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The involvement of Western Balkan terrorist-fighters in armed conflicts in Syria and Iraq

Udział zagranicznych bojowników-terrorystów z Bałkanów Zachodnich w konfliktach zbrojnych w Syrii i Iraku

Abstract: The primary purpose of this article is to explain the meaning and consequences of foreign fighters' participation from Western Balkan countries (WB6) in armed conflicts in Syria and Iraq. In the first part, the issue of foreign fighters is discussed in historical terms. The author focuses on the examples of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the ethno-religious conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In the second part of the text, the definition framework of foreign fighters' concept and its evolution towards foreign terrorist-fighters is discussed. Then, a detailed analysis of the main problem is conducted, and several research questions are answered: 1) What is the scale of the phenomenon of Balkan volunteers (e.g., their number, the structure of origin, and others) in comparison to fighters from other regions? 2) What are their motivations and goals, and what are their recruitment process and ways of moving into the war zone? 3) What is the threat posed by returning fighters to the security of the Western Balkans, and how do individual states counteract this phenomenon? The author uses mainly the following research methods: critical content analysis (literature, scientific articles, documents, reports, press materials), and historical and comparative analysis. The author's visits to this country in 2018-2020 constituted an essential contribution to the part concerning the case of Kosovo.

Keywords: foreign fighters, terrorism, Islamic State, Western Balkans, ISIS, jihad

Streszczenie: Głównym celem niniejszego artykułu jest wyjaśnienie znaczenia i konsekwencji udziału zagranicznych bojowników z państw Bałkanów Zachodnich (WB6) w konfliktach zbrojnych w Syrii i Iraku. W pierwszej części zagadnienie zagranicznych bojowników zostało przedstawione w ujęciu historycznym. Autor skupił się na przykładach radzieckiej invazji na Afganistan

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oraz konfliktu etniczno-religijnego w Bośni i Hercegowinie. W drugiej części tekstu omówione zostały ramy definicyjne pojęcia zagranicznych bojowników oraz jego ewolucja w kierunku zagranicznych bojowników-terrorystów. Następnie przeprowadzona została szczegółowa analiza głównego problemu oraz odniesiono się do kilku pytań badawczych: 1) jaka jest skala zjawiska bałkańskich ochotników (np. ich liczba, struktura pochodzenia i inne) w porównaniu z bojownikami z innych regionów? 2) Jakie są ich motywacje i cele, jak wygląda ich rekrutacja i sposoby przemieszczania się w rejon działań wojskowych? 3) Jakie są zagrożenia dla bezpieczeństwa Bałkanów Zachodnich ze strony powracających bojowników i jak poszczególne państwa przeciwdziałają temu zjawisku? Autor zastosował następujące metody badawcze: krytyczna analiza treści (literatura przedmiotu, artykuły naukowe, dokumenty, raporty, materiały prasowe) oraz analiza historyczna i porównawcza. Istotny wkład w część dotyczącą przypadku Kosowa stanowią wizyty autora w tym kraju w latach 2018–2020.

Słowa kluczowe: zagraniczni bojownicy, terroryzm, Państwo Islamskie, Bałkany Zachodnie, ISIS, dżihad

Introduction

The phenomenon of foreign fighters is not new. According to research conducted by David Malet, foreign fighters participated in 93 (about 26%) out of 353 conflicts that occurred between 1815 and 2015.¹ However, the scale of this phenomenon is not always significant enough to have a meaningful impact on the conflict. Nevertheless, the deployment of volunteers to war zones may have severe consequences in the medium and long term. The mass influx of radical militants into Syria, Iraq, Libya, Yemen, Afghanistan, or Ukraine makes it an important issue from the perspective of each countries' internal and international security. The risks and threats associated with this phenomenon are not limited to the fighters' direct participation in the conflict. Veterans returning to their places of origin, or moving into subsequent conflict zones, have combat experience that they can use for terrorist and subversive activities. They are responsible for the radicalization and recruitment of new volunteers with whom they share their knowledge and skills – that is how Al-Qaeda, whose core was formed by Arabs fighting in the 1980s in Afghanistan, made up its structures. The problem of returning foreign fighters is a particular challenge for contemporary states and international organizations when considering 1) the difficulties related to border protection (e.g., as a result of

1 D. Malet, *The Foreign Fighter Project*, 03.05.2016, http://davidmalet.com/uploads/Foreign_Fighter_Typology_2016.pdf [04.03.2020].

a mass illegal influx of refugees and immigrants), 2) the evolution of terrorism (which increasingly often takes the form of “lone wolves” attacks carried out by home-grown terrorists), or 3) hybrid activities, which consist in the use of armed organizations and terrorist groups as proxies by state sponsors.

