elbasan, Librazhd, and Pogradec; however, some are from larger towns such as Shkodër and Vlorë. Foreign fighters from Albania reflect an older demographic than is seen in contingents from Western Europe, in which fighters have often been described by intelligence agencies and the media as "vulnerable youth." Adrian Shtuni, a US-based independent analyst tracking Albanian foreign fighters in ISIL, has raised the issue of this generational gap between Alba-

68 Aleksandra Bogdani, interview by author, March 2015.

69 Namik Mahmutllari, interview by author, Pogradec, April 2015. Other media inquiries into classified information reveal that the youngest child, only 2 months old, was accompanied to Syria by both parents, from Gurras in Librazhd. See (in Albanian): "Raporti i SHISH, fëmijët dhe gratë e 13 luftëtarëve shqiptarë iu bashkuan luftës në Siri," abcnews.al, March 19, 2014, <http://www.abcnews.al/lajme/aktualitet/2/40351> (accessed September 10, 2016).

nian fighters and other European fighters. He maintains that Albanians who have joined ISIL range between 25 and 35 years old.<sup>70</sup> But Albanian police data made public to local media indicates that identified foreign fighters from the country have been between 19 and 29 years old.<sup>71</sup>

Witness testimonies also confirm that a number of the Albanian men who have joined ISIL have not been uneducated or “vulnerable” youth. Some were well educated and exposed to life in the West; but the EU economic crisis resulted in a surge of Albanians returning home, most notably from Italy and Greece, with few employment prospects awaiting them. According to the International Migration Organization (IOM), over 130,000 Albanian immigrants over 18 years of age returned home between 2009 and 2013, and almost 100,000 of these returnees were male.<sup>72</sup> The current unemployment rate among Albanians from 15 to 29 years old is over 34%, and the lack of job opportunities in EU countries that led many people to return home had already significantly decreased remittances – one of the key sources of income for many Albanian families – adding an extra layer of insecurity.<sup>73</sup> Thousands of Albanian migrants returned home in the hope of building a future in their communities, but absence of opportunity and continued economic hardship instead defines many of their lives.

And so, Albanian migration has not stopped flowing in the other direction, too. Weak governance and poor rule of law, and limited government presence in remote areas, are problems common to many Balkan countries, and Albania is no exception. Collective anger over high levels of unemployment and extensive government corruption has been further stoked by widespread dissatisfaction with the prolonged EU integration process for Albania. This has contributed to a recent gradual increase in people from Kosovo and Albania migrating to Western Europe, and in fact Albanian migrants ranked third after Syrians and Afghans in seeking asylum in Germany in late 2015.<sup>74</sup> According to some estimates, asylum seekers from Albania accounted for “5% of all first time applicants for asylum in European Union countries during

70 Adrian Shtuni, interview by author, Tirana, May 2015.

71 Bogdani, interview.

72 Gjergji Filipi, Emira Galanxhi, and Majlinka Nesturi, *Return Migration and Reintegration in Albania, 2013* (International Organization for Migration, 2014).

73 Republic of Albania Institute of Statistics, “Labour Force Survey Q1 2015” <http://www.instat.gov.al/en/themes/labour-market/publications/books/2015/labour-force-survey-q1-2015.aspx> (accessed September 10, 2016).

74 “Eurostat: Shqiptarët, të tretët se azilkërkues, pas Sirisë e Afganistanit,” *Panorama*, September 19, 2015, <http://www.panorama.com.al/eurostat-shqiptaret-te-tretet-si-azilkerkues-pas-sirise-e-afganistanit/> (accessed September 10, 2016).

2015.”<sup>75</sup> Almost 80% of these migrants were youth between 18 and 34 years, many of whom had dropped out of school.<sup>76</sup>

As migration trends fluctuate, returned Albanian migrants and asylum seekers, and their children, continue to face challenges of reintegration and an inability by state authorities to address their needs. Notably, little attention has been devoted by relevant authorities and civil society to analyzing the appropriate responses to these migration flows and to assessing state-level capacities to face existing and emerging challenges in this regard. A recent study published by the Institute of Democracy and Mediation (IDM) in Tirana found that youth “who are unemployed, uneducated and/or untrained professionally, remain the most excluded and vulnerable category” of returnees; and yet the study also determined that no concrete policy initiatives have been incorporated by state agencies into reintegration programs – not even by the Ministry of Education and Sports, which does not possess significant data on returned migrant youth. While state authorities have developed comprehensive documents to address youth unemployment and marginalization, returned migrants and asylum seekers are not defined as a separate category that may benefit from specific psychosocial services and vocational opportunities.<sup>77</sup>

For these marginalized individuals, radical ideologies can offer an apparent solution to feeling ostracized and isolated. Indeed, in interviews conducted over the past two years, it has become increasingly evident to the author that returned migrants are particularly vulnerable to the manipulation of radical religious ideologues, and then to recruitment into jihadist organizations. Journalistic investigations and reports have alluded to a similar susceptibility. For instance, Aleksandra Bogdani, an investigative journalist at the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN), observed that many Albanian foreign fighters who joined the war in Syria had first returned from living and working in Greece or Italy and, upon returning home, “immediately converted to practicing Islam and within 3-6 months they picked up arms to fight in Syria. They were all recruited in a very short period of time.”<sup>78</sup>

75 Eurostat Statistics Explained, “Asylum Quarterly Report,” June 15, 2016 [http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Asylum\\_quarterly\\_report](http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Asylum_quarterly_report) (accessed September 10, 2016).

76 Ibid.

77 Sidita Dibra, Irma Semini, and Marsela Allmuça, *Reintegration of Young Asylum Seekers in the Albanian Education System* (Institute for Democracy and Mediation, 2016).

78 Bogdani, interview.

This trend has been reflected in other testimonies that have indicated, for example, that many of the young men recruited from the Pogradec area had recently returned from years of living and studying in Italy, Greece, and other European countries, but were forced to return home due to the economic crisis in the EU.<sup>79</sup> Such was the case of Verdi Morava, a 48-year-old recently sentenced to 13 years in prison for his alleged role in facilitating the travel of jihadists from Albania, and for financing terrorism. According to his father, Morava lived for many years in Italy and graduated with a degree in mechanical engineering. He became a practicing Muslim in the past 8 or 9 years, following his separation from an Italian woman with whom he lived in Italy, and was a frequent visitor to the Unaza e Re Mosque located on the outskirts of Tirana, which is infamous for spreading extremist propaganda and recruiting fighters to join the war in Syria. “[The Italian woman] was the reason for his psychological condition, and why he felt the need to find peace elsewhere,” his father claims.

Another case is that of Ervin Duka, a young man from Zargushan, who had also recently returned from years of living abroad, in Greece, when he was recruited into extremism. He found himself frequenting mosques in his hometown, where Genci Balla – a self-proclaimed imam who was recently sentenced to 15 years in prison for his role in recruiting foreign fighters – would often hold sermons without the consent of the KMSH, in which he would inspire jihad among his listeners.<sup>80</sup> With no prospects for work, Duka traveled to Syria with three other adherents from the same village, who had also spent years studying and living abroad before returning home to disappointingly few opportunities.

## Conclusions and Implications

Following a wide-scale crackdown from the summer of 2014 through the spring of 2015, the number of ISIL recruits from the Western Balkans, including from Albania, has dramatically declined. While this may be due in part to changing dynamics in the war in Syria – where coalition airstrikes have degraded ISIL territorial strongholds and resources – state authorities tend to attribute the decrease solely to the measures they have taken at home. In fact, officials from both Albania and Kosovo have boasted about the fact that no individuals have traveled from either country to Syria

79 Namik Mahmutllari, Mufti of Pogradec, interview by author, April 2015.

80 Ibid.

since the spring of 2015.<sup>81</sup> However, this fails to acknowledge that the foreign fighter phenomenon is merely a symptom of larger state and social failures that must be addressed at the local level; and further, that support for the ideology of ISIL persists among some followers and radical religious leaders.

As ISIL adapts its organizational objectives to territorial losses in the Middle East and pivots to the West, issuing calls for supporters there to conduct terrorist attacks against civilians, the Western Balkans plays a crucial role that should not be overlooked by policymakers in the region. Since the emergence of the “Islamic State” and the recognition that Balkan foreign fighters were joining the organization, regional security analysts and think tanks have attempted to establish a profile of these fighters. They have concluded for the most part that a majority of fighters from the region have criminal backgrounds and come from impoverished areas, and were mobilized and inspired by a single radical imam who served as a key link with jihadist groups abroad.

Still, so far, there has been relatively little focus on the alleged role of organized crime in aiding militant cells in Western Europe, or on the involvement of the Balkan diaspora in providing arms for terrorist groups in the West. Since the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia and the collapse of the communist regime in Albania in the 1990s, weak rule of law and corruption have strengthened smuggling networks in the region, many of which are often closely linked to public officials. Weak state structures to combat organized crime, along with these high levels of corruption, have enabled several nexus groups to emerge and dominate drug trafficking and arms trade in European markets; and also to establish significant relationships with terrorist organizations, as they did in the past with the Kurdish PKK or al-Qaeda.<sup>82</sup>

Most notable is the case of the Albanian mafia and its links with the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) in the late 1990s, which grew out of the Albanian economic downfall that followed the collapse of “pyramid” investment schemes in 1997. Violent protests led to the ransacking of hundreds of military and police storage facilities across the country, and over 100,000 weapons are believed to have been stolen over the course of a few months. The majority of these are still being used in conflicts

81 “Saimir Tahiri: Në një kohë krize, një Shqipëri europiane,” *Koha Jone*, February 29, 2016, <http://www.kohajone.com/2016/02/29/saimir-tahiri-ne-nje-kohe-krize-nje-shqiperi-europiane/> (accessed September 10, 2016).

82 Tamara Makarenko, *Europe’s Crime-Terror Nexus: Links Between Terrorist and Organized Crimes Groups in the European Union* (European Parliament, 2012).

or re-sold in European markets – whereby some are believed to be in the hands of terrorist organizations, including Western sleeper cells, with Belgium providing the largest black market.<sup>83</sup> Furthermore, regional networks that have developed for years out of these criminal and political nexuses, especially in the tri-border area of Albania, Kosovo, and Macedonia, are believed to be “directly tied to operational developments of militant Islamist cells in the UK,” where they dominate in heroin smuggling and other types of drug and human trafficking.<sup>84</sup> According to several accounts, heroin from the Balkans brings in over \$20 billion annually, which is largely funneled to groups like Hezbollah and al-Qaeda.<sup>85</sup>

It is no surprise that violent extremist groups, including ISIL, seek to exploit home-grown cells already established in the Western Balkans, as well as those in diasporic communities. One EU-led study that examined ties between organized criminal groups and terrorism in Western Europe found a notable increase in the involvement of second- and third-generation members of the Balkan diaspora with religious radicals based in the West. This has been a particular concern among the Balkan diaspora in Austria, Switzerland, Italy, and the UK, which have each seen a significant number of youth – mainly nationals of Albania, Kosovo, and Montenegro – join ISIL in Syria and Iraq. In Switzerland, for instance, where a large portion of the Muslim population consists of immigrants, a sizable percentage of foreign fighters are of Balkan origin, particularly Kosovar.<sup>86</sup> Although experts say that many of the ethnic Albanian Muslim communities in Europe, including those in Switzerland, have access to independent funding for their religious needs, they are not immune to the influence of well-funded Wahhabi and Salafi interests that represent more radical religious views. “Many religious communities fight over the leadership that is going to represent Muslims, making Albanian practitioners susceptible to being usurped by suspicious finances and attracted to radical ideologies,” claims one Tirana-based security official.<sup>87</sup>

83 Christian Oliver and Duncan Robinson, “Paris attacks: Belgium’s arms bazaar,” *Financial Times*, November 19, 2015.

84 Makarenko, 19.

85 Natasha Srdoc, “Europe Needs Help Combating the Mafia’s Influence,” opinion, *New York Times*, April 28, 2014.

86 Daniel Glaus and Lorenzo Vidino, “Swiss Foreign Fighters Active in Syria,” Combating Terrorism Center, July 30, 2014.

87 Tirana-based security official who wished to remain anonymous due to security concerns, interview by author, November 2015.

It is becoming increasingly clear to government officials and the Albanian security community that violent extremism must be addressed as a social phenomenon, in addition to being seen as a security threat. Recent studies and local literature addressing the phenomenon of foreign fighters joining ISIL confirm this trend and often encourage security actors to take a new approach to addressing violent extremism, especially among youth. And, over the past few years, the Albanian government has adopted a comprehensive document that lays out the country's strategy to counter violent extremism, as well as guidelines for state structures and civil society to observe this as a social issue.

Despite these efforts, implementation of this strategy is not occurring swiftly and there is some fear that radicalization and recruitment may accelerate. While economic struggles and endemic corruption remain high priority issues, social support structures lack the capacity to create safe spaces for youth and to address the needs of increasing numbers of youth that follow migration flows in and out of the country. The role of these structures risks being replaced by charismatic religious leaders who can offer the support and group cohesion many youth have difficulty finding in other environments.

This is an especially important factor for youth who do not see opportunities at home and foresee migration or involvement in criminal activities as the only ways to reach financial stability. Recently, international and local media reports about the involvement of Albanian youth in a cannabis growing boom has set off alarms that this trend is putting young men and women at risk.<sup>88</sup> But, more alarmingly, recent figures issued by the United Nations indicate that 40% of Albania's population resides outside the country. This highlights that economic hardship and a lack of opportunity are key reasons Albanians cross borders to Western destinations. Along with rampant immigration and the drug trafficking boom, religious radicalization may provide an antidote to marginalized youth and to some people in disenfranchised communities.

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88 Linda Pressly, "Europe's outdoor cannabis capital," *BBC*, 1 December 2016, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-38111945> (accessed 15 March 2017).

# BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

## The Complex Ecology of Islamic Narratives and Movements in Bosnia and Herzegovina

by Muhamed Jusić<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

*The current religious life of Muslims in Bosnia and Herzegovina is about returning to domestic traditions and reducing the post-communist euphoria in public demonstration of religion. The fall of the socialist order led to this euphoria, which was intensified by the aggression and war in Bosnia and Herzegovina – seen, in the minds of Bosnian Muslims, as aimed at destroying Bosnia and Herzegovina as a state and Bosniaks as a people. Meanwhile, the pluralization of the Islamic religious scene in Bosnia and Herzegovina has resulted in the emergence of non-traditional forms of Islamic religious practice. On one hand, this pluralization occurred within the Islamic Community as a consequence of its openness toward other madhhabs and Islamic experiences, and as a result of its exposure to globalization and other broader social and cultural shifts. On the other hand, it occurred outside the Islamic Community and, sporadically, against it, through advocates of different alternative, and in principle, sloppy and rigid interpretations of Islam. The vast majority of Bosnian Muslims perceive these alternative views as attacks on the traditional Bosnian practice of Islam, and they reject them as unacceptable attempts to replace a religion of joy, serenity, and tolerance with a religion of gloominess, discontent, and exclusiveness; attempts to abandon a religion that palliates in order to accept a religion that aggravates.<sup>2</sup>*

This is how the Grand Mufti of the Islamic Community in BiH, Husein Kavazović, has contextualized alternative interpretations of Islam in post-Dayton Bosnia and Herzegovina. Though delivered in Hungary, his lecture was not intended only to assuage a skeptical European public, which is becoming increasingly suspicious about the presence of Islam in Europe and even about traditional Muslim communities, now accused of playing a role in radicalization; it was aimed, too, at explaining how these interpretations emerged and the position of Muslims themselves. Indeed, while

1 Muhamed Jusić is an Islamic scholar and columnist.

2 Reis ul-ulema Husein ef. Kavazović, lecture, University of Pécs, April 29, 2016. Translated by the author.

indigenous Muslim communities in Europe are not necessarily seen through the war-on-terror prism – or at least, they are not openly identified as terrorist threats – the new interpretations of Islam that Reis Kavazović mentioned in his lecture are commonly thought to be radicalizing traditional Muslim communities. So far, no research has provided detailed insight into those alternative communities and their beliefs. But this text attempts to explain the complex ecology of alternative Islamic religious thought in BiH.

### External Influence

A silent battle for the “spirit of Islam” in Bosnia and Herzegovina began in the 1990s, during the war. Even then, an attempt by some actors to impose specific political influence was apparent, and it was clear that these efforts introduced more than just conflicting “religious truths.” In essence, a secret war was fought, primarily by Iran and Saudi Arabia, for long-term influence over political, security, and religious institutions in BiH.

At first, Iran managed to gain better position in this struggle, because it was prepared to deliver weapons to the BiH Army, which was under an international arms embargo.<sup>3</sup> Iran also helped train military personnel in BiH, particularly intelligence officers, with whom they developed close relations. The Bosnian media reported on these relations, especially in the aftermath of the 1996 assassination of Nedžad Ugljen, Assistant Director of the *Agencija za Istraživanje i Dokumentaciju* (AID) – a secret police organization established in BiH during the war.<sup>4</sup> At the time, local media linked the assassination to a “clash between Iranians in the BiH security services” and Ugljen, who had reportedly become close to American intelligence actors and had started cooperating with investigators at the Hague Tribunal. The “Pogorelica case” brought more attention to the potential presence and influence of Iranian intelligence structures in BiH, but just as in the case of Ugljen’s assassination, the focus of the public was on the security and political implications of this influence, with few reports analyzing the issue of ideological interference under the guise of cultural cooperation or “soft power.”

3 Later, it was discovered that this had occurred with the tacit approval of the US. See: Douglas Jehl, “US Looks Away as Iran Arms Bosnia,” *New York Times*, April 15, 1995.

4 On Ugljen’s assassination, see: Vildana Selimbegović, “Žrtva rata orlova i Ševa,” *BH Dani*, October 27, 2000.

Following pressure mounted by Western allies, and above all the United States, key security sector personnel with known or suspected links to Iran were removed from their positions. Pressure was also applied by those same political power centers on authorities in Sarajevo, who were asked to ensure that all foreign fighters who had fought alongside the BiH Army left the country after the war; and by threatening to end their “Train and Equip” program.<sup>5</sup> This brand of diplomacy, along with the implementation of the Dayton Peace Agreement and defense reforms, and the gradual fulfilment of conditions for NATO membership, all worked to interrupt relations between BiH security agencies and partners from Islamic countries, fostered in wartime.

Saudi Arabia did not manage to impose significant influence on security and military institutions during the war, instead exercising its power through close diplomatic relations, primarily with Alija Izetbegovic, the Chairman of the BiH Presidency at the time. Saudi Arabia donated a building to be used by the BiH foreign service in Washington, DC, accepting no financial compensation; and the Saudis advocated for resolution of the war in BiH on several occasions, in Washington and in other Western capitals.<sup>6</sup> Unlike Iran, they developed their influence by focusing on humanitarian and missionary work, primarily through the Saudi High Commission.

Both during the war and after, the Saudi High Commission not only funded humanitarian assistance via numerous Saudi government agencies and NGOs, but also printed texts on Islam, drawing argumentation from the Salafi (Wahhabi) interpretation.<sup>7</sup> Foreign fighters from Saudi Arabia, who fought in the Bosnian el-Mujahid Unit, mainly originated from the radical and conservative wing of Salafism and thus tended not to demonstrate sympathies toward the ruling Al-Saud family.<sup>8</sup> According to a source who spoke with the author about relations between Saudi Arabia and BiH, the Saudis expressed concerns on several occasions about the activities of extremist Salafist groups in BiH that openly oppose the ruling family and the Saudi political system. Still, Saudi Arabia supports other, so-called moderate Salafists as “friends of the Kingdom,” a distinction that is not always clear to Bosnians.

5 Selimbegović, “I crvene strijele su zelene,” *BH Dani*, May 17, 2002.

6 From an interview conducted by the author with a highly-positioned former Bosnian politician who participated in those processes.

7 Numerous titles on Islamic theology were printed and distributed for free by the Saudi High Commission. The most prominent among these were an abridged version of *Tafsir ibn Kathir* (commentary on the Qur’an by ibn Kathir) and the translations of a family library that included 23 different titles.

8 For more on the role of mujahideen from Saudi Arabia and other Muslim countries during the 1992-1995 war, see (in local language): Esad Hećimović, *Garibi-mudžahedini u BiH, 1992-1999* (Zenica: Sina Foundation, 2006).

During the war in BiH, Turkey also offered support through diplomacy and humanitarian assistance. But, as a NATO member, Turkey did not use this influence to the same extent as other countries, reflecting both US and Turkish foreign policy at the time. When the AKP assumed power in Turkey at the turn of the century, and asserted Turkish policy more forcefully in the region and the world, the political and economic presence of Turkey grew throughout the Balkans and in Bosnia. Numerous Turkish faith-based organizations undertook humanitarian, educational, and cultural activities in BiH, including some that distributed religious literature as a part of these activities. Many Bosnians welcomed the influence of Turkish religious organizations, and saw them as a counter-balance to Salafism. Bosnian Muslims have traditionally belonged to the Ottoman cultural sphere and the Bosnian and Turkish practice of Islam are similar. Both models have, for instance, demonstrated compatibility with a secular state order, unlike the Saudi or Iranian models.

### A Battle for “the Spirit of Islam”

Majority Muslim states have been expanding their influence outside their borders for some time, and promoting their different interpretations of Islam and Islamic tradition. Yet, the soft power exercised by these states through proselytism and through support to various movements and communities (*jamaats*) has never been seriously analyzed at the global level. Nonetheless, it is commonly understood that Saudi Arabia exercises a good deal of its influence in this way, throughout the Islamic world and among Islamic minorities, through support provided to Salafist gatherings that follow the state-sanctioned Saudi interpretation of Islam. In BiH, this has led to a conflict between Turkish and Saudi interpretations.<sup>9</sup> Caught in the crossfire are Muslim communities of the Bosnian tradition and their indigenous cultural patterns.

Among those fighting for “the spirit of Islam” in BiH, and thus trying to influence Bosniaks, are also numerous non-state actors or movements. In many cases, these represent factions that see themselves in opposition to the political orders and ruling religious authorities of their homeland governments. This has resulted in renegade militancy by Salafists who have separated from the mainstream Salafist movement; most famously, forming al-Qaeda and the so-called Islamic State. The reach of these groups varies widely. For example, extremist Shia elements acting in BiH are not collaborating with Iranian cultural, diplomatic, and religious institutions in BiH or

9 See: Kerem Öktem, *New Islamic actors after the Wahhabi intermezzo: Turkey's return to the Muslim Balkans* (University of Oxford, 2010).

in Tehran. And since their split from AKP leader Erdogan, the movement of Fethullah Gülen – which developed on the foundations of neo-Naqshbandism – has become a non-state actor, and one strongly disfavored by authorities in Ankara. These are global dynamics, playing out partly in BiH, where non-state factions have turned out to be more agile and open in their proselytism, and in their critique of traditional religious practice, than many organizations associated with majority Muslim states.

### The Salafists

There is no doubt that Salafism has attracted the most attention as far as Islamic movements that have challenged traditional Bosnian Islam. The roots of Salafist influence reach back to the foreign fighter phenomenon during the war in BiH.<sup>10</sup> Although Salafists were, and often still are, perceived as a monolithic community, they have long been quite fractured. While all Salafists share the belief that they are the only “true” followers of the *Sunnah* and thus the only “true” Muslims; even before the rise of ISIL, the movement experienced significant internal opposition and division, with four main Salafist factions fighting for supremacy within a movement that emerged from the teaching of Sheikh Muhammad bin Abdul Wahhab.

### The *Taqliidiyun*

Salafism is, of course, the state-sanctioned ideology of Saudi Arabia, where the official view of the ruling family is that of the *taqliidiyun* – traditional conservatism that is explicitly apolitical. Adherents claim that militants such as Osama bin Laden “only create disturbance in the world.” One of the most conservative wings of this branch is led by Saudi Sheikh Rabee al Madkhalee, who has yet to attract many followers in the Balkans but who has attracted some among Bosnian diaspora, particularly in Sweden. Still, there is a group of Salafists in BiH who advocate a similarly conservative interpretation of Islam, but do not support violent extremism. They criticize the Islamic traditions of Bosniaks,<sup>11</sup> do not recognize the authority of the Islamic Community of BiH, and advocate for the establishment of parallel religious institutions – so-called *para-jamaats* – as well as for the segregation of their communities from the rest of the society.

One of the leading figures of this *taqliidiyun* tradition has characterized the Islamic Community in BiH as:

<sup>10</sup> See: Hećimović.

<sup>11</sup> Fikret Karčić, “Šta je to ‘islamska tradicija Bošnjaka,’” *Preporod*, December 7, 2006.

...a community of Muslims who have organized themselves in order to help each other in whatever they do, but only for those who accept it as their own. This clearly indicates that they are an optional community and that every person has the right to choose whether to be its member or not. The interpretation that they constitute the only legitimate (qualified) authority that can and should interpret Islam in BiH is wrong. ...should the need arise for a new Islamic institution in the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina or even in the entire Balkans, there is no impediment. Moreover, the state constitution and the law stipulate that each group of people (200 members) that expresses the desire and need to organize into an institution is entitled to do so, even if it entails a new Islamic community. Therefore, the constant repetition of the phrase that the Islamic Community is the only institution that has the right to interpret religion is wrong, dangerous and can lead to a counter-effect, just like the one that happened in Serbia...<sup>12</sup>

This movement is very critical of militant Salafists, but also of everything they see as a deviation by the Islamic Community from the “fundamental teachings of Islam.” They condemn what they consider to be *bidat* (innovation) in Bosniak religious practices, and particularly criticize customs such as the celebration of Mawlud (Muhammad’s birthday), visitation to *turbehs*, and payment made in exchange for recitations of the Qur’an for the deceased. Their leading figures have already denied the official *taqweem* of the Islamic Community, and pray and fast in accordance with their own *taqweem*, based on the interpretation of Saudi ulema. This movement is not in open conflict with the state and its legislation, but strongly denies the religious authority of the IC of BiH.

### *The Sahwa*

The *Sahwa* Movement (the Awakening Movement) of Salafist reformers enjoys the greatest support among Salafists, both in Saudi Arabia and abroad. They advocate for Islamization through gradual reforms, with a strong focus on education, and an eventual ideological (not militant) confrontation with secularists and Westernized liberals. They oppose violent methods and are constantly evolving their views by adopting increasingly open and liberal values, atypical for traditional Salafists. In BiH, supporters of the *Sahwa* constitute a majority of Salafists and follow ulema such as Selam al-Awadi, Safar al-Hawali, Nasser al-Omar, and other Saudi reformists. These clerics do respect the authority of the Bosnian state and the Islamic

12 Safet Suljic, “Akaidski mezheb IZ i muslimana u BiH,” Put Vjernika, January 25, 2013, <http://putvjernika.com/forums/topic/akaidski-mezheb-iz-e/> (accessed June 2, 2017).

Community of BiH, though they emphasize their disagreement on many religious issues. They have even supported the recent decision of the Islamic Community to put so-called *para-jamaats* under its control. While adherents of the *Sahwa* tradition insist that Salafism is the only accurate interpretation of Islam, they believe that changes to custom and belief should come through *da'wah* (Islamic missionary work) and be delivered by existing institutions of the Islamic Community. In BiH, the *Sahwa* Movement operates a network of internet portals, citizens' associations, radio and television shows, multimedia studios and publishers, as well as schools and kindergartens.

### *Jihadists*

Many people think only of *jihadists* when they think of Salafism or of terrorism; yet this militant wing of Salafism considers fighting to be a strict religious duty of every Muslim only when Muslims are attacked and where the enemy is clearly defined (such as in BiH during the war). Salafists from BiH who see themselves as *jihadists* may now be members of units such as Ahrar al-Sham or a wing of Al-Nusra Front in the Syrian conflict. These *jihadists* – who advocate for what they consider “legitimate jihad” – do not represent the most extreme form of Salafist ideology, which evolved under the influence of militant Islamist movements from Egypt on Afghan battlefields and combined Salafist religious conservatism with the concept of *takfir* (the practice of declaring other Muslims infidels or non-believers). These more extreme Salafists are thus distinct from *jihadists*, and are known as *takfiri jihadists*. Since September 11th, global media has portrayed *takfiri jihadists* as the sole representatives of Islamic militarism, almost completely suppressing the notion of “legitimate jihad” that long compelled *mujahideen* who were not inclined to terrorism and saw themselves as “freedom fighters.”

### *Takfirists*

These most extreme militants – the *takfiri jihadists* – are now known for having become synonymous with Al-Qaeda. Its one-time representative in Syria, the Al-Nusra Front, separated officially from the larger organization at the beginning of August 2016. Another branch of Al-Qaeda, recruited from Iraqi Sunnis and volunteers from Muslim countries, was established by Jordanian Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi after the American invasion of Iraq and became highly radicalized, laying the foundations for today's ISIL.

Followers of ISIL threaten all other Muslims – including other followers of Salafism – equally, treating these less radicalized interpretations of Islam as heretical. In fact, they threaten Muslims more than adherents of any other religious group, and more than media representatives or other public stakeholders. And their takfirist ideals are not only being played out in Syria and Iraq, but also among Bosnian Salafists and others in the region.

Divisions between Salafists in BiH align with the ideological matrix set by battle lines in the Middle East, and their loyalties lie with the religious authorities of Saudi Arabia (i.e., the reformist), or with Al-Nusra or ISIL. The reactions of Bosnian Salafists to the Islamic Community's initiative to close so-called *para-jamaats* were predictable through this lens, with some groups embracing the initiative but remaining determined to continue promoting their views through social activities, and other groups expressing takfirist declarations that the Bosnian ulema and any other Muslims they disagree with are unbelievers.<sup>13</sup>

It is important to understand these dynamics within the Bosnian Salafist community; they are often misunderstood by media and even by security agencies. Salafists are not a monolith and do not share one opinion on every issue. Still, we cannot ignore the fact that every Bosnian who has joined Al-Nusra or ISIL, and those who openly threaten Bosnian Muslims, have been adherents of Salafism. And so, while it is wrong to generalize, it is also wrong to dismiss the fact that a reductionist and conservative interpretation of Islamic tradition which is detached from reality has led to the emergence of a phenomenon like ISIL and to domestic support for its aims.

### A Complex Scene

Besides Salafists, there are other groups in BiH that operate outside the framework of the Islamic Community and could thus be defined as having *para-jamaats* – from the Ahmadiyyas, to various Shia groups, to neo-Naqshbandi Turkish Tariqats. These groups differ in their opinions toward the Islamic Community of BiH. Among Shia organizations, for example, there is apparently a split between those which are close to Iranian official institutions and those following ayatollahs from London and the Iranian, Lebanese, and Iraqi diasporas. While adherents of Salafism certainly attract most

13 A threat against the Reis ul-ulema in response to integration efforts was posted online in February 2016. It is available at: <https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=QdaCogwDEB8&feature=youtu.be> (accessed 15 March 2017).

of the media attention, these numerous other sects and movements also claim to be Islamic and do hold influence among some Bosnian Muslims, in BiH and abroad.

