

Radicalization Among Muslim Communities in the Balkans: Trends and Issues

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**Senate Committee on Foreign Relations
Subcommittee on Europe and Regional Security Cooperation**

**Hearing on:
Southeast Europe: Strengthening Democracy and Countering Malign Foreign Influence
June 14, 2017**

Introduction: Defining the problem in a historical and political context

Radicalization is understood as a process by which an individual or group comes to adopt increasingly extreme political, social, or religious ideas that reject or undermine the status quo in a society in terms of existing ideas, norms and practices. By this definition, what is considered quite normal in one society can be considered radical in another. Dress code and legal restrictions for women in Saudi Arabia would be a symbol of radicalization in Balkan societies, where traditionally European legal and dress codes apply. Radicalization therefore can take different forms, is not always violent, and does not necessarily serve a particular political goal. In the Balkans it has manifested itself in a diverse array of conservative Islamic movements, usually referred to as Salafis, that are far from being a homogenous group in their orientation or aims. While the majority of these groups are non-violent, several are considered a potential security threat by government agencies and some of them have members turned foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq or have plotted terrorist attacks at home.

Radicalization of Muslims in the Balkans has to be understood within the context of the recent history of armed conflicts in the 1990s, which opened a window for outside proselytizing influences on Muslim communities. It did so in two ways. First, the inflow of the foreign Mujahideen from the battlefields of Afghanistan introduced various ideologies initially foreign to the Balkans, a trend that continued in the post-conflict era through foreign (or foreign-educated) clerics, NGOs and Internet-based platforms. Secondly, the extreme form of violence used against Muslims during the conflicts of the 1990s, including the campaigns of ethnic cleansing and genocide, have colored the postwar perceptions of the Muslim population, in some cases creating a fertile ground for the recruitment into radical beliefs and practice of Islam. While all ethnic groups suffered losses, Muslim communities in Bosnia and Kosovo were disproportionately affected by campaigns of ethnic cleansing, with the highest numbers of civilian casualties.¹ Given that the majority of Muslims in the prewar era were not deeply religious, the notion that “their lack of true belief was to blame for ethnic cleansing and genocide” is often used by radical clerics to strengthen their recruitment narrative in the Balkans.

¹ In Bosnia, 64,000 Muslims were killed, out of which 33,000 were civilians). The Srebrenica genocide, in which over 7,000 Muslim men and boys were killed and about 20,000 more expelled from the area, was the worst episode of mass murder in post-WWII European history. Over 600 mosques were destroyed in Bosnia between 1992–1995.

Radicalization: Trends and issues

Generally speaking, we can distinguish between two forms of radicalization taking place among Muslim communities in the Balkans:

- *Non-violent radicalization, which some scholars refer to as “radicalization of belief and behavior.”*² Since the Balkan wars in the 1990s, a small percentage of Muslims in the region have, via external influences, adopted a very conservative and rigid interpretation and practice of Islam often seen in Salafi tradition, built on denial of local traditions and practices, and contradicting local laws on family, gender equality and education.³ Although most of the “converts” in this category are non-violent, the spread of the Salafi ideology introduces additional tensions in the already fragile and socially divided societies of the Western Balkans. Furthermore, the groups spreading the ideology are anti-pluralist in their orientation and often promote a very rigid and uncompromising Muslim identity, based on transnational rather than local allegiances. Combined with other push factors, this disconnect from local identity and traditions may play a determinant role in motivating foreign fighters to Iraq and Syria.

- *Radicalization linked to violence* has been observed among a small fraction of the population, whether through participation in terrorist attacks at home or abroad, or as combatants in Syria and Iraq. In the Bosnian context, at least 1/3 of foreign fighters had prior criminal backgrounds, and represent about 1% of those already considered radicalized.⁴ While one should not underestimate the threat emanating from violent extremists, it is important to keep in mind that these groups represent a small percentage of the total Muslim population. There are approx. 6.4 million Muslims spread around the territory of Bosnia (approx. 1.9 million), Kosovo (approx. 1.7 million), Albania (approx. 1.7 million) Macedonia (approx. 809,000) and Serbia (approx. 229,000). It is estimated that between 800–1000 individuals from these six states have gone to Syria and Iraq between 2012–2016. This represents approximately 0.015% of the total Muslim population of the countries covered. If we compare foreign fighters as a percentage of the total Muslim population rather than per capita of the entire population, then the Muslim population in the Balkans produces a smaller percentage of foreign fighters (0.011%–0.018%) than, for example, France (0.04%). In comparison to Belgium, an

² Edina Becirevic. *Salafism vs. Moderate Islam: A Rhetorical Fight for the Hearts and the Minds of Bosnian Muslims*. Atlantic Initiative, 2016

³ Ibid.