1. The phenomenon of foreign fighters in historical terms

1. The conflict in Afghanistan in the 1980s certainly had a significant impact on the development of foreign fighters’ phenomenon. The Soviet invasion launched on 26 December 1979 kindled anger in the Islamic world. In his *fatwa*, Sheikh Abdullah Azzam, a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, called on all Muslims to fight the infidels. Within a decade, about 25,000 foreign jihadist ideologists came to Afghanistan to fight on the side of their “brothers in faith” against local communists and their allies from the Soviet Union. Through the Maktab al-Khadamat organization established in 1984, Azzam coordinated the flow of money, volunteers, and arms to Afghanistan while at the same time cooperating with the Saudi Sheikh Osama Bin Laden (later founder of Al-Qaeda), numerous Muslim organizations (funded by Saudi donors), and Pakistani intelligence.²

In the 1980s, Afghanistan was an essential part of the geopolitical competition between the United States and the USSR.³ The Soviet invasion was used by American strategists to entangle Moscow in a long-lasting and costly conflict (such as the one that the U.S. was facing in Vietnam). By providing financial, training, and armaments support to the Mujahedin (including the FIM-92 Stinger portable surface-to-air missile sets), Washington increased the cost of the Soviet intervention and thus accelerated the collapse of the USSR. However, the Cold War success of the U.S. in the medium and long term led to a blowback effect with unintended and undesirable consequences.⁴ With the end of the CIA’s covert operation codenamed

2 T. Hegghammer, *The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters. Islam and the Globalization of Jihad*, “International Security”, Winter 2010/11, vol. 35, no. 3, pp. 70-89.

3 A. J. Kuperman, *The Stinger Missile and U.S. Intervention in Afghanistan*, “Political Science Quarterly”, 1999, vol. 114, no. 2, pp. 219-263.

4 Ch. Johnson, *Blowback. The Costs and Consequences of American Empire*, London 2002.

“Cyclone,” Washington lost interest in Afghanistan’s situation without assigning it strategic importance. However, American armaments were at the disposal of the Mujahidin, who used them in another Afghan civil war which broke out upon Soviet soldiers’ withdrawal. As a result, in 1996, the Taliban came to power in Kabul. They provided shelter to Al-Qaeda fighters, a terrorist organization mostly made up of “Arab Afghans” – foreign fighters from Arab countries recruited, trained, and armed by the U.S. and Saudi Arabia to fight the USSR in the 1980s.⁵ A decade later, the former American allies made their fight against their former “sponsor” their primary goal. In retaliation for the American military presence in Saudi Arabia (the sacred land of Muslims), Al-Qaeda attacked U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania (1998). It then attacked the U.S. destroyer USS Cole in Yemen (2000), and on 11 September 2001, it hit major U.S. symbols, the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. The organization of these attacks was the responsibility of veterans of fighting in Afghanistan.⁶ In the opinion of critics, these tragedies would not have happened if it had not been for Washington’s policy towards Afghanistan in the 1980s and the omission of the consequences resulting from the destabilization of that country. Its armaments were used to fuel further stages of the internal conflict.

In response to the 11 September attacks, the United States of America decided to intervene militarily in Afghanistan to eliminate Al-Qaeda and remove the Taliban from power. As such, Washington, together with NATO allies, engaged in the longest-running armed conflict in its history. Since 2001, soldiers fighting under the Hindu Kush have had to face an enemy using weapons supplied to the Mujahedin in the 1980s. The FIM-92 Stinger portable surface-to-air missile sets, which appeared to be extremely effective against the Soviet Mi-24 helicopters, proved to be equally useful against American helicopters. Besides, some of the armaments, together with foreign fighters, went

5 J. K. Cooley, *Unholy Wars: Afghanistan, America, and International Terrorism*, London 2002; S. Coll, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001*, New York 2004.