The Ahmediyya and Baha'i movements, both of which advocate the peaceful dimensions of Islam, are both active in Bosnia. The Ahmediyyas have been trying to register as an official religious group in BiH for some time, and have already registered their own mosque in a Sarajevo building. And adherents of Baha'ism are involved in projects aimed at bringing peace through the Bosnian education system.

There is also a Shia influence, which is often supported by Iranian government agencies and NGOs. This represents yet another challenge for the Islamic Community, in terms of the possibility that counterproductive ideologies (sectarian, revisionist, and those promoting the politicization of religion) may penetrate the domestic space and may import and advocate new patterns of belief and religious practice. In addition to the many state institutions and projects supported by the Iranian government, a large number of non-governmental, pro-Shia organizations exist in the country, and many do attempt to spread Shiism among Bosnian Muslims. Concerns in Bosnia about the proselytism of some Shia organizations is linked partly to the traumatic global history of bloody Sunni-Shia conflicts and fears that internal conflicts in Muslim countries could be exported to BiH – a worry that has been expressed by numerous religious authorities in the country.<sup>14</sup>

We cannot omit the activities of various Islamist movements and educational institutions based in Turkey from this discussion. Indeed, many have played an important role in the organization of religious life in Islamic communities in Southeast Europe for some time. The presence of these groups is increasing in BiH; for instance, in growing numbers of neo-Nakshbandi Tariqats from the Nursi movement, or followers of Fethullah Gülen.<sup>15</sup>

After a recent unsuccessful military coup in Turkey, which authorities in Ankara have accused Gülenists of carrying out, the presence of his followers in BiH and the region became a topic of intense media coverage. Under pressure from Turkish authorities, especially the insistence of President Erdogan, BiH Presidency Member

14 For example, see the comments made on this topic by Arabist and academic Esad Duraković in an interview with Sarajevo-based TV1's host Sanjin Bećiragić on the March 5, 2012 episode of "Specijal."

15 See: Anne Ross Solberg, *Balkan Muslims and Islam in Europe: The Role of Turkish Islamic Networks in the Western Balkans* (Sudosteuroopa, 2007).

Bakir Izetbegovic and Grand Mufti Kavazović issued public statements raising suspicion about the activities of Gülen’s organization, known as FETO.<sup>16</sup>

The Anatolia News Agency also compiled a list of organizations and institutions in the Balkans accused by Ankara of having links with FETO. In BiH, private education provider Bosna Sema was among those named; though the company denies any association with FETO. Bosna Sema, which started its work in Bosnia in 1998, now operates “jamaat schools” throughout the country, running 4 preschools, 5 elementary schools, and 5 secondary schools, along with Burch International University. Burch University is an important source of income for the organization but it is also said to be a training ground for future personnel through which FETO can influence social developments in BiH. A tourist agency, Fidan, is also said to have ties to FETO. The agency brings Turkish citizens to BiH and vice versa. And in the field of media, FETO is purportedly active through an Internet portal, “New Time,” which originally operated as a weekly magazine. What’s more, Gülen’s books are printed and distributed in BiH by the Hikmet publishing house, which Anatolia characterized as having “significant social and political influence.”<sup>17</sup>

In addition to these better organized or better recognized groups, smaller groups as well as influential individuals offering particular interpretations of Islamic thought also exist in BiH, as do followers of organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhood, Hizb ut-Tahrir, Tablighi, and Sufi Tariqats with sheikhs who come all the way from Malaysia. Among these are modernists, but they are rarely mentioned in research because the focus of the public remains on those movements that are believed to pose a security threat.

### The Challenge and the Response

The challenges presented by these different interpretations of Islam in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the position the Islamic Community of BiH should adopt, has been discussed by the IC on several occasions – including at a conference organized in mid-2011 by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation and the IC’s Association of Ilmiyyah

16 See: “Kavazović: Kao i svugdje u svijetu, FETO postoji i u BiH,” N1TV, August 10, 2016, <http://ba.n1info.com/a108594/Vijesti/Vijesti/Kavazovic-Kao-i-svugdje-u-svijetu-FETO-postoji-i-u-BiH.html>, (accessed August 14, 2016); and “Nakon udara u Turskoj, logično je da se upitamo - zašto je FETO prisutan u BiH,” *Vijesti.ba*, August 9, 2016, <http://vijesti.ba/clanak/320059/nakon-udara-u-turskoj-logicno-je-da-se-upitamo-zasto-je-feto-prisutan-u-bih>, (accessed August 14, 2016).

17 “FETO struktura u zemljama Zapadnog Balkana,” *Agencija Anadolija*, July 28, 2016, <http://aa.com.tr/ba/turska/feto-struktura-u-zemljama-zapadnog-balkana/617392> (accessed August 14, 2016).

(which brings together all the organization's imams and scholars), titled "The Islamic Scene in Bosnia and Herzegovina." The aim of the conference was to publicize and answer questions that had been kept until then under wraps by the Islamic Community and by wider society, about the ideological conflicts introduced by newly imported interpretations of Islam.<sup>18</sup> The author, a keynote speaker at the event, expressed his opinion that the traditional religious community in BiH would find it difficult to respond to the influences of new religious sentiment, noting:

*In Communist Yugoslavia, Muslims were placed under a sort of ideological glass bell, which largely kept them isolated from ideological and other turmoil in the rest of the Muslim world. That glass bell was broken in the flame of war that occurred in the former Yugoslav republics after the collapse of the communist regime. Muslims in the region, primarily Bosniaks – who made up a significant portion of the Islamic community in the former Yugoslavia – and their official religious authorities did not have enough time to gain the necessary experience and knowledge to cope with the invasion of ideas, ideologies, sects, and other social phenomena inspired by Islam that emerged in a war-torn BiH society. The half-century of isolation to which Bosnian Muslims had been subjected left them, as a community, unable to develop an "immunity" to other ideological interpretations of Islam or a clear attitude toward pluralism during the war years and in the post-war period. This is still largely true and it is up to the Islamic Community to work at home and in the diaspora to find models that will, in the spirit of Islamic pluralism, preserve the identity of Bosnian Muslims and protect them from religious and ideological exploitation.*

The Islamic Community does seem to be aware that this new pluralism of religious thought in BiH makes it impossible to hold a monopoly on religious teaching. Further, democratic standards of freedom of religion must also be respected. Therefore, the Islamic Community in BiH is focused on trying to preserve its own, locally specific, interpretation of Islam. While the IC can neither impose orthodoxy outside its framework nor call for repressive measures of other ideologies by the state, it has begun to embrace that it can be competitive in "the market of ideas" and can ensure that any religious authorities acting under its auspices respect the Bosnian Islamic tradition.

<sup>18</sup> Published conference proceedings contain the text of all seven key lectures as well as the opening address by Grand Mufti Karić. See: Enes, et al., *Published Proceedings: Islamska scena u Bosni i Hercegovini*, Sarajevo, 2011, Association of the Ilmiyyah of the Islamic Community and Konrad Adenauer Foundation.

## The Challenge of Para-jamaats

It was during the war that the official Islamic Community began to be aware of the existence of alternative interpretations of Islam in BiH. The IC responded with official statements by either the Grand Mufti himself or the Riyaset – the IC’s executive organ. Early in the war, on December 13, 1993, Reis Cerić issued a *fatwa* on mandatory compliance with the regulations of the Hanafi school in all religious rituals and all Islamic gatherings. Later, the Riyaset echoed this in a Resolution on the Interpretation of Islam dated March 27, 2006, as well as in Amendments to the Resolution dated November 7, 2006 and in House Rules in Mosques adopted October 16, 2007.<sup>19</sup> These House Rules came about in response to the attempt by a group of Salafists who followed prominent extremist Jusuf Barčić to organize lectures in Sarajevo’s Emperor’s Mosque without the consent of the Imam, attracting significant media attention.<sup>20</sup>

Still, despite the official stance of the Islamic Community, opponents of former Grand Mufti Mustafa Cerić – who led the organization from 1993 to 2012 – have often criticized him for having a “tolerant attitude” toward Salafists.<sup>21</sup> After the 2015 terrorist attack on two members of the Bosnian Armed Forces,<sup>22</sup> new Grand Mufti Husein Kavazović and his administration decided to use the existing legal framework and an open-door policy to mount pressure on unofficial Islamic congregations they dubbed “para-jamaats,” to encourage their return to the purview of the official Islamic Community.

At the initiative of the new Grand Mufti’s Deputy, Husein Smajić, the IC also initiated a process that included discussions held between December 2015 and March 2016, aimed at reaching agreement with non-member individuals and groups. This process attracted considerable media attention, and generated much speculation about its outcome. Managed by the Administration for Religious Affairs, discussions included individuals and groups that were performing Friday prayers, Eid prayers, religious teaching, or any other prayers in *jamaats* outside the Islamic Community’s framework, or which led ceremonies without appropriate authorization.

19 See: Mustafa Prljača, ed., *Rezolucija Islamske zajednice u Bosni i Hercegovini o tumačenju islama i drugi tekstovi* (Sarajevo: El-Kalem, 2006).

20 Merima Spahić, “Vehabije jurišaju na BiH džamije,” *Nacional*, March 13, 2007.

21 Mensur Osmovic, “Bivši reis napao akademika zbog vehabija,” *Dnevni list*, May 8, 2015.

22 For more about this attack, see: Zdravko Ljubas, “Murder of two Bosnian soldiers an act of terrorism,” *Deutsche Welle*, November 19, 2015, <http://dw.com/p/1H97Z> (accessed October 23, 2016).

In the run-up to talks, the IC administration wrote in June 2015 to muftis throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina, requesting that they provide information on any such activities in their geographic areas of responsibility. Working meetings were then organized in the Muftiate, followed by lectures, and then a joint meeting of the muftis and the Riyaset in November 2015. This meeting focused especially on the *para-jamaats* and on interpretations of the Islamic creed; and resulted in the December 2015 letter by the Grand Mufti tasking his subordinates to conduct preliminary interviews with Muslim religious actors working outside the Islamic Community by the end of January 2016. The Riyaset was also tasked with conducting interviews across the country by March, in cooperation with authorities in the field.

A report on this process was presented at the April 23, 2016 session of the IC Assembly, detailing attempts to come to agreement with the Islamic groups and individuals with whom interviews and talks had taken place. All participants were said to be very active and to have contributed to successful management of the process; and representatives of both the IC and the non-member groups showed a willingness for dialogue. Indeed, representatives of the Islamic Community gave real attention to critiques of the organization, and were open to offering full membership to all Muslims.

Some of the criticism leveled at the IC included that there are modernists among its members – who are seen as renegades from the religion for embracing concepts such as *tawhid*, praying at the grave, the closure of mosques during the day, and the use of recorded *adhans* – and that the Community is focused on the material rather than spiritual elements of its work. These opinions are largely due to the influence of *da'is* (Muslim missionaries) who originate from the region but have studied abroad, often importing foreign interpretations back into BiH. Because they have not graduated from one of the madrasas of the Islamic Community in BiH, they do not meet the requirement of the IC to be employed in official religious activities.

In total, 38 groups or individuals operating *para-jamaats* were part of the talks, and 14 have agreed to join the Islamic Community.<sup>23</sup> In the meantime, the *para-jamaats*

23 From the report of the Directorate for Religious Affairs of the Riyaset of the Islamic Community in BiH, prepared for the Assembly of the Islamic Community, titled: "Report on activities undertaken in order to conduct interviews and reach agreements with individuals and groups, members of Islam who are not members of the Islamic Community in BiH and who are not involved in the *jamaats* of the Islamic Community on BiH territory," No. 05-03-2-1657-1/16, April 13, 2016, the author's archive.

that have refused integration continue to operate; however, since they are not part of the Islamic Community, they will be subject to legislation regulating NGOs and religious groups. As yet, the government has not shown considerable interest in imposing a legal framework on their activities or forcing them to shut down, register as a religious community, or harmonize their activities with the NGO statute. And, while the media has reported on several inspections performed by Federation officials, the outcome of those inspections and their consequences have not been made public.

### **The Influence of Para-jamaats**

The departure of Bosnian citizens to battlefields in Syria and Iraq has drawn the attention of the public and of the Islamic Community to the alternative Islamic movements that exist throughout the country. Research on foreign fighters from BiH, to which the author contributed, has shown that “radicalization and recruitment is occurring by and large...during social gatherings that take place in the privacy of people’s homes. These gatherings amount to ‘illegal’ or ‘parallel’ mosques, or ‘para-jamaats’... and are now considered by many as hotbeds of radicalization and recruitment in BiH.”<sup>24</sup> This research also suggests that these para-jamaats represent a serious social and security problem that goes beyond the sphere of spirituality; increasingly, they are filling gaps in almost every sector where reduced governmental capacities (due to political obstruction, corruption, nepotism, and incompetence) mean the needs of citizens are no longer met by public agencies, usually under the auspices of non-profit organizations.

A significant number of these humanitarian and non-governmental organizations, working both independently and in coordination, have filled the space created by a dysfunctional state, to establish what are essentially parallel or alternative structures that fulfill a range of social needs. Though unregistered and unapproved, they have set up schools and kindergartens, have opened health clinics, and have established safe houses for women victims of domestic violence. Still, “these parallel organizations are not only offering alternative services, but are carrying out a kind of conservative revolution that is fundamentally changing the values and identity of some Bosnians.”<sup>25</sup>

24 Vlado Azinović and Muhamed Jusić, *The New Lure of the Syrian War: The Foreign Fighters’ Bosnian Contingent* (Sarajevo: Atlantic Initiative, 2016), 13.

25 *Ibid.*, 69.

Not all so-called *para-jamaats* in BiH are Salafist, nor do they all advocate violence, and yet, the fact remains that all Bosnian foreign fighters who have departed for Syria and Iraq have belonged to Salafist groups. Fear of such groups and of their interpretations of Islam are thus based in concerns that go beyond the mere rejection of religious pluralism. Indeed, such pluralism, as well as freedom of religion, have long roots in Bosnia and Herzegovina. But, while the government has no right to interfere in the religious teachings and worldviews of these groups so long as their activities are carried out in accordance with the law, Bosnian citizens certainly have the right to question the attitudes and beliefs that are promoted and taught in such circles. And, what some citizens are beginning to sense is that radicalization – often discussed as an extreme and obvious process – may work more subtly, unweaving a social fabric thread by thread until suddenly, familiar patterns are no longer visible anymore.

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# CROATIA

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## ISIL's Western Balkan *Caliphettes*

by Anita Perešin<sup>1</sup>

With the June 2014 establishment of a “caliphate” in the territories of Iraq and Syria, announced by the self-proclaimed “caliph” and leader of ISIL Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, his appeal to all Muslims to migrate to these territories has been viewed by some “true believers” in the Western Balkans as a mandatory religious duty. A new wave of Muslim men and women from the Balkans, motivated by a combination of religious and other factors, have left home for the “caliphate,” where the Balkan contingent has supported groups fighting the Assad regime since the beginning of the civil war in Syria. The number of Western Balkans citizens in ISIL territories is not precisely known, but up to 1,000 are thought to make up the Balkan contingent – including male fighters, a much smaller percentage of female fighters, women and children who accompanied their husbands and fathers, some women who traveled alone (often in order to marry), and a small number of teenagers, most of whom have left home without the consent of their parents.<sup>2</sup> The motives and expectations of women in this contingent are difficult to grasp; for, despite ISIL propaganda that compares living in its territory to being at a “Disneyland for Muslims,” the group is among the most notorious terrorist organizations in the world, infamous for its brutal abuse, derogation, and mistreatment of women.

The aim in this chapter is to present what is known so far about women from the Western Balkans who have joined or sympathize with ISIL, including their backgrounds and motivations, as well as the roles assigned to them by ISIL. Some of these Western Balkan *caliphettes* represent a unique threat to their domestic countries in the case they return. If the “caliphate” collapses and ISIL loses control in Syria and Iraq, it will be necessary to assess the level of risk posed by these women to the region; and not just because they may be perpetrators themselves, but due to their desire to raise a new generation of Salafi-jihadists.

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  - 2 Vlado Azinović and Muhamed Jusić, *The New Lure of the Syrian War: The Foreign Fighters' Bosnian Contingent* (Sarajevo: Atlantic Initiative, 2016), 38.

## Who are the Western Balkan *caliphettes*?

In his first speech after declaring himself “caliph,” ISIL leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi urged all Muslims around the world to migrate (or undertake *hijra*) to ISIL-held territory, to fight its enemies and help build the infrastructure and society of the group’s nascent “state.”<sup>3</sup> Al-Baghdadi’s call echoed throughout the Western Balkans and in the other parts of the Western world, and soon after, several hundred Muslims from the region had departed for battlefields in the Middle East. To assure its functioning and longevity, ISIL needs both men and women to migrate. For this reason, ISIL dedicates particular attention to the role of women, albeit with glaring contradictions between the role and treatment reserved for Muslim women versus the treatment of women it considers heretics, such as Yazidi women, who are treated as slaves and seen primarily as commodities that can be traded away or given as rewards to ISIL fighters.<sup>4</sup>

A surprisingly high number of women from the Western Balkans have voluntarily departed for the “caliphate” in spite of ISIL’s well-documented brutality, and abuse and humiliation of women. Even given the political, social, and economic upheaval in the Western Balkans, the fact that women are willing to live in strict accordance with Sharia law – unknown in the Islamic tradition of the region – and, moreover, to raise their children in a conflict zone, is hard to understand and shows the complexity of several push and pull factors that have influenced these women.

It is clear that most women from the region who depart to ISIL territory do not intend to be fighters and official data on the number who have joined ISIL units is lacking, mainly due to the difficulty in confirming their membership in a militant faction once they are in Syria and Iraq. This is often unclear, for instance, in the case of women who at first accompany their husbands and then become foreign fighters themselves. In addition, some women in the Balkan contingent have come from diaspora communities in European countries, such as two Austrian teenagers, Sabina Selimovic and Samra Kesinovic, known worldwide as the “ISIL poster girls,”

3 “ISIS Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi first Friday sermon as so-called ‘Caliph,’” *Al Arabiya English*, July 5, 2014, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/webtv/reports/2014/07/07/ISIS-Abu-Bakr-al-Baghdidi-first-Friday-sermon-as-so-called-Caliph-.html> (accessed July 24, 2014).

4 This type of slavery, trading, and permissible rape is formally approved by ISIL’s interpretation of Islamic law as described in the pamphlet it issued in 2014, titled “Questions and Answers on Taking Captives and Slaves.”

both of whom were children of Bosnian refugees who left BiH during the war.<sup>5</sup> In fact, links between the region and diaspora are common, and it is estimated that over one-fifth of the Bosnian citizens who have departed to Syria and Iraq have had such connections.<sup>6</sup>

Despite the dearth of official data, there are an estimated 100 women from the Western Balkans in ISIL-controlled territory, amounting to just under 10% of the foreign contingent from the region; which reflects the percentage of women who have relocated from Western countries.<sup>7</sup> But in contingents from certain Western Balkan countries, like Kosovo and BiH, the rate of women is estimated to be as high as 36%.<sup>8</sup>

In general, a higher percentage of women and children from the Western Balkans have traveled with their families to Syria or Iraq, rather than alone, than from the rest of Europe. Recent research indicates that 61 women from Bosnia and Herzegovina have departed to Syria and Iraq, with 81 children; that some 38 women have departed from Kosovo;<sup>9</sup> and that up to 29 women have departed from Albania.<sup>10</sup> Regional media has published even higher estimates – that 45 women have traveled from Kosovo with 50 children and 35 women have left Albania with 32 children.<sup>11</sup> Further, 8 women are believed to have departed from Serbia for Syria and Iraq, with 5 children;<sup>12</sup> and 4 women from Montenegro, with two children.<sup>13</sup> The official number of Macedonian women in ISIL territory is not available, but published estimates put it at 10% of the total Macedonian contingent in Syria and Iraq.

Among women from the region, the number of converts from outside Islam is negligible, and is much lower than the rate among women from Western Europe. Still, there

5 Tara Dodrill, "Samra Kesinovic: 'ISIS poster girl' used as sex slave until she was beaten to death trying to escape," *Inquisitr*, December 30, 2015, <http://www.inquisitr.com/2668839/samra-kesinovic-isis-poster-girl-used-as-sex-slave-until-she-was-beaten-to-death-trying-to-escape/> (accessed December 31, 2015).

6 Azinović and Jusić, 38.

7 Harriet Sherwood, et al., "Schoolgirl jihadis: the female Islamists leaving home to join Isis fighters," *The Guardian*, February 21, 2015.

8 Azinović and Jusić, 28.

9 *Ibid*, 11.

10 Eric Mietz, *What About the Women? Understanding and Addressing the Problem of ISIS Female Recruitment in the Western Balkans* (Belgrade: Belgrade Centre for Security Policy, 2016), 13-14.

11 "Žene sa Zapadnog Balkana na ISIL ratištima: šalju vlastitu djecu u smrt," *Crne Gore Media*, June 19, 2016, <http://crna.gora.me/vijesti/drustvo/zene-sa-zapadnog-balkana-na-isil-ratistima-salju-vastitu-djecu-u-smrt/> (accessed July 23, 2016).

12 *Ibid*.

13 "Za ISIL ratuju četiri Crnogorke," *Crne Gore Media*, March 18, 2016, <http://crna.gora.me/vijesti/politika/za-isil-ratuju-cetiri-crnogorke/> (accessed March 23, 2016).

is no universal profile of a typical female recruit from the Western Balkans in terms of age, family background, level of education, or marital status. However, some of the characteristics of these women are unique when compared to trends in Western countries; for example, most come from geographic, social, and economic margins and, with very few exceptions, are less educated than their Western counterparts and have little to no work experience, offering them poor prospects for the future.<sup>14</sup>

The age of women from the region who have departed for ISIL territory ranges widely. Women from Kosovo have averaged just 23 years old upon departure, for example;<sup>15</sup> while women from Bosnia have averaged 31 years of age and a vast majority (93%) have already been married upon arrival in Syria and Iraq<sup>16</sup> – a tendency that can be attributed to the strong trend among Bosnians to heed the call for *hijra* by migrating with entire families, sometimes three generations. There are also examples of teenage girls who, seeking adventure, have left for ISIL territory without the consent of their parents. This was the case for the two Austrian teens mentioned above, as well as for two girls from Kosovo that were stopped in March 2015 by police as they attempted to cross into Macedonia on foot, on their way to Syria, without identity documents. The mother of one girl told a journalist that she “...didn’t know where they had gone until the police brought them home,”<sup>17</sup> a sentiment also commonly shared by the parents of teenage girls from Western Europe who unexpectedly leave their homes after being lured by ISIS recruiters.

Profiles of women who have departed for Syria and Iraq illustrate the influence of families in these cases, to various ends. While some women have been encouraged to migrate by their husbands or close relatives, who often shared their radical views, other families have been shocked by the decision of their loved one to migrate and have tried to push them away from violent extremism.<sup>18</sup> Some individuals have even traveled to ISIL territory in attempts to bring their family members home. After his son and daughter-in-law contacted him from Syria, one father from

14 Azinović and Jusić, 44-45; Shpend Kursani, *Report inquiring into the causes and consequences of Kosovo citizens’ involvement as foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq* (Kosovar Center for Security Studies, 2015), 11.

15 “Žene sa Kosova na čelu kampova ISIS-a u Siriji,” *Info-ks.net*, January 26, 2016, <http://www.info-ks.net/vijesti/kosovo/62094/zeri-zene-sa-kosova-na-celu-kampova-isis-a-u-siriji-foto> (accessed January 30, 2016).

16 Azinović and Jusić, 12.

17 Arbana Xharra, “Few but Fanatical – the Kosovo Women Who Go Over to ISIS,” *Balkan Insight Alumni*, January 26, 2016, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/few-but-fanatical-the-kosovo-women-who-go-over-to-isis-01-22-2016> (accessed July 23, 2016).

18 Ibid.

Kosovo sold his business and spent 30,000 euros to reach Aleppo, find them, and bring them back, but he was not allowed by ISIL to reach the camp in which they were said to be staying.<sup>19</sup>

## Motivation

The motives for women who migrate to Syria and Iraq are similar to those of men, and include a mixture of personal drivers and ideological, religious, political, and humanitarian incentives. At the beginning of the civil war in Syria in 2011, some Muslims from the Western Balkans, including those who had previously practiced a more liberal form of Islam, moved there to help oppressed Syrians and to show solidarity with their Muslim brothers and sisters – victims of the Assad regime. Muslims from the region were also motivated to go to Syria and Iraq as foreign fighters out of a sense of duty because of similar help received by Muslims in Balkan countries during the wars of the 1990s. Then, after the proclamation of the “caliphate” and a shift by ISIL toward promoting *hijra* as the most important duty of “true Muslims,” the number of women who left to join their husbands, or to find one among ISIL fighters, increased rapidly. These women called themselves the *muhajirah* – female migrants who moved from lands inhabited by infidels to the “promised land,” to serve Allah. Believing they were fulfilling a religious duty (*hijra*), and lured by what was sold as a potential utopia in ISIL territory, some women were excited by the opportunity to take part in a state-building process that would create a new, ideologically-pure society – a Muslim *Ummah* in which all women would live honorably, under strict Sharia rules.

For every individual who has departed to Syria and Iraq, there have also been various personal motives influencing their decision: dissatisfaction with their living conditions, boredom and a desire for adventure, rebellion against family, troubled domestic relationships, traumatic experiences, etc. It is clear that women from the Western Balkans are traveling to Syria or Iraq for many of the same reasons as women from Western countries. However, some push factors are unique to the Western Balkans, including weak educational systems, high youth unemployment rates (which are highest among Bosnians and Kosovars, at up to 60%),<sup>20</sup> and weak and ineffective government institutions – all of which lead to poor socio-economic prospects and a lack of meaningful opportunities for young people.

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19 Ibid.

20 Mietz, 7.

For some, ISIL offers a seemingly easy solution to these problems, assuring female adherents a meaningful life, a sense of belonging, a battle-tested husband, and benefits and financial rewards that make women believe they will be financially secure and want for nothing; and further, that they will be guaranteed a place in paradise. ISIL propaganda entices women on the premise that they become “jihadi brides,” whose main role is to raise a new generation of jihadists; but some women expect to play more militant roles and images of women carrying Kalashnikovs raise their aspirations to achieve a status more equal to that of male foreign fighters. Such opportunities are still limited, but not inaccessible.

### How ISIL Recruits Women in the Western Balkans

To lure women from the Western Balkans, ISIL recruiters have created narratives specially designed to instrumentalize all the push and pull factors that typically impact female migrants from the region. Images, videos, and narratives about children suffering and injured in Syria and Iraq are spread on social media and by local radical imams with the intent to enhance anger and engender a desire to intervene. And women are specifically targeted by images of brave foreign fighters looking for dedicated wives with whom they can create families, images of empowered-looking women carrying Kalashnikovs to show how important they are to the future of the “caliphate,” and images of villas with swimming pools and luxurious cars parked out front as a preview of the luxury that awaits them once they undertake *hijra*. These inducements are accompanied by verses from the Qur’an, highlighting the religious framework and announcing that migrants can expect an afterlife in paradise.

Radicalization and recruitment are usually initiated through contact with already radicalized family members or friends, who connect women with radical imams or other active ISIL recruiters. Since the wars in the 1990s, many religious charities from Gulf region countries have established a strong presence in the Western Balkans, introducing Salafi/Wahhabi and takfirist ideologies that had not existed before in the region. In the same period, many young men have received scholarships to train as imams in Middle Eastern countries, where they have absorbed more radical Islamic ideals, and return home with extremist and intolerant attitudes that influence vulnerable people in their communities.<sup>21</sup> These fundamentalist and conservative interpretations of Islam contradict local Islamic tradition and religious culture, and have created schisms within the Muslim communities in Western Balkan countries.

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21 Xharra.

For many young people from secular families it is difficult to differentiate between a credible imam and a radical one. Legitimate mosques are sometimes used as a platform by imams who spread radical Islam and encourage young people to go to Syria, but there is also a network of informal places of worship or “para-jamaats,” as the official Islamic Community has labeled them, as well as other, even more private, spaces. These para-jamaats are now viewed as hotbeds of radicalization and recruitment in Bosnia, Albania, Kosovo, and Macedonia.<sup>22</sup>

Radicalization can sometimes occur quite quickly. The Kosovar father mentioned above, who traveled to Syria in search of his son and daughter-in-law, told a journalist that they had been brainwashed in just a couple of months by the radical imam in their village, after which “he could no longer recognize his children.”<sup>23</sup> They did not just change their behavior and mode of dress, but began talking about helping their brothers in Syria, about the necessity of fully committing to their religion, and even about the need to bomb US Camp Bondsteel – the main US Army post under KFOR command in Kosovo.

Quite often, the process of radicalization and recruitment is augmented by online activity in social media networks. ISIL uses Western women who have already moved to Syria and Iraq to spread its narrative in social media and blog posts, and these women promote not only the aims of ISIL and its battlefield victories, but the experience of life in ISIL-controlled territory. By presenting their everyday activities – such as cooking, playing with their children, gathering with other women, and posting pictures with their beloved husbands against romantic sunset backdrops – they are selling an ideal meant to attract would-be female migrants, and this approach has proven to be very effective.

Women from the Balkans are rarely engaged in online ISIL propaganda; and only a few of them are reportedly active as online recruiters. More often, men play that role, attempting to lure both men and women to migrate to Syria and Iraq. These recruiters often make direct pleas in videos. As one young Bosnian fighter in Syria explained in a video posted on Facebook in 2014, “we have unmarried brothers here, we have brothers who would like to have more women, we have brothers who would

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22 Azinović and Jusić, 13.

23 Xharra.

like to take you under their guardianship...<sup>24</sup> Another popular video, titled “Honor is in Jihad: A message to the people of the Balkans,” showed foreign fighters from the Balkans with their families, and urged other families from the region to travel to Syria and Iraq.<sup>25</sup>

While it is certainly influential, the Internet does not carry the same weight in processes of radicalization and recruitment in all Western Balkan countries. In BiH, the role of social media and the Internet in individual cases of radicalization appears to be only tertiary in importance (after the influence of family members, relatives or friends, and local imams), serving as a force multiplier.<sup>26</sup> In some other Balkan countries, this influence appears stronger. For example, despite poor economic development, the Internet is very popular and highly accessible in Kosovo, where some 76% of people claim to use it.<sup>27</sup> Still, while one may expect this to facilitate the exposure of Kosovar youth to foreign ISIL propaganda, the rate of young Kosovars who speak or understand English or other foreign languages is quite low.<sup>28</sup> This makes the role of domestic recruiters more important.

Social media posts and ISIL’s electronically-available magazine *Dabiq* provide a variety of practical tips and advice to women on how to prepare for travel to the “caliphate,” and how to behave with their husbands and the entire community once they arrive. For more detailed instructions and to get the contact information of guides who will facilitate their travel, women recruits use encrypted channels and private messages. These resources reflect the effort ISIL has made to bring more women into the organization. And a number of women from the Western Balkans have responded; but not all have been satisfied with the role allocated to them.