⁴ ISIS propaganda in the Balkans has targeted criminal individuals with tailor-made messages promising redemption from their sins.

average Bosnian Muslim is 4.7 times less likely to become a foreign fighter than is an average Belgian Muslim.⁵

Yet as even a small number of well-organized individuals can implement a devastating attack, the risk of terrorism in the Balkans should not be underestimated. Given the loss of ISIS territory in Syria as well as more effective monitoring by local security agencies, no departures to Syria and Iraq from the region have been documented in 2016.⁶ Instead, the ISIS propaganda arm has called on its Balkan followers to carry out attacks at home – a reason for more vigilance. Regional experts expect no foreign fighters to return to the Balkans from those still remaining in Syria.⁷

To date, security agencies in the region have been able to contain the threat relatively well, taking into account the general weakness of state institutions in the region. A number of planned terrorist attacks were thwarted; a number of returnees from Syria and Iraq were arrested and charged and many more were prevented from leaving in the first place.⁸ Each country in the region has adopted a counterterrorism strategy, criminalized the recruitment and participation in conflicts abroad, and issued sentencing guidelines, which range from 5 to 15 years of imprisonment, and in the case of Kosovo, potential loss of citizenship.⁹ In Bosnia, 42 individuals have been sentenced so far to 150 combined years for acts of terrorism, recruitment of foreign fighters and departure to Syria.¹⁰

5 Vlado Azinovic, Ed. "Between Salvation and Terror: Radicalization and the Foreign Fighter Phenomenon in the Western Balkans." Atlantic Initiative, 05/25/2017

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 For a detailed discussion of Balkan countries' counterterrorism strategies and approaches see Vlado Azinovic, Ed. "Between Salvation and Terror: Radicalization and the Foreign Fighter Phenomenon in the Western Balkans." Atlantic Initiative, 05/25/2017

10 <https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/bih/za-terorizam-u-bih-do-danas-optuzene-42-osobe-izreceno-ukupno-150-godina-zatvora/170524029>

Push and pull factors

Several sociological and political phenomena have combined in the post-conflict period to compound the problem of radicalization. These include both “push” and “pull” factors. The first category occurring within the Balkans includes the postwar trauma, mistrust and prejudices among ethnic groups, broken and dysfunctional families, and mental health issues. As important are political and economic push factors, most notably unaccountable and corrupt governments, general lack of economic prospects and high youth unemployment. Combined, these factors have yielded significant segments of the population lacking any positive vision about their future and disillusioned with their political (and sometimes religious) leaders, whom they view as politically and morally corrupt. The external pull factors of radical ideology, proselytized by foreign or domestic clerics, NGOs, charities and radical internet platforms, are likely to be more effective among these segments of the population.

While there is no single explanation behind the trend of violent radicalization, regional experts have identified some patterns, such as preexisting criminal backgrounds, links to extremist Diaspora groups in the EU, unemployment, family problems, and mental health issues.¹¹

An important push factor in the Balkans is extremism and fear mongering by non-Muslim groups. Given the recent history in the Balkans, denial of war crimes, celebration of war criminals, and occasional incidents of violence will reinforce fears among Muslims that the experience of the 1990s may be repeated.¹² Besides radical nationalist groups who engage in military parades and commit acts of violence, there is also a proclivity of authoritarian politicians to use nationalism to distract from their failures in governance, further deepening the divisions in society and fueling the process of radicalization. Perhaps most vocal in this respect is the Bosnian Serb leader Milorad Dodik, whose exclusive nationalist discourse (positively correlated to the number of corruption cases pending against him) reinforces Muslim security concerns and perceptions of victimhood. It is precisely such perceptions that facilitate jihadist recruitment, as ISIS propaganda targeting the Balkans places the victimhood of Muslims in the 1990s at the center of their campaign. Similarly, some non-violent Salafis build their Muslim followings by pointing to continuing dangers of Serb aggression that will not disappear until Bosnian Muslims embrace “true Islam.”