6 J. R. Zuidewijn, E. Bakker, *Returning western foreign fighters: The case of Afghanistan, Bosnia and Somalia*, “The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism”, 2014, no. 2, p. 4.

to other places of armed conflict (including Bosnia and Herzegovina, Chechnya, Tajikistan, and Kashmir).⁷

The conflict in Afghanistan in the 1980s certainly had a significant impact on the development of the phenomenon of foreign jihadist ideological fighters. Since the early 1990s, it was Al-Qaeda that set the strategic goals and acted as an ideological centre for local Islamic extremist factions. The group's strategy was not only to fight the "great Satan" (the USA) but also to create a caliphate by supporting Salafist movements seeking to overthrow secular regimes in Muslim countries and replace them with governments based on Sharia law. In the 1990s, Osama Bin Laden's organization supported Islamic militants fighting in Algeria, Afghanistan, Kashmir, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Chechnya and Dagestan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Somalia, and Indonesia through providing them with financial assistance and arms, as well as conducting training, recruiting, and sending volunteers.⁸

One of the main target countries for the jihadists was Bosnia and Herzegovina, where a bloody civil war on ethnic-religious grounds occurred between 1992 and 1995. About 3,000 - 5,000 Islamic volunteers from Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Turkey, Algeria, Afghanistan, Egypt, Sudan, Iran, and Syria were then sent to the Balkans. These included veterans fighting in Afghanistan, members of terrorist organizations (Al-Qaeda, the Islamic Armed Group, Hezbollah, Ha-mas, Jamaat-e-Islami(ji)), as well as radicalized Muslims from Western countries. The first of them were recruited in 1992 by the Deputy Prime Minister of the Sarajevo Government, Muhamed Čengić, who was sent to Turkey to acquire weapons, ammunition, and fighters. The scale of illegal arms and volunteer flows into war-torn Bosnia is illustrated by the activities of the Third World Relief Agency (TWRA) in Sudan. It intermediated the transfer of funds and arms from Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Pakistan, and Malaysia to Bosnia and Herzegovina. The total amount of donations in the years 1992-1996 was about USD 2.5 billion. An essential role in the whole procedure was played by, among others, Osama bin Laden, who in 1992, under cover of humanitarian

7 J. Prados, *Notes on the CIA's Secret War in Afghanistan*, "The Journal of American History", 2002, vol. 89, no. 2, p. 471.

8 R. Gunaratna, *Inside Al Qaeda. Global Network of Terror*, New York 2003, p. 52.

aid, delivered 130 tons of military equipment from Sudan to the Balkans. In addition to TWRA, there were other NGOs in the Balkans (officially involved in charity and humanitarian activities) that mediated the process of supplying and financing Muslim fighters in Bosnia and Kosovo and Macedonia (including Muwaffaq, Al-Haramayn, Global Relief Foundation, Benevolence International Foundation).⁹

Thanks to external support in Bosnia, an El-Mudžahid battalion was established under the command of Saudi Abu Abdel Aziz, a combat veteran in Afghanistan, a close associate of Bin Laden, and later commander of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). The group had two training camps in Mehurici and Zenica near Travnik. The battalion, consisting of foreign fighters (mainly Arabs), was famous for ruthless behaviour, including the destruction of Catholic churches, mass killings, attacks on people of other faiths than Islam, and the decapitation of Serbian prisoners of war.¹⁰ Several Afghans joined the ranks of the 7th Muslim Brigade, part of the 3rd Corps of the Army of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The members of this formation of about 1,000 soldiers were also famous for their brutality, and the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) accused many of their commanders (e.g., Enver Hadžihasanović, Muhamed Alagić) of committing war crimes. In the areas they occupied, Islamic troops tried to introduce strict religious and customary rules, forcing residents to live according to Sharia law.¹¹ Even after the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement (1995), which ordered foreign fighters to leave Bosnia within 30 days, the jihadists did not give up fighting, but, on the contrary, planned attacks on UN peacekeepers and suicide attacks on Croatian forces. A Canadian volunteer, John Fawzan, who blew himself up in front of the Croatian police headquarters in Rijeka in October 1995, was the first ever terrorist to carry out an effective suicide attack in Europe on behalf of an Islamic terrorist organization.¹²

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- 9 M. Hajdinjak, *Smuggling in Southeast Europe: The Yugoslav Wars and the Development of Regional Criminal Networks in the Balkans*, "Center for the Study of Democracy Reports", 2002, no. 10, pp. 10–11.
- 10 R. K. Cragin, S. Stipanovich, *Metastases: Exploring the impact of foreign fighters in conflicts abroad*, "Journal of Strategic Studies", 2019, vol. 42, no. 3-4, p. 405.
- 11 D. Gibas-Krzak, *Terrorism in the Balkans. Genesis – types – prognoses*, "Internal Security Review", 2018, vol. 10, no. 19, p. 324.
- 12 J. de Roy van Zuidewijn, E. Bakker, *Returning...*, p. 5.