24 “Bosanac iz Sirije poziva muslimanke: Ima braće koja hoće i više žena, ima dosta praznih mjesta,” *Klix.ba*, April 29, 2014, <http://www.klix.ba/vijesti/bih/bosanac-iz-sirije-poziva-muslimanke-ima-brace-koja-hoce-i-vise-zena-ima-dosta-praznih-mjesta/140429064> (accessed March 12, 2016).

25 Available at: <http://jihadology.net/2015/06/04/al-%E1%B8%A5ayat-media-center-presents-a-new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-honor-is-in-jihad-a-message-to-the-people-of-the-balkans/> (accessed August 3, 2016).

26 Azinović and Jusić, 13.

27 Kursani, 13.

28 *Ibid*, 82.

## Life in the “caliphate”

To establish a fully functional state on the territory under its control, ISIL needs women, for a variety of reasons: to marry foreign fighters and keep them in ISIL territory, to raise a new generation of jihadists, to occupy certain professional positions (like being teachers, nurses, or doctors), to help control the civilian population (especially the behavior and dress of other women, largely monitored by the all-female Al-Khansaa brigade), to manage the slave market, and to recruit other women. Not all of these roles are accessible to all Western Balkan female recruits, and most women from the region keep to traditional gender roles, as wives and mothers. However, a few are reportedly active recruiters or members of the Al-Khansaa brigade.<sup>29</sup>

The level of these women’s satisfaction with their role and living conditions in Syria and Iraq varies from highly satisfactory to deeply disappointing. Women who are satisfied have established a sisterhood, feel a sense of belonging, and show no intention of leaving ISIL territory, even when they are widowed. One example of this is a woman from Montenegro, who moved to Syria with her husband and two daughters and decided to stay after her husband’s death, claiming the “caliphate” is a better place to raise her children.<sup>30</sup> The same decision was made by a Kosovar woman who has stayed in Syria with her two children after her husband’s death.<sup>31</sup>

Still, some women have found their status and living conditions in ISIL territory disappointing or even terrifying, but have not been able to leave. Such was the case of the two Austrian ‘poster girls’ who joined ISIS in 2014. One of them posted a series of tweets saying: “Here I can really be free. I can practice my religion. I couldn’t do that in Vienna,” but was reported dead soon afterwards, apparently due to fighting.<sup>32</sup> The other allegedly wrote to her family after arriving, saying she was sickened by the

29 One woman from BiH, who goes by the aliases “The Sand of Damascus” and “The Heart of the Caliphate,” is reportedly a member of the Al-Khansaa brigade. She has posted photographs of herself carrying weapons and one that supposedly shows her executing another member of the brigade, who was accused of spying (See: Azinović and Jusić, 48). Only two other women from the region are alleged to have played more militant roles in ISIL operations – a 23-year old Kosovar woman is believed to be ISIL’s main online recruiter of ethnic Albanian women (see Xharra) and a Montenegrin woman is said to be in the Al-Khansaa brigade (See: “I četiri žene iz Crne Gore ratnice ISIL-a,” CDM, March 18, 2016, <http://www.cdm.me/drustvo/hronika/i-cetiri-zene-iz-crne-gore-ratnice-isil-a>).

30 “Za ISIL ratuju četiri Crnogorke.”

31 Xharra.

32 Mark Piggott, “Isis: Austrian teen ‘poster girl’ reportedly beaten to death for trying to leave Raqqa,” *International Business Times*, November 24, 2015, <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/isis-teen-austrian-poster-girl-reportedly-beaten-death-trying-leave-raqqa-1530343> (accessed March 12, 2016).

brutality of ISIL and wanted to leave; she was beaten to death as she tried to escape from Raqqa. A Serbian woman who succeeded in returning home, together with her husband and son, also described her three-month stay in Syria as a living hell.<sup>33</sup>

Once they arrive in ISIL territory, these women are exposed to a very different way of life, even if they come from extremist Muslim communities in the Western Balkans. New social norms and parameters for everyday life are dictated by ISIL's very specific interpretation of Islamic law. What's more, women must adapt to less variety in their food, frequent relocation, and the deaths of friends and family members. Their dress and behavior must align exactly with the precepts set by ISIL or they may be sanctioned on the spot, and leaving the house without an accompanying related man is strongly forbidden (except for theology students, doctors, and teachers) and can be punished with lashing or stoning.

Thinking of female migrants only as "jihadi brides" marginalizes their role in Syria and Iraq, and implies they have no influence on the actions and decisions of men. On the contrary, ISIL propaganda often advises Muslim women (both wives and mothers) that it is their "responsibility" to encourage men to join and support ISIL and wage  *jihad*. This role of women is sometimes emphasized as even more important than  *hijra*, and some women appear to take it very seriously. The mother of one of the most wanted jihadists from BiH, who posted a video in July 2016 calling on Muslims worldwide to kill Christians, said she was proud of him and couldn't wait for him to become a martyr. "If I had ten more sons, they would all fight for Allah," she told local newspapers.<sup>34</sup> The ideology of ISIL glorifies martyrdom as the ultimate reward for waging  *jihad* and some women also express great pride that their husbands have been martyred, describing them as heroes who made the ultimate sacrifice to help establish an Islamic state.<sup>35</sup>

33 "Ispovest žene iz Srbije: Moj životipatnjau Islamskoj državi," *Blic*, March 29, 2016, <http://www.blic.rs/vesti/hronika/ispovest-zene-iz-srbije-moj-zivot-i-patnja-u-islamskoj-drzavi/p03jvq5> (accessed June 23, 2016).

34 "Majka najtraženijeg džihadista iz BiH: On je junak, da imam još deset sinova, svi bi išli u džihad!" *Slobodna Dalmacija*, July 4, 2016, <http://www.slobodnadalmacija.hr/novosti/bih/clanak/id/318321/majka-najtrazenijeg-dzihadista-iz-bih-on-je-junak-da-imam-jos-deset-sinova-svi-bi-isl-u-dzihad> (accessed August 2, 2016).

35 Joanna Paraszczuk, "Diary of an Islamic State Wife: British Woman in Syria Tells of Husband's Death in Kobani," *Radio Free Europe*, November 24, 2014, <http://www.rferl.org/content/islamic-state-wives-syria-uk-blog-kobani/26708088.html> (accessed March 24, 2015).

## Women and Violence

ISIL has certain limitations on the use of women in combat. In contrast to some of the images promoted online, an ISIL document (in Arabic) posted on a jihadist forum in January 2015 clarified that the designated role of women is primarily domestic.<sup>36</sup> Still, this manifesto does not exclude a combat role for women, but permits it only in extreme cases. The participation of women in combat in ISIL territory in Syria and Iraq has not been confirmed, but Libyan officials have confirmed that, in that country, ISIL is using women fighters – believed to be Tunisian – in combat roles on the frontline.

Online posts indicate that some women from Western Balkan countries are trained to use weapons, and in general, these *caliphettes* appear to facilitate brutality and violence at the same level as male foreign fighters. They support and celebrate tortures and executions, justify the mistreatment and sexual abuse of Yazidi women, run slave markets, and mete out punishment to other women. And on social media, these women often express a willingness to become martyrs as suicide bombers. In May 2015, it was reported that a new ISIL wedding contract allows “jihadi brides” to carry out suicide missions without their husband’s permission if ISIL leader Al-Baghdadi gives the order.<sup>37</sup> This may suggest that ISIL has longer-term plans to use female recruits for suicide missions.

Women who have departed to Syria and Iraq are active online in instigating terrorism by ISIL sympathizers in the West; but there are also radicalized women who have not been able to migrate to Syria and Iraq, or who may have decided to remain in their home country and act domestically. Such was the case with a 21-year-old Serbian woman who was arrested in BiH in 2015, along with her husband, for allegedly collecting data on possible targets in Bosnia and recruiting other women.<sup>38</sup> Some media has gone so far as to portray women as having been trained to carry out suicide

36 See: Jamaal Abdul-Alim, “ISIS ‘Manifesto’ Spells Out Role for Women,” *The Atlantic*, March 8, 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2015/03/isis-manifesto-spells-out-role-for-women/387049/> (accessed March 18, 2017).

37 This was reported in various media outlets. For example, see: Heather Saul, “Isis wedding certificate shows jihadi bride demanding right to be suicide bomber as condition of getting married,” *The Independent*, May 14, 2015, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-wedding-certificate-shows-jihadi-bride-demanding-right-to-be-a-suicide-bomber-as-condition-of-10250346.html> (accessed March 18, 2017).

38 “UBiH uhićena državljanka Srbije osumnjičena za terorizam,” *Vecernji list*, November 25, 2015, <http://www.vecernji.hr/svijet/u-bih-uhicena-drzavljanica-srbije-osumnjicena-za-terorizam-1040053> (accessed August 1, 2016).

attacks in the Balkans.<sup>39</sup> Anxiety that female ISIL sympathizers from the Western Balkans may pose a direct physical threat to the region is relatively new, but several indicators signal a possible change in the future role of women in violent attacks.

### The Future of Western Balkan *Caliphettes*

A key security concern for Western Balkan countries is what happens to these Western Balkan *caliphettes* going forward, especially if the “caliphate” collapses. What threat could they pose to the region? Several likely scenarios have been identified, depending on each woman’s motivation, level of satisfaction with the “caliphate,” and willingness to continue to participate in violence.

*Disillusioned women* will probably try to escape a dissolving ISIL “state” to return home, with no intention of future violence. They may be relatively easily reintegrated into society and could serve as powerful actors in prevention and deterrence efforts. *Some women will migrate with their families to other fronts*, and will seek other places to relocate, to avoid possible punishment at home – especially now that all Western Balkan countries have passed legislation criminalizing the recruitment, participation, incitement, or material support of foreign paramilitary groups by their citizens.<sup>40</sup> *Others may engage in violence and take on more militant roles as suicide bombers or fighters* in the territory controlled by ISIL, if the situation for ISIL worsens and the group lacks male fighters. It is also possible that *some women will return to their home countries in order to recruit, facilitate, or even perpetrate terrorism*.

Recent examples from different countries show the growing desire of women for a more active role in violent extremism.<sup>41</sup> Thus, special attention must be given to women known to be ISIL sympathizers, who have been radicalized at home and for various reasons have not traveled to ISIL territory; and all female ISIL adherents from Syria and Iraq should be assessed for risk and properly treated in the case of return.

39 “Vrbovanje Devojka iz Srbije regrutovala žene za ISIS,” *Blic*, November 26, 2015, <http://www.blic.rs/vesti/hronika/vrbovanje-devojka-iz-srbije-regrutovala-zene-za-isis/yhfhpn8> (accessed August 1, 2016).

40 Mietz, 13-14.

41 See: Jason Burke, “Isis sends female supporters to serve as frontline suicide bombers,” *The Guardian*, November 12, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/nov/12/isis-women-frontline-suicide-bombers> (accessed March 18, 2017); and David Lawler, et al., “San Bernardino shooting: Isis claims attack as reports suggest wife came to US to perpetrate terror,” *The Telegraph*, December 6, 2015, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/northamerica/usa/12030160/California-shooting-Multiple-victims-reported-in-San-Bernardino-live.html> (accessed March 18, 2017).

In the Western Balkans, prevailing socioeconomic conditions such as high unemployment and low education levels, and the higher likelihood that individuals are recruited by family members, mean the role of women in both radicalization and de-radicalization processes cannot be underestimated. ISIL itself celebrates women who enable jihad by promoting a culture of male militancy. Indeed, one motive of the online propaganda ISIL directs at women is to encourage them to bear children, raise their boys for jihad, and spur men to embrace jihad and shame them if they do not. This duty has been recognized and accepted by some women in the region, as presented by several examples in this chapter.

On the other side of this equation, the role of women, especially mothers, in de-radicalization programs should be strengthened. Regional strategies to prevent radical extremism that leads to violence ought to fully appreciate and harness the influence of women in this regard. Mothers are often the most likely to recognize signs of radicalization within the family, and they should be seen as partners in protecting individuals at risk of radicalization, especially children and minors.

A significant number of children from Western Balkan countries who have moved with their parents to Syria or Iraq, or were born in ISIL-controlled territory, also represent a specific social and security concern, since they have been exposed to norms of violence and some have been indoctrinated and trained in using weapons. ISIL is already known to use teenage boys and girls as executioners, and though there is no evidence so far that children from the region have been involved in such activities, children will no doubt continue to be targeted for violent and militaristic tasks in order to secure the future of the “caliphate.” The importance ISIL places on these children makes their mothers, and their willingness to support de-radicalization programs, extremely valuable.

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# MONTENEGRO

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## Montenegro and the Foreign Fighter Phenomenon<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

Like other countries in the region, Montenegro has had its fair share of citizens participating as foreign fighters on battlefields abroad; and for the purpose of this study, we will focus on Montenegrin foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq. Due to its geographical location and shared borders with countries that have dealt to a greater degree with this phenomenon – such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Albania – the number of Montenegrin foreign fighters joining the fronts of the so-called Islamic State has varied over time, reaching its peak in 2014. Numbers in 2016 were the lowest they have been since the start of the phenomenon; and one can argue that this is the result of legal and operational mechanisms implemented by the Montenegrin government in 2015.

In the first part of this chapter, the mechanisms that Montenegro has put in place will be explained, followed by case studies of Montenegrin nationals who have been killed fighting for ISIL and an analysis of the push and pull factors that led them to the battlefield. Current trends and patterns, some of the psychological influences at play, and effects on local populations and state authorities will also be elaborated. Media and social networking will be discussed as well, as far as it relates to the current foreign fighter threat and relevant state institutions. Ultimately, with a decreasing number of foreign fighters joining the ISIL fight, it seems that departure to the front is “out of fashion” in Montenegro; both the legal mechanisms put in place and the interventions of families and religious institutions have played a crucial role in tackling this issue.

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1 The authors are Montenegro-based security analysts.

## Legislative Mechanisms in the Fight against Terrorism in Montenegro

As the war in Syria and Iraq intensified from 2011 to 2014 and ISIL claimed new territory by committing egregious violations of human rights, the number of foreign fighters joining their ranks increased. It is estimated that, in 2014, the number of foreign fighters on Syrian and Iraqi battlefields numbered over 28,000.<sup>2</sup> Foreign fighters from the Balkans contributed to this number, most of them coming from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, and Kosovo, but also from Macedonia, Serbia, and Montenegro.<sup>3</sup>

The *modus operandi* of ISIL in recruiting new fighters from the Balkans has primarily relied on Internet and social media propaganda; though, person-to-person contact has also been a factor in radicalization.<sup>4</sup> Despite the ISIL ideal of universal brotherhood, foreign fighters from each country tend to stick together both on the battlefield and as they engage in social media activities, attempting to lure other nationals from their home countries. For example, in one of the many videos posted by the ISIL media team, a Montenegrin citizen, Mirza Haklaj, appears with his wife and children and calls for others, particularly for his countrymen, to join him and live under Sharia law.<sup>5</sup> The video was released in 2015, as the number of Montenegrin nationals joining the ranks of ISIL had just reached its peak.

As ISIL and affiliated groups became more visible in Europe in 2015, committing numerous attacks across the continent and in the rest of the world, the foreign fighter phenomenon was placed very high on Montenegro's agenda. In March 2015, the Parliament of Montenegro made amendments to the Criminal Code whereby the law criminalizes persons who "organize, recruit, finance, encourage, lead or train people or groups of people" with the goal of joining foreign armed groups outside

2 National Security Division, "Assistant Attorney General John P. Carlin Delivers Remarks at the International Institute for Justice and the Rule of Law's Event on More Effective Responses to the Foreign Terrorist Fighter Threat," Department of Justice, September 28, 2015, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/speech/assistant-attorney-general-john-p-carlin-delivers-remarks-international-institute-justice> (accessed August 30, 2016).

3 Miloš Rudović, "Sa Balkana 875 ratnika, 30 iz Crne Gore," *Vijesti*, March 28, 2016, <http://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/sa-balkana-875-ratnika-30-iz-crne-gore-881149> (accessed August 30, 2016).

4 Guy Taylor, "Islamic State targets Balkans as next recruitment hotspot," *The Washington Times*, December 22, 2015.

5 Darvin Murić and Vladimir Otašević, "Mirza Haklaj poginuo, žena i djeca jos u Siriji," *Vijesti*, June 6, 2015, <http://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/mirza-haklaj-poginuo-zena-i-djeca-jos-u-siriji-836933> (accessed August 30, 2016).

the country to participate in military conflicts.<sup>6</sup> This conforms with UNSCR 2178, which condemns violent extremism and underscores the need to prevent travel and support for foreign terrorist fighters. As of this writing, there are two cases in Montenegrin courts pending verdicts relating to these offenses.<sup>7</sup>

### Strategic Mechanisms

Montenegro adopted a new Strategy for Preventing and Combatting Terrorism for the period of 2015-2018, which is compatible with the EU's Counter-Terrorism Strategy and draws on its five pillars: prevention, protection, pursuit, response, and criminal processing. Additionally, this Strategy compliments other national strategies, including the National Strategy for National Security and Strategic Defense and the National Strategy against Corruption and Organized Crime.<sup>8</sup> Monitoring and oversight of implementation of the Strategy for Preventing and Combatting Terrorism is the charge of the Bureau for Operational Coordination, which supervises the National Security Council, headed by the Prime Minister.<sup>9</sup>

### Institutional Mechanisms

There have also been improvements and reforms made at the institutional level, and in accordance with the recommendations of the European Commission, a Special Prosecutor's Office was established. Furthermore, in line with the Rulebook on Organization and Systematizations of the Ministry of the Interior, a specialized Counter-Terrorism (CT) Unit was formed within the Police. This new unit cooperates directly with the Special Prosecutor's Office to address, among others, issues

6 See: Krivicni zakonik Crne Gore (the Criminal Code of Montenegro), Text 295, dated March 26, 2015, which amends Article 449 on participation in foreign military groups. Available in local language at: <http://www.sluzbenilist.me/PravniAktDetalji.aspx?tag={CF6EABC8-9CB7-40BA-9525-D30F27532ED7}> (accessed August 30, 2016).

7 "U toku dvije istrage zbog ratovanja u drugim drzavama," CDM, March 15, 2016, <http://www.cdm.me/drustvo/hronika/u-toku-dvije-istrage-zbog-ratovanja-u-drugim-drzavama> (accessed August 30, 2016).

8 "Sekretar MUP-a Dragan Pejanovic ucestvuje na radionicama u Makedoniji na temu borbe protiv terorizma i podrške saradnju i jecanju kapaciteta granicnih policija Jugoistocne Evrope", Ministarstvo unutrašnjih poslova, <http://www.mup.gov.me/vijesti/159855/Sekretar-MUP-a-Dragan-Pejanovic-ucestvuje-na-radionicama-u-Makedoniji-na-temu-borbe-protiv-terorizma-i-podrške-saradnji-i-jecanj.html> (accessed August 30, 2016).

9 See: "Izvjestaj o sprovođenju strategije za prevenciju i suzbijanje terorizma, pranja novca i finansiranja terorizma 2015-2018," October 15, 2015, <http://www.aspn.gov.me/vijesti/154204/VIII-IZVJES-TAJ-O-SPROVOĐENJU-STRATEGIJE-ZA-PREVENCIJU-I-SUZBIJANJE-TERORIZMA-PRANJA-NOVCA-I-FINANSIRANJA-TERORIZMA-2015-2018.html> (accessed August 20, 2016).

of crime, money laundering, terrorism, and closely related areas such as weapons smuggling and terrorist financing.<sup>10</sup>

### Case Studies of Montenegrin Citizens who have Participated in the Conflict in Syria and Iraq

From mid-2013 through June 2016, departures of Montenegrin citizens to foreign conflict zones trended slightly upward. By the fall of 2014, 13 Montenegrins had traveled to Syria to fight alongside ISIL and the Al-Nusra Front.<sup>11</sup> And according to data published by the Montenegrin government, the number of Montenegrin citizens on foreign battlefields varied from 6 in 2014 to 16 at the end of 2015.<sup>12</sup> Since the beginning of the conflict in Syria, officially, 5 Montenegrins have lost their lives. Although it was initially speculated that their deaths were strictly related to participation in conflict, some of the data on the latest deaths (of Ernad Huseinović and Adem Mustafić) suggests that they were killed by ISIL; and this is certainly a possibility given that current battlefield pressures on the organization, due to fierce offensives from several directions, have increased numbers of deserters. Besides Huseinović and Mustafić, Mirza Haklaj from Podgorica, Adis Salihović from Rožaje, and Damir Slaković from Bar have also been killed in Syria.

Analysis of the background on these killed Montenegrin foreign fighters, as well as the push and pull factors that impacted them, and the routes to Syria or Iraq they took supports the view that there is no universal or stereotypical foreign fighter. Indeed, the youngest of these fighters was 18 and the oldest 35, one was an uneducated career criminal and another an *imam*.

10 European Commission, "Montenegro: 2015 Report," Commission Staff Working Document, No. SED(2015) 210 final, November 10, 2015.

11 "Pretnja Balkanu 'domaći džihadisti,' među njima i građani Crne Gore," Novosti online, October 23, 2014, <http://www.novosti.rs/vesti/planeta.300.html:515978-Pretnja-Balkanu-domaci-dzihadisti-medju-njima-i-gradjani-Crne-Gore> (accessed August 20, 2016). According to unofficial reports, it is believed that adherence to one of the militant groups active in the Middle East depends largely on who offers fighters the greatest financial compensation. In some cases, monthly compensation in the initial periods of the conflict is thought to have reached tens of thousands of euros; but over time, as the financial resources of militant factions have diminished, that figure has decreased. Available data indicates that families of the Montenegrin citizens most recently killed in Syria and Iraq have received no compensation.

12 From the Committee for Safety and Defense, Parliament of Montenegro.

## Adis Salihović

The first Montenegrin citizen who died in Syria was **Adis Salihović** from Rožaje, on May 15, 2013. Fighting under the *nom de guerre* of Abu Merdija, Salihović was killed during an attack on a prison, where he and another fighter were aiming to liberate their comrades. An experienced fighter, Salihović moved swiftly up the ISIL chain of command, and led the action in which he died. His death drew considerable public attention in Montenegro; and on the basis of his case, which featured regional connections, trends of departures of Montenegrin citizens to foreign battlefields have often been considered in the regional rather than in the national context, from the very beginning.

## Mirza Haklaj

**Mirza Haklaj** is the only Montenegrin foreign fighter who was born and raised in the capital of Podgorica. He had been known to authorities since 2009, when he and four accomplices repeatedly interfered with religious services at the Osmanagić Mosque. A judge issued an order that required Haklaj to keep his distance from the mosque.

By the time Haklaj departed for Syria, he was a career criminal with a thick dossier of felonies. In mid-2015, he was one of the participants in a video released by ISIL, in which extremists originating from the Balkans threatened the countries of the Western Balkans, including Montenegro.<sup>13</sup> In the video, Haklaj appeared with his family members (a wife and two young children).

The official news of Haklaj's death was published in early June 2016, though it's likely he died months beforehand, in early February. According to reports, his wife Almina Kurpejović and their two juvenile daughters remain in Syria and have no intention of returning to their country of origin. After the death of Almina's husband, she was offered, with the mediation of a Salafi leader from Gornja Maoča, a chance to return to Bosnia and Herzegovina and then to Montenegro, but she refused.<sup>14</sup>

13 The video was titled, "*Honor is in Jihad: A Message to the People of the Balkans.*"

14 "Za ISIL ratuju četiri Crnogorke," RTCG, March 18, 2016, <http://www.rtcg.me/vijesti/politika/122690/za-isil-ratuju-cetiri-crnogorke.html> (accessed August 30, 2016).

## Damir Slaković

A native of Bar, **Damir Slaković** came to public attention in late April and early May 2015, when he sent threatening messages via Facebook to fellow citizens, members of the official Islamic Community, and Montenegrin MPs Rifat Rastoder, Azra Jasavić, and Dritan Abazović. Slaković's posts coincided with other unrest in the region, so that his message had a particularly powerful psychological impact and managed to spread fear among the population of Montenegro. Several incidents in the Western Balkans at that time had the characteristics of terrorist acts, and this worked in the favor of Slaković and others who prey on panic. Attacks took place just days apart, carried out by members of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) on a police station in the village of Gošinci on April 21, 2015 and by Nerdin Ibrić on a police station in Zvornik, Bosnia and Herzegovina on April 27, 2015.<sup>15</sup>

## Ernad Huseinović

The youngest of Montenegrin citizens killed in Syria or Iraq, 18-year old **Ernad Huseinović** from Plav died on the battlefield on January 20, 2016. Huseinović spent more than half a year fighting for ISIL. Based on available data, he traveled to Syria through Bochum, Germany. Analysis of Facebook activity indicates that news of his death gained a considerable amount of attention, especially among young Montenegrins; and furthermore, that other Facebook users have since posted pictures of Huseinović or created groups under his name.<sup>16</sup> Huseinović appears to have been recruited and radicalized online himself, most likely through communication with other Montenegrin citizens already on the battlefield in Syria, who introduced him to contacts that aided his trip to Syria.

15 See: "Makedonija: Grupa iz Gnjilana odgovorna za napad," *Vijesti*, April 21, 2015, <http://www.vijesti.me/svijet/ovk-zauzela-policijsku-stanicu-u-makedoniji-ne-dolazite-sve-cemo-likvidirati-830015> (accessed August 30, 2016); and "MUP: Napad na policiju u Zvorniku izveo Nerdin Ibrić," *Aljazeera Balkans*, April 28, 2015, <http://balkans.aljazeera.net/vijesti/mup-napad-na-policiju-u-zvorniku-izveo-nerdin-ibric> (accessed August 30, 2016).

16 For example, one posting that included a picture of Huseinović, by an account under the name N.Đ., generated a considerable number of 'likes.'

## Adem Mustafić

The fifth Montenegrin citizen killed in Syria, and most recently, was **Adem Mustafić** (35) from Bar. The exact date of his death cannot be confirmed, seeing that news from the battlefield is usually delayed by 3 to 6 weeks.<sup>17</sup> But Mustafić spent almost a year in Syria as a part of ISIL and, reportedly, was a key recruiter and a high-ranking member of the organization. Contrary to the stereotype that foreign fighters from the Balkans are uneducated, indigent, come from rural areas, are relatively easy to manipulate, and so forth, Mustafić was highly educated at the Faculty of Islamic studies in Novi Pazar, in Serbia, and worked as an *imam* in Bar for 10 years.

...

Data available through the end of May 2016 indicates that a total of 33 Montenegrin citizens have departed for conflict zones in Syria and Iraq; but that no departures have occurred since the beginning of 2016. This number includes fighters still on the battlefield and those killed, as well as returnees, women, and two preschool-aged children. It is believed that all the Montenegrin fighters who remain on foreign battlefields are in the Middle East, but there are signs that some of them could soon be engaged in other places, such as in the failed state of Libya.<sup>18</sup>

The psychological propaganda that spurred some citizens to depart reached its height in mid-2015. Leading local and regional media, as well as social networks, radical web portals, and blogs were all skillfully exploited to negatively influence certain groups. This resulted in a strong impact for a relatively short period of time, which aimed to create confusion and insecurity among the citizens and institutions of Montenegro; and to exhaust the resources of competent security structures. This propaganda continues, most often in the following forms:

- **Broadly published news about the deaths of Montenegrin citizens on the battlefield.** The publication of this information is itself a certain form of psychological propagandizing that may have multiple impacts, both negative and positive. The news that Adem Mustafić was a high-ranking ISIL leader and one of its main recruiters of Montenegrins, for example, may actually inspire some individuals

17 This is not due to any respect for the deceased or their families, but rather to delay the monetary compensation awarded to relatives of the victim. See: "Mustaficu presudile tekfirdzije," *Pobjeda*, April 22, 2016.

18 According to available data, ISIL adherents act in the wider Benghazi area in Libya.

and groups to act similarly, despite the tragic final outcome. On the other hand, his death and that of other Montenegrin citizens on foreign battlefields may be a deterrent for others who had entertained departing.

- **Specialized websites designed to spread propaganda messages directly from the battlefield.** Internet sites featuring radical content have been widely available to the Montenegrin public. For example, sites such as “*Vijesti Ummeta*” (News of the Ummah), a blog that shared videos of brutal executions until it was suspended in early 2016.<sup>19</sup> Footage of uncensored and extreme violence seems to dominate these sites; and prior to its suspension, “*Vijesti Ummeta*” even featured videos in which children were the executioners. Lately, much of this messaging has moved from blogs to YouTube.

### The Psychological Impact of Regional Terrorism and Extremist Propaganda in Montenegro

The devastating physical effects of terrorist attacks are intended to create and propagate fear among the population.<sup>20</sup> In this sense, they are an element of propaganda, and the fear they evoke can be kept alive without the necessity of sustained violence. Just as coalition forces do before and during deployment, ISIL has undertaken Information Operations (IO) as an element of a larger warfare strategy.<sup>21</sup> Numerous propaganda materials are available, many in electronic form, from a variety of groups in the region; and currently, this mode of terror dominates in the Western Balkans, so that the average smart phone or laptop computer is more valuable to extremists than firearms. It must be stressed how scientific and technological advancements have shifted the focus from physical to virtual operational environments.<sup>22</sup> Instead of wearing masks and carrying weapons on the battlefield, some extremists use virtual weapons to achieve tactical advantages in a propaganda war.

The web portal “*Vijesti Ummeta*,” which was suspended in late 2015 and then re-established at a new IP address as “*Sablja Istine*” is a good example of this. The sec-

19 Before suspension by WordPress, the blog's web address was: <https://vijestiummeta.wordpress.com/>

20 Recent attacks felt strongly across region include the assault on a police station in Zvornik (BiH), the execution of Croatian citizen Tomislav Salopek by ISIL, and the assassination of two soldiers in Rajlovac, near Sarajevo (BiH).

21 Information Operations generally involve a combination of electronic warfare (EW), psychological operations (PSYOPS), and operations security (OPSEC).

22 The definition of “operational environment” that is used by of the United States Department of Defense is: A composite of the conditions, circumstances, and influences that affect the employment of capabilities and bear on the decisions of the commander. (JP 3-0)

ond site was eventually also suspended, but both sites were administered by the same team originating in the Balkans and received material and financial support from beyond the region. The “*Vijesti Ummeta*” site was registered in Saudi Arabia, for instance, under the name Abdullah Abdurrahman.

The use of online media or social networks makes it easy to spread a number of messages and influence a wide audience in a relatively short period of time. For this reason, all relevant institutions in Montenegro will continue to track and assess the situation across the region. It may be that Facebook can contribute significantly to identifying individuals and groups that show indications of radicalization. Though tracking such threats is a demanding task, Montenegro is a relatively small country, so that sometimes just a person’s last name is enough for authorities to start making connections and appropriate assessments.

### **The Current Situation in Montenegro regarding the Threat of Violent Extremism**

There is no evidence of attempts to establish any so-called sleeper cells or logistics bases in Montenegro to provide support or training to future potential foreign fighters from the country.<sup>23</sup> And as a country which strives toward multicultural and ethnic dialogue, Montenegro has managed to incorporate all spheres of society into tackling the issue of violent extremism. A very underestimated yet crucial role in this has been played by the Islamic Community (IC) of Montenegro. On numerous occasions, both publicly in appeals to the local media and during *jummah* (Friday prayers), imams throughout Montenegro have condemned terrorist attacks committed in the name of Islam – whether they have taken place in Paris or Istanbul or Baghdad.<sup>24</sup> And when Damir Slaković threatened members of the Montenegrin Parliament, the Islamic Community intervened and, on several occasions, reiterated that terrorism has nothing to do with Islam.