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² The provocative acts which celebrate war criminals or acts of violence include opening of a student center named after Radovan Karadzic by the RS leader Milorad Dodik, parades by “Cetnik” battalions in Visegrad where about 3,000 Muslims were killed by Serb paramilitary brigades, and attacks on the ceremony of laying the groundstone for the reconstruction of a Ferhadija Mosque in Banja Luka.

Therefore, all extremist ideologies, whether Salafism, Jihadism, political manipulation of nationalism, and non-Muslim extremism, drive radicalization and can mobilize to violence. While “Islamist” ideologies act as a pull factors, the continued extremism by non-Muslims against Muslims operates as a push factor.

Structural problems and future trends:

1. Kleptocratic authoritarianism as the single most important domestic driver of future radicalization

Several structural issues, which foster radicalization in the Balkans need to be urgently addressed to keep this problem from spreading. Domestically, most of these issues can be traced back to one core problem: unaccountable rule by kleptocratic authoritarian leaders. While this problem is present in all states of Western Balkans, in states divided by ethnic lines it creates a particularly dangerous mix of authoritarianism and nationalism, as unaccountable rulers exploit nationalist discourse to cover up their failures in governance. This produces two mutually reinforcing trends unfolding in parallel: deepening of societal divisions and weakening of democratic institutions. Several examples of how the authoritarian elites increase the prospects of radicalization and cripple the capacity of government institutions to deal with the problem are worth highlighting:

1. Kleptocratic rulers siphon off public funds, cripple the economy and leave populations disillusioned and susceptible to extremist ideologies. Given that groups promoting radical ideologies fill not just spiritual gaps, but also gaps in health, social services and education, these groups are more likely to gain foothold in societies with weak economies and inadequate medical and social services.

2. The very institutions that are meant to be responsive to society and protect it from criminal and terrorist threats are being actively undermined by authoritarian leaders, who see them as threats to their own power. The law enforcement institutions in Bosnia were built up through considerable US and EU investment of political capital and funds, in part to fight terrorism in the aftermath of September 11, 2001.¹³ These agencies have so far been effective in containing the terrorist threats. However, as they also have jurisdiction over corruption and crime, they have been the object of attacks in places like the Republiks Srpska, in particular by President Milorad Dodik. In December 2015, the RS government unilaterally suspended cooperation with state-level judicial and law enforcement agencies and in 2016, Dodik declared that SIPA, the Bosnian version of the FBI which

¹³ Key institutions in Bosnia include the State Investigation and Protection Agency with jurisdiction to investigate terrorism, the BiH Prosecutors Office and the BiH Court with jurisdiction to prosecute and adjudicate such cases.

the US helped create, is no longer granted access to the RS territory. It was only due to a strong international reaction that he was forced to back away from these moves. The attacks on law enforcement institutions can be seen in the context of a decade long campaign by Dodik and his inner circle to undo reforms that were built up since 1996 with EU and US assistance, giving the extremely weak BiH government under Dayton a small number of additional competencies.

3. The same leaders prevent reconciliation by manipulating societal divisions in order to distract from failures in governance. In parallel, they engage in relentless branding of the opposition as national traitors. While the nationalisms promoted by VMRO-DMPNE leadership in Macedonia and Milorad Dodik in Bosnia are quite different (one is state centric, the other secessionist), in both cases Albanians or Bosniaks (predominantly Muslim groups) are often used to create the image of an enemy, a strategy feeding Muslim victimhood perceptions that may yield dangerous consequences. The recent attack on the Macedonian parliament is a case in point, where an organized mob was let into the parliament by VMRO MPs, attacking members of the opposition and the leader of an Albanian party, who barely survived his injuries. In Bosnia, Dodik has been denying war crimes, glorifying war criminals, calling for partition of the Bosnian state, thus feeding the Bosniak victim complex. In Serbia, 2017 presidential election campaign has been loaded with Kosovo-related provocative rhetoric and actions, the train- turned-nationalistic billboard being only one example. Furthermore, Bosniak and Albanian nationalisms tend to be reactive, sometimes misusing the narrative of victimhood and in the latter case, promoting the idea of greater Albania.