After the war, most of the fighters returned to their home countries, where they engaged in terrorist activities or went to jihad in other armed conflict zones. It is estimated that around 1,000 fighters stayed in Bosnia, taking advantage of the fact that during the conflict, Bosnian authorities granted them passports, birth certificates, and other documents confirming their Bosnian nationality. The political elite in Sarajevo did not take any action to prevent the development of Salafism in their country. Thus, Bosnia became a crucial safe haven for jihadists in Europe, a place where terrorists were recruited and trained and attacks were planned. It was only after 11 September that the Bosnian authorities, as part of the “global war on terror,” decided to expel many of the foreign fighters and withdrew their citizenship. At that time, numerous counterterrorism measures were taken (arrests, confiscation of weapons and explosives, etc.), and the issue of radical Islam began to be seen as a threat to internal security, as Islamists had managed to infiltrate state structures by then.¹³

2. Definition framework – from foreign fighters to foreign terrorist-fighters

The notion of foreign fighters has many definitions and interpretations and has been described with various scientific and legal terms. According to David Malet, the term “foreign fighter” should be used to describe a person who has joined a partisan group but is not a citizen of the state involved in conflict.¹⁴ Thomas Hegghammer considers a foreign fighter to be a person who meets four criteria: 1) has joined an active armed group; 2) is not a citizen of any of the parties to the conflict (therefore, he is not a person returning to his homeland to take up arms); 3) is not a member of any officially existing military organization (a soldier of a third country); 4) is an active fighter for other than mercantile reasons (is not a mercenary).¹⁵ The above definition and framework seems to explain the essence of this phenomenon aptly and distinguishes between foreign fighters and mercenaries. While

¹³ K. Erjavec, *The Bosnian war on terrorism*, “Journal of Language and Politics”, 2009, vol. 8, no.1, pp. 5-27.

¹⁴ D. Malet, *Foreign Fighters: Transnational Identity in Civil Conflicts*, New York 2013, p. 13.

¹⁵ T. Hegghammer, *The Rise...*, pp. 57-58.

the former is mainly driven by ideological motives (extreme right/left or religious), the latter is motivated by material benefits.¹⁶

According to the typology of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, the motivations and psychological profile of volunteers leaving to take part in armed struggle can be separated into the following types: 1) *revenge seeker* – an individual who is deeply frustrated and angry, looking for a way to unleash frustration and anger on a person, group, or entity that he or she finds guilty of his or her condition; 2) *status seeker* – an individual who seeks recognition and appreciation among others; 3) *identity seeker* – an individual driven primarily by the need to belong and be part of something meaningful and who is seeking to define his or her identity or sense of self by belonging to a group; 4) *thrill seeker* – an individual joining a group with a desire for excitement, adventure, and glory.¹⁷

With the development of the phenomenon of Islamic terrorism (especially after the events of 11 September 2001), foreign fighters began to be defined as foreign terrorist fighters (FTF), thus giving them an apparently negative character. Therefore, the “positive” or “romantic” approach to volunteers going to the conflict zone to “fight for the right cause” was called into question. The evolution of this conceptual category has emerged from the radicalization of certain social groups and the development of various forms of political extremism (religious, nationalist, anarchist, etc.), as well as a change in the methods used by these milieus to provoke political struggle. Analyses of the phenomenon of foreign fighters or foreign terrorist fighters are certainly not facilitated by the hybridization of methods for performing armed actions by non-state actors, who often use guerrilla fighting tactics and

16 The First Additional Protocol to the Geneva Convention defines a mercenary as a person who:
(a) has been specially recruited at home or abroad to fight in an armed conflict; (b) actually takes direct military action; (c) takes part in an armed activity primarily for personal gain (d) is not a citizen of a party to a conflict or a permanent resident of a territory controlled by a party to a conflict; (e) is not a member of the armed forces of a party to a conflict; (f) has not been sent by a State other than a party to a conflict on an official mission as a member of the armed forces of that State, see: *Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (Protocol I)*, 08.06.1977, https://www.icrc.org/en/doc/assets/files/other/icrc_002_0321.pdf [30.01.2020].