23 “U Crnoj Gori nema terorističkih ćelija,” CDM, April 8, 2016, <http://www.cdm.me/drustvo/crnagora/u-crnoj-gori-nema-teroristickih-celija> (accessed August 30, 2016).

24 Rifat Fejzić “Reis Islamske zajednice u Crnoj Gori: Ne povezivati muslimane s teroristima,” *Večernji list*, November 23, 2105.

## Educating Montenegrin Youth with the Aim of Preventing Radicalization

As a complement to the more repressive measures of the Prosecutor's Office and security structures in Montenegro, training aimed at preventing young people from heading to foreign conflict zones began at the end of 2015. Youth in the northern part of Montenegro were the first to be targeted, through a project titled "Prevention of radicalism among young people." As an example, a training entitled "Me, my values and the society around me," seeks to create space to discuss the values of young people in today's changing society, the way they are facing the challenges of development, and the relationship between "traditional" and "modern" values.<sup>25</sup> Other topics discussed during these trainings include: the promotion of peace and tolerance, activism in the community, and creative conflict resolution. This Project is financially supported by the Embassy of the United Kingdom and the Directorate for Youth and Sports of Montenegro.

Montenegrins hold varying opinions regarding the necessity of such interventions, with some people concerned that they may actually increase the number of departures to foreign battlefields and levels of radicalization by exposing youth to certain concepts. Additionally, others see organizations that offer these programs as unnecessarily draining on budget resources. Still, some truly believe that such organizations will contribute to a decrease in radicalization, or even a complete de-radicalization of Montenegrins, especially youth.

## Views of the Foreign Fighter Phenomenon among the Montenegrin Public

If one tries to answer why Montenegrin society generally pays too little attention to the threat of radicalization into extremism, the answer can be found in several different, but connected, factors:

- **Political context** – In 2016 particularly, the Montenegrin public was overwhelmed with a number of national political issues, mostly related to the regularity of the Montenegrin electoral process (*lex specialis*). Parliamentary elections took place on October 16, 2016 and dominated other issues in the country and region.<sup>26</sup> In this political climate, the threat from returned foreign fighters faded nearly

25 See: "Promotion of the video 'Me, my values and society around me,'" Forum MNE, June 24, 2016, <http://www.forum-mne.com/index.php/en/22-novosti/716-promotion-of-the-video-me-my-values-and-society-around-me> (accessed August 30, 2016).

26 "Lex specialis može narušiti sistem," RTCG, April 15, 2016, <http://www.rtcg.me/vijesti/drustvo/125685/lex-specialis-moze-narusiti-sistem.html> (accessed August 30, 2016).

completely away from people's awareness. Further, Montenegro's receipt of an official invitation for accession to NATO in December 2015, a leading foreign policy topic, has also partially distracted the public.

- **The work of competent structures** – Since March 2015, when amendments to the Criminal Code of Montenegro allowed for radicalized individuals and returned foreign fighters to be processed legally, the public, and especially the media, have given less attention to these issues. The work of the Prosecutor's Office and judicial authorities undoubtedly contribute significantly to the fight against this kind of threat. Additionally, interagency cooperation has been intensified on both the national and international levels, which is surely also one of the factors supporting successful diversion efforts.
- **Economic context** – The economic side of the story of foreign fighters should also not be ignored, especially regarding recruits who originate from the coastal area. Tourism is a leading industry in Montenegro, and continuous talk that two citizens of Bar have died on foreign battlefields could have a rather negative impact on upcoming tourist seasons in that region, and in the country as a whole, especially in towns from which departures to foreign battlefields were registered.
- **Media coverage** – Since mid-2015, the way media reports (or not) on issues of terrorism and radicalization has been seen as a very efficient weapon in fighting the propaganda of violently extreme organizations and of ISIL. This was one of the conclusions of experts at the "2BS Security Forum" held in Budva in 2015. On a panel dedicated to the threats posed by foreign fighters, one panelist said that "instead of putting them or any kind of news related to them on the covers of leading magazines, put them in the corner of the second to the last page..."
- **Crime, organized crime, and social unrest** – If an average Montenegrin was asked which dangers currently feel most immediate for citizens, they would probably point to crime, organized crime, and social unrest caused by various factors. Because these threats feel more "everyday," fears of foreign fighters and their potential return as terrorists are more temporary and linked to specific incidents, rather than continuously present among Montenegrin citizens.

## Conclusion

As coalition forces in the fight against ISIL manage to reduce its territory, and furthermore, to starve the organization of its finances, its popularity is declining in Montenegro. At the same time, countries that have seen large numbers of citizens depart to fight in Syria and Iraq have implemented additional security measures, with

some – such as the Netherlands, France, and Germany – even debating whether to strip fighters still aligned with terrorist organizations of their citizenship. Although this may not be possible due to violations of the Geneva Convention on the right to nationality, some countries have imposed travel bans on some citizens. Other security measures, such as the Passenger Name Record, which enables airlines to look into the itineraries of their passengers, have proved to successfully aid in limiting the flow of future potential foreign fighters.

Perhaps partly for these reasons, it appears that fighting alongside ISIL is no longer “in” in Montenegro. Furthermore, the mixed local populations in the areas from which departures to foreign battlefields have been registered show no tendency to polarize along ethnic, religious, or other lines, and have mostly succeeded in remaining immune to wider negative influence that seek to instrumentalize these differences, most prominently, ideologically-inclined domestic and regional media. Still, there is no doubt that the populations in these municipalities have not forgotten the divisive events from their own recent pasts, and those of people from the Balkans generally; and thus, it is imperative that the greatest treasures of Montenegro – mutual tolerance, harmony, and multi-ethnicity – be upheld.

# KOSOVO

## The Foreign Fighter Phenomenon in Kosovo: Covering a Blind Spot

by Shpend Kursani and Arbër Fetiu<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

The recent emergence of the foreign fighter phenomenon, which has entangled citizens of Kosovo, has attracted significant attention among policymakers, security analysts, and academics at the local and international levels. In Kosovo, the jihadist ideology linked to the phenomenon is unprecedented, at least insofar as its scale. Even the Afghan Wars (1978-1992 and 2001-present) and other Middle Eastern conflicts, which have attracted some 5,000 to 20,000 foreign fighters – many from Europe and the United States<sup>2</sup> – have not inspired certain elements of Kosovo’s Muslim population like the recent conflict in Syria has. Many authors have pointed to the ease of travel and the proximity of the Syrian conflict as important factors in explaining the extraordinary numbers of European foreign fighters taking part in the war there.<sup>3</sup> Yet, the Bosnian war (1992-1995), which attracted a few thousand fighters from around the world, including from other parts of Europe, did not attract fighters from Kosovo in any significant numbers, despite their even closer proximity and potential geostrategic interest in fighting Serbia.<sup>4</sup>

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- 2 Thomas Hegghammer, “The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: Islam and the Globalization of Jihad,” *International Security* 35, no. 3 (2010): 61.
- 3 See: Lorenzo Vidino, “European Foreign Fighters in Syria: Dynamics and Responses,” *European View* 13, no. 2 (2014): 217–24; and Rik Coolsaet, “What Drives Europeans to Syria, and to IS? Insights from the Belgian Case,” Egmont Paper No. 75, March 2015.
- 4 Timothy Holman, “Foreign Fighters from the Western Balkans in Syria,” Brief Report, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, 2014. NB: If one stretches the foreign fighter concept beyond its recent religious characterization, the phenomenon has been historically evident among Albanians, including those from Kosovo, starting with medieval *stratioti* mercenaries and through to the Albanians who joined the leftist international forces in the Spanish Civil War. Moreover, some Kosovo Albanians took part in wars surrounding the breakup of Yugoslavia, even before the war in Kosovo began, when they joined the sides of the Croats and the Bosnians; though given that these conflicts erupted within the confines of the Yugoslav Federation, this participation could be seen as having taken place within a civil conflict. Additionally, a number of Kosovo Albanians also fought on the side of their ethnic kin in southern Serbia in 2000, and in Macedonia in 2001. However, these fighters were driven strictly by national identity rather than religion. There has been speculation that a handful of Kosovar citizens were also involved in the 2003 Iraq War, but no evidence confirms this.

Beyond frequent media commentaries on the issue, the few analysts who have dealt more comprehensively with the foreign fighter phenomenon in Kosovo have, in general, highlighted militant manifestations among some Muslim religious circles on the one hand and socio-structural issues on the other to explain the growth of the phenomenon among some Muslims in the country.<sup>5</sup> For the most part, these fighters are young (65% are under 28 years of age) and lack university degrees (80% do not have one), and close to 40% have at least one criminal charge on their record. Fighters from Kosovo also exhibit patterns of family and social isolation and alienation.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the profiles of fighters from Kosovo reflect patterns that are commonly found in studies of foreign fighters from other Balkan states and from European states in general.<sup>7</sup> Most of these studies have been valuable in providing both detailed accounts of many individual foreign fighters and a broader snapshot of trends that help explain the emergence of the phenomenon. Still, some “blind spots” remain unexplored in our understanding of the emergence of the foreign fighter phenomenon among citizens in Kosovo.

One of these blind spots is the extent to which official state policy, discourse, and behavior vis-à-vis the Syrian conflict have served as potential enabling factors, inadvertently supporting the emergence of the foreign fighter phenomenon, especially during its initial stages, and then perpetuating it. To examine this dynamic, we must zoom out to contextualize the phenomenon – which emerged at the onset of the Syrian conflict in the spring of 2011 and continued through mid-2015, when the last foreign fighters from Kosovo are reported to have departed to Syria.<sup>8</sup> Our analysis shows that the official position of state institutions, and their discourse and behavior toward the Syrian conflict and the foreign fighter phenomenon itself, were

5 See: Shpend Kursani, *Report Inquiring into the Causes and Consequences of Kosovo Citizens' Involvement as Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq* (Prishtina: Kosovar Center for Security Studies, 2015); and Adrian Shtuni, “Breaking Down the Ethnic Albanian Foreign Fighters Phenomenon,” *Soundings* 98, no. 4 (2015): 460–77.

6 Kursani.

7 On foreign fighters from Balkan states, see: Vlado Azinović and Muhamed Jusić, *The Lure of the Syrian War: The Foreign Fighters' Bosnian Contingent* (Sarajevo: Atlantic Initiative, 2015); Azinović and Jusić, *The New Lure of the Syrian War: The Foreign Fighters' Bosnian Contingent* (Sarajevo: Atlantic Initiative, 2016); and Gjergji Vurmo, Besfort Lamallari and Aleka Papa, *Religious Radicalism and Violent Extremism in Albania* (Tirana: Institute for Democracy and Mediation, 2015). On foreign fighters from other European states, see: Vidino; Coolsaet; and Bibi van Ginke and Eva Entenmann, *The Foreign Fighters Phenomenon in the European Union: Profiles, Threats & Policies* (The Hague: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 2016).

8 On March 14, 2016, Kosovo's Minister of Internal Affairs, Skender Hyseni, asserted that the country was “entering the ninth month in which no case has been recorded of foreign fighters originating from Kosovo going to Syria.” See: “Për Nëntë Muaj, Asnjë Kosovar Nuk Shkoi Në Siri – Aktuale,” *Gazeta Zëri*, March 14, 2016.

defined over this period by two phases of stark contradiction; the first from 2011 to 2013 and the second encompassing 2014 and 2015.

The first phase, during the initial stages of the conflict, saw the emergence of foreign fighters from Kosovo who were not at all on the discursive radar of Kosovo's official state institutions, which supported the "Syrian opposition" at the time and viewed it as a single actor on the ground. This position was quixotic given the actual situation in the conflict zone, and a number of events at the end of 2013 and the beginning of 2014 marked a critical juncture during which state institutions in Kosovo reconsidered their views. This led to a drastic change in the discourse and behavior of these institutions toward the Syrian conflict and the problem of foreign fighters in 2014 and 2015, leading to the securitization of the phenomenon.

### **2011-2013: The Ambivalence of State Institutions in Kosovo about the "Syrian Opposition"**

The foreign fighter phenomenon emerged in Kosovo at the intersection of the messaging and attitude of state officials regarding the geopolitical complexities of the Syrian civil war, and the various forms of extremism that were manifesting in Syria among various actors there. During early stages of the conflict, state institutions in Kosovo failed to grasp the nuances of this nexus and the far-reaching impacts of events in Syria. Indeed, various sources show that the government predominantly understood the conflict as an oversimplified dichotomy – in which "the opposition" was largely viewed as a unified body incarnating the essence of freedom-loving Syrian people, who were to be supported, and "the regime" was seen as a singular culprit to be opposed.

In the initial years of the Syrian conflict, Kosovo's state institutions and representatives issued more than two dozen statements expressing explicit and unconditional support for "the opposition," while condemning "the Assad regime" and calling for it to be toppled quickly, as had occurred in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya.<sup>9</sup> In August 2011, the Foreign Ministry issued its first reaction, noting that Kosovo joined with "all democratic countries in opposing the violence and repression against the Syrian demon-

<sup>9</sup> In the case of Tunisia, it took less than one month for the government to fall. In Egypt, it took less than one month for former President Mubarak to resign. And in Libya, it took around six months for Tripoli to be captured and the government to fall, and eight for President Gaddafi to be captured and killed after the inception of the revolution.

strators” and that Assad had “lost the right to govern.”<sup>10</sup> This came less than a month after a number of Syrian Army officers had defected to create the Free Syrian Army (FSA), which was immediately supported by the West.<sup>11</sup> In Kosovo, the government was convinced that these opposition forces would quickly achieve their objectives.<sup>12</sup>

In April 2012, Foreign Minister of Kosovo Enver Hoxhaj met with representatives of the FSA, expressing his interest to “financially support the opposition in Syria” and, within the confines of state capacities, to support “any requests” that would help Syria become a democratic country in the post-conflict space.<sup>13</sup> In the same meeting, Ammar Abduhamid, a member of the opposition and a pro-democracy activist in Syria, emphasized that recognition of Kosovo would be among the top agenda items for Syria should the opposition win.<sup>14</sup> A month later, Minister Hoxhaj confirmed that his government had already established “some diplomatic contacts” with the Syrian opposition, and said that Kosovo was supporting their cause much like it supported opposition groups in Libya and the other Arab countries. He emphasized that Kosovo was one of the first European countries to have done so.<sup>15</sup>

Throughout this initial period of the Syrian conflict, officials in Kosovo appeared to be attempting to capitalize on the opportunity it presented to build up clout in the international arena, whereby state actors hoped to be seen both as a flagship of a successful international intervention and as a supporter of democratic transformation in the Middle East and North Africa. Often, parallels were drawn between the Syrian struggle and the conflict endured by Kosovo in the 1990s, in which it was said citizens in Kosovo had fought “for the same aspirations [and] for the same values.”<sup>16</sup> This comparison would inform Kosovo’s position throughout these first stages of the conflict; for instance, when Minister Hoxhaj advocated for international inter-

10 Kosovo Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Ministry of Foreign Affairs Condemns the Violence in Syria,” press release, August 23, 2011.

11 Joshua Landis, “Free Syrian Army Founded by Seven Officers to Fight the Syrian Army,” *Syria Comment Blog*, July 29, 2011, <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/free-syrian-army-established-to-fight-the-syrian-army/> (accessed October 12, 2016).

12 Kosovo Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Government of Kosovo Condemns Killings and Repression in Syria,” press release, February 7, 2012.

13 Kosovo Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “The Syrian Opposition Promise Kosovo’s Recognition Immediately after the Triumph of Democracy in Syria,” press release, April 26, 2012.

14 *Ibid.*

15 Louis Charbonneau, “Kosovo Voices Strong Support for Syria Opposition,” *Reuters*, May 14, 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-kosovo-idUSBRE84D1EI20120514> (accessed October 12, 2016).

16 *Ibid.* Also see (in Kosovo Albanian): Kosovo Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Ministri Hoxhaj Merr Pjesë Në Konferencën ‘Miqtë E Popullit Sirian’ Në Paris,” press release, July 5, 2012.

vention in Syria because the mass violence perpetrated by the Assad regime was similar to what the Milošević regime had subjected Kosovo to in the late 1990s:

*Today, in Syria, once again, as in Bosnia and Kosovo years ago, the international community faces a dilemma in undertaking appropriate action to prevent violence and victims. Syrian opposition aspirations to transform Syria into a democratic, open, and pluralistic country are similar to those of the people of Kosovo a few years ago. We were the victim of ethnic cleansing and the violation of human rights because of the logic of a tyrant like Slobodan Milošević. Today, Kosovo is a democratic, independent factor for peace and stability in the Balkans and in Europe.*<sup>17</sup>

In his visit to Turkey in October 2012, Kosovo's Deputy Foreign Minister, Petrit Selimi, repeated the analogy between Milošević and Assad, highlighting the similarities in their crimes.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, in April of the following year, Minister Hoxhaj met his German counterpart, Guido Westerwelle, in Berlin, and both used the opportunity to condemn the Assad regime, with Hoxhaj reiterating this comparison between Assad and Milošević once again.<sup>19</sup> The use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime in August 2013, which caused massive casualties in Ghouta, compelled Kosovo's President at the time, Atifete Jahjaga, to join the wider international community in condemning the attack.<sup>20</sup> In keeping with the official stance held by officials at the Foreign Ministry, and drawing from the outcome of humanitarian intervention in Kosovo in 1999, the President maintained that:

Only an international intervention in Syria can stop the bloodshed and save the lives of citizens while creating the conditions for the Syrian people to determine their governance through free elections... [and that intervention] is the general principle through which freedoms and rights of citizens can be protected from military violence and dictatorial systems.<sup>21</sup>

Two things were evident in the discourse and position of Kosovo's state institutions during this initial period of the conflict. First, these institutions had not grasped the

17 Kosovo Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Minister Hoxhaj Delivered a Speech before Global Leaders at the Conference 'Friends of the People of Syria,'" press release, July 6, 2012.

18 See an interview with Selimi on CNN Türk, from an October 19, 2012 news story, available on YouTube at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-jguKrOV0e4> (accessed October 12, 2016).

19 Kosovo Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Gjermania Partner Kryesor i Kosovës Evropiane," press release, April 16, 2013.

20 Kosovo Office of the President, "Presidentja Jahjaga Dënon Sulmet Me Bomba Napalm Në Aleppo Të Sirisë," press release, August 30, 2013.

21 Ibid.

diversity and variation of *Islamisms* that had already emerged within the myriad opposition groups, or the involvement of Kosovar citizens with those groups. While state institutions continued to view the conflict in dichotomous terms, the overwhelming majority of would-be Kosovar foreign fighters (See Table 1) had already joined one of the more than four dozen rebel opposition groups that formed – featuring different programs, affiliations, enemies, and allies – all with the goal of toppling Assad (See Table 2). Despite this, the foreign fighter phenomenon had not captured the attention of Kosovo’s state institutions.

**Table 1: Departures of foreign fighters from Kosovo**

Year	Departed Fighters	Percentage	Cumulative percentage
2011	0	0%	0%
2012	68	30%	30%
2013	123	54%	84%
2014	19	8%	94%
2015 (Jan-Mar)	16	7%	100%
<b>2011-2015 (Jan-Mar)<sup>22</sup></b>	<b>226</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source:<sup>22</sup> Kosovo Police, “Statistical Data on Kosovo Originating Foreign Fighters,” 2015.

22 NB: The total, of 226 foreign fighters, includes only those for whom departure during this period (Jan 2011-Mar 2015) was confirmed by the Kosovo Police. According to statements by the Kosovo Minister of Interior and other available data in the media, there appear to be an additional 80 foreign fighters for whom the period of departure cannot be confirmed. We are working under the assumption that the departures of those 80 fighters were distributed in accordance to the trends indicated in Table 2 (for example, 30% of these departures took place in 2012 and 54% occurred in 2013, etc.). We believe this is a realistic projection, drawing partly from a statement issued by Kosovo’s Minister of Internal Affairs that, from around mid-June 2015 until around mid-March 2016 (a period of nine months), there were no recorded cases of foreign fighters originating from Kosovo. See: “Për Nëntë Muaj, Asnjë Kosovar Nuk Shkoi Në Siri – Aktuale,” *Gazeta Zëri*, March 14, 2016.

**Table 2: List of Syrian rebel groups opposing the Assad regime (2011-2013)**

	Date of Emergence	Opposition Group	Affiliation	Source(s) See Annex I	
2011	2011 (July)	Free Syrian Army	FSA	(A)	
	2011 (Mid-)	Northern Storm Brigade	FSA	(B)	
	2011 (Summer)	Suqour al-Sham Brigade	n/a	(C)	
	2011 (December)	Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya	SIF	(D)	
	2011 (September)	Suqour al-Sham	SIF	(D), (E)	
	2011 (Late)	Martyrs of Syria Brigades	FSA	(E)	
	2011 (Late)	Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zenki	n/a	(F)	
2012	2012 (January)	Al Nusra Front	Militant Islamic	(D), (E), (G)	
	2012	Ansar Brigades (Alwiyat al-Ansar)	FSA	(H)	
	2012	Ahfad al-Rasoul Brigades	n/a	(E)	
	2012	Durou al-Thawra Commission	n/a	(E)	
	2012	Harakat al-Fajr al-Islamiya	n/a	(I)	
	2012	The Ahfad al-Rasoul Brigades	n/a	(G)	
	2012	Muslim Botherhood	n/a	Sly	
	2012 (Early)	Kataeb Ahrar al-Sham	n/a	(I)	
	2012 (March)	Katibat al-Ansar	n/a	(I)	
	2012 (April)	Liwa al-Bara	n/a	(J)	
	2012 (May)	The Homs Revolutionaries' Union	n/a	(I)	
	2012 (Summer)	Popular Protection Units (YPG)	Kurdish Group	(E)	
	2012 (June)	Ansar al-Sham	SIF	(D)	
	2012 (July)	Liwa al-Tawhid	SIF	(D), (E)	
	2012 (August)	Liwa al-Haqq	SIF	(D), (K)	
	2012 (August)	Tajammu Ansar al-Islam	n/a	(E), (G)	
	2012 (August)	Yarmouk Martyrs' Brigade	n/a	(E)	
	2012 (August)	National Unity Brigades	n/a	(E)	
	2012 (September)	Syrian Islamic Liberation Front (SILF)	n/a	(E)	
	2012 (November)	Asala wa al-Tanmiya Front	n/a	(E)	
	2012 (December)	Syrian Islamic Front (SIF)	SIF	(I), (G)	
	2012 (Late-)	Ahrar Souriya Brigade	FSA	(L)	
	2012 (Late-)	Jamaat al-Taliaa al-Islamia	n/a	(I)	
	2013	2013	18th March Division (Forqat 18 Adhar)	FSA	(H)
		2013	13th Division (Forqat 13)	n/a	(K)
		2013 (March)	Jaysh al-Muhajirin wa al-Ansar	Militant Islamic	(E)
2013 (April)		Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)	Militant Islamic	(D), (E)	
2013 (September)		Jaysh al-Islam	SIF	(D), (E)	
2013 (Late-)		Faylaq al-Rahman	n/a	(H)	
2013 (December)		Ajnad al-Sham Islamic Union	n/a	(M)	
2013 (December)		Syrian Revolutionary Front	n/a	(N)	
2013 (December)	Syria Revolutionary Front (SFR)	Moderate	(H)		

**Notes:**

This table includes groups for which a date of establishment between 2011-2013 is confirmed by sources; and thus, is not exhaustive.

Some of the groups listed are quite fluid and may have merged with other groups.

Among and within these groups, there are also subgroups, which are not listed as separate entities.

The dates shown are the known date of a group's establishment, though they may have emerged earlier.

It should be noted that the Official Islamic Communities in Albanian speaking areas of the Balkans, in Kosovo and Macedonia in particular, interpreted the situation

during the initial period of the Syrian war similarly. On Friday, July 6, 2012 – the day the Kosovo Foreign Minister participated in a third meeting of the “Friends of Syria” in Paris, during which he spoke in support of the opposition and drew parallels between the regimes of Milošević and Assad – the Islamic Community in Kosovo (BIK) instructed its imams to dedicate their sermons to the Syrian people and refugees.<sup>23</sup> These imams were told to speak about the value of the land of *el Sham* and about the situation in Syria. And much like the position and discourse of their secular state counterparts, the BIK asked its imams to speak about Assad’s role in Syria as akin to Milošević’s role in Kosovo, and to express that Assad “is pretending, much like the *jalad* (executioner) of the Balkans – Milošević – that he is defending people from armed terrorists.”<sup>24</sup>

Despite expressing an almost clear-cut, yet indirect, corroboration with official state institutions, the BIK’s July Friday sermon instruction also included an eschatological view of the conflict with elements of sectarian readings. The text directed imams to speak about the “deviant Alawite sect” and their connection to “Iran’s Shias” and, as a result, their ruthless rule with “iron and fire” over the majority Sunni population of Syria.<sup>25</sup> Still, the crux of this sermon remained one rooted in a dualist view of the conflict – a quest for freedom and liberation in a genocidal context – and drew parallels between the suffering of Kosovo Albanians under the Milošević regime and the suffering of Syrians under Assad.<sup>26</sup>

Beyond Kosovo’s borders, the stance taken by the head of the official Islamic Community in Macedonia, Sulejman Rexhepi, regarding the Syrian conflict was very similar during this period. In response to reports in the media about an Albanian from

23 The authors found no explicit coordination between official state institutions and official religious institutions and see their alignment as a coincidence that highlights how similarly these institutions viewed the situation in Syria, especially during the initial stages of the conflict.

24 Bashkësia Islame e Kosovës (Islamic Community of Kosovo), “Hytbe Kushtuar Refugjatëve Dhe Të Zhvendosurve Në Siri,” sermon, July 3, 2012, <http://www.bislame.net/sermons/237-hytbesiri> (accessed November 6, 2016).

25 Ibid.

26 Despite the sectarian elements of this sermon, BIK representatives have repeatedly stated that the war in Syria is not a religious war, but a people’s struggle for liberation from an oppressive regime. For example, see: Fatmir Aliu, “Lufta Në Siri Dhe Shqiptarët E Kosovës,” *Radio Evropa e Lirë*, June 1, 2013, <http://www.evropaelire.org/a/25003862.html> (accessed November 6, 2016); Jeta Xharra, Interview me Myftiun Naim Tërnavë, *Jeta në Kosovë*, RTK, September 19, 2013. Available on YouTube at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gsz2dZXmShM> (accessed November 6, 2016); and “Bashkësia Islame e Kosovës kundër shkuarjes së shqiptarëve në Siri,” VOA, November 13, 2013, <http://www.zeriamerikes.com/a/kosovo-islamic-community-/1789241.html> (accessed November 6, 2016).

Macedonia who was killed fighting against Assad, Rexhepi said in a June 2013 interview that:

*...the participation of this young man, and possibly others, is on the side of democracy. This means, they have joined their brothers to help them get liberated from the claws of a totalitarian system... For the moment, we cannot call them radicals, because they are part of the structures of soldiers, in other words of the Western army forces. This means that the entire alliance would have to be accused [of radicalism], the United States would have to be accused, because those young people are on their [the United States'] side, and have joined people who fight to resolve their issues once and for all from Syria's totalitarian system.<sup>27</sup>*

The norm that was created by supporting the Syrian people through the prism of a single “Syrian opposition” on one hand and the opposing “Assad regime” on the other appears to have created a discursive standard that was commonly accepted by a wide range of other actors as well – including the media and individuals who followed the conflict in Syria closely and were inclined to join “the opposition” against Assad.

The case of Fatos Rexhepi, an adherent of Salafism and an activist in one of the small political movements in Kosovo with an Islamic agenda, further illustrates this. Rexhepi had been studying and living in Syria for several years prior to the outset of the civil war and was, together with his family, in one of the first groups of Kosovar citizens evacuated from Syria in a joint Kosovo-Turkish evacuation operation in the first part of 2011.<sup>28</sup> Because of his time in Syria, and his experience of being among the first evacuees from Kosovo, Rexhepi made frequent appearances in mainstream national media to provide analysis about the situation in Syria. He was referred to as *njohës i rrethanave në Siri*, which roughly translates to “a Syria analyst/expert.” In one of his appearances, Rexhepi spoke about the 15,000 “*Arnauts*” living in Syria who, according to him, recognized themselves as and felt to be Albanian; they were proud of their nation and open about their patriotic national feelings for Kosovo.<sup>29</sup>

27 Zërijeta Hajro Jajaga, “Sulejman Rexhepi: Forcat çlirimtare kundër Asadit, s’janë radikale,” *Radio Evropa e Lirë*, June 1, 2013, <http://www.evropaelire.org/a/25003904.html> (accessed November 11, 2016).

28 Kosovo Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “First Group of Kosovar Evacuees Arrive from Syria,” press release, April 29, 2011.

29 “Fatosi Ne Siri Jetojn Shum Shqiptar,” *Prishtina Empire*, Klan Kosova, August 2, 2012. Available on YouTube at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CJerk4BLaxl> (accessed November 11, 2016).

Rexhepi lamented that it was Kosovo's state obligation to come to the aid of its own people in Syria.

When the first Kosovo citizen, Naman Demolli, was reported to have lost his life fighting in Syria at the end of 2012, mainstream news outlets did not raise the issue of the potential militant character of Demolli's involvement, but reported the story as that of a fighter from Kosovo who had turned his weapon against a dictator.<sup>30</sup> To comment on the death of Demolli, Rexhepi was once again invited by the media as an analyst. He opined that "it is a democratic right that today we unite [with the opposition in Syria] in terms of material help" and provide other forms of help as well.<sup>31</sup> In other comments made to Radio Free Europe in mid-2013, where he was invited to speak specifically about Kosovo Albanians fighting as part of the Syrian opposition, Rexhepi openly and unreservedly said he was very happy with and proud of all the Albanians fighting in Syria, because they were opposing a brutal regime and because "there are a lot of arguments that it is a holy place."<sup>32</sup>

Official institutional support in Kosovo for the Syrian opposition and condemnation of the Assad regime in the initial phases of the conflict did not evolve independently from the position of many actors in the West. Key Western governments involved in the Middle East were similarly preoccupied with the quick toppling of Assad, with much disregard for heterogeneous developments among the various groups opposing his regime on the ground. For instance, despite the EU's arms embargo on Syria, imposed in 2011, France continued to supply arms to various rebel groups throughout 2012, believing they would fall into "safe hands."<sup>33</sup> Similarly, when French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius was asked about the potential that some militant Islamic groups were carrying out crimes in some areas, Fabius relativized, stating that "Assad does not deserve a place on this earth" and that "Jabhat al-Nusra is doing a good job" in fighting the regime.<sup>34</sup> The Belgian Foreign Minister, Didier Reynders,

30 For just two examples of this, among others, see: "Kosovari Naman Demolli është vrar në Siri," *Studio Islame Prishtina*, Klan Kosova, November 13, 2012. Available on YouTube at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NaD-hopf1\\_s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NaD-hopf1_s) (accessed November 11, 2016); and "Grupe Shqiptarësh Në Luftë Frontale Kundër Assadit," *Koha.net*, November 14, 2013, <http://koha.net/?id=8&arkiva=1&l=123107> (accessed November 11, 2016).

