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NO WIDESPREAD SUPPORT FOR RELIGIOUS EXTREMISTS IN MACEDONIA AND THE BALKANS

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commentary

□ ONE lurking danger that is constantly on the agenda of any government in the Balkans is the threat of the growing radical Islamist community. This is a pressing concern as there is a sizeable Muslim population in the region. It ranges from more than 90% in Kosovo to 45% in Bosnia and Herzegovina to about 33% in Macedonia (State Statistical Offices of the Countries), a fact that could be exploited by organizations like ISIS.

For people in former Socialist Yugoslavia terror and radicalization until recently were foreign concepts; they were perceived as issues that simply do not happen in this region. Muslims were de-Islamized by the Socialist Party to a point where Muslims were more secular than the average Yugoslav citizen¹.

From the early 1990's many foreign Muslim charities, mainly Arab, found their way into the region using the fall of socialism to spread their extreme version of Islam². Their vast financial resources helped them reach the mainly poor communities that they had targeted. These offered stipends for young students of Islam, rebuilt mosques and distributed Qurans. After this they started distributing other literature that can be deemed radical. The local Muslim community at first did not perceive these groups as a threat. Arab preachers may have looked fanatical but not dangerous. Salafists have been taking advantage of the vulnerabilities in the region, with its political instability,

¹ "Countering Islamist Radicals In Eastern Europe". Gyorgy Lederer, September 2005. pg 2
<http://www.investigativeproject.org/documents/testimony/33.pdf>

² Radical route – Salafism in the Balkans". Dimal Basha, 29 January 2013
<http://www.dimalbasha.com/radical-route-salafism-in-the-balkans/>

ethnic tensions, high rates of unemployment, especially amongst the youth (up to 75%), to exploit moderate Muslims in order to promote their more extreme and fundamentalist ideas. To achieve this they used the processes of infiltration, financial subsidies and indoctrination.

RELIGIOUSLY MOTIVATED TERRORISM

The Balkans and Macedonia have not remained unaffected by the global phenomenon called religious terrorism. In the last 20 years, after the breakup of Yugoslavia there have been a dozen of small scale attacks (the attack by a gunman on a police station in Zvornik, Bosnia and Herzegovina³; the attack on the US embassy in Sarajevo⁴ being the most recent). Evidence shows that these attacks were mainly perpetuated by so called 'lone wolves', where no particular group really took responsibility for the attacks. Fortunately there have been no major attacks with massive casualties.

One of the greater concerns when it comes to religious terrorism in the Balkans is the increased number of people from the region who join ISIS, al-Nusra front and other extremist groups. Recent estimates show that several hundred Muslims from the region have joined the fight in Iraq and Syria. 130 have been estimated to have joined the fight from Macedonia⁵.

³ "Bosnia: Gunman kills officer in Zvornik police station". BBC, 27 April 2015

<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-32491026>

⁴ Sarajevo gunman fires at US embassy in Bosnia capital. BBC, 28 October 2011

<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-15499143>

⁵ Sinisa Stankovic. "Апсење на осомничени за тероризам и за поврзаност со групата Исламска држава (Arrests of terror sus-

However, there are 6.5 million Muslims living in these countries. This shows that as a percentage the number of Balkan Muslims joining these groups is not too alarming. An interesting phenomenon is that some of these fighters do not actually go on religious grounds, but join the fight in solidarity against what they believe to be despotic governments in the regions, thus joining moderate groups like the Free Syrian Army. The radical fighters, who join ISIS, however do not have widespread support and have been condemned by both political and religious authorities. The head of Bosnia's Islamic Community, Husein Kavazovic, denounced ISIS saying "there is not 'but' in condemning those crimes"⁶ and asked authorities to strip Bosnian ISIS fighters of their citizenship. The Islamic Religious Community in Macedonia was also quick to condemn the Charlie Hebdo attacks stating, "This attack has nothing to do with Islam. We believe that there is no religion in the world that justifies these acts"⁷

Despite attempts to portray Muslims in Macedonia and the region as becoming radicalized and dangerous, the reality is much different. The number of Muslims that have started following more strict interpretations of Islam in Macedonia might be growing but not in a sig-

pects). Voice of America-Macedonia, 06 August 2015.