4. Finally, the authoritarian leaders actively undermine EU membership, currently the only external stabilizing factor in the region. Dodik as well as the VMRO-DMPNE in Macedonia have a long record of blocking EU-related reforms, dismissing EU integration as only one possible path among others (i.e. alliance with Russia), and opposing the NATO membership. Macedonia has just managed to form a new democratic government, in large part due to US diplomatic pressure. While the new government has immediately set the EU and NATO agenda as its priority, they will have to surmount a number of challenges, including the politicized administration and judiciary they have inherited from 11 years of authoritarian rule.

Given these trends, the threat that urgently needs to be addressed is the prospect of state failure in Bosnia, and possibly renewed large-scale violence in the Balkans. This would no doubt fuel radicalization among Muslim populations on a much more serious scale and could potentially attract mujahedeen after the loss of territory in Syria and Iraq.

Therefore the greatest threat to US interests is the continuation of radical politics embraced by corrupt politicians in the Balkans who employ divisive nationalist rhetoric to weaken the rule of law, state functionality and fragile agreements brokered under the tutelage of the US and the EU.

2. Foreign Influences: Saudi Arabia and Gulf

There are many media reports regarding the influence of Middle East based religious institutions and charities spreading a conservative and rigid interpretation of Islam in the Balkans and promoting social norms which run counter to local legislation and tradition. In these reports, the Gulf States, in particular Saudi Arabia, have in the past been singled out as key actors, financing new mosques, educating clerics who are then sent back to promote the Saudi version of Islam, and supporting NGOs and humanitarian organizations addressing social needs while spreading the faith. There is much anecdotal evidence of Gulf money being used to encourage Balkan Muslim communities to convert, leading to radicalization of belief and behavior.¹⁴ It is not easy to establish the exact extent to which Gulf States (rather than individual nationals of those states) have engaged in such activities. Saudi Arabia has rejected such claims repeatedly. More recently, Riyadh has underlined its determination to work with the US Government in fighting both terrorism and violent extremism. The Saudis can point to a number of deradicalization and counterterrorism measures that have been initiated by the Saudi government over the last decade. These provide a sense on how Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states can be engaged constructively in working against religious radicalism in the Balkans. The following initiatives are worth highlighting:

- In 2014, a number of anti-terror laws were passed, listing several organizations and groups as terrorist organizations
- Support for and joining jihadist organizations has been criminalized, and the authorities have cracked down on individuals supporting ISIS and AQ, be it financially, ideologically (in particular online support) or preparing to join jihadist groups. The number of convictions for such offenses have gone up.
- Creation of a Media Centre in the Royal Court including the Digital Extremism Observatory (DEO) which monitors online content and utilizes sophisticated software to engage in real time analysis of Jihadist social media content.
- Creation of the Global Center for Combatting Extremist Ideology which was opened during the visit of President Trump to Riyadh in May which has partly incorporated the DEO structure.

¹⁴ Edina Becirevic. *Salafism vs. Moderate Islam: A Rhetorical Fight for the Hearts and the Minds of Bosnian Muslims*. Atlantic Initiative, 2016

- Creation of a Center for Ideological Warfare at the Saudi Ministry of Defense
 - Establishment of the Islamic Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism (IMAFT) along with a multinational CT Center at the Alliance's HQ in Riyadh.

Critics of these efforts assert that these new developments lack substance and are part of a strategic communication campaign designed to highlight Saudi efforts while blaming other countries in the region for supporting radical groups. Taking the Saudis and other Gulf states at their word could open space for concrete initiatives to counter a) radical rhetoric of imams or individuals b) abandon efforts to proselytize an Islam incompatible with local traditions c) assist with digital counter-radicalization initiatives.

Policy recommendations

If we define U.S. interests as creating conditions that will strengthen resilience against radicalization in the Balkans, then these should be pursued through a two-pronged approach.