31 "Kosovari Naman Demolli është vrar në Siri," *Studio Islame Prishtina*.

32 See: Aliu, "Lufta Në Siri Dhe Shqiptarët E Kosovës." Rexhepi would later join the conflict as a foreign fighter himself, and was among dozens arrested for involvement in terrorist activities in a massive raid undertaken by the Kosovo Police in the summer of 2014.

33 See (in French): Robin Verner, "La France a Fourni des Armes À La Révolution Syrienne dès 2012, Explique François Hollande dans Un Livre," *Slate.fr*, May 6, 2015, <http://www.slate.fr/story/101291/France-armes-Syrie> (accessed November 11, 2016).

34 "Des Syriens Demandent Réparation à Fabius," *Le Figaro*, December 10, 2014.

also viewed events in Syria with a disconnect from the complexities unfolding there. Reynders suggested that young people leaving Belgium to fight Assad alongside the “Syrian Liberation Army” were heroes taking part in a revolution for which “maybe one day we should build monuments.”<sup>35</sup>

Kosovo’s state institutions continued to view the character of the conflict through this dichotomous lens (“the opposition” vs “the Assad regime”) well into 2013, in what appeared to be an attempt to find relevancy in international relations as a model of democratic transition through international intervention. This course largely imitated Western governing circles and provided a “blank check” for foreign fighters originating from Kosovo, so that by the end of 2013, 85% of those fighters had already made their way into Syria. More than 30% had departed in 2012, and close to 55% left in 2013 alone. It wasn’t until nearly the end of 2013 that the official view of the Syrian conflict and the involvement of Kosovar citizens in it drastically shifted, as the result of a number of events that, in retrospect, marked a critical juncture. In fact, from this point forward, state institutions adopted a radically different position on the foreign fighter phenomenon.

### Late 2013-Early 2014: The Critical Juncture

While there is no exact date or a single event that triggered the problematization of the foreign fighter phenomenon among leadership and policy makers in Kosovo, we can link it to two sets of broader developments that unfolded in the second half of 2013 and the beginning of 2014. The first were related to the domestic impact of a number of events in Syria, beginning in the fall of 2013, when two ethnic Albanians – one from Kosovo and the other from Albania – posted videos calling publicly for

35 See: (in French) “Je Suis Préoccupé Par Un Certain Nombre de Personnes Radicalisées Qui Vont S’entraîner Au Maniement Des Armes,” RTL Info, April 26, 2013, <http://www.rtl.be/info/belgique/politique/-je-suis-preoccupe-par-un-certain-nombre-de-personnes-radicalisees-qui-vont-s-entraîner-au-maniement-des-armes--355612.aspx> (accessed November 11, 2016); and (in English) Grégoire Laliou, “Why We Lost the Battle against Terrorism and How We Can Win It,” Investig’Action, April 5, 2106, <http://www.investigaction.net/en/why-we-lost-the-battle-against-terrorism-and-how-we-can-win-it/> (accessed November 11, 2016). In this initial period, the US government held a similar, albeit a much more careful, stance; and US State Department archives show the US Government regularly condemning the Assad regime and standing by the Syrian people. Later, especially in 2013, while their condemnation of the Assad regime persisted, the US began to take a more opaque stance toward opposition groups, stressing that in addition to diplomatic and humanitarian support to the “Syrian Opposition Coalition (SOC),” they were providing support to “unarmed opposition.” For example, see: US Department of State, “US Government Assistance to Syria – Fact Sheet,” press release, February 22, 2013.

others to join them in “the land of Jihad” to fight “*kufër*” (unbelief).<sup>36</sup> This was the first time anyone had issued such a call in the Albanian language. Then, in November, Kosovo security authorities arrested 6 individuals they suspected of having links with Al-Qaeda and planning terrorist activities in Kosovo; and one appeared to be a returnee from Syria.<sup>37</sup> A few months later, in January 2014, another video appeared, featuring a group of what appeared to be about a dozen ethnic Albanian militants standing behind a native Kosovo Albanian speaker, who recruited people to participate in jihad and threatened Muslims in Kosovo that he claimed were betraying their faith by not joining the fight in Syria. He also voiced his desire to “capture the American General so as to behead him, because he expressed his support for the Free Syrian Army.”<sup>38</sup> In March 2014, yet another ethnic Albanian from Kosovo appeared in a video, holding an ISIL flag and encouraging those already fighting to “raise the word of Allah.”<sup>39</sup> These videos finally made it impossible to ignore the foreign fighter phenomenon.

The second set of developments that helped steer state officials away from earlier positions were related to events outside of Kosovo, but not in Syria, which took place in the West in general and in Europe in particular. Despite the fact that the European Union (EU) had a counter-terrorism strategy in place by 2005, it wasn't until the second half of 2013 that a number of its member states began problematizing the issue of foreign fighters through various threat assessments.<sup>40</sup> This was linked to several events that unfolded on European soil, explicitly connected to European foreign fighters. In the initial period of the conflict, only a few such incidents had occurred; but they became more frequent and more violent as 2013 was drawing to a close.<sup>41</sup> For instance, in October 2013, police in the UK arrested four men who had reportedly returned from Syria, for allegedly planning a “Mumbai-style plot” in London, charging

36 Both videos are available on YouTube. See: “Plaku Nga Shqipëria Thirrje Për Xhihad,” October 19, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BjQzpn9to8>; and “Lavdim Muhaxheri Flet Rreth Gjendjes Ne Siri,” November 7, 2013, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m4yd1k\\_mIYA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m4yd1k_mIYA) (accessed November 11, 2016).

37 Selvije Bajrami, “Grupi i Dyshuar Për Lidhje me ‘Al Qaedan,’” Zeri.info, November 12, 2013, <http://old.zeri.info/artikulli/20346/grupi-i-dyshuar-per-lidhje-me-al-qaedan> (accessed November 11, 2016).

38 The video is available on YouTube. See: “Lufta Ne Siri,” January 14, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zhbWhgS6svc> (accessed November 11, 2016).

39 See: “Video Ku Behet Thirrje per Lufta Ne Siri,” TV Klan, March 13, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2NGM8ds0Hj4> (accessed November 11, 2016).

40 Bibi van Ginke and Eva Entenmann, *The Foreign Fighters Phenomenon in the European Union: Profiles, Threats & Policies* (The Hague: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 2016).

41 Edwin Bakker and Jeanine de Roy van Zuijdewijn, *Jihadist Foreign Fighter Phenomenon in Western Europe: A Low-Probability, High-Impact Threat* (The Hague: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 2015).

them with terrorism.<sup>42</sup> In the same month, French police arrested a person who was also said to have returned from Syria, under suspicion that he was planning a suicide attack in Paris.<sup>43</sup> Other similar “imminent” plots, allegedly planned by Syrian returnees, were reported in France; and likewise, by February 2014, US intelligence was increasingly expressing concern that Al-Qaeda was encouraging American and “other western fighters in Syria to undertake special training to prepare them for possibly returning to their home countries to carry out attacks.”<sup>44</sup> These cases and the warnings that followed captured the attention of mainstream media throughout the West, raising awareness about the actual and potential threat emanating from foreign fighter returnees.

In light of these and other similar events, most Western governments began designating as terrorist groups some of the Syrian opposition rebel factions affiliated with militant Islamism. Canada had already designated ISIL an entity of Al-Qaeda in August 2012,<sup>45</sup> and the US had declared Jabhat al-Nusra an alias for Al-Qaeda in Iraq in December 2012,<sup>46</sup> but other governments and international organizations took much longer to do so. In May 2013, the United Nations followed suit,<sup>47</sup> and countries like France and the UK finally did the same several months later. But it wasn't until June 2014 that Turkey designated Jabhat al-Nusra a terrorist group,<sup>48</sup>

42 Andrew Zammit, “List of Alleged Violent Plots in Europe Involving Syria Returnees,” *The Murphy Raid* (blog), June 29, 2014, <https://andrewzammit.org/2014/06/29/list-of-alleged-violent-plots-in-europe-involving-syria-returnees/> (accessed November 11, 2016); and Raffaello Pantucci, “The British Foreign Fighter Contingent in Syria,” *CTC Sentinel* 7, no. 5 (2014)..

43 Zammit, “List of Alleged Violent Plots.”

44 Ibid. Also see: Barbara Starr, “Officials: Al Qaeda Tries to Recruit Americans in Syria,” *CNN Security Clearance* (blog), February 21, 2014, <http://security.blogs.cnn.com/2014/02/21/officials-al-qaeda-tries-to-recruit-americans-in-syria/> (accessed November 12, 2016). For a list of recorded attacks, including those by foreign fighters, see: Bakker and van Zuijdewijn; and Thomas Hegghammer and Petter Nesser, “Assessing the Islamic State’s Commitment to Attacking the West,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9, no. 4 (2015).

45 Government of Canada, “Archived - The Government of Canada Updates the Criminal Code List of Terrorist Entities to Include the Islamic State,” press release, September 24, 2014. Also see: Nick Logan, “Canadian Government Lists ISIS as Terrorist Entity,” *Global News*, September 24, 2014, <http://globalnews.ca/news/1581138/canadian-government-lists-isis-as-terrorist-entity/> (accessed November 15, 2016). Canada listed ISIL/ISIS as a terrorist entity separate from Al-Qaeda after the latter disavowed the former.

46 US Department of State, “Terrorist Designations of the Al-Nusra Front as an Alias for Al-Qa’ida in Iraq,” press release, December 11, 2012.

47 United Nations Security Council, “Security Council Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee Amends Entry of One Entity on Its Sanctions List,” press release, No. SC/11019, May 30, 2013.

48 “Turkey Lists al-Nusra Front as Terrorist Organization,” *Hürriyet*, June 3, 2014, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-lists-al-nusra-front-as-terrorist-organization.aspx?pageID=238&nID=67322&NewsCatID=359> (accessed November 15, 2016).

and it took Russia until December of that year to designate both ISIL and Jabhat al-Nusra as terrorist organizations.<sup>49</sup>

This period of unprecedented explicit militant Islamic calls by a number of Albanian speaking individuals, events involving foreign fighter returnees in Europe, and the subsequent problematization and securitization of the phenomenon by official state institutions in the West, pushed state institutions in Kosovo to depart from their previously held stance. As a result, in December 2013, we witnessed a dramatic change in the tone of discourse from these institutions, which finally began to view the phenomenon through a security lens. That month, In her annual speech in front of Parliament, President of the Republic of Kosovo Atifete Jahjaga said for the first time that the risk from Kosovo citizens fighting in Syria for an “unknown cause” could be a potential destabilizing force for the state.<sup>50</sup>

### 2014-2015: The Securitization of the Foreign Fighter Phenomenon

After the President’s December 2013 speech, state institutions in Kosovo carried out threat assessments on potential “Syrian returnees.” This eventually led to a number of raids by Kosovo’s security structures in the second half of 2014, in which around 70 individuals were arrested on suspicion of involvement in terrorist activities. Four people were arrested in June 2014, five in July, forty-seven in August, and fifteen in September, including some well-known conservative imams.<sup>51</sup> Another dozen were arrested in mid- and late 2015.<sup>52</sup> It is worth noting that the August 2014 raid that swept up nearly fifty individuals in a single day occurred just two weeks after a Report on Religious Freedom was issued by the US Department of State explicitly citing “instances of religious-based violence, interference with religious pilgrimages, hate speech, and vandalism,”<sup>53</sup> and around two weeks before a quarterly debate about Kosovo was held at the UN Security Council.<sup>54</sup> During this UNSC session, the

49 Russian Federation, National Antiterrorism Committee, “Unified Federal List of Organizations, Including Foreign and International, Designated as Terrorist by the Courts of the Russian Federation,” <http://en.nac.gov.ru/unified-federal-list-organizations-including-foreign-and-international-designated-terrorist-courts.html> (accessed November 15, 2016). See Numbers 22 & 23.

50 Kosovo Office of the President, “President Jahjaga’s Annual Speech at the Assembly of the Republic of Kosovo,” President’s Speeches, December 12, 2013, <http://www.president-ksgov.net/?page=2,6,3186#.WEXillz3hPI> (accessed November 15, 2016).

51 Kursani, *Report Inquiring into the Causes and Consequences of Kosovo Citizens’ Involvement as Foreign Fighters*.

52 “Kosovë: Pesë Të Arrestuar Nën Dyshimet Për Terrorizëm,” VOA, July 11, 2015, <http://www.zeramerikes.com/a/kosovo-police-terrorism/2857719.html> (accessed November 15, 2016).

53 US Department of State, “Kosovo 2014 International Religious Freedom Report.”

54 See: United Nations Security Council, *7257th Meeting*, No. S/PV.7257, August 29, 2014.

raid was applauded by Farid Zarif, Head of the UN Mission in Kosovo, as an “effective action taken by the Kosovo police and security bodies to tackle trends of violent extremism and prevent participation of some Kosovars in the conflicts in Syria and Iraq.”<sup>55</sup> The UK representative also welcomed the operation and “applaud[ed] the Kosovo authorities’ determination to tackle extremism and foreign fighters.”<sup>56</sup> But these raids, controversial in Kosovo to a certain extent, raised a number of questions; because, while they triggered a wave of Islamophobia on one hand, as reported in the Freedom House Report on Kosovo,<sup>57</sup> they mobilized civil society actors who had been critical of the state’s approach to the issue on the other.<sup>58</sup>

The security measures taken by state institutions eventually led to a public grappling with earlier policy positions. Those indicted for being involved in terrorist activities as a result of the suspicion by security and justice structures that they had travelled to Syria at some point brought the 2011-2013 context into courtrooms and into public opinion in general. For instance, one of the accused, Hajdin Elezi, who admitted before the court that he travelled to Syria between March and April 2013 before deciding to return, argued that he posed “no threat to Kosovo’s people” and pointed out that, at the time he departed, there had been “no positive laws prohibiting travel to Syria.”<sup>59</sup> In a similar vein, Emri Bushi admitted to having been in Syria and to joining a faction of the opposition not considered to be terrorists, noting that in the period during which he was in Syria, between June and August 2013, “there was no law prohibiting participation in these wars.”<sup>60</sup> Muxhahid Brava also freely admitted to having participated in the Syrian conflict between January and March 2014, stating that he “was not aware that this was prohibited, and as soon as he heard about [Kosovo’s plans to outlaw such participation] returned to Kosovo.”<sup>61</sup>

Some of the accused individuals were even more explicit and strategic in their instrumentalization of the 2011-2013 context in their defense. For instance, when Fehmi

55 Ibid., 3.

56 Ibid., 17.

57 Freedom House, “Freedom in the World 2015: Kosovo,” February 2016, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2015/kosovo> (accessed November 15, 2016).

58 Arber Fetiù, “Kosovo” in *European Islamophobia Report 2015*, eds. Enes Bayrakli and Farid Hafez (Ankara: SETA, 2016). Beyond civil society actors, a main opposition party also raised questions about the raid and how the media covered the issue of arrests. The Vetvëndosje movement characterized the coverage as creating “euphoria” about the arrests, and called this “harmful.” See the August 15, 2014 Vetvëndosje newsletter (in Albanian) as a pdf at: [http://www.vetevendosje.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Fletushka\\_Nr.420.pdf](http://www.vetevendosje.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Fletushka_Nr.420.pdf).

59 Basic Court Pristina, First-instance Judgment, PPR. KR. nr. 406/2014, September 4, 2014.

60 Ibid., 14.

61 Ibid.

Musa – who was arrested in Kosovo in the “Badovac case” – was asked in court as to why another individual, Betim Brahimaj, departed to Syria, Musa laid culpability at the feet of Enver Hoxhaj, Kosovo’s Foreign Minister, who he said “invited people to go and fight so they can help the Syrian opposition.”<sup>62</sup> Such statements reflect a number of the interviews we have conducted with former foreign fighters who have been charged for their involvement with terrorist organizations. For example, when asked about whether he would have departed to Syria had he known that this would eventually be criminalized, Albert Berisha, a former foreign fighter who joined the conflict at the end of 2013, said he would not have done so. In fact, Berisha felt that state authorities had not only failed to express that such an act was criminal “but to the contrary, they stimulated us to go there.... The issue is not only the frequent statements by Kosovo authorities in support of the opposition, but also those of their international allies, which created such circumstances as to have facilitated our departure.”<sup>63</sup>

Like Berisha, another former foreign fighter from Kosovo, Liridon Kabashi – who was arrested one day after passing a Kosovo Police exam for a job he had applied for with the agency – said that early statements by state officials, especially those of Foreign Minister Hoxhaj, led him to believe that by joining the opposition groups fighting Assad, he was “even helping the cause of the state [of Kosovo].”<sup>64</sup> Arianit Selimi, another former foreign fighter who was arrested by the French authorities and deported to Kosovo for alleged involvement in terrorist activities, expressed that all “states have publicly called to support the opposition fighting against Assad, including France and Kosovo.”<sup>65</sup> Still, another former fighter from Kosovo, Bekim Asllani, was more ambiguous about whether he would have gone to Syria had he known about the eventual criminalization of the act. Bekim claimed that if the authorities would have been clear with regards to the criminalization of departures to

62 Skender Govori, “I Akuzuari i ‘Badovcit’: Fajtor për Rekrutimet në Siri Është Enver Hoxhaj,” Kallxo.com, June 8, 2016, <http://kallxo.com/akuzuari-badovcit-fajtor-per-rekrutimet-ne-siri-eshte-enver-hoxhaj/> (accessed November 16, 2016). The Badovac case involved individuals arrested in the area near Lake Badovac in Kosovo, who appeared to be making videos in support of ISIL. Media coverage of the case reported that arrestees were militant Islamists who planned to poison Lake Badovac (a main source of water for Prishtina); but Kosovo Police denied that such a plot existed.

63 Albert Berisha, interview, 2016.

64 Liridon Kabashi, interview, 2016.

65 Arianit Selimi, interview, 2016. This is a pseudonym, as this individual agreed to speak only on the condition of anonymity.

Syria, he would have at least understood that his two choices were either to stay in Kosovo and not join the fight in Syria at all, or to depart, but depart for good.<sup>66</sup>

While the sectarian religious reading of the conflict, as well as many other aspects elaborated by Kursani, may provide plausible explanations regarding the emergence of the foreign fighter phenomenon in Kosovo, it is also clear that official discourse and the position of state institutions during the initial stages of the conflict created a normative standard that appears to have been understood by some to place them outside of any consequence should they decide to fight the Assad regime.<sup>67</sup> It was in that initial period of the conflict that the vast majority (nearly 85%) of foreign fighters originating from Kosovo departed to Syria; a number that dropped precipitously after the shift in the state's position, discourse, and behavior.

## Conclusion

While it was certainly not the main factor, the official position and discourse of Kosovo's state institutions toward the Syrian conflict should not be ignored as an inadvertent enabler of the foreign fighter phenomenon in Kosovo. By historicizing and contextualizing the phenomenon in the early period of the Syrian conflict, from its onset in spring 2011 through the end of 2015, we have shown the stark contradictions that existed in this official position from the conflict's initial stage (2011-2013) to its subsequent stage (2014-2015). Systematic analysis of state archives and other primary and secondary sources has revealed that, despite the fact that around 85% of the total number of Kosovar foreign fighters had departed to Syria by the end of 2013, the phenomenon was not on the radar of state institutions during this early period of the conflict. Indeed, these institutions viewed the conflict in a way that was detached from the actual situation on the ground, even as more than four dozen rebel groups, including those with a militant Islamic mission, were emerging. Instead, leadership in Kosovo followed the path of most Western states, which viewed the conflict through a Manichean prism – as a war being fought between a single “opposition” force against “the Assad regime.” The norm of support for this “opposition,” fostered during the initial stages of the conflict, was also adopted by the Islamic Community of Kosovo; and no second thoughts were given to the po-

66 Bekim Asllani, interview, 2016. This is a pseudonym, as this individual agreed to speak only on the condition of anonymity.

67 See: Kursani, *Report Inquiring into the Causes and Consequences of Kosovo Citizens' Involvement as Foreign Fighters*.

tential legal and criminal consequences of joining these forces by the bulk of those who sought to join various opposition groups in toppling Assad.

This is not to say that a different position and discourse on the part of official state institutions toward the Syrian conflict in its initial stages would have definitely prevented the emergence of the foreign fighter phenomenon in Kosovo. However, it is clear that the discourse of these institutions cannot be overlooked as a variable that must be considered in any attempt to gain a more comprehensive view of the emergence of the phenomenon; and we suggest that it was an important factor in materializing an option that would otherwise have remained a possibility for only a few individuals.

An anticipated objection to our analysis is rooted in the fact that the number of foreign fighters in Syria from Western European states has doubled between June 2014 and December 2015, despite changes in the stance of those respective governments on the conflict, and their subsequent securitization of the phenomenon. While this is a reasonable objection, it is important to note that our analysis is specific to Kosovo, which means that a number of contextual differences between Western Europe and Kosovo, or even between other Western Balkans countries and Kosovo, must be taken into account.

Unlike in most Western European countries, Islamic discourse and practices in Kosovo are largely institutionally and hierarchically centralized under the auspices of the Islamic Community (BIK). The conflict in Syria made its way into the mosques of Kosovo only after instructions from the BIK. Second, the few religious figures in Kosovo who have introduced Islamic militancy related to the Syrian conflict have mostly remained outside the control of the BIK, and have been among those detained by authorities after the phenomenon was securitized. Thus, propagation of this more extreme discourse has been frozen in lectures available online, posted prior to their arrests. Further, as official state discourse shifted in 2014 and 2015, reflecting a more realistic view of the situation on the ground in Syria, the BIK – and even more conservative imams operating under its authority – did in fact expedite anti-jihad messages. And third, while the global rhetoric of extremist Muslims has had some influence on the creation of strong identity attachments to the “suffering Sunni Muslim brothers” in Syria among certain religious practitioners in Kosovo, the impact seems to be significantly less than it has been among more alienated Muslims in non-Muslim majority countries in Western Europe. In Kosovo, official state discourse appears to have had a greater influence on Muslim practitioners than it has in the European context.

## Annex I

### Sources, Table 2: List of Syrian rebel groups opposing the Assad regime (2011-2013)

(A) Joshua Landis, "Free Syrian Army Founded by Seven Officers to Fight the Syrian Army," *Syria Comment Blog*, July 29, 2011, <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/free-syrian-army-established-to-fight-the-syrian-army/> (accessed October 12, 2016).

(B) Chris Looney, "The Northern Storm Brigade: It's History, Current Status, and Why It Matters," *Syria Comment Blog*, March 18, 2014, <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/northern-storm-brigade-history-current-status-matters-chris-looney/> (accessed October 12, 2016).

(C) Asher Berman, "Rebel Groups in Jebel Al-Zawiya," ISW Backgrounder, July 26, 2012. Available as a pdf at: [http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Backgrounder\\_RebelGroupsJebelAlZawiyah\\_31July.pdf](http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Backgrounder_RebelGroupsJebelAlZawiyah_31July.pdf).

(D) Stanford University, "Mapping Militant Organizations," <http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/> (accessed November 16, 2016).

(E) "Guide to the Syrian Rebels," *BBC*, December 13, 2013, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-24403003> (accessed November 16, 2016).

(F) Aron Lund, "The Mujahideen Army of Aleppo," *Diwan*, April 8, 2014, Carnegie Middle East Center, <http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/55275?lang=en> (accessed November 16, 2016).

(G) Aron Lund, "The Non-State Militant Landscape in Syria," *CTC Sentinel* 6, no. 8 (August 2013): 23-28. Available as a pdf at: <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/v2/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/CTCSentinel-Vol6Iss85.pdf> (accessed November 16, 2016).

(H) "The Moderate Rebels: A Growing List of Vetted Groups Fielding BGM-71 TOW Anti-Tank Guided Missiles," *Hasan Mustafa* (blog), May 8, 2015, <https://hasanmustafas.wordpress.com/2015/05/08/the-moderate-rebels-a-complete-and-growing-list-of-vetted-groups-fielding-tow-missiles/> (accessed November 16, 2016).

(I) Aron Lund, "Syria's Salafi Insurgents: The Rise of the Syrian Islamic Front," UI Occasional Paper, no. 17, Swedish Institute of International Affairs, March 2013.

Available as a pdf at: <http://www.ui.se/eng/upl/files/86861.pdf> (accessed November 16, 2016).

**(J)** Nicholas A. Heras, "June 2015 Briefs – Beating on Assad's Doors: Syrian Militia Fighter Abd Al-Nasr Shmeir," *Militant Leadership Monitor* 6, no. 6, The Jamestown Foundation, June 30, 2015.

**(K)** Jennifer Cafarella and Genevieve Casagrande, "Syrian Opposition Guide," ISW Backgrounder, October 7, 2015. Available as a pdf at: [http://understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Syrian%20Opposition%20Guide\\_0.pdf](http://understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Syrian%20Opposition%20Guide_0.pdf) (accessed November 16, 2016).

**(L)** Aron Lund, "Aleppo and the Battle for the Syrian Revolution's Soul," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, December 4, 2012, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2012/12/04/aleppo-and-battle-for-syrian-revolution-s-soul/fd4q?reloadFlag=1> (accessed November 16, 2016).

**(M)** "فصائل في دمشق تتوحد في «الاتحاد الإسلامي لأجناد الشام»," *Al-Hayat*, December 1, 2013, <http://www.alhayat.com/Details/577756> (accessed November 16, 2016).

**(N)** "Syria: Who Are the Rebel Groups Fighting against Assad?" *The Week*, August 14, 2014. Available online at: <http://www.theweek.co.uk/world-news/syria/59958/syria-who-are-the-rebel-groups-fighting-against-assad> (accessed November 16, 2016).

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## MACEDONIA

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### The Threat Posed by Foreign Terrorist Fighters to the Republic of Macedonia and the Western Balkans

by Vasko Šutarov<sup>1</sup>

#### Salafism in the Republic of Macedonia

The topic of religious radicalism in the Western Balkans has long attracted the attention of media, researchers, and security services. Ill-advised policy approaches to the issue, along with a lack of knowledge and information, mean the phenomenon has often been misused for political aims. In the last decade, reports about “growing terrorist threats,” “Islamic terrorism,” “terrorist training camps,” “dangerous Salafists,” etc. have burgeoned, with most of these “warnings” coming from self-proclaimed “security experts” and irresponsible politicians – who are regularly invited to present their security assessments in the media and at various conferences. Several incidents involving Salafi adherents from the region have further contributed to the idea that the Western Balkans is under threat from religious radicalism. In this climate, full of unconfirmed information and irrelevant speculation, security services have occasionally tried to calm the situation and relieve feelings of uncertainty among citizens by issuing official statements.

In general, Salafi structures in the Western Balkans are divided along ethnic and linguistic lines. In other words, we can speak distinctly about Albanian and Bosniak Salafi structures, between which there is no functional contact and no tendency to unify under a single Salafi movement. As a result, various charismatic leaders have appeared within each of these communities.

In the Republic of Macedonia, Salafi adherents are divided among several leaders with their own *jamaats*, or congregations, which operate outside the official Islamic Community (IC). The activities of these *jamaats* are organized around several Islamic humanitarian organizations, and include the distribution of humanitarian aid, the presentation of Salafi lectures, and the production of Salafi content for the Internet and for improvised radio and TV. Frequent joint meetings among Salafi leaders in

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the region, as well with diaspora in Western Europe and in Scandinavian countries, have defined the problem for Salafism as the Islamic Community, rather than other ethnic or religious groups.

Unlike other Balkan countries, the Republic of Macedonia has not experienced direct security threats from Salafism; and the Macedonian media has thus reported relatively rarely on religious radicalism. Overall, the Salafi community is peaceful and hidden, and attracts little attention. Still, Salafi adherents in the Republic of Macedonia are not entirely unschooled in jihadi ideology and in supporting global jihadism; and beginning in 2011, propaganda promoting jihadism emerged, mostly featuring Skopje-based imams Rexhep Memishi and Shukri Aliu.<sup>1</sup> Constrained to just a few websites that leaned slightly toward Salafi-jihadi ideology and presented news from crisis zones, jihadism was still not very present for the average citizen at the time, on a practical or propaganda level.<sup>2</sup> However, conflict in Syria brought a new reality and revealed that some Salafi structures in the Balkans were taking leading roles in producing propaganda, recruiting new adherents, and providing logistics support to extremists.

### The Three Phases of the Foreign Fighter Phenomenon

The phenomenon of foreign fighters in the Western Balkans can be considered in three phases. The first is marked by the beginning of the Syrian conflict, when a major campaign against Bashar al Assad was undertaken by a range of actors, including Salafi leaders, representatives of the Islamic Community, followers of the Muslim Brotherhood, members of media, and even politicians – all of whom spoke of the need to overthrow Assad and help the Syrian people. Websites, videos, and social media were full of pro-jihad content and the glorification of martyrs (*shahid*). The names of those who went to fight were published, and to be a foreign fighter was not necessarily scorned, nor was it immediately condemned by religious or political structures. In this period, most foreign fighters claimed to have participated in battle alongside the Free Syrian Army, and said they went to help other Albanians who live there, or for money, etc. However, information available later indicated that

1 For example, see: “Rexhep Memishi & Shukri Aliu – GHURABA,” YouTube video, 10:44, posted by Egzon Latifi, March 20, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OTpYEAs0BNo&spfreload=10> (accessed March 18, 2017).

2 These sites included [www.teuhid.net](http://www.teuhid.net) and [www.botaislame.com](http://www.botaislame.com), both of which are no longer active.

most of these fighters were actually in some of the most radical brigades, including those aligned with ISIL (then, still just the “Islamic State” or IS).

Foreign fighters from the Balkans began openly posting about their activities, sharing pictures or videos of themselves with guns and explosives, and expressing their desire to become martyrs. As individuals showed their support, the “Islamic State” built its brand, and became a trend, a vanguard to follow. At this point, even the broader international community had not adopted a stance on the foreign fighter phenomenon, as international actors remained driven by the primary objective of overthrowing Assad. These policy blinders explain why little attention was given to who went to Syria and when, and why travel from and border crossings with neighboring countries (Turkey) were not better monitored.

The second phase in the foreign fighter phenomenon started with the IS proclamation of a “caliphate” and the massive offensive that followed in Iraq in June 2014. This finally triggered alarm in the international community, and attitudes toward extremist groups in Syria and Iraq began to shift. Initiatives were introduced to sanction those participating in the Syrian conflict, and police actions were undertaken. At the same time, official Islamic Communities, mainstream Muslim leaders, and politicians started to appeal directly to young people, telling them that the conflicts in Syria and Iraq were not their war. In this new environment, Salafi structures became more cautious, aware of police monitoring, and some adherents who had only considered departing for Syria left, fearing sanctions. It was in this second phase that the first direct terrorist threats impacted the Western Balkans.

