



Islamic radicalism in the Balkans

by Predrag Petrović

Balkan countries are among Europe's top exporters of volunteers fighting for radical Islamic organisations such as Daesh and Jabhat al-Nusra. The Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) estimates that over 300 fighters from Kosovo have travelled to warzones in Iraq and Syria, while 330 fighters have come from Bosnia and Herzegovina, 110 from Albania, 100 from the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, 50 from Serbia and 13 from Montenegro. This places Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina as the top two European countries by percentage of population who have joined terrorist organisations, while Albania is ranked in fourth place just behind Belgium.

These figures are all the more sobering once the fact that Islamic traditions in the Balkans have never had extremist tendencies is taken into account. This then raises the question, why are radical Islamist movements now proving so popular?

From imported to local Islamic extremism

Radical interpretations of Islam are somewhat alien to Muslim communities in the Balkans, which are traditionally oriented towards the Hanafi school of thought of Sunni Islam. Furthermore, 50 years of communist rule in the region instilled a sense of secularism in Balkan Muslim communities, and gave rise to an Islamic tradition that is markedly different in its interpretations and practices to its more conservative counterparts in the Arabian Peninsula.

More conservative interpretations of Islam (such as the Hanbali school and the Salafist movement), as well as the religion's militant form (Takfirism) first arrived in the Balkans in the early 1990s, when some 2,000 Arab mujahedeen fighters came to fight on behalf of Bosnian Muslims during the Yugoslav wars.

Although the 1995 Dayton Peace Accords, which marked the end of the Bosnian war, decreed that foreign fighters should leave the country, around 600 men were granted citizenship by the Bosnian Muslim authorities. They are now largely found in isolated rural areas across Bosnia and Herzegovina, living in communities unintegrated with society at large with their own religious codes and without paying taxes. In a similar manner to Bosnia, armed conflict and instability in Kosovo (1998-1999) and in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (2001) also attracted foreign fighters from Salafist movements.

An important factor contributing to the spread of Salafist ideas throughout the Balkans has been the dire economic situation of these countries: a consequence of armed conflict and the transition to free markets from planned economies compounded by the global economic crisis. These economic shocks have affected the youth in particular. The World Bank, for example, has reported that youth unemployment continues to rise and in 2015 stood at 57% in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 49% in Serbia and 29% in Albania. And according

to Prishtina Insight, an online magazine, 55% of young people in Kosovo are unemployed. These problems are made worse still by systemic corruption, a phenomenon so ingrained that young people find it extremely difficult to find sustainable work. Government institutions are often in thrall to political parties or plagued by corruption.

Salafists – supported mostly by Saudi funds since the early 1990s – are exploiting this state of affairs to spread their ideas across the Balkans, mainly through mosques, Islamic humanitarian centres and non-governmental organisations. A report by SEERECON, a political risk analysis firm, entitled ‘From the Balkans to ISIS’ estimates that of the \$800 million of Saudi money to have entered Bosnia and Herzegovina since the end of the country’s conflict, \$100 million is ‘untraceable’, lost in a maze of charity organisations and possibly used to fund Islamic extremism.

Taking advantage of economic hardship and the profound failure of governments to improve living conditions, radical Islamic movements also began to provide public services ranging from helping the poor to supporting hospitals and schools. Meanwhile radical imams began to provide something akin to life coaching, and in some towns, dormitories opened to provide accommodation to poor students and spread Salafist and Takfirist ideas. In the eyes of certain segments of the impoverished populations of the Balkans, the representatives of these Islamic organisations began to have more credibility than government institutions.

The growing number of local imams who received their religious education in Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan has also contributed to a greater acceptance of Salafist thought in the Balkans. When they return to their home countries, these imams make use of mosques and other premises (often not administered by the official Islamic community) to spread extremist ideas. Moreover, because of infighting, the official leaders of Islamic communities have lost legitimacy in the eyes of local Muslims.

Militant Salafist ideas have also spread to Muslim members of Roma communities in recent years. Jovan Damjanović, president of the World Roma Organisation, has characterised this as a huge challenge because most members of the Roma community do not understand the threat posed by radical Islamists. The radicalisation of Roma communities – and the manner in which the media reports it – could result with them being viewed as a terrorist threat rather than a vulnerable group,

thereby making the already difficult task of integration even harder.

The need for prevention

Following the 2014 adoption of UN Resolution 2178, and due to EU and NATO accession aspirations, the Balkan states have passed new legislation or adapted existing regulations to combat terrorism, including the financing of terrorist activity. All of the countries of the Balkans have, therefore, amended their criminal codes to make it illegal to participate in or organise travel to foreign warzones. This has resulted in a growing number of arrests of those suspected of terrorism or of sending fighters to Syria and Iraq. According to BIRN data, more than 100 suspects have now been prosecuted.

The main problem is, however, that the anti-terrorism response by Western Balkan countries pays little or no attention to prevention. The implementation of community policing policies is still in its infancy, even though many years have passed since it was first introduced. There are also no studies on the causes, contributing factors, channels and scale of radicalisation or its potential consequences. Also lacking are mechanisms to link various central institutions (e.g. police forces) with local actors (schools, local authorities, sports centres) to enable the early detection of radicalisation and to provide assistance to those already on the path to becoming radicalised.

The fact that the majority of Balkan Muslims reject radical and conservative religious ideas, as well as violence against civilians, was confirmed by a 2013 poll conducted by the Pew Research Center. This research showed that ‘only’ 20% of Kosovar Muslims, 15% of Bosnian Muslims and 12% of Albanian Muslims support the introduction of Sharia law. The use of suicide bombings and other violent acts in the defence of Islam was supported by 11% of Kosovar Muslims, 6% of Muslims from Albania and 3% of Bosnian Muslims.

Although extremist Islamist movements are not as prevalent in the Balkans as in other regions with large Muslim populations, they nonetheless pose a significant danger. Moreover, they will continue to spread if the situation in which they took root is not addressed.

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