17 *Foreign Terrorist Fighters Manual for Judicial Training Institutes South-Eastern Europe*, Vienna 2019, p.8, https://www.unodc.org/pdf/terrorism/Foreign_Terrorist_Fighters_Handbook/EN_Foreign_Terrorist_Fighters_Ebook.pdf [30.01.2020].

terrorist methods at the same time (although on different scales). In consequence, the victims of their actions are both the enemy's armed forces and civilians.

In 2014, the FTF concept was introduced into official documents of the United Nations (UN). Security Council Resolution 2178 defines foreign terrorists-fighter as "individuals traveling to a state other than that of their nationality or residence, to carry out, planning, prepare for, or participating in terrorist activities, or to conduct or attend terrorist training, including in connection with armed conflict."¹⁸ Acting as an FTF is a criminal offense under the Council of Europe Convention for the Prevention of Terrorism¹⁹ and its First Additional Protocol of 2015.²⁰ The United Nations Security Council Resolution 2396 of 2017 imposes many obligations on Member States relating to, among other things, the transit of combatants, the identification of persons active in terrorist organizations and illegal armed groups, holding them criminally responsible, and the implementation of rehabilitation and reintegration programs for FTF families.²¹ These definitions accurately characterize the essence of the FTF phenomenon and have useful operational value for the enforcement of legal standards. However, they do not resolve the dilemma of clearly distinguishing between "terrorists" and "freedom fighters."²²

Given the operational definition, foreign terrorist fighters can be divided into those remaining in the conflict area (*remainders*), those returning to their country of origin (*returnees*), and those moving to third countries (*relocators*). They can perform various roles, such as 1)

18 United Nations, *Security Council Resolution 2178*, 24.09.2014, [https://www.undocs.org/S/RES/2178%20 \(2014\) \[30.01.2020\].](https://www.undocs.org/S/RES/2178%20 (2014) [30.01.2020].)

19 Article 5: Public provocation to commit a terrorist offence; Article 6: Recruitment for terrorism; Article 7: Training for terrorism, see: *Council of Europe Convention on the Prevention of Terrorism*, 16.05.2005, [https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list/-/conventions/treaty/196 \[30.01.2020\].](https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list/-/conventions/treaty/196 [30.01.2020].)

20 Article 2: Receiving training for terrorism; Article 4: Travel abroad for terrorist purposes, Article 5 Financing travel abroad for terrorist purposes; Article 6: Organizing or otherwise facilitating travel abroad for terrorist purposes, see: *Additional Protocol to the Council of Europe Convention on the Prevention of Terrorism*, [https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list/-/conventions/treaty/217 \[30.01.2020\].](https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list/-/conventions/treaty/217 [30.01.2020].)

21 United Nations, *Security Council Resolution 2396*, 21.12.2017, [https://undocs.org/en/S/RES/2396 \(2017\), \[30.01.2020\].](https://undocs.org/en/S/RES/2396 (2017), [30.01.2020].)

22 B. Ganor, *Defining Terrorism: Is One Man's Terrorist another Man's Freedom Fighter?*, "Police Practice and Research", 2002, vol. 3, no. 4, pp. 287-304.

a martyr – a person killed on the battlefield who does not constitute an immediate danger, but whose “sacrifice” can be used for propaganda and recruitment; 2) *a veteran* – an experienced fighter who continues to fight in the conflict area or moves to other hot spots; 3) *a recruiter* – one who after returning to their home country recruits others to fight and/or acts as a “spiritual leader;” 4) *a reintegrated fighter* – a person returning to his/her country of origin who a) breaks off from terrorist activity as a result of disillusionment with the ideology and everyday life in an armed/terrorist organization, b) stops operational terrorist activity but continues to sympathize with the radical ideology; 5) *a terrorist* – a person returning to place of origin and seeking an opportunity to carry out a terrorist attack there.²³

On this basis, different kinds of threats to international security, such as performing a terrorist attack, planning and directing terrorist activities, creating new organizations or strengthening existing ones, radicalizing and recruiting new terrorists-fighters, are attributed to different types of fighters. Historical examples of foreign fighters returning from Afghanistan or Bosnia and Herzegovina confirm that they are engaged in terrorist activities after coming back to their countries. According to research carried out by Thomas Hegghamer, in the years 1990-2010, 50% of the foiled terrorist attacks were committed by former FTF. Persons returning from places of armed conflict participated in the preparations of about 66% of the attacks that resulted in fatalities.²⁴ Although in recent years most terrorist attacks have been carried out by home-grown terrorists, it should be noted that some attacks, e.g., the attack on the Jewish Museum in Brussels (2014) and the attacks in Paris (2015), were carried out by the French, who returned from war in Syria.

