

Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Nexus with Islamist Extremism



In a report from Atlantic Initiative and Democratization Policy Council, available on the DPC website, Vlado Azinovic argues that any effort that will successfully prevent and discourage extremism and radicalization in BiH must be inclusive of all BiH citizens

Bosnia and Herzegovina was a destination for hundreds of Muslim foreign fighters during the 1992-1995 war, who brought with them their austere and belligerent interpretation of Islam, Salafism. Some twenty years after the end of the war in BiH, the country now has an indigenous Salafi community and has become a source of mujahideen. The war in Syria has drawn fighters from BiH. The number of BiH citizens involved in the fighting in Syria is difficult to estimate for several reasons, allowing for politically-driven manipulation. Research undertaken by the author, looking at data available between December 2012 and December 2014, revealed credible evidence that just under 200 BiH citizens have gone to Syria (80% of them male with one-third having a criminal background). More recent data indicates that casualty figures for BiH fighters in Syria have been on the increase since early 2015. Two distinct groups have been identified - older fighters with prior war experience and younger persons in their twenties. Cheap flights to Turkey from Sarajevo facilitate the departure of those intending to go to Syria.

Incentive to Escape

Among the motives identified for going to Syria and Iraq are a youthful urge for

action, a desire to struggle against a perceived worldwide war on Islam, and the potential for rapid upward mobility - all of which provide BiH citizens incentive to escape the stifling economic and social situation in BiH. Radicalization takes numerous forms, from effective personal mentoring for jihad to remote inspiration - and active recruitment via social media. These phenomena are not dissimilar from avenues to radicalization observed elsewhere. Interestingly, those most prone to radicalization tend not to have previously been religiously observant.

Some BiH citizens have already returned from Syria and Iraq, with the likelihood of having been radicalized, traumatized, and/or disillusioned by their experience. While it cannot automatically be presumed that they would be inclined to engage in domestic acts of terrorism, the considerable effort that the Islamic State has made to explicitly promote such activity in BiH gives ample cause for concern.

The motives for the "lone wolf" terrorist attack on the Zvornik police station in April this year cannot be definitively known, though it is clear that the shooter, Nerdin Ibric, recently had undergone a physical and behavioral transformation

after visiting a nearby Salafist community. Until a few months before the attack, he had exhibited no telltale signs of deviancy - even securing a gun license by legal means. The Republika Srpska police's response to the attack, Operation Ruben, was initially billed a success, uncovering evidence of alleged wrongdoing. But of the 32 Bosniaks arrested, 30 were released after they were interviewed and two were jailed for only one month. The operation, conducted without involvement of relevant state bodies, sent shockwaves through the Bosniak returnee community, rekindling fears of its vulnerability in the RS. Subsequently, the BiH Ministry for Human Rights and Refugees concluded that Operation Ruben had involved harassment and intimidation of returnees.

Ad Hoc Cooperation

BiH was the first country in the region to amend its criminal code to prohibit joining "foreign paramilitary and para-police formations" which it did in June 2014 and it has since joined the international coalition against ISIL. Operation Damask, undertaken by the State

Investigation and Protection Agency (SIPA), the BiH Intelligence and Security Agency (OSA), and the BiH Prosecutor's Office in late 2014 through early 2015, targeted those suspected of recruiting or financing BiH citizens to go to Syria and Iraq. The BiH Prosecutor's Office for its part formed a new task force to deal specifically with these types of cases. The entities have created specialized police bodies to counter terrorism and extremism. But, as is well known and has been demonstrated previously, most visibly during the February 2014 protests, cooperation and coordination among these various structures is ad hoc and sporadic at best - not based on any institutionalized mechanisms, but rather often dependent on personalities and individual initiative.

As with many other issues in BiH, international pressure was important in encouraging authorities to develop a statewide strategy for prevention and countering terrorism, drafted by an inter-agency working group under the auspices of the BiH Ministry of Security and adopted by the BiH Council of Ministers on July 9, 2015. On paper, this would facilitate the inter-agency and inter-entity coordination needed to undertake surveillance, investigation, and prosecution of radicalization and recruitment efforts throughout BiH, as well as of the activities of those returning from Syria and Iraq. But this strategy is presently just a declaration of intent and now needs to be operationalized in action plans with

timelines, specific designated tasks, and mechanisms for coordination of effort.

Black-and-White World View

Analysis of the radicalization, recruitment, travel, and eventual residence of BiH citizens in Syria and Iraq brought to



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light that all of these phases and activities often involved a number of socially, morally, and legally controversial or punishable activities (adultery, rape, family violence, abandonment of children, abductions, theft), which not only were given justification but also were presented as a theological imperative or God's order. In essence, this is an indirect attempt to introduce new norms into a society that is practically without any in the post-conflict and transitional space it

still occupies. In the absence of a viable and reliable value alternative to this trend, it may have real formative potential in BiH, particularly for young people. And, even if we assume that the majority of returned fighters will not engage in violence, veterans from the Syrian and Iraqi theatres could easily become heroes and role models in their local communities, particularly influencing youth from the margins, who are already vulnerable to radicalization and recruitment.

The role of the educational system is particularly important and, while the current curricula do not overtly promote violent extremism, students are also not taught how to resist it. Where BiH youth should be exposed to critical thinking, schools in BiH tend instead to affirm the dogma and ideology of collective identity, based on the ethnicity of students. This "ethnization" of education promotes limited awareness and an oversimplified black-and-white world view that depend on an "us" vs. "them" paradigm. In this climate, everything seen as "ours" is taken at face value, and this state of mind provides fertile ground for ideological radicalization against an "other."

Any effort that will successfully prevent and discourage extremism and radicalization in BiH must therefore be inclusive of all BiH citizens. It is up to the state to develop and employ effective tools and mechanisms including monitoring, surveillance, and criminal prosecution; and it is up to society to call for effective interventions and develop counter-narratives that oppose radicalization. Families, the educational system, civil society organizations, the academic community, and media must all play a role in clarifying the severity of the problem and bringing about some consensus regarding norms to combat it. These and other recommendations have all been embodied in BiH's new national strategy for prevention and countering terrorism. However, this document is just an official declaration of intent. It is now up to BiH's governments, law enforcement agencies, and society as a whole to take their share of responsibility for effective implementation of the strategy and act upon its formal pledge. Even if there is full implementation of the BiH strategy, a number of relevant factors fall outside its scope.

Recommendations

- ❖ Relevant stakeholders within the country must enhance their communication and the exchange of information at the operational and strategic levels with their counterparts in the region in order to better coordinate planning and execution of activities and prevent gaps and overlapping.
- ❖ BiH law enforcement agencies must strengthen and further develop analytical capabilities to reach a better understanding of the patterns of radicalization and recruitment of individuals and groups for militant and terrorist groups.
- ❖ BiH governments and law enforcement agencies must engage the media, academic community and NGOs to help raise awareness of the risk factors for radicalization to descend into violent extremism, and particularly the recruit-

ment of foreign terrorist fighters.

- ❖ BiH law enforcement agencies must develop additional Internet monitoring capabilities, given the increasingly important role of the Internet and social networks as a tool for spreading extremist ideas and recruitment of young people, especially minors. EU and US partner agencies are best suited for this task through provision of technical support and training.
- ❖ The EU must support activities that include first-line responders, the academic community and civil society to develop national and regional Radicalization Awareness Network(s) - based on best practices and tools available from the EU-wide Radicalization Awareness Network that was officially launched in September of 2011.