We are currently in the third phase of the foreign fighter phenomenon, in which police actions have been followed by indictments and court cases; and most of the extremist ideologues, recruiters, and fighters who have entered the legal system have received sentences. This has reduced levels of recruitment. It has also left fighters in Syria who wish to leave the battlefield with a dilemma – to return home and face justice or risk execution by fellow ISIL fighters who see them as deserters. ISIL factions are under pressure as Syrian and Iraqi forces build offensives with the support of Russian and US air strikes respectively; and as the “caliphate” falls apart, policymakers must prepare for “the day after,” which will surely present security challenges originating from the return process.

## The Path to the Battlefield

What has motivated foreign fighters? While radicalism is not new in the region, the Syrian conflict has acted as a particular trigger and inspiration to some youth in the Western Balkans. On one side, they saw Assad – secular, antireligious, and Shia – and on the other, a “caliphate” glowingly sold as a paradise-in-the-making and structured by Sharia law. In Syria, they could feel the rush and honor of being a jihadi, could experience Sharia, and could gain a sense of their “Muslim pride.” Like someone reading *The Republic* by Plato or *The City of the Sun* by Tommaso Campanella and dreaming of living there, many young men from the region departed for Syria and Iraq not just to fight but because they were seduced by the promise of this newborn state.

The Republic of Macedonia has not been excluded from the worldwide spread of the foreign fighter phenomenon. With too much emphasis put on data in recent years, and thus on total numbers of foreign fighters, the fact has been overlooked that even one citizen departing for foreign battlefields should be considered worrisome. Macedonian authorities estimate that around 135 citizens have departed for Syria or Iraq, some 27 died, and around 80 have returned (these individuals are now under surveillance).<sup>3</sup> Most are men, who engaged or are engaged in fighting, along with a very small number of women and children who accompanied them. While Kosovo and Bosnia can both cite examples of women citizens fighting within ISIL, this is not case for Macedonia. Further, while other Balkan countries have faced cases of forced migration, the kidnappings of children, or the radicalization of children to engage them in combat, Macedonia has not.

Most foreign fighters from Macedonia are of Albanian origin and, due to linguistic or ethnic reasons, were grouped with Kosovar and Albanian fighters in Syria and Iraq. The so-called Albanian units have included individuals who have quickly moved up the ISIL ranks, such as: Bekim Fidani from Gostivar, Macedonia; Ridvan Haqifi from Gnjilane, Kosovo; and Lavdrim Muhaxheri from Kacanik, Kosovo.<sup>4</sup>

Most Macedonian foreign fighters originate from Skopje (Cair and Gazi Baba municipalities), as well as neighboring Aracinovo and Saraj. Some even lived on the same

<sup>3</sup> According to various security sources.

<sup>4</sup> See: “Kush është “Ebu Usama”, ekstremisti nga Maqedonia?” *Bota Sot*, July 12, 2015; and “Kush është shefi i terroristit Lavdrim, shqiptari Ridvan Haqifi?” *Gazeta Express*, July 29, 2014, <http://www.gazetaexpress.com/lajme/kush-eshte-shefi-i-terroristit-lavdrim-shqiptari-ridvan-haqifi-32692/?archive=1> (accessed March 18, 2017).

street, near the Jaja Pasha and Tutunsuz mosques in Cair, and knew each other and were influenced and recruited in the same manner.<sup>5</sup> Other foreign fighters, like Fidani, have come from Kumanovo and Gostivar. And recruitment has sometimes occurred outside the country, by members of the Albanian Diaspora in Western Europe.

As is true of most foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq, Macedonia citizens have traveled through Turkey, taking advantage of the freedom to “stay” there for three months, and then return. As a result, there is no evidence that these fighters were in Syria, as they appear to have been in Turkey. Others have departed from Western European countries to avoid detection. In most cases, families of foreign fighters have not even known that their relative departed to Syria; though, in some cases, they did know, supported the decision, and kept in touch.

The young age of Macedonian foreign fighters highlights the vulnerability of youth. Most of those killed on the battlefield have had no religious education, came from very poor families, were largely uneducated, and had criminal backgrounds. Among older fighters, some had experience in former conflicts as members of the Kosovo Liberation Army. Most departed intending to die as martyrs.

As is true of foreign fighters from neighboring countries, some Macedonian citizens have taken rank within the command structures of ISIL. The most famous of these is Bekim Fidani, mentioned above, and also known as “Ebu Usama.” In addition, some Macedonian citizens have become high-ranking members of Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (the one-time Al-Nusra Front).<sup>6</sup> In 2014, for example, Abdul Jashari from Skopje, also known as “Abu Qatada” or “al-Albani,” was appointed by Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani as leader of the group’s military operations.<sup>7</sup>

Sometimes, the notoriety of these foreign fighters is a powerful recruiting tool, especially among young people; and in some cases, the radicalization of young people has occurred incredibly quickly, in just several weeks. One example is that of Stefan

5 “Гази Баба и Чаир плодно тло за македонските џихадисти,” September 16, 2014, <http://tocka.com.mk/1/137177/gazi-baba-i-cair-plodno-tlo-za-makedonskite-dzihadisti> accessed March 18, 2017).

6 This group, an al-Qaeda offshoot, was first called the Al-Nusra Front or Jabhat al-Nusra, but began referring to itself as Jabhat Fateh al Sham in mid-2016. Since early 2017, after a merger with several other groups, the coalition has been renamed again, and is now called Tahrir al-Sham. However, analysts continue to use the various names of groups within this coalition and use varied terminology even to refer to this newly formed group.

7 See: US Department of the Treasury, “Treasury Designates Key Al-Nusrah Front Leaders,” press release, November 10, 2016.

Stefanovski (known as “Sufijan”), a Macedonian Orthodox Christian from a well-respected family who graduated with a degree in medicine, converted to Salafism after visiting the Tutunsuz mosque, and then went to Syria to treat wounded ISIL fighters.<sup>8</sup> This case changed public perception of the radicalization process and served as a warning that everyone is vulnerable to being radicalized.

In Macedonia, recruitment has primarily been the task of Salafi preachers and returning fighters, supported by propaganda on social media and the Internet. Until his 2015 arrest, Rexhep Memishi was the most radical and influential figure within the Macedonian Salafi movement. He was also respected throughout the region (such as in Kosovo, where he often gave lectures), and by the Albanian Diaspora in Germany and Scandinavia. He freely used radical terminology and praised jihad when he preached at Jaja Pasha and Tutunsuz mosques, and was also very active online.<sup>9</sup> In his lectures, Memishi urged his audiences to join the jihad in Syria and Iraq. Another preacher who recruited foreign fighters was Omer Bajrami, head of “Rinia Islame-Saraj” (Islamic Youth Saraj), who is blamed by the family of Kosovar suicide bomber Blerim Heta for his radicalization.<sup>10</sup>

The Internet has also played a role in the recruitment and radicalization of Macedonian citizens, but not as much as in Bosnia. Yet, the radicalization process depends on a complex interplay of personal, socioeconomic, and global events, so that it is difficult to emphasize one factor over another. Online recruitment can be very powerful, though; for example, in the case of an 18-year old schoolgirl, Z.K., from Kumanovo, who left for Iraq in March 2015 to marry a foreign fighter. Z.K.’s recruiter alienated her from her family to such a degree that they didn’t realize what was occurring until she disappeared.<sup>11</sup> The nature of this case is useful in understanding the problem of online radicalization in order to develop effective responses.

8 “Како Стефан станал Суфијан - сведоштво на таткото на преобратениот Македонец,” *Republika*, August 9, 2015, <http://republika.mk/465148> (accessed March 18, 2017).

9 Memishi was associated with the website [www.teuhid.net](http://www.teuhid.net), and managed pages under this name on both Facebook and YouTube.

10 “Омер Бајрами, моите проповеди не се причина за самоубиствениот напад во Ирак,” *Dnevnik*, April 9, 2014.

11 “Kumanove, 18-vjecarja rekrutohet nga ISIS, prinderit: Eshte ne Irak,” *CityNews*, July 21, 2015, <http://www.citynews.al/2015/07/kumanove-18-vjecarja-rekrutohet-nga-isis-prinderit-eshte-ne-irak/1> (accessed March 18, 2017).

## Constraining the Foreign Fighter Phenomenon: Criminalization and Education

It is important to acknowledge that Macedonia, along with the rest of the countries in the Western Balkans, have only recently considered preventive strategies, well after the departure of hundreds of foreign fighters. A lack of necessary legal mechanisms to combat the foreign fighter phenomenon was among the main excuses state authorities in the region gave for their initial inaction. As a result, debate emerged in these countries over how to improve national criminal codes, to respond to the threat; but reforms were not conducted in a coordinated manner and with consultation, so countries in the region have adopted unsynchronized and unstandardized changes to their laws. This has resulted in a regional legal framework that applies very different sanctions in different countries. Macedonia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Albania all changed their laws, and Kosovo adopted a *lex specialis* that was delayed due to politics but was finally implemented, yet Croatia has not acted similarly.<sup>12</sup> This dis-united front facilitates foreign fighters migrating among Balkan countries to evade authorities or face the most limited sanctions.

In Macedonia, Article 322 of the Criminal Code was amended in September 2014, making various activities related to the foreign fighter phenomenon punishable. For instance, the creation, organization, recruitment, training, or other form of preparation, financing, or help for a person or group in a foreign army or paramilitary unit outside Macedonia is now punishable by up to 5 years imprisonment.<sup>13</sup> Other legal mechanisms did exist before this change; almost every criminal code prohibits, for example, incitement of ethnic or religious hate. Yet, these laws were never used to counter the radical propaganda of Salafi-jihadism.

Still, changes to the Criminal Code have not put a stop to radicalization and recruitment processes, even if they have had a preventive effect, as evidenced by fewer departures. Now, future recruits know that their travel to Syria or Iraq is a prosecutable offense; and this is also true for their recruiters and facilitators, and for propagandists. In some cases, though, these laws have had the opposite effect, apparently spurring potential fighters to depart as quickly as possible in order to avoid arrest.

12 Andreja Bogdanovski, "We did criminalize it – now what? Western Balkans response to the foreign fighters threat," policy brief, Analytica, September 2014.

13 "Изгласани измените на Кривичниот законик," 24 Vesti, September 3, 2014, <http://www.24vesti.mk/izglasani-izmenite-na-krivichniot-zakonik> (accessed March 18, 2017).

Once laws in the region were changed, the key issue for states became one of collecting evidence – specifically, how to prove that someone had been in Syria or Iraq, and had taken part in fighting. Again, in different Balkan countries, different practice was implemented, but in Macedonia, new legal mechanisms allowed police to use special investigative measures to obtain evidence. These broader intelligence and evidence gathering activities led Macedonian police to undertake Operation Cell on August 5, 2015, in Skopje, Kumanovo, Struga, and Gostivar, which resulted in 9 arrests, mostly of returned foreign fighters. A total of 36 individuals between 19 and 49 years of age had been suspected, but 27 had remained in Syria; among those arrested was Rexhep Memishi. In total, 21 houses, an internet café, the Jaja Pasha and Tutunsuz mosques, and 2 NGOs were searched and 38 desktop computers, 18 laptops, 18 tablets, and 119 cell phones were seized.<sup>14</sup> Operation Cell was not carried out in response to an imminent security threat to Macedonia, but to address the country's foreign fighter recruitment network, and arrestees were convicted under new legal provisions. Rexhep Memishi, the leading Salafi ideologue and recruiter in Macedonia, received a 7-year sentence.<sup>15</sup>

In the summer of 2016, Operation Cell was followed up by Operation Cell 2, in which 4 former foreign fighters, age 23 to 38, were arrested. Police seized computers, cell phones, memory cards, USB sticks, and passports, but discovered no explosives or weapons. These returnees were monitored for several months but were not found to conduct any terrorist activities.<sup>16</sup>

Several months later, Operation Cell 3 was conducted in cooperation with the Turkish police, and 5 Macedonian citizens from Kumanovo (3) and Skopje (2) were arrested in Istanbul on their way to Syria. They had been recruited by returnees and had attended lectures by Salafi preachers in their hometowns. All were accused under the new Criminal Code for “membership in a foreign army, parapoliсe or paramilitary unit.”<sup>17</sup>

14 “МВР разби ќелија на ИСИЛ во Македонија,” *Večer*, August 6, 2015.

15 “Шест од обвинетите од „Ќелија“ признаа дека врбувале за ИСИС, бараат спогодба со Обвинителството,” МКД, March 11, 2016, <http://www.mkd.mk/makedonija/shest-od-obvinetite-od-kjelija-priznaa-deka-vrbuvale-za-isil-baraat-spogodba-so> (accessed March 18, 2017).

16 “ДЕТАЛИ ЗА ‘ЌЕЛИЈА 2’: Еве кои се уапсените - поминале воено-терористичка обука во Сирија,” *Večer*, July 9, 2016.

17 “МВР со детали: Македонски државјани уапсени во Турција, планирале заминување на боиштата во Сирија како дел од ИД,” *Kurir*, August 27, 2016, <http://kurir.mk/makedonija/vesti/mvr-so-detali-makedonski-drzhavjani-uapseni-vo-turtsija-planirale-zaminuvane-na-boishtata-vo-sirija-kako-del-od-id/> (accessed March 18, 2017).

As policymakers and security actors have begun responding more strongly to the foreign fighter phenomenon, the Islamic Community of the Republic of Macedonia has also responded, although initially with only a few public statements by IC head Sulejman Rexhepi. These statements denied the religious reasons used to justify travel to Syria, but avoided acknowledging the high level of religious radicalization taking place in the region.<sup>18</sup> In later statements, however, the IC has openly condemned the foreign fighter phenomenon, claiming that recruits are indoctrinated by a manipulated form of religion.<sup>19</sup>

Acting as the moderate voice of true Islam, and of peace, the IC has vocally opposed all terrorist propaganda and Rexhepi has argued for preventive actions led by political institutions with the support of religious institutions. The IC also supported Operation Cell, has come out against violence in the name of religion, has declared that ISIL is a terrorist organization, has argued for the rule of law and the elimination of extremism, and has called on all international bodies working on these issues to see the Islamic Community of the Republic of Macedonia as their ally.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, in December 2014, the IC developed a “Stop radicalization & involvement in terrorism project,” aimed at preventing further departures by potential fighters and re-socializing returnees, even in prisons. This project – envisioned to encompass 700 mosques in Macedonia and among the Diaspora – would involve public campaigns, workshops, and meetings about radicalism, as well as the inclusion of relevant subjects in the curricula of religious schools in order to strengthen the moderate voice of peace in Islam.<sup>21</sup> Although a program of this nature should be eagerly supported by government agencies, foreign embassies, the EU, the OSCE, and USAID, it has yet to be implemented.

18 “ИВЗ е против учество на македонски граѓани во војната во Сирија,” *Kajgana*, January 15, 2014, <http://kajgana.com/ivz-e-protiv-uchestvo-na-makedonski-gragjani-vo-vojnata-vo-sirija> (accessed March 18, 2017).

19 Frosina Dimovska, “Реџеџи - Ако се гине, подобро за Македонија отколку за Сирија,” *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, October 19, 2014, <http://www.slobodnaevropa.mk/a/26644106.html> (accessed March 18, 2017).

20 SinishaStankovic, “Реакцијата на акцијата ‘Келија,’” *VOA*, August 7, 2015, <http://mk.voanews.com/a/2906454.html> (accessed March 18, 2017).

21 Frosina Dimovska, “ИВЗ: Казни и ресоцијализација на оние што се борат во странство,” *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, January 27, 2015, <http://www.slobodnaevropa.mk/a/26815766.html> (accessed March 18, 2017).

## The Risk of Violence at Home

As recognition of the foreign fighter phenomenon has grown, the risk returnees may pose to their home countries has been a common question. Mainly, fears of returnees are based on theoretical potential threats; but, some very real threats have also been made against citizens at home by foreign fighters in Syria, through social media and in videos. Moreover, other real threats, supported by evidence of planning or attempts to conduct terrorist acts, have been stopped.

When considering the domestic terrorism threat related to the conflict in Syria and Iraq, we should ask: What is the motive of potential attackers and is our region a target? At first, the focus of foreign fighters was squarely on Syrian and Iraqi battlefields, where they had gone to fight Assad's forces, protect the "caliphate," and live under Sharia law; and local authorities in their home countries gave these fighters few reasons to view those countries as targets. But, the situation has changed. Moral or actual support by local governments to the grand anti-terror coalition, changes in laws, the pressure of security services, and police actions have all changed the playing field; and what's more, a *fatwa* was issued by ISIL to its adherents to attack all "enemies of the caliphate."<sup>22</sup>

By design, terrorism is unpredictable, undetectable, and may potentially occur at any time. However, just as the foreign fighter phenomenon can be analyzed in three phases, so too can the evolution of terrorist threats against the region. In the first phase, there was no attention at all paid to the Balkans by extremists. In the second, ISIL began showing an interest in the region and issued the now infamous video titled "Honor is in Jihad."<sup>23</sup> This was a turning point at which threats of all sorts increased – in social media posts, in videos, and also in the form of real terror threats that triggered security alerts. The third phase, which began at the start of 2016, has seen a decreased intensity of announced threats; though caution must be taken, for challenges will surely mark the return process.

22 Yara Bayoumy, "Isis urges more attacks on Western 'disbelievers,'" *Independent*, September 22, 2014.

23 "al-Hayāt Media Center presents a new video message from The Islamic State: "Honor is in Jihād: A Message to the People of the Balkans," Jihadology, June 4, 2015, <http://jihadology.net/2015/06/04/al-%E1%B8%A5ayat-media-center-presents-a-new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-honor-is-in-jihad-a-message-to-the-people-of-the-balkans/> (accessed March 18, 2017).

Threats made by foreign fighters in Facebook posts or YouTube videos have mainly been directed against religious authorities and mainstream Muslims – who extremists believe do not practice “pure” Islam – as well as against the media, accused of publishing false information, and political and state authorities for alleged “oppression.” Threats have also been made against other ethnic and religious groups, as well Western countries. And it is clear that these fighters remain aware of the situation at home while in Syria and Iraq.

The June 2015 issuance of the video “Honor is in Jihad,” issued by ISIL’s al-Hayat Media Center, deserves particular attention for a number of reasons. It was the first direct terrorist threat made against Balkan countries as a whole by a united front of Balkan foreign fighters, including Albanians from Kosovo, Montenegro, and Albania, and Bosniaks from Bosnia and Serbia. The video was a sign that the attention of ISIL had turned toward the region, which is perceived as a frontier for Islam where it has been repressed for centuries.

The two main strategic messages of the video were, first, a call for *hijra* (migration) to the “caliphate” and second, threats of terrorist attacks. Bosniak Ines Midžić (known as Salahudin al Bosni) urged adherents who cannot travel to Syria to instead perform terrorist acts against civilians in Bosnia and Serbia. In even stronger language, Kosovar Ridvan Haqifi (alias Abu Muqatil al Kosovi) evoked the subjugation of Muslims in Macedonia, Kosovo, and Albania and threatened suicide operations targeting both the government and civilians. Just over one month later, a second video was issued. Titled “We are the Islamic State,” the video marked Western Balkan countries as ISIL territory. The main message was that these countries would eventually be brought into the “caliphate” and under Sharia law.<sup>24</sup>

Specific threats had already been made against individual countries before this, though. In May 2015, Damir Slaković, a foreign fighter from Montenegro, released a video in which he threatened the IC, his fellow Montenegrin citizens, and a specific MP, and claimed that ISIL was coming and would show no mercy.<sup>25</sup> In June, Macedonia was singled out by an Albanian known as Abu Bakr al Albani, who made

24 “Poruka dzihadista na Balkanu: ‘Mi smo islamski hilafet,’” Info-ks.net, July 15, 2015, <http://www.info-ks.net/vijesti/regija/56745/poruka-dzihadista-na-balkanu-mi-smo-islamski-hilafet> (accessed March 18, 2017).

25 Milutin Sekulović and Veliša Kadić, “ID napada preko Bara?” *Večernje novosti*, May 5, 2015, <http://www.novosti.rs/vesti/planeta.300.html:546495-ID-napada-preko-Bara> (accessed March 18, 2017).

threats against leaders and civilians in all the countries adjacent to Albania, but especially against Macedonians.<sup>26</sup> And in August, a Facebook message posted after Operation Cell by a suspected Macedonian foreign fighter who goes by Abu Sejfedin Al Albani called on ethnic Albanians in the country to take up arms against the “Slav crusaders” as revenge for arrests made by police.<sup>27</sup> In the wider region, threats had also been made against media, including against Bosnian state broadcaster BHRT by a fighter known as Abu Suhayla Salahaddin in May 2015, when he claimed ISIL had arrived in Bosnia and its fighters were ready to kill.<sup>28</sup> Another threat issued in June specifically targeted Albanian journalist Aurora Koromani of Tirana News 2 and *Gazeta Sqiptare*.<sup>29</sup>

Some of the fighters made their own videos threatening their respective countries. On May 3, 2015, Damir Salakovic from Bar, Montenegro released a video-message threatened religious community, citizens and particular parliamentarians that “Daesh” is coming and will show no mercy.<sup>30</sup> On February 18, 2016, new video threats were made by fighters from Bosnia: Amir Selimović threatened “hostile” media and Grand Mufti Husein Kavazovic, while another Bosnian fighter, known as “Ebula Mua’tezu el Bosni”, threatened that fighters will return and bring blood to Bosnia with suicide belts.<sup>31</sup>

Besides these threats issued by foreign fighters, a threat against the Balkans was also issued by the self-proclaimed “caliph” Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. According to the President of Kosovo Hashim Thaçi, al-Baghdadi threatened to send jihadis to kill “infidels” in Kosovo and the Balkans after Thaçi implemented counterterrorism measures in Kosovo in 2014.<sup>32</sup> This kind of direct response confirms that ISIL feels it has interests in the region.

26 “Shqiptari I ISIS: Rama, Thaci, Gruevski, Ahmeti dhe Vucic, beni gati arkivolet!” *Java*, June 6, 2015.

27 “Албански медиуми: Член на ИСИС и се закани на Македонија,” *Grid*, August 10, 2015, <http://grid.mk/news/510747427/albanski-mediumi-chlen-na-isis-i-se-zakani-na-makedonija> (accessed March 18, 2017).

28 Željko Andrijanić, “ISIL je došao u Bosnu, uskoro ćete nestajati i letjeti u zrak,” *Večernji list*, May 8, 2015.

29 “Kërcënohet për herë të dytë nga ISIS gazetarja Aurora Koromani,” *Albeu.com*, June 15, 2015, <http://www.albeu.com/shqiperi/kercenohet-per-here-te-dyte-nga-isis-gazetarja-aurora-koromani/202746/> (accessed March 18, 2017).

30 ID napada preko Bara?, 05.05.2015, <http://www.novosti.rs/vesti/planeta.300.html:546495-ID-napada-preko-Bara>

31 Two videos threatening terrorist attacks in Bosnia posted, 22.02.2016, <https://eblnews.com/news/balkan/two-videos-threatening-terrorist-attacks-bosnia-posted-11250>

32 “Kosovo foreign minister ‘received death threat from ISIS leader,’” *The Straits Times*, February 4, 2016.

There has also been one case of a real, coordinated threat to Macedonia and Kosovo. On July 11, 2015, Macedonian and Kosovar authorities intercepted a message between Lavdrim Muhaxheri and Bekim Fidani discussing preparations for attacks on water supply systems meant to kill as many civilians as possible. They were the main organizers, instructing supporters in both countries on how to attack critical infrastructure facilities to cause both material damage and civilian deaths. Several people arrested near Lake Badovac in Kosovo were said to have planned to poison the main water supply in Pristina. An ISIL flag and a small amount of poison were seized, and the water supply was temporarily shut off to ensure that the water was safe.<sup>33</sup>

In October and November 2015, there was again a high-level alert in Macedonia, in the wake of the Paris attacks. The capital Skopje was especially on alert, with security at key locations strengthened, concerts marked by a high police presence, and mobile police units spread across the city. In the blink of an eye, Macedonian citizens knew how it felt to live with a constant threat of terrorism. In the same period, unconfirmed media reports that some leading foreign fighters had secretly entered Kosovo and Macedonia spurred Macedonian authorities to respond with even more high security, very visibly deploying police forces at shopping malls and music events. The atmosphere was one of fear and uncertainty; which of course is the goal and nature of terrorism.

Other counterterrorism activities in the region have included the March 2016 arrest by Kosovo authorities of three returnees from ISIL battlefields, one of whom commanded a Kosovar unit in Syria. Police announced that these former fighters were charged with establishing ISIL cells locally and planning attacks in Serbia, but provided no further information.<sup>34</sup> If such an attack occurs, it is likely to provoke ethnic animosity and lead to further social destabilization in Kosovo. In November 2016, Albanian and Kosovo authorities made more arrests of suspected members of ISIL, accused of planning coordinated terrorist attacks in Albania, Kosovo, and Macedonia. Four individuals were arrested in Skadar, in Albania, and nine in Kosovo in connection to one of these plots, in which an attack on the Albania-Israel football match

33 "Уапсените терористи во Косово планирале да фрлат отров и во водите за пиење во Македонија," *Večer*, July 13, 2015.

34 "Тројца џихадисти на Косово планирале напади во Србија," *Makfax*, March 2, 2016, <http://makfax.com.mk/svet/region/trojca-dihadisti-na-kosovo-planirale-napadi-vo-srbija/> (accessed March 18, 2017).

at Loro Bolic Stadium in Skadar was planned.<sup>35</sup> According to the confessions of arrested Kosovars, they were to execute the attack, with Albanian co-conspirators handling the logistics. Their plan was to attack the Israelis after their arrival in Albania, first with explosives and then with firearms (similar to the Paris attack in November 2015). Due to this threat, the match was moved to Elbasan.<sup>36</sup>

According to Kosovo authorities, the group involved in this plot in Kosovo included some 30 people who represented a branch of a larger group from Albania and Macedonia. Arrested Kosovars had also planned attacks against international and other security institutions in Kosovo, with the aim to generate considerable fear among citizens, destabilize the country, and destroy basic social structures in order to establish an Islamic state. Similar attacks in Albania and Macedonia were also planned by this group, which appeared to operate by dividing into cells, each with different targets, coordinated by Lavdrim Muhaxheri and Ridvan Haqifi.<sup>37</sup> In Macedonia, two people were arrested in Skopje and Aracinovo and charged with terrorism (Art. 394b) in connection with the group. According to the Ministry of Interior, they had planned to conduct attacks in Macedonia; yet, during the search at the time of the arrest, no explosives or weapons were found.<sup>38</sup> Still, it is important to situate this plot within the context of previous threats made in the “Honor is in Jihad” video, in which Haqifi warned of “spectacular and coordinated attacks” in Albania, Kosovo, and Macedonia.

In addition to above-mentioned cases, there were also other reports about planned or prevented terrorist attacks, some of which were not officially confirmed by authorities. However, Albanian defense minister Mimi Kodeli confirmed in December 2016 that several terrorist attacks had been prevented in the country.<sup>39</sup>

So far, perpetrators of terrorism in Western Europe have not included citizens of the Republic of Macedonia or other Balkan countries. However, members of Balkan dia-

35 “Уапсен повратник од Сирија, поседувал експлозив и муниција,” *Večer*, November 13, 2016.

36 “Двајца од уапсените Косовци признале дека планирале напад врз израелските фудбалери,” *a1on.mk*, November 15, 2016, <http://a1on.mk/archives/668313> (accessed March 18, 2017).

37 “Спречен терористички напад на натпреварот Албанија-Израел,” *Lokalno*, November 13, 2016, <http://lokalno.mk/sprechen-teroristichki-napad-na-natprevarot-albanija-izrael/> (accessed March 18, 2017).

38 “Чавков: Спречен терористички напад во Македонија,” *Večer*, November 10, 2016.

39 Албанските разузнавачи спречиле повеќе терористички напади, 18.12.2016, <http://www.plusinfo.mk/vest/97097/albanskite-razuznavaci-sprecile-povekje-teroristicki-napadi> (accessed May 15, 2017).

sporas in Europe have been connected to planned attacks. Two Kosovo-born brothers were arrested in Duisburg, Germany in December 2016, suspected of planning an attack on a shopping center in Oberhausen.<sup>40</sup> And in January 2017, an Albanian was arrested in Austria for allegedly planning an attack in Vienna.<sup>41</sup> Salafi *jamaats* that serve Balkan diaspora communities may serve as recruiting bases but also as logistics centers; and ongoing attempts to establish a jihadist network were proved by a mass raid, also in January 2017, in both Graz and Vienna. Austrian police arrested 14 people, including Bosniaks and a Macedonian, linked to the network of well-known radical preacher Mirsad Omerović, who was arrested in Graz in 2014 and jailed for 20 years for recruiting foreign fighters.<sup>42</sup>

### Assessing the Threat of Returnees

The global migrant and refugee crisis has been another big challenge for the region. In the context of the foreign fighter phenomenon, the question is whether foreign fighters or other terrorists may use migrant routes to enter the Balkans or proceed into Western Europe. Information that one of the perpetrators of the 2015 Paris attacks passed through Macedonia on the Balkan route brought the reality of this possibility to the forefront.<sup>43</sup> Macedonian security services have responded by monitoring migrants that transit through the country in an attempt to detect potential terrorists.<sup>44</sup> To ask this additional competency of the security personnel who conduct screenings, training has been required.

In anticipation of the return of foreign fighters, some key questions arise about how they will re-enter their home countries. Will they return via legal border crossings with authentic documents, secure illegal passage using legal documents, or obtain false passports in order to pass as migrants? On August 27, 2015, a group of five foreign fighters from Kosovo made the choice to return through a legal crossing and

40 "UHAPŠENA BRAĆA SA KOSOVA Osumnjičeni da su planirali NOVI NAPAD u Nemačkoj," *Blic*, December 23, 2016.

41 "Австриските служби уапсија Албанец кој подготвувал атентат во Виена," *BGNES*, January 21, 2017, <http://www.bgnes.com/sviat/evropa/4483719/> (accessed March 18, 2017).

42 Jack Moore, "Austria arrests 14 ISIS-linked suspects in major raids," *Newsweek*, January 26, 2017, <http://www.newsweek.com/austria-detains-14-isis-suspects-major-raids-preachers-network-vienna-548547> (accessed March 18, 2017).

43 "И официјално, двајца од напаѓачите во Париз поминале и низ Македонија," *eMagazin*, November 24, 2015, <http://emagazin.mk/vesti/vest/15243?title=i-o%D1%84icijalno-dvajca-od-napagjachite-vo-pariz-pominale-niz-makedonija> (accessed March 18, 2017).

44 Miomir Serafinovic, "Меркел: На Западен Балкан повторно има тензии," *Telma*, November 3, 2015, <http://www.telma.com.mk/vesti/merkel-na-zapaden-balkan-povtorno-ima-tenzii> (accessed March 18, 2017).

were discovered by police near the Bulgarian-Macedonian border.<sup>45</sup> This may inspire other returning fighters to take advantage of existing criminal networks, especially in Turkey, to obtain various forged documents or modified original passports.