23 *The Challenge of Returning and Relocating Foreign Terrorist Fighters: Research Perspectives*, “CTED Trends Report”, March 2018, pp. 4-7, <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/ctc/content/challenge-returning-and-relocating-foreign-terrorist-fighters-research-perspectives> [30.01.2020].

24 T. Hegghammer, *Should I stay or should I go? Explaining variation in western Jihadists' choice between domestic and foreign fighting*, “American Political Science Review”, 2013, vol. 107, no. 1, pp. 2-11.

3. Determinants, actions, and effects of Balkan terrorists-fighters' engagement in armed clashes in Syria and Iraq

The territorial conquests of ISIS in Syria and Iraq changed the geopolitical situation in the Middle East and, above all, was a huge propaganda success for the global jihadist movement. In June 2014, the self-proclaimed caliph of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announced the creation of the so-called Islamic State with a "capital" in Syrian Ar-Rakka. In an area comparable to the territory of Great Britain, extremists introduced the principles of Quranic Sharia law. They created efficient political and spiritual structures, well-armed and trained terrorist and partisan formations, and foundations of the administrative and financial system. By announcing the creation of the jihadist caliphate, the jihadists have achieved what Al-Qaeda failed to achieve. Most of the entities formerly affiliated with the "Base," except for the Al-Nusra Front (the Syrian branch of Al-Qaida now known as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, HTS) and the AQAP, decided to join ISIS by taking an oath of allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

The creation of a quasi-state, combined with the use of new technologies for the needs of propaganda, radicalization, and recruitment, as well as the leaks on the Turkish-Syrian border, ensured a grouping of supporters and a steady flow of volunteers from around the world. Like the war in Afghanistan in the 1980s, the then-ongoing conflict in Syria launched another wave of transnational jihad.^{25,26} Unlike historical examples of foreign fighters' phenomenon, these were not only men who wanted to join the ranks of the "army of the caliphate" but also women and children (about 25%). The wave that reached Syria and Iraq exceeded all other examples known from recent history in terms of scale. It is estimated that between 2011 and 2016, between 30,000 and 42,000 volunteers joined the ISIS series. The largest group (8717) were from the post-Soviet area, followed by the Middle East

²⁵ M. Mishali-Ram, *Foreign Fighters and Transnational Jihad in Syria*, "Studies in Conflict & Terrorism", 2018, vol. 41, no. 3, pp. 169-190.

²⁶ G. Joffé, *Global Jihad and Foreign Fighters*, "Small Wars & Insurgencies", 2016, vol. 27, no. 5, pp. 800-816.

(7054), Western Europe (5718), Maghreb (5319), South and South-East Asia (1568), the Balkans (845), and North America (439).^{27, 28}

The effect of the global anti-ISIS coalition activity was that by mid-March 2019, it was possible to break up the organization and bring about the collapse of the “Islamic State.” That, in turn, contributed to the systematic outflow of FTF. According to a UN report, in February 2019, 14,000-18,000 people fought in the *Da'esh* ranks, of whom approximately 3,000 were foreign terrorist fighters (approximately 7% of all FTFs), and another 2,000-2,500 (approximately 6.5%) were imprisoned in the territories of Syria and Iraq.²⁹ It is impossible to estimate the exact number of FTFs who died in combat or who returned to their homes or third countries.