First, the US is well advised to invest political and diplomatic capital to counter politically motivated challenges to state structures, democratic institutions, and civil society.

Secondly, it should assist where it can to contain the further spread of radical ideas, including those promoted by extremists belonging to other national groups. Here, one should keep in mind that there are certain areas where America is not the best “frontline” messenger. An American touch to anti-extremism counter-narrative may in some cases be counterproductive. Some detailed ideas are outlined below:

1. Countering politically motivated challenges to state structures and democratic institutions

This requires U.S. and EU political engagement and the willingness to sanction political provocations against the state and radical rhetoric against other ethnic groups, civil society and opposition parties.

- In the whole of western Balkans the US should not be supporting individual actors, but defending democratic principles and institutions regardless of the party in power
- US and EU should address the post-war manipulation of nationalism and inter-communal fears in a more direct manner. Politicians should be called out for their behaviour (named and shamed) and the US and EU should be more consistent in promoting and defending their own values. Credible threat of sanctions is sometimes more useful than sanctions themselves, and these should be used by the US – the EU and IFIs should be encouraged to do the same.
- Specifically in Bosnia, the US should:
 - maintain strong focus on consolidating state (national) structures in context of EU integration and encourage the EU, IMF and World Bank to do the same.

- support retention of High Representative and EUFOR until significant improvement in functioning of state institutions and political rhetoric aimed at reconciliation
- insist on and support better cooperation between law enforcement agencies at all levels of government with state in coordinating role. Ensure that functioning institutions and agencies remain in place and that challenges to these institutions do not go unsanctioned.
- Keep the three international judges on the BiH Constitutional Court
- Support organisations and programs focused on reconciliation and countering nationalist narratives

2. *Containing the spread of radical ideology* requires acknowledging and engaging the large majority of moderate Muslims in the region.¹⁵ Building a counter-ideological narrative is crucial to prevent further spread of radical ideology. Rooting Bosnian Muslims in their local customs and traditions can strengthen resilience against external influences, such as Salafism. Moderate imams in Kosovo teach schoolchildren how to anticipate and build a counter-narrative to the arguments extremists may use to entice them. Similar projects should be encouraged elsewhere in the Balkans, constructively engaging local religious leaders and counterterrorism experts.

- While the US may not be the best frontline messenger for religious counter-narratives, there is plenty that the US could do without much cost:
- Encourage Islamic Communities in the region to open up to more liberal interpretations of Islam, promote moderate Imams and avoid entering competition with Salafi influences by becoming more conservative.
- The reinvigorated relationship of the US with Saudi Arabia could be used to encourage the GCC governments to undertake several steps in countering any radicalizing influences. In particular, encourage the Saudis and other Gulf states to launch concrete initiatives to counter a) radical rhetoric of imams or individuals b) abandon efforts to proselytize an Islam incompatible with local traditions c) assist with digital counter-radicalization initiatives.

¹⁵ The EU is already entering into cooperation with the Islamic Community in Bosnia to work on deradicalization.

- About half a million Americans are of Bosnian origin. Plenty of IT businesses are run by first generation Bosnian Americans, who are also present on the Bosnian market. These businesses could be incentivized to get engaged in digital initiatives similar to Jigsaw, the Google owned tech incubator that developed programs targeting individuals watching online ISIS propaganda and placing links to Arabic and English language video clips which would counter such propaganda. These included testimonials from former extremists, imams denouncing ISIS's corruption, ultimately dissuading them from responding to the group's calls for violence. Combining the IT expertise of these businesses, their knowledge of the language, and access to moderate Imams in the region could produce a version of such software which could target the populations in the Balkans more effectively than many conferences and workshops that western funds are currently being spent on.
- Support community programs where imams and psychologists could be the first to answer voluntary hotlines to be used family members of those radicalised. In the US, in over fifty percent of the cases the family knew that their family member was radicalizing. While they will often not make a call to a security agency, they might call a hotline that provides rapid intervention by a psychologist or an Imam, to talk to their children.
- Draw on lessons learned in the US from projects such as Cure Violence to the field of preventing violent radicalization. Many foreign fighters return disillusioned by what they have seen, these individuals can and should be used to prevent future radicalization.