In the background of these considerations, the threat from ISIL of the creation of a “Balkan caliphate” must not be dismissed by governments in the region. Foreign institutions and governments as well as members of the media have all warned that ISIL supporters in the Balkans could be inspired by the ISIL “caliphate” to create their own, or to take territory under their control. Whether these threats are very real is hard to say; such ideas and propaganda were present on the Internet even before the Syrian conflict began and ISIL emerged. But even if a “Balkan caliphate” is only a virtual reality, any threat of its creation deserves the attention of security services, because ideas inspire actions. Ultimately, the future threat to Macedonia and the region will depend largely on the situation in Syria and Iraq, as has been the case so far. If the “caliphate” dissolves, Balkan fighters on the battlefield could just as easily defend it to the bitter end or return disappointed.<sup>46</sup> In this way, ironically, the situation in Syria and Iraq has now become a determinate of security policy in the Balkans (and across the globe).

Yet, ISIL still needs fighters in the war theater and considers defense of the “caliphate” more important than actions abroad. So, is there really a global ISIL agenda? Some of the terrorist acts committed outside of Syria and Iraq have not been directed by ISIL, but were “lone wolf” operations by individuals who adhere to ISIL ideology. Still, such actions are indeed part of the global strategy of ISIL, which has begun, in a way, to “outsource” terror. This is why it is important to closely monitor the agenda and motives of ISIL and other groups, for if they do decide to broaden their operations, it is possible that foreign fighters from the Balkans could be used to attack certain states in the region, or perhaps in the West.

Concerns about returning foreign fighters tend to relate both to their ideology and experiences, with people fearing that returnees: are radicalized to such a degree that they seek violence; maintain membership in terrorist organizations; have specialized training and expertise with weapons; bring an even more radical ideology and

45 “На бугарско-македонската граница уапсени џихадисти од Косово,” *Večer*, August 27, 2015.

46 There is some evidence that ISIL may prevent fighters from leaving in some cases, such as reports of foreign fighters from the region being executed because they wanted to desert their ranks.

greater levels of radicalization back home with them; suffer from potentially long-term psychological problems due to the trauma of war; may be used as “sleepers” for future ISIL operations; may inspire future generations toward terrorism; could seek revenge for police and other government actions; and may serve as logistical support for other foreign fighters in the future. And, their time in Syria and Iraq has given them the opportunity to build links and relationships with various individuals and groups who spread Salafism.

Individuals who have been arrested and imprisoned also pose a security challenge, and may continue to act to radicalize other prisoners, or even adherents outside prison walls. These people may be local heroes, seen as “martyrs to the cause.” Experience with dismantling radical structures is teaching us that simply arresting or killing a leader doesn’t mean that a group or activity is disrupted. There are always new leaders emerging or individuals ready to act independently.

As far as the Macedonian experience with foreign fighters so far, it is important that what has happened and why is analyzed. And the question must be asked: What overlooked factors may have contributed to their radicalization and recruitment? Answering that will require interviews with radicalized individuals themselves, arrested or returned, or others who have played a role in the recruitment and radicalization process. This kind of scientific approach offers a basis for the creation of an appropriate preventive response that accounts for current tendencies and trends. Regular assessments of this nature may also help identify radical preachers. Over the last few years, extremists have learned where the “thin red line” lies and how to avoid attracting the attention of security services. And yet it is important to identify radical preachers not only in order to take repressive preventive measures, but to initiate dialogue about their beliefs.

There is a parallel need for constant monitoring of groups in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), including of Al Qaeda, ISIL, and Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, to ascertain their current and future plans and goals in particular regions and countries. In the Western Balkans, the main imperative should be to detect links between these groups and individuals, and operations, logistics, or propaganda efforts in the region. This will require better communication with security professionals, academics, religious figures, and other stakeholders in the MENA region; for a security assessment cannot be complete without connecting all the dots and continuously gaining greater expertise.

## Looking Ahead

Regarding whether ISIL is already in the Balkans, it is not just the physical presence of their operatives that should be considered; for the ideology of ISIL is already here, and it can inspire individuals to commit acts for which ISIL will happily take responsibility. But jihadism did not arrive in the Balkans with the emergence of ISIL and it will not suddenly disappear with the group's dissolution. The story of radicalization will thus not end with Syria, and security services will continue to play cat-and-mouse with recruiters who seem to always find new and unknown people to perpetrate terrorist attacks.

Looking longer term, the problem of many children from the region who have been to Syria and Iraq must be addressed. Their potential level of radicalization makes them a possible threat, especially given reports that ISIL is training children for terrorism.<sup>47</sup> There should be increased monitoring of these children alongside efforts to de-radicalize them; and the same is true for women who return from ISIL territory. Despite the fact that most of these women traveled to Syria and Iraq with fighter husbands and did not engage in combat themselves, they should not automatically be considered less dangerous. Qamile Tahiri from Kosovo is an example of a woman who left for Syria with her husband but later took up rank within ISIL, eventually running a women's camp and recruiting female fighters.<sup>48</sup>

Of course, future terror threats in the Balkans will depend on any number of factors in this region famously known as a powder keg; and it is not just radicalism fueling instability. Corruption, ethnic disputes, social inequality, and economic stagnancy are problems in Macedonia and in every Western Balkan country. And in some countries, the political, economic, social, and security situations are so fragile that they could be easily exploited; for example, by actors seeking to channel high levels of frustration among youth into radical ideology and violence.

For Macedonia and some neighboring states, the multiethnic nature of the society adds another challenge in the fight against radicalism and terrorism. For ex-

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47 Mark Piggot, "Isis trains children as young as 9 to be suicide bombers in Iraq," *International Business Times*, December 18, 2016, <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/isis-trains-children-young-9-be-suicide-bombers-iraq-1597063> (accessed March 18, 2017).

48 Sara Malm, "The lost generation: Desperate parents reveal hundreds of young men and women have left Kosovo to fight for ISIS in Syria," *Daily Mail*, February 1, 2016, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3426369/The-lost-generation-Desperate-parents-reveal-hundreds-young-men-women-left-Kosovo-fight-ISIS-Syria.html> (accessed March 18, 2017).

ample, if it is found that most Macedonian foreign fighters are of ethnic Albanian origin and this is emphasized by media or researchers, it may be seen as an attack against the entire Albanian community. Macedonian authorities, especially police and security forces, are aware of this and thus sometimes hesitate to interfere in the religious sphere even in the early stages of what may be radicalization and recruitment. Bad experiences in the past, when police actions were seen as targeting the Albanian community as a whole, have tempered police decision making; and this is why Macedonian police use forces from mixed ethnic origins in almost every action. Macedonian lawmakers and media are also cognizant of avoiding collective condemnation of any ethnic group.<sup>49</sup> When laws on foreign fighters were adopted in Macedonia, a number of MPs stressed that they did not just target Albanians or even fighters in Syria, but all Macedonian citizens in all foreign conflicts (such as in Ukraine, for example). And during Operation Cell, media focused attention on Stefan Stefanovski, to highlight that not all arrestees were of ethnic Albanian origin.

These tensions and considerations also exist in other multiethnic countries, where terrorism-related issues could easily damage ethnic relations, which are so tied to religion. In 2014, for example, graffiti supporting ISIL appeared at the Dečani Monastery in Kosovo and sparked ethnic debate and accusations.<sup>50</sup> And the group arrested in Kosovo in November 2016 also allegedly planned to attack Serbian Orthodox churches and monasteries.<sup>51</sup>

The importance of ethnic and religious relations cannot be understated in the fight against radicalism and terrorism, especially in countries where ethnic and religious lines are one and the same. For this reason, the complex problem of religious radicalization and the foreign fighter phenomenon must remain on the agenda in Macedonia, the region, and beyond. Yet, with so many policymakers now legitimately focused on the migration and refugee crisis, the radicalization and terrorism threat is being neglected, falling off as a priority since the beginning of 2016; and at a time

49 Sinisa Jakov Marusic, "Ethnic Tensions Complicate Counter-Extremism in Macedonia," *Balkan Insight*, March 29, 2016, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/ethnic-tensions-complicate-counter-extremism-in-macedonia-03-28-2016> (accessed March 18, 2017).

50 Nektar Zogjani, "Islamist Graffiti at Kosovo Serb Monastery Sparks Anger," *Balkan Insight*, October 13, 2014, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/kosovo-monastery-vandalized-with-graffiti> (accessed March 18, 2017).

51 "Планирале напади на цркви: Уапсени џихадисти од Косово, ги командувал озлогласениот Мухаџери," *Kurir*, November 17, 2016, <http://kurir.mk/svet/region/planirale-napadi-na-tsrkvi-uapseni-dihadisti-od-kosovo-gi-komanduval-ozloglaseniot-muhadheri/> (accessed March 18, 2017).

when the return of foreign fighters is expected to increase and de-radicalization efforts will be most imperative.

Fortunately, the issue has not been entirely forgotten by Macedonian officials, who finally adopted a National Strategy for Counterterrorism in March 2016, for which an Action Plan is being prepared. De-radicalization efforts are a component of the Strategy but have yet to take form, as the Plan is still in its initial development, bringing into question whether it can have any impact on Macedonia's 86 current returnees.<sup>52</sup> A similar challenge faces other Balkan countries, where despite years of awareness of the foreign fighter phenomenon, few prevention and de-radicalization strategies have been followed up by concrete projects and measures and many policymakers are still in the consideration and planning stages.

Broad efforts to counter the threat of terrorism that originates from religious radicalism are crucial, though, and security measures alone are not sufficient. Religious and local communities, families, NGOs, and media must all be involved in efforts that are led by religious authorities and supported by the state. In Macedonia, where the Islamic Community still awaits support for its de-radicalization project, the state-level Commission for Relations with Religious Communities and Groups could be more active in this partnership.

Media can also play a key role by offering research-based stories that counter ISIL propaganda. The news of killed Macedonian foreign fighters should receive more attention; instead, they have begun to be seen as "just another Macedonian dead in Syria." The families of Macedonian foreign fighters have also been discouraged from speaking about their family tragedies and have, for the most part, remained reticent. It would be much better if they spoke out, shared their experiences, and could perhaps sound the alarm for other families who see reflections of their own story; in the same way that many narratives of recruitment and radicalization in Kosovo and Bosnia have been useful to understanding the foreign fighter phenomenon across the region and to developing preventive measures. It is also wise to recognize the special position that women hold as wives, sisters, and daughters, and the likelihood that they are among the first to detect changes in the attitude or behavior of their family members. Similarly, school teachers and psychologists are among the front-

52 "Иванов: 86 лица се вратени во Македонија од боштата во Сирија," *Telma*, July 27, 2016, <http://telma.com.mk/vesti/ivanov-86-lica-se-vrateni-vo-makedonija-od-boishtata-vo-sirija> (accessed March 18, 2017).

line workers who may detect radical behavior in students. And, just as many anti-drug programs engage with children in the classroom, it would be useful for once-radicalized individuals to speak as part of de-radicalization campaigns in schools.

Currently, there is no NGO focused on intervening in radicalization processes or engaging in related issues. This is a missing link in counter-radicalization efforts in Macedonia. Indeed, there should be more focus in general on prevention moving forward. This will require strong messaging and joint statements from politicians, religious figures, and independent academics that not only condemn radicalism and terrorism but encourage tolerance and coexistence.

Unified messaging of this sort by governments and religious leaders across the Balkans would also be a significant step forward. The foreign fighter phenomenon has actualized problems of mutual trust among countries in the region, impacting the exchange of information. But terrorism is not something to hide, and cooperation is a must. Various ideas meant to improve information exchange – whether a Balkan counterterrorism center or some other platform for cooperation – must be considered in this era of globalization. To that end, the Macedonian Ministry of the Interior has announced intensified cooperation on the national and international levels, to facilitate both information exchange and joint actions, and to identify foreign fighters and prevent terrorist attacks.<sup>53</sup> A planned NATO antiterrorist unit in Tirana is a very encouraging development that may support this initiative.<sup>54</sup>

Finally, in order to prevent the spread of wrong information, security services should be more open to new partnerships between the public, academics, and researchers. Experience teaches us that ethnicity and religion are very easy to manipulate in order to provoke reactions and raise tensions, and of course these are particularly sensitive pressure points in the Balkans. This social context is a kind of a secondary risk factor; and one that demands we have an early warning system based on metered assessments of possible threats, so that none are underestimated and none are unnecessarily exaggerated. In other words, regional specifics require appropriate and relevant analysis based on mutual trust and cooperation. If Western Balkans countries agree that radicalism and terrorism have no place in the region,

53 Pelagia Stojanchova, “Македонија не е имуна на тероризам,” *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, January 19, 2016, <http://www.slobodnaevropa.mk/a/27496375.html> (accessed March 19, 2017).

54 Fatjona Mejdini, “Albania to Host NATO Centre on Foreign Fighters,” *Balkan Insight*, June 23, 2016, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/albania-will-host-nato-center-on-foreign-terrorist-fighters-06-23-2016> (accessed March 18, 2017).

this should be communicated loudly and clearly – and in unison – along with the message that mutual tolerance, coexistence, and respect among different ethnic and religious groups have been Balkan values for centuries.

## Conclusion

Security challenges originating from the conflict in Syria have become interlaced with security threats in the MENA region and in the Western Balkans. Several years ago, those regions felt like distant places with little in common with the Republic of Macedonia; yet today, Macedonian national security and that of its neighbors, depends to a large extent on far away events. This new security environment requires new security approaches, to both prevent and combat extremism.

Salafism and Salafi-jihadism, new to Western Balkans Muslims just decades ago, have challenged state and religious institutions in each country in the region in different ways. Yet, across the region, the teachings of Salafism and some Salafi preachers were underestimated at first, and legal mechanisms and police measures proved inadequate in response. Then, the foreign fighter phenomenon made the influence of radical preachers clear.

ISIL has supported this phenomenon by developing sophisticated propaganda, spread through modern forms of communication, that make radicalization, mobilization, and recruitment much easier. What is particularly concerning from a security perspective is that the “battlefields” ISIL now recruits for are no longer only in the “caliphate,” but in all Western countries and nations that embrace democracy, liberal values, and secularism, even Muslim countries that reject Salafism. Thus, the sphere of ISIL terrorist operations now includes countries like France, Germany, the US, Belgium, and Turkey. The Republic of Macedonia and other Western Balkans countries cannot view themselves as immune to this risk. In fact, there is a growing focus on planning attacks in this region. Prevention strategies and countermeasures must therefore be a permanent and longstanding imperative for security services.

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## SERBIA

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### Radicalization in Serbia: The Youth of Sandžak between a Hammer and an Anvil

by Aida Ćorović<sup>1</sup>

#### Introduction

The end of the 20th century brought deep change to the Balkans, including redefined national aspirations, and the disintegration of one large state and the emergence of new, smaller states. The period was marked not only by economic crisis and the dissolution of political systems, but above all by the brutal and bloody disintegration of Yugoslavia, which had been an important geostrategic meeting point of East and West for years. A wave of conflicts inspired by political extremism soon awakened religious radicalism, and in new and rather unexpected places, such as Albania, where the ban on religion was lifted after the fall of a brutal Communist dictatorship in the early 1990s. This total religious prohibition was replaced by religious freedom, opening the doors to the influence of global Muslim extremism; and pressured by events in Afghanistan, Albania became a destination and temporary refuge for Afghan mujahideen.

The war in Bosnia and Herzegovina (1992-1995) created a space particularly conducive to these influences, brought partly by foreign fighters and missionaries (*da'is*) who returned from fighting in Afghanistan or who came to fight in Bosnia from places like North Africa or immigrant communities in Western Europe. Proselytizing activities in Bosnia became centered in and around the wartime El-Mujahid Unit, which included both foreign and local fighters. Following the establishment of peace, some foreign members of this Unit left Bosnia in 1996, but some stayed and some soon returned to the Western Balkans – to Kosovo – when conflict broke out there in the late 1990s. The resistance of Bosniaks in Bosnia and Albanians in Kosovo – largely Muslims – enjoyed opportunistic support by Muslim extremists around the world who saw these conflicts as a chance to promote their ideology to local populations under the guise of missionary and humanitarian work, and to link this ideology with the fights put up by Bosniaks and Albanians for the independence of their respective

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states. At the same time, similar attempts were underway in the southwestern part of Serbia known as Sandžak, an area predominantly populated by Bosniaks.

### **Sandžak: Isolation after Dissolution**

Muslims in Sandžak had faced a particularly difficult situation after the 1991 proclamation of the autonomy of the region, followed by the establishment of the so-called Independent Sandžak Government. The regime in Belgrade declared these events a coup and almost completely excluded Sandžak from political decision-making, so that when the war ended in neighboring Bosnia, Sandžak struggled with economic and social hardships due to international sanctions imposed against Serbia, but had little to no political voice. A short-lived economic boom in the region was driven by the emergence of dozens of jeans factories along with smuggling networks linked with Turkey and Bulgaria, but it was fleeting and proved that the region could not function within a state in economic collapse. Southwestern Serbia thus entered the new millennium completely devastated and marginalized.

The collapse of Yugoslavia had left Sandžak without two integral parts – one in southeast Bosnia and the other in northeast Montenegro. The region had been directly affected by war crimes (in villages around Priboj, bordering Bosnia), had suffered civilian casualties, faced an economy and infrastructure in ruins, and poverty was on the rise. In other words, Sandžak was an ideal target for radicalization. Following the nationalist turn of many Serbians, the destructive politics of Slobodan Milošević, and all that occurred during the wars in Bosnia and Kosovo, Bosniaks in Serbia were pushed into a kind of isolation. Irresponsible and bellicose politicians, who established themselves as nationalists and warmongers, did not care at all about the situation in the region, and their dialogue with Belgrade was inspired primarily by personal and partisan gains. As if between a hammer and anvil, amid deep ethnic segregation and years of hate speech in the media and educational system, young Bosniaks and other Muslims in Sandžak became easy targets for national and religious radicalization of every kind.

### **Who is Being Radicalized, and Where?**

Youth, viewed as easily psychologically influenced, were the first targets of radicalization by extremist Muslim ideologues. Almost overnight, facilities preaching militant interpretations of Islam, especially Wahhabism/Salafism, appeared in Novi Pazar, the largest city in the region. In the streets, people began appearing wearing

attire viewed as unusual by local traditions but in accordance with the rigid rules of the Salafi movement (women almost completely covered, and men with long beards and short pants). Initially, there was a financial incentive to convert; indeed, the spread of radical Islam in Sandžak operated like a multilevel sales scheme, with converts receiving extra money for bringing new members into the community. And strong ties with Bosnia, which most Muslims in Sandžak view as their homeland, led many to start attending an extremist camp there, in Gornja Maoča, to learn the principles of *takfirism* and master the art of warfare.

According to an expert on these issues, attention should be paid to the theory that these groups were organized under the auspices, or with the tacit permission, of the leadership of the Islamic Communities of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Sandžak at the time, Reis-ul-Ulema Mustafa Cerić and Sandžak Mufti Muamer Zukorlić. These officials are said to have made financial gains from cooperation with radical elements. What's more, key actors in the movement are thought to have split not due to ideological disagreement but to disputes over financial control of these groups.<sup>2</sup> These claims cast a new light on the responsibility of the Islamic Communities in facilitating the penetration of radical Islam into the region.

Whatever the case, individuals inspired by *takfiri* ideologies became more visible in the mid-2000s in Novi Pazar and were associated with incidents and provocations that took place in mosques or in public. The first major incident occurred in the summer of 2006 when a group of enraged Muslim extremists prevented a concert by popular band Balkanika.<sup>3</sup> Then, in 2007, a spectacular arrest was made of six members of a group living in the Ninaja Mountains, during which a large number of weapons and ammunition were found and seized, along with plastic explosives, gas masks, and propaganda material.<sup>4</sup> The case was classified by the Special Prosecutor's Office for Organized Crime as a state secret, based on the threat it posed to state security. The raid had been met with armed resistance and resulted in two casualties, with Ismail Prentić killed and Senad Ramović – a notorious “tough guy” who was linked years earlier to the trafficking of drugs and humans – wounded.

2 From an interview with law enforcement officials who spoke only on the condition of anonymity.

3 “Novi Pazar: Vehabije i huligani,” B92, 5 June 2006, [http://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?nav\\_id=199956](http://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?nav_id=199956) (accessed March 20, 2017).

4 “Sukob spolicijom - ubijen vehabija,” B92, 20 April 2007, [http://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2007&mm=04&dd=20&nav\\_category=11&nav\\_id=242766](http://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2007&mm=04&dd=20&nav_category=11&nav_id=242766) (accessed March 20, 2017).

Ramović was known to the public for having escaped from a prison in Italy before joining the Muslim extremist movement.<sup>5</sup>

The members of “Ninaja group” belonged to one of two Novi Pazar congregations, Tevhid or Furqan, the first of which was under the control of Nedžad Balkan (aka Abu Muhammed) – one of the most extreme adherents of *takfirism*. Interestingly, Balkan was once a champion kickboxer in Germany and sources assert that his behavior often runs contrary to the values he promotes.<sup>6</sup> He was arrested in January 2017 in a raid by Austrian police in Vienna, alongside thirteen other Salafists from the Balkans, accused of supporting ISIL.<sup>7</sup>

The Furqan Mosque was established in 2009 as an Islamic Youth Association congregation and is linked to the global activities of its sister organization (Al-Furqan) as well as to those of Nusret Imamović, an extremist leader from Gornja Maoča (in Bosnia). The founder of Furqan and, at one time, one of its most active members, Abid Podbićanin, was killed in Syria fighting for the so-called Islamic State. Podbićanin was among the first people accused of terrorism in Serbia. He was born in Novi Pazar, received his education in Saudi Arabia, and preached Wahhabism. After traveling to Gornja Maoča for training, Podbićanin started recruiting foreign fighters for the ISIL cause; and this was the crime for which he was charged.<sup>8</sup>

Officially, the Al-Furqan organization is an Islamic Heritage Foundation from Saudi Arabia that is dedicated to the revitalization and preservation of Islamic heritage and traditions. Its branch office in Serbia was established with the same mission – to help local Muslims protect and promote their traditions and values. The organization is known for its efficiency and field activities, yet Al-Furqan also stands out as very religiously rigid, with a high degree of religious fanaticism. The intensive activities of both the Tevhid and Furqan mosques, and especially Furqan, have added fuel to the fire of conflicts in Syria and Iraq and have facilitated the spread of radical Islam, resulting in an increasing number of youth showing an interest in joining ISIL.

5 Ibid.

6 E.P.K., “Nedžad Balkan, čovek koji je regrutovao Jašarevića!” *Kurir*, November 3, 2011, <http://www.kurir.rs/nedžad-balkan-covek-koji-je-regrutovao-jasarevica-clanak-120434> (accessed March 20, 2017).

7 Goran Obradović, “Bosanska veza; Nedžad Balkan hteo da ISIS osnuje u Austriji,” *Blic*, January 31, 2017.

8 See: Marija Ristic, et al., “Jihadists ‘Target Young, Marginalised Serbian Muslims,’” in *Balkan Jihadists: The Radicalisation and Recruitment of Fighters in Syria and Iraq* (BIRN, 2016).

A cause for concern, according to police sources in Novi Pazar and Belgrade is the growing number of people who identify with the extremist ideology of *takfirism*, in Novi Pazar, Sjenica, and Tutin. Allegedly, there are some 1,000 active members in just these three cities.<sup>9</sup> As for the structure of this community, it is heterogeneous in terms of social, educational, and age criteria, and subject to almost daily shifts. Initially, members of this community were attracted by the financial security it provided them; so, recruits were generally extremely poor youth, mainly from rural areas, who had no steady income. In recent years, though, members have increasingly been recruited in urban areas, where those who are pushed to the margins of society are primarily targeted. Recruiters harness their dissatisfaction with society and poor prospects for the future, and often focus on youth with a criminal past. It is a short path from dissatisfaction and a lack of self-confidence to membership in a new “family” of like-minded people who promise unimaginable glory through martyrdom.

A source who spoke on the condition of anonymity claims that, among the Salafi/Wahhabi community in Sandžak, there are increasing numbers of highly-educated or highly-skilled members – doctors, engineers, craftsmen, and even elites. The same source also points to some interesting and little-known data which suggests that Salafists in Serbia are not recruited only from the Muslim population, but also include youth from Serbian Orthodox, Roma, and other communities who have converted to Islam; some of whom have undertaken extremist activities in Belgrade, Zemun, Novi Sad, and Pančevo.<sup>10</sup>

### Recruitment into Terrorism and Foreign Fighting

Certainly, social networks and online media have done the lion’s share of work in radicalizing young people, but the key actors in this process are “scouts” – charismatic leaders whose task is to recruit, prepare, and facilitate travel for youth from Sandžak to Syria. In late 2012 and early 2013, a number of young men set off from Serbia to Syrian war theaters, and it was only then that the general Serbian public became aware of the issue of foreign fighters. Among the first casualties among foreign fighters from Novi Pazar was Eldar Kundaković, killed in May 2013 in the vicinity of the Aleppo prison during an attempted rescue of Montenegrin Anes Sali-

9 For more on this, see: M. Nićiforović, “Vehabije umesto u Siriju, stigle u zatvor,” *Večernje Novosti*, March 9, 2014.

10 This same anonymous source was quoted in an article published in *Večernje Novosti*. See: “U Beogradu ima 200 vehabija, na Vojnom putu imaju svoj mesdžid,” *Večernje Novosti*, March 15, 2014.

hović. Kundaković became invested in the civil war in Syria mainly via propaganda on the Internet, where he also found a way to reach the front; but he also had contact with some members of the Furqan Mosque.

Mevlid Jašarević, who committed an armed attack on the US Embassy in Sarajevo in October 2011, also attracted considerable media attention and also had ties to Gornja Maoča, Novi Pazar, and Furqan. Mirza Ganić, allegedly killed on a Syrian battlefield, belonged to Furqan, too. Mirza was known by the sardonic nickname “Abu Publicity,” because of his presence on social networks during his stay in Aleppo – behavior that led many to believe he was not there to fight but had ulterior motives. His posts on Facebook were often very graphic and offensive, and he frequently addressed threats to Serbian and Bosnian politicians and NGO activists.

Although many Salafists very strictly practice and abide by the word of the Prophet, there are also those who enter this community for financial reasons. Indeed, money is the most intriguing and most frequently cited motive for departing to war theaters in Syria. And, it is clear that Syria will not be the last foothold of “Allah’s warriors;” for police sources claim that, although there is no direct proof, there is much circumstantial evidence indicating that key Salafi organizers in the Balkans are involved in drug and arms trafficking, and young enthusiasts who believe to be on the path of salvation are in fact a kind of “cannon fodder.” Indeed, some people are known by local security authorities to be engaging in organized crime in conflict zones – a suitable environment for crimes including trafficking in drugs, arms, and humans. Yet, the most lucrative business in these territories remains inciting and recruiting mujahideen, which is said to be very well paid.<sup>11</sup>

According to Serbian police sources, there are about 100 jihadists in Serbia; and, while this number may seem insignificant at first glance, it is important to consider that it takes only one person to commit a terrorist attack or engage in violent extremist activity. Still, at present, the general Serbian public as well as numerous media and researchers are most interested in the number of citizens who have departed to foreign war theaters. Determining how many Serbians are foreign fighters is difficult to establish, though, and for various reasons. The geographical position of the Balkans, the flexibility of borders, and the region’s liberal visa regime with Turkey – which is a major transit route to Syria and Iraq – mean that no one can say with certainty how many nationals from Balkan states are on battlefields in those

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11 From high-level sources who spoke on the condition of anonymity.

countries. And establishing the exact number of Serbian nationals who have departed for these war zones is further complicated by the fact that most of them do not live in Serbia, but have dual citizenship or study abroad. In fact, a number of foreign fighters who are said to be from Europe actually originate from the Balkans.<sup>12</sup>

Those returning from the battlefield are trained to carry out violence and have the capacity to execute any terrorist act demanded of them. As security experts have remarked, “They set off as extremists, and return as terrorists!”<sup>13</sup> Having taken part in the war, they have crossed the so-called red line and become potential “lone-wolf” attackers. And security risks are not the only consequence of the involvement of Balkan youth in foreign wars, which also leads to social issues like intolerance against Muslims generally. Discrimination against the Serbian Muslim population has already risen; and for mainstream Muslims – who face the stresses of being associated by others with extremism – this pressure is layered atop threats from extremists themselves, who constantly bully those who refuse to become part of their flock.

The efforts of radical Muslims in the Balkans have also resulted in increased hate speech and social segregation. Rousing lectures by extremist leaders and preachers include incitements to violence and denials of basic rights. This has left many Serbians with negative views of the entire Islamic Community; and, a lack or insufficient level of condemnation by other Muslim leaders is seen as a serious concern. Considering the time in which we live – rife with superficial and often malicious, arbitrary, and unverified information in the media – this adds to false perceptions that further deepen inter-ethnic divides.

The social segregation of radical Muslims isolates them not only from non-Muslims but also from other Muslims who are not considered to be “on the right path.” This antagonism by extremist Muslims of any “others” presents a particularly demanding and sensitive challenge, and not only in Serbia, but in all Western Balkans societies with Muslim populations. Due to the still fresh memories of the bloody breakup of Yugoslavia and the wars that affected the region, the countries that emerged in the aftermath must take extra caution in approaching this issue. Restless nationalist passions, deep ethnic divides, and the presence of nationalist rhetoric in the public

12 Timothy Holman, “Foreign Fighters from the Western Balkans in Syria,” *CTC Sentinel* 7, no. 6 (June 2014).

13 Ivana Jovanović, “Usamljeni vukovi sa Balkana,” *Antidot*, April 2, 2015, <http://www.anti.media/medijska-mreza/analize/povratnici-iz-isil-a-usamljeni-vukovi-sa-balkana/> (accessed March 20, 2017).

space, especially alongside the rather dramatic economic impoverishment of these societies, must be handled with care. And yet, ignorance and disrespect for diversity have become a general paradigm of our societies. Unfortunately, this is most often manifested through aggressive treatment of the “other.”

Involvement in the armed conflict in Syria on the side of rebels opposing the Assad regime has been an opportunity for radicalized Muslims to demonstrate to their “brothers” their willingness to do anything asked of them for the sake of their faith. They have undergone harsh physical and psychological training, and most have experienced conflict from the front lines. Still, beyond their direct participation in *jihad*, these fighters also see it as their duty to indoctrinate others. They often return from the battlefield equipped with videos, contacts, and strategies for recruiting new members.

For this reason, special attention should be paid to the processes by which potential jihadists organize, recruit, indoctrinate, and radicalize. Only with sufficient attention devoted to this phenomenon and with consensus in the community – among security services, state institutions at the local and higher levels, and civil society organizations – can we claim to have started addressing this problem. If we can understand and recognize the ways youth are encouraged and trained to commit terrorist acts, we can develop the skills required to fight these efforts effectively.