Although the share of the FTF from the Western Balkan countries is only about 2-3% of the phenomenon, it should be considered high in relation to each country's population. In 2015, 300 citizens of Kosovo left for Syria and Iraq, which, considering the entire population of this country (1.8 million people), means 16 fighters per 100,000 inhabitants — eight times more than in France, where the FTF in ISIS comes from in Europe.³⁰

The Balkan terrorist fighters in the ranks of ISIS and the Al-Nusra Front are mainly young people between 20-35 years of age who come mainly from rural areas (apart from Kosovars, who were mostly from cities), poorly or moderately educated, with no professional experience and skills, and are usually poor and unemployed. Most of them are amateurs—only about 10% had military training or experience in partisan fighting in the ranks of the Kosovo Liberation Army (UÇK). The unfortunate socio-economic situation and low level of education

- ²⁷ R. Barret, *Beyond The Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees*, “The Soufan Center”, October 2017, p. 11, <https://thesoufancenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Beyond-the-Caliphate-Foreign-Fighters-and-the-Threat-of-Returnees-TSC-Report-October-2017-v3.pdf> [04.05.2020].
- ²⁸ *Responses to returnees: Foreign terrorist fighters and their families*, “RAN Manual”, July 2017, p. 15, https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/system/files_en?file=2020-09/ran_br_a4_m10_en.pdf [04.05.2020].
- ²⁹ United Nations, *Eighth report of the Secretary-General on the threat posed by ISIL (Da'esh) to international peace and security and the range of United Nations efforts in support of Member States in countering the threat*, https://www.un.org/sc/ctc/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/N1901937_EN.pdf [23.03.2020].
- ³⁰ A. Shtuni, *Ethnic Albanian Foreign Fighters in Iraq and Syria*, “CTC Sentinel”, 2015, vol. 8, no. 4, p. 12.

in the region contribute to the development of organized crime and increase people's vulnerability to radicalization. Accession to ISIS improves their financial situation and allows them to achieve unattainable social status in their country of origin.³¹ Unemployment in the WB6 countries averages 20% (three times the EU average), with Montenegro, Kosovo, and Bosnia and Herzegovina oscillating between 30-45% with the highest percentage of young people (30-60%). The lack of job prospects forces people to emigrate and encourages society's criminalization (among the FTF from Kosovo, as many as 40% of terrorists have a criminal history behind them).³²

The process of radicalization can take place in two ways: 1) the future FTF undergo the process of self-radicalization, using content propagated by Islamic extremists in the public interest (especially in social media); 2) the future FTF engages through mosques, charities, and educational institutions promoting Salafism and a life model based on Quranic Sharia law. As well as promoting jihadist ideology, Islam fundamentalist communities are also training and recruitment points, including in Albania (Lesnica, Zagoracan, and Rremenj, Pogradec), in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Ošve, Gornje Mace, Sarajevo, Zenica, Tuzla, Travnik and Bihać), in Kosovo (Pristina, Hani and Elezit, Kacanik, Mitrovica, Gjilan, Viti), in Northern Macedonia, (Skopje: Cair and Gazi Baba, Aracinovo, Saraj, Kumanovo, Gostivar), in Serbia (Sandžak, Novi Pazar).³³

It should be emphasized that the development of Islamism in the Western Balkans is closely linked to external actors' involvement. Since the beginning of the 1990s, one can observe an increase in political, ideological, and economic interest in the region on the part of the Gulf states financing the construction of mosques and Quranic schools (*madresa*), as well as sponsoring local imams' leaves for studies to Middle Eastern countries. It is through them that radical Salafist and Wahabi ideology is promoted. Muslims from the Western Balkans are considered the most moderate and even secularized as a result of the

31 J. Beslin, M. Ignjatijevic, *Balkan foreign fighters: from Syria to Ukraine*, "Brief ISSUE", 2017, no. 20, p. 2.

32 A. Shtuni, *Dynamics of Radicalization and Violent Extremism in Kosovo*, "United States Institute of Peace Special Report", 2016, no. 397, pp. 4-7.

33 See: *Between Salvation and Terror: Radicalization and the Foreign Fighter Phenomenon in the Western Balkans*, V. Azinović (ed.), Sarajevo 2017.

socialist socio-political model that prevailed in Yugoslavia and hard communism in Albania, where religion was banned from 1967-1990. Practitioners referred to moderate (mystical) currents within Sufism. The situation changed radically after the war in Bosnia with the influx of foreign fighters calling for jihad and financial and ideological support for Bosnians from Salafist and Wahabi communities. Since then, there have been well-organized Islamic fundamentalist structures in the region that have managed to radicalize, mobilize, and recruit many volunteers to go to Syria and Iraq.³⁴

It is estimated that between 2012 and 2019, more than 1,000 people (including about 67% men, 15% women, and 18% children) from Western Balkan countries joined ISIS and the Al-Nusra Front. The majority came from Kosovo (431) and Bosnia and Herzegovina (330). Around 150 people left Albania, 140 North