<http://mk.voanews.com/content/article/2904375.html> - According to information from the MOI

⁶ "Muslim Clerics Lash out at ISIS Over Pilot's Execution". Newsmax, 06 February 2015. <http://www.newsmax.com/World/GlobalTalk/isis-muslim-clerics-lash-out/2015/02/06/id/623249/>

⁷ Borjan Jovanovski "Македонија реагира на нападот во Шарли ебдо (Macedonia react fo Charlie Hebdo attack)". Voice of America-Macedonia, 08 January 2015.

<http://mk.voanews.com/content/voa-macedonian-macedonia-reactions-charlie-paris/2590750.html>

nificant rate. These individuals who are mainly Salafists focus on non-violent da'wah (preaching of Islam), education, and "purification of religious beliefs and practices" and do not have intentions of engaging in terrorist activities. They claim they are being labeled as dangerous "Wahhabis" mainly for political purposes. Religious and political authorities, according to some of them, fear changes.⁸

The governments of Bosnia-Herzegovina, Macedonia, Kosovo, and Albania have also taken extra measures to curb ISIS recruitment. Despite the financial constraints they face, they have been fairly successful in the law enforcement aspect of the anti-terrorist operations by conducting numerous arrests.⁹ Even though arrests have been intensified, various challenges remain. For example in September 2014 Kosovo authorities have made spectacular arrests of around 80 people suspected of ISIS related affiliation and support. More than half were released due to lack of evidence.¹⁰

8 Zorana Spasovska "Вахабисти или поинакви верници? (Wahhabis or different kind of believers?)". Radio Free Europe-Macedonia, 22 November 2011

<http://www.makdenes.org/content/article/24398427.html>

9 Elvira M. Jukic. "Bosnia Arrests 16 Suspected Jihad Recruiters". Balkan Insight, 03 September 2014

<http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/bosnia-arrests-15-alleged-terrorists>

10 Ervin Qafmolla, Skender Govor. "Lax Precautions for Kosovo Terror

Likewise, Macedonian authorities, on August 6 2015, conducted the operation "Kelija (Cell)" where they arrested 9 individuals suspected of organizing and recruiting fighters for the violent extremist groups in the Middle East. The operation is deemed a success, but critics argue that it should have been done much sooner.

One concern is that despite the efforts and initiatives in terms of law enforcement and legislation there have been minimal to no efforts in the aspect of rehabilitation, reintegration and prevention through education. Such rehabilitation programs have been set up in several countries such as Saudi Arabia, Singapore, Indonesia, Germany, Denmark and others. A good example for that kind of education/rehabilitation would be the teaching done at a Danish rehabilitation program¹¹ where authorities work on trying to convince vulnerable young Danish citizens not to join militant groups in Syria and Iraq. The program uses methods like in community policing- highlighting the importance of communication between teach-

Suspects". Balkan Insight, 03 July 2015.

<http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/lax-precautions-for-kosovo-terror-suspects>

11 Jon Henley. "How do you deradicalise returning Isis fighters?". The Guardian, 12 November 2014.

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/nov/12/deradicalise-isis-fighters-jihadists-denmark-syria>

ers, counselors, parents, other community members and the police. Another suggestion would be for moderate Imams to visit radical detainees and try to challenge their extreme views, or have former radicals talk to them during their time in prison. It is important that policymakers understand the significance of de-radicalization within the broader counter-terrorism strategy, as these rehabilitation programs are the best approach for mitigating the potential future danger posed by detained terrorists and extremists.

To conclude, despite the harsh reality of existence of Islamic terrorists and extremists in the Balkans the situation does not appear to be alarming. The region has not been subject to a large number of religiously motivated attacks, and the threat from Islamic terrorists, although real, might be exaggerated especially by sensationalism in the media. This does not imply that the region is safe from religiously motivated attacks and plots, as the threat from the returning jihadists is realistic. However, due to radical extremists not having substantial support from the local Muslim communities, and the proactive approach in fighting terrorism by the governments in the region, the situation does appear to be somewhat under control for the time being. □



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