### Stages of Radicalization

No one is born a terrorist, and there are no universal forces that compel someone to become a likely perpetrator of terrorism. Terrorists are formed in a complex process of radicalization that is comprised of several phases that may vary in length and are not necessarily universal, the factors of which cannot be viewed in isolation. Indeed, it is the combination and interplay of these various factors that lead to radicalization; and in the case of Muslims from the Balkans, this has inspired participation in the Syrian conflict.

Before considering the individual stages of the radicalization process, it should be noted that even among those who are radicalized, a very small number actually become perpetrators of violence. It is also important to discern between legitimate and terrorist forces in Syria, to avoid a false equivalence between rebels fighting the Assad regime and terrorist actors linked to global terrorist networks. According to some reports, Muslims from the Balkans are recruited to the battlefield by these networks, and not always on the same side; with some fighting for the Islamic State

and others fighting for Jabhat-al-Nusra – meaning that they belong to parties in an open conflict, which could have future security implications in the region.<sup>14</sup>

For Serbian recruits, the first stage of radicalization – as one might expect – sets the stage for the process that follows, and may thus be labeled a preliminary phase. Whether this phase is the inception of a radicalization process is related to the personality and social background of the persons being targeted for radicalization. A number of young imams from the region have been educated and trained to preach a radical ideology, and they work to draw recruits in. This, along with individualized factors, such as a search for or crisis of identity, family tragedy, real or perceived discrimination, and poverty, all contribute to the susceptibility of individuals to the process of radicalization.

In the next stage, religion truly comes into focus. Depending on the previous attitude a recruit held toward religion, the changes that occur in this phase can manifest in different ways. A person may shift from a more secular worldview to embracing Islam as a framework for social regulation; they may move from a more moderate to a radical interpretation of Islam; or they may undergo a religious conversion from another faith. (Globally, Islam currently has the largest number of religious converts, but this phenomenon is less frequent in the Balkans.) At this stage of the radicalization process, individuals begin to feel ownership of a new ideology and are compelled to take part in solving the problems of Muslims worldwide.

Individuals in the third phase of the radicalization process attract the most attention because it is at this point that they may withdraw from or completely break from relationships that were established in their previous life. It is also at this stage that they try to more deeply understand the essence of radical Islamic teachings. Since the religious education of a recruit is often minimal before this exposure, many have insufficient tools to think critically about these teachings and thus tend to embrace simplified interpretations as absolute truth. It is at this point that a person becomes particularly vulnerable to manipulation. The ideologues who indoctrinate recruits become a source from whom they seek answers to all their dilemmas, and guidance is often provided in a way that is very subtle yet suggestive. At this stage, recruits are given specific tasks within the group, and radicalized individuals demonstrate a readiness to undertake activities for “a higher cause.” They feel the need to prove

14 O.Andonov, R. Mikac and K.Mamić, “Fenomen stranih boraca u Siriji i možebitne posljedice za Europu,” *Međunarodne studije* 14, no. 1 (2014): 43-63.

their beliefs to others, mainly by way of their physical appearance, attire, habits, and behavior. This is often a conflictive period and is considered quite crucial because, if adequately approached – with a thorough and reasoned discussion and mutual respect – the radicalization of an individual may be stopped here. On the other hand, any categorical rejection of the newly adopted attitudes of such an individual may lead them to feel an even greater alienation and push them closer to other radicalized individuals, whom they see as like-minded.

If a recruit is sufficiently motivated to participate in *jihad* – jihad being the only armed component of this complex phenomenon – these persons undergo a kind of military training, the quality and quantity of which varies. Some self-isolated communities of radical Muslims in the Balkans are located in such remote areas that this training occurs with little to no interference. Further, easy access to resources left behind after the war and the poor ability of authorities to control such resources means that these camps may potentially serve recruits beyond local and regional borders. Indeed, some well-known terrorists from outside the region have spent time in this region prior to perpetrating terrorism.<sup>15</sup>

The last phase of the radicalization process comprises the preparation, planning, and execution of violence, which in the case of foreign fighters implies departure to and participation in the Syrian conflict. Their preparation primarily involves the acquisition of materials and financing, including of equipment that can be transported without raising the suspicion of authorities. This also requires obtaining necessary documents and connecting with intermediaries who facilitate transport, reception in the Middle East, and accommodation at a fighter's final destination. Having committed to jihad, these fighters are ready to gain the status of *shahid* (martyr). Often, their use of propaganda is intensified and a feeling of specialness is reinforced among them, because they view their participation as a battle on the path to salvation.

15 Adna Zukanović-Zilić, "Terorista iz Pariza snimljen kako se zabavlja u izbjegličkom kampu u Srbiji," Source Video Portal, November 16, 2015, <http://source.ba/clanak/Adna/385264/Terorista-iz-Pariza-snimljen-kako-se-zabavlja-u-izbjegličkom-kampu-u-Srbiji> (accessed March 20, 2017); "Srbija može biti meta džihadista: Beograd je najugroženiji od napada Islamske države!" *Telegraf*, November 15, 2015.

## Moving Forward

In the period ahead of us, we, as individuals and societies, must seek ways to overcome the challenges posed by radical ideologies, including *takfirism*. It appears that in the near future, we face a growing “octopus” of extremism, the tentacles of which are spreading not only across the Western Balkans but also Europe and the world. The consequences of this may be far-reaching, but despite many questions, and more all the time, there are few concrete, clear, and comprehensive solutions to confront this problem. Further, globalization and economic devastation in Serbia, along with an educational system that remains unresponsive to the demands of our time and sensationalized media that report rather superficially, all very much benefit the aims of extremists. It remains to be seen how and to what extent Serbia will be a part of the global turmoil that has resulted from violent extremism and terrorism.

Although not every Serbian citizen is ready to devote themselves to addressing this issue, even the beginning of a public discussion on the topic leads us closer to finding solutions. A hopeful sign is the growing interest in tackling the problem of extremism through a multidisciplinary approach, phase by phase, with a full appreciation that human lives are at stake.<sup>16</sup> In this model, the prevention of radicalization into violence and the demystification of radical ideologies will become a priority, with security systems operating at the secondary level. Establishing a dialogue between Islam and other religions, but above all, between people with various conceptions of life and differing worldviews, is the only chance for humanity.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge some of the young men who have gone to Syria and will not return. These youth bought into a fairytale about “true faith,” “just cause,” and “the right way.” Perhaps they could have become doctors, engineers, lawyers, car mechanics, plumbers, or farmers. Maybe they were good sons and could have become husbands and fathers. Instead, they are tragic examples – victims, if you will – of successful radicalization. We must now do all we can to deconstruct the process that pushed them down that road, and prevent other potential, innocent victims of radicalization from following their lead. This is a question of broad social importance, and it must be dealt with in different segments of society and examined from different angles. It is important that we are not only reactive, but that we treat

16 See: Stevan Stevčić, “Генеза Радикалног Исламизма на Балкану,” *ТЕМЕ* XL, no.2 (2016): 613-626.

the problem of radicalization holistically, recognizing the complexity and layers of radicalization that may occur in young people.

Establishing a space for permanent dialogue, whether formal or informal, or a multi-disciplinary body or network of experts to deal with topics related to radicalism would be wise. Any such body should include representatives of relevant state institutions, especially those dealing with security, but also from the educational system, the academic community, religious communities, and civil society. A lack of dialogue and inaction as far as solutions have, after all, contributed to the emergence of extremism, and not just in Sandžak and in Serbia, but globally. It is clear that this problem has no ready-made solutions, but we must seek them, especially by finding opportunities for young people who have been pushed to the margins of society to strengthen their self-confidence and sense of belonging.

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## SLOVENIA

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### From Conversion to Jihad: Contemporary Janissaries – A Slovenian Case Study

by Simona Hrastnik Čuček<sup>1</sup>

As the Syrian crisis has escalated, Slovenia – like a number of European countries – has faced the departure of volunteers for Middle Eastern battlefields. There has been a growing interest among young members of local radical Salafi associations to engage in jihad, which compelled the first two such departures of young men, both converts, in the summer of 2013. They were followed by a third in October of that same year. The radicalization of these young men occurred very quickly, with less than a year passing between their conversion to Islam and their departures for foreign conflict zones.

These cases serve as proof that the radicalization process can be expedited by aggressive religious propaganda, particularly that viewed on the Internet, which keeps adherents up-to-date on and personally invested in the situation in Syria and Iraq. The Internet is also the platform of choice for extremist activities of almost any type that address people in their local languages, as part of an effort to spread propaganda.

Slovenia's first converts have opened the proverbial Pandora's Box by leaving for Syria and joining ISIL, and new departures of Slovenian citizens can't be ruled out in the future. The radicalization process in Slovenia is unique due to the very high percentage of converts among the most radicalized individuals – indeed, *all* Slovenian jihadists have been converts from outside Islam. The participation of converts in ISIL operations may provide attractive propaganda material for ISIL media campaigns, but the loss to Slovenian society is considerable, as these young boys and men are essentially stolen from their families, communities, and cultures, just as the Janissaries were one hundred years ago during the Ottoman invasion of the Balkans.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, it is imperative that a strategy is developed to identify those

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2 The Janissaries (Turkish: *yeniçeri*, meaning "new soldier") were elite infantry that formed the Sultan's household troops and bodyguards. The force, created by Sultan Murad I in 1383, began as an elite corps of slaves recruited from among young Christian boys and became famous for an internal cohesion cemented by strict discipline and order. The Janissaries were gathered through the *devşirme* system, whereby non-Muslim boys, notably Anatolian and Balkan Christians, were enslaved. In the early days, all Christians were enrolled indiscriminately; later, those from Albania, Bosnia, and Bulgaria were preferred.

at risk of radicalization, or in the midst of the radicalization process (changes in behavior, social isolation, changes in appearance, etc.), and that awareness among citizens is raised.

### **A Historical Overview of Islam and Muslims in Slovenia**

The Republic of Slovenia – one of the smallest ex-Yugoslav states – has always been religiously homogenous and mostly Catholic. After declaring independence from Yugoslavia, the country adopted a new constitution that separated state and religion, and ensured freedom of religion and the equal status of all religious communities. Thereby, the Islamic Community (IC) in Slovenia (officially formed by declaration on December 18, 1994 and subordinated to the IC in Sarajevo),<sup>3</sup> has the same rights as other religious communities in the country. And according to the 2002 census, the IC is the second largest religious community in Slovenia, accounting for 2.4% of all religious citizens (47,488), primarily people of Bosniak, Albanian, Macedonian, or Arab origin. According to statute, the IC in Slovenia operates on the basis of the Qur'an, the Ehli Sünnet tradition, and Hanafi *fiqh*.<sup>4</sup>

3 The official history of the IC in Slovenia goes back to 1962, when a small group of Muslims organized group prayers and, as their numbers increased, formed a committee that was registered in 1967. But the IC in Slovenia has actually existed for over 100 years, from when Islam was officially recognized by the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1912.

4 In the Balkans, many Islamic terms have been passed down in the Turkish, not Arabic, form; the term "Sünnet" is the Turkish equivalent of "Sunnah." There are four *fiqh*, or schools of thought, in Sunni Islam, and the Hanafi school has the largest number of followers.

**Table 1: Ethno-national affiliation of Muslims in Slovenia, 2002**

Ethno-national affiliation	Total in Slovenia	Those who select Islam as their faith	Share within those who select Islam (%)
Bosniak <sup>5</sup>	21,542	19,923	42.0
Muslim	10,467	9,328	19.6
Bosnian	8,062	5,724	12.0
Albanian	6,168	5,237	11.0
Slovenian	1,631,363	2,804	6.0
Ethno-nationally undeclared, Regionally declared, Refused to reply, Unknown	188,465	1,861	4.0
Other affiliations <sup>6</sup>	94,705	1,732	3.6
Roma	3,246	868	1.8
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>1,964,036</b>	<b>47,488</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Source: Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia, *Population, Households and Housing Census of 2002*.<sup>6</sup>

The history of Islam and Muslims in Slovenia can be divided into four eras.<sup>7</sup> The first was in the sixteenth century, when the Ottoman Empire acquired certain parts of Slovenian territory. This period, often reflected in literature and art, powerfully impacted the historical memory of Slovenians, and Turkish incursions into Slovenian territory resulted in a national mythology of deep trauma that later manifested in attitudes toward Islam and Muslims.<sup>8</sup> An extensive body of Slovenian literature includes novels, tales, and poetry about the “olden days” when our Slovenian ancestors were continuously under threat from “the Turks,” and in which Muslims have been routinely portrayed as vicious and bloodthirsty savages.<sup>9</sup> Even today, many Slovenes associate Turkish incursions with the abduction of young Slovenian boys,

5 In 1994, the constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina introduced the term Bosniak (*Bošnjak*) in order to signify Muslim identity as a national category (i.e. residents of Bosnia and Herzegovina). The term was consequently also used in the 2002 Slovenian Census as an ethno-national category, though “Bosnian” and “Muslim” also remain.

6 These include ethno-national affiliations such as Croatian, Montenegrin, and Hungarian, that represent only a very small share of citizens identifying as Muslim.

7 “O Islamski skupnosti v Sloveniji,” O Nas, Islamska skupnost v Republiki Sloveniji, <http://www.islamska-skupnost.si/o-islamski-skupnosti-v-sloveniji> (accessed August 20, 2016).

8 The earliest Turkish incursions into Slovenia were particularly violent and merciless. The Turks burned entire villages, kidnapped young boys to be Janissaries, and enslaved many others. Though these incursions can hardly be attributed to the teachings of Islam, they nonetheless negatively impacted public opinion toward Islam in Slovenia. See: Anja Zalta, “Muslims in Slovenia,” *Islamic Studies* 44, no. 1 (2005):93-112.

9 One of the most influential tales that has really settled into the hearts of Slovene readers is a novel by Josip Jurčič (1844-1881) entitled *Jurij Kozjak, Slovenski Janičar* [Slovene Janissary], in which he wrote very disapprovingly about Islam. The novel is still compulsory primary school reading in Slovenia. See: Zalta.

raised by the Turks to become Janissaries. Intolerance toward Muslims in Slovenia therefore stems from negative stereotypes that are included even in school curricula and are reproduced by the media.<sup>10</sup>

The second era of this history was marked by the Austro-Hungarian annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1878, when a significant number of Bosnian Muslims, who lived in the same empire as Slovenians, became members of the European cultural class for the first time.<sup>11</sup> The Yugoslav period marked the third era; and the fourth is ongoing, beginning with the 1991 independence of the Republic of Slovenia. It is impossible to understand the status of Islam and Muslims in Slovenia without accounting for all of these eras and for the socio-historical elements associated with each of them. Some argue that it is the intersectionality of ethno-national and religious prejudice that has led to negative attitudes in Slovenia toward Muslims as “others,” but in fact, Muslims in Slovenia have always been ethnicized – first as Turks and more recently as Bosnians.<sup>12</sup>

The Austro-Hungarian period is especially important as it relates to Muslims in the Western Balkans, who were confronted with Christian European culture for the first time – which was until then unknown to them and due to which they experienced some degree of culture shock.<sup>13</sup> During World War I, young boys from Bosnia and Herzegovina fought in modern day Slovenian territory; among them, many Muslims who were buried in Slovenia. These soldiers built the first mosque in Slovenia (in Log pod Mangartom), which has since been destroyed.

10 Veronika Bajt, “Muslims in Slovenia: Between Tolerance and Discrimination,” *Revija za sociologiju* XXXIX, no. 4 (2008): 221-234.

11 Muslim authors contributed many literary and scientific works in Bosnian, Turkish, and German, raising many questions and dilemmas of the times. Later, during World War I, they defended common European values and freedom, fighting and dying as part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (particularly on the Isonzo/Soča front).

12 Bajt.

13 Austro-Hungarian administrators frequently voiced the hope that Bosnia and Herzegovina would become a contemporary European society; yet, their policies served only to append the outward manifestations of modernity to a traditional (Ottoman) society. See: Tomislav Kraljačić, *Kalajev režim u Bosni i Hercegovini (1882-1903)* (Sarajevo: Veselin Masleša, 1987).

**Figure 1: Mosque in Log pod Mangartom, torn down after World War I<sup>14</sup>**



The largest number of Muslim immigrants to Slovenia arrived after World War II for economic reasons, especially from the Una-Sana, Banja Luka, and Tuzla cantons in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and later also from Sandžak in Serbia. Toward the end of the 1960s, ethnically Albanian Muslims from Macedonia and Kosovo also started to migrate to Slovenia in higher numbers. In communist Yugoslavia (of which the Republic of Slovenia was an integral part), religious communities were not allowed to develop, and though freedom of conscience and religion were recognized at the formal and legal levels, communist authorities (particularly in early post-war Yugoslavia) strictly controlled religious activity in both the public and private spheres. Among Muslims, this negation of their rights has influenced their religious identity to this day; and in Slovenia, some Muslims still do not want to declare their religion to state authorities.<sup>15</sup>

### **Seeds of Radicalism and the Radicalization Process**

The emergence and propagation of radical Islamist ideas in the Western Balkan has been a consequence of the arrival of large numbers of Muslim volunteer fighters (mujahideen) during the wars of the 1990s, as well as the presence of certain nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), which started aggressive campaigns of religious proselytism in a process that can be viewed as a re-Islamization of the

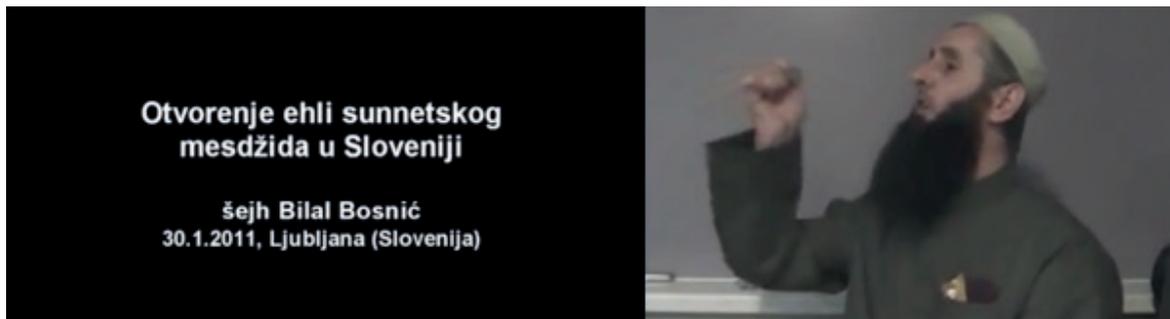
14 See: Samir Bešić, "Log Pod Mangartom," Bošnjaci.net, June 26, 2009, <http://www.bosnjaci.net/prilog.php?pid=34558> (accessed March 20, 2017).

15 An increase in the number of Muslims between the 1991 (29,361) and 2002 (47,488) censuses is thought to result from the fact that many Muslims did not declare themselves as such in the 1991 Census. And, according to estimates of the Islamic Community, there are even Muslims who did not declare their religion in the 2002 Census; thus, an increase in their number is expected in the next census. Officials believe that increased reporting is due to the more democratic atmosphere in which the 2002 Census was conducted, compared to 1991.

Balkans.<sup>16</sup> These mujahideen and NGOs have now been joined by local organizations, among which Active Islamic Youth (*Aktivan Islamska Omladina*) was the first, in spreading radical ideology.

Following this model, Western Europe has begun to see the creation of a number of radical *jamaats*, or unofficial congregations, run by individuals originating from the Western Balkans who adhere to some variation of Salafism (ranging from its moderate version, i.e. political Salafism, to Salafi-jihadism, to the most radical Salafi-takfirist movement). Salafism is gaining strength in Slovenia as it is in other European countries with a large populations originating from the former Yugoslavia, and Slovenia has become a popular gathering point for leading Salafi preachers from the Western Balkans.

**Figure 2: The opening of a Salafist association in Slovenia, featuring prominent ideologue Bilal Bosnić<sup>17</sup>**



With the appearance of Salafism in Slovenia over the last decade, Slovenian society has been confronted by the accelerated radicalization of certain groups, especially second- and third-generation Muslims with family ties to the Western Balkans and marginalized people like the Roma, as well as a surprisingly high number of young converts from outside of Islam.<sup>18</sup> Vulnerable groups are targeted by the most radical Salafi ideologues from the broader region, who promote extreme violence. The efforts of these ideologues are focused on quickly converting young people to

16 The prevailing form of Islam in the Western Balkans is a Sunni Islam that developed its own unique characteristics during a century-long isolation from Islamic centers in the Arab world.

17 This image was clipped from a video that was posted online but which is no longer accessible.

18 A lack of research on the topic of radicalization in Slovenian society has led to a lack of awareness of the potential dangers of radicalization into violent extremism. There is also a complete absence of public discourse on the issue.

militant Salafism; and those with no previous knowledge of religion are among the easiest to swiftly radicalize.<sup>19</sup>

Social networks play an important role in all phases of the radicalization process, and in the activities that represent the final stage of radicalization, such as departure for foreign battlefields. Indeed, the accessibility these networks allow has considerably shortened the radicalization process, as radicalizing texts are available in different languages and real-time transmissions from the main theaters of conflict allow would-be fighters to engage with their brothers on the battlefield even before departing for Syria or Iraq. Moreover, contemporary societies are increasingly challenged by the reality that individuals can *self*-radicalize via the Internet; which frequently leads to eventual contact with extremist/terrorist groups.

Radicalization in Slovenia is achieved mostly through online engagement (on social media), *dawah* (proselytism), and religious lectures organized by local Salafist associations. Once people are attracted by these means, a period of in-depth indoctrination, often combined with physical training, follows.<sup>20</sup> In general, the radicalization process among Slovenian adherents of Salafism, including among converts to Islam, resembles the model put forth by the US National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC), which reflects a dynamic process involving various interacting factors that influence each individual. That model envisions a core path – from radicalization to mobilization to action – with factors along the way that inhibit or catalyze radicalization. This framework emphasizes that radicalization is a dynamic, layered process.<sup>21</sup>

The main forces of radicalization in Slovenia are individuals who are highly radicalized themselves and have close relationships with other adherents abroad, and with extremist groups and NGOs. For the most part, radicalization in Slovenia takes place mainly in private settings – in families, at Salafist associations, in certain work environments, at specialized sports clubs, etc. – but, increasingly, radicalism is on display in public spaces as well. Still, it is the virtual world (the Internet and social media) that remains

19 While individual terrorists and their organizations have been subject to detailed analysis, far less is known about the vulnerability of Muslims and non-Muslims to recruitment in more general terms. Without this, no real profile exists and it remains unclear who among the larger population of potential recruits has the characteristics that mark them as the small group of highly-motivated people willing to sacrifice their own lives in a terrorist cause.

20 It is typical of radical Salafists to train in martial arts and engage in other recreational activities that resemble standard military drills – obstacle courses, weight lifting, etc.

21 See: National Counterterrorism Center, "(U/FOUO) Countering Violent Extremism: A Guide for Practitioners and Analysts," May 2014, 5. Available at: <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/1657824-cve-guide.html> (accessed March 20, 2017).

the principal tool for propagating aggressive religious ideology. Urban environments also appear to crucially influence radicalization in Slovenia, where the main centers of religious extremism are in the largest cities of Ljubljana, Jesenice, and Koper.

### From Conversion to Jihad

It has been clear from the first departures of foreign fighters to Syria that it would become a popular and frequent destination for adherents of Salafism from the Western Balkans. At the beginning, volunteer fighters felt obliged to help their fellow Muslims in need, especially since Syrian Muslims had participated on the Bosnian Muslim side during the war in BiH. Later, after the emergence of ISIL, a majority of foreign fighters from the region joined this group, along with Al Nusra, and for the very first time Slovenia was faced with the departure of its citizens to Syria. In this way, Slovenia has been added to the map of global jihad; and with the proclamation of the “Islamic caliphate,” the fire of Muslim extremism has been stoked and its influence on volunteers from Europe and elsewhere to join the jihad has grown.

**Table 2: Slovenian and Slovenian-born Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq**

Country of departure	Slovenian citizens (C); Slovenian born non-citizens (B) <sup>22</sup>	Returned	Killed	Still in conflict zone
Slovenia	3 (C)	2	1	0
Other European country	3 (B)	0	1	2

Source: Vlado Azinović and Muhamed Jusić, *The New Lure of the Syrian War: The Foreign Fighters' Bosnian Contingent* (Sarajevo: Atlantic Initiative, 2016).

It must be noted that, in the broader context of European departures to Syria, Slovenia is an exception as far as the structure and profile of its foreign fighters. All three were converts, and all three were highly stereotypically Western – born, raised, and educated in Slovenia, with Catholic backgrounds, blond hair, and blue eyes.<sup>23</sup> Further, these three cases are the only confirmed cases of Slovenian citizen foreign fighters.

Converts are always valuable to the propaganda aims of extremist religious groups, and radical Salafi preachers in the Western Balkans often take converts with them

22 The three individuals born in Slovenia but not Slovenian citizens left for Syria from BiH, Austria, and Germany.

23 There are some studies on converts in other European contexts, but few are relevant to Slovenia, where all converts came from Catholicism.

on their tours of the *jamaats* they have established in Europe. ISIL, of course, attracts and accepts all Salafists, but it also particularly recruits recent converts or works to convert them. In the case of Slovenia's three converted foreign fighters, their radicalization was extremely swift, lasting less than a year. Primarily, they were radicalized in small group settings, with other young members of local Salafist associations. Soon, they also established contact with an influential preacher from the region and paid several visits to isolated communities of Salafists in BiH.<sup>24</sup> One of these converts was prone to violence in the past and also participated in the war in Bosnia, but the other two had never engaged in violent activities before.

After the initial establishment of contact with radical influences, the stages of radicalization for these converts were: rapid indoctrination, acceptance of radical ideology, sudden lifestyle shifts, resignation from their jobs, selling of property, and withdrawing socially, before finally departing for jihad. Due to their extremely rapid radicalization and the fact that they did not stand out as radicalized in the period before their departure, their choice to leave for Syria was a surprise to everybody who knew them. They all chose a route to Syria via BiH and Turkey, with the help of a regional logistics network, and when they entered Syria, joined local jihadist groups with other foreign fighters. It is likely they financed their own way to Syria, but it is obvious they were in contact with prominent Salafists from the area, who were likely involved in organizing their travel.

Two of Slovenia's foreign fighters returned to Slovenia the same way they departed, via Turkey; while the third, a young engineer, was killed in Syria. Already deeply radicalized before their departure, the two returnees became even more arrogant and intolerant as they re-entered Slovenian society, which they expressed on social media, within Salafi circles, and even to bystanders. Since then, both appear to have calmed their rhetoric and are trying to maintain low profiles, though they continue to practice Salafism. In the spring of 2016, Slovenian police arrested one of them, accused of terrorism in Italy, on a European arrest warrant.<sup>25</sup> Allegedly, he was recruiting European volunteers for

24 As a result of a Bosnian counterterrorism operation known as Damascus, Bosnian Salafi leader Bilal Bosnić was arrested for his role in the financing, organizing, and recruiting of fighters for the Syrian and Iraqi battlefields; and connections to Slovenian fighters were made. For a summary in English, see: Elvira M. Jukic, "Longer Detention of Bosnia Terror Suspect Sought," *Balkan Insight*, October 2, 2014, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/bosnian-prosecutor-demands-detention-or-alleged-terrorists-1> (accessed August 20, 2016).

25 The international arrest warrant was issued by Italian authorities based on an investigation by special military police from Padova, coordinated by the Office of the Prosecutor from Venice, that was initiated in 2013 to investigate the actions of the Bosnian imam Bilal Bosnić, who was convicted in BiH for terrorist activity.

participation in the conflict in Syria. He was extradited to Italy, where he repented in prison and has cooperated with police and investigators, and now awaits trial.

The most interesting and tragic case is that of the young Slovenian convert who was killed. After his death, a local tabloid published several articles, explaining that this young man “converted a year ago, and before that was a Catholic who took the sacraments, and even, at a young age, an altar boy.” This case illustrates the power of ideology and how difficult it can be to find effective approaches to countering the rapid radicalization process promoted by Salafists. The departure of this young engineer, Jusuf (he took this Muslim name after conversion), was a shock to Slovenian society, and to his closest friends and family. People close to him describe him as a calm and totally non-violent man; but after converting and deciding to leave for Syria, he broke ties with everyone in his previous social circles. Among the possible triggers or push factors in his conversion and rapid radicalization are health problems and misfortunes in love. In any case, for Jusuf, his radicalization was linked to a local Salafist association that may have provided him a sense of belonging and utility that led, in the spring of 2014, to his distinction as the first Slovenian *shahid*.

## Conclusions

Despite the sentiment that young people are the world’s greatest treasure, this principle is being lost in modern Western societies and youth increasingly face unconstrained influences of many kinds; some of which use radical ideologies and persuasive rhetoric to pull youth toward extremism. Over the last few decades in Europe, it seems that Salafists have been most successful in this respect, attracting more and more young people of different backgrounds to Salafism. Some of these youth are then radicalized to the degree that they opt to depart to foreign battlefields, where they face and engage in extreme violence as part of groups like ISIL. In Slovenia, these young people are mostly converts to Salafism that can be compared to the elite Ottoman infantry units made up of Janissaries – boys and men stolen from their families and communities during the Ottoman invasion of the Balkans.

The reasons for converting to a radical form of Islam and taking part in violent jihad vary from person to person.<sup>26</sup> So, it is impossible to generalize about who is likely to be converted or to predict the activities of returnees from the foreign war theater

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26 There are many diverse “pathways” to radicalization and it is not a “one-way street.” Individuals and groups can radicalize or de-radicalize because of a variety of factors.

once they return home. But generally speaking, the Slovenian case has shown that some volunteers who decide to join the fight in Syria undergo a very rapid radicalization, as a consequence of their contact with radical groups and aggressive Salafist propaganda on the Internet.

Conversions to Islam in Slovenia are on the rise among young Slovenes with Catholic backgrounds, second- or third-generation Muslims who never practiced religion in their families, and segregated communities of Roma. In most cases, these converts enter Islam through radical *jamaats* and not through the official Islamic Community, which has repeatedly distanced itself from radical rhetoric. Thus, these converts are frequently more radical and more eager to prove their commitment to Islam than new Muslims who enter the religion via mainstream institutions.

Slovenian authorities are aware of the complexities of the domestic security situation given the radicalization into violence of several Slovenian citizens, and the government is therefore the prime mover of a special Western Balkan Counterterrorist Initiative (WBCI), which offers a framework for activities aimed at preventing radicalization that leads to extreme violence and terrorism. The following recommendations emphasize key elements:

- In the context of violent radicalization, special attention should especially be paid to raising awareness among the broader community about the dangers of radical rhetoric, to encouraging prevention programs (particularly educationally-based programs and partnerships between civil society and governance), and to identifying risk indicators.
- Along with prevention programs, it is crucial that a clear and credible counternarrative is broadcast in online spaces, using the history and facts of Islam to argue against radical ideology and de-glamorize violent jihadism.
- And, finally, all countries faced with the foreign fighter phenomenon must enforce the law. There is still room to improve the effectiveness of administrative measures and to prosecute individuals who join terrorist groups more severely on the basis of existing legislation. To this end, strengthening and maintaining a strong sense of legitimacy and fairness within the judicial system is also very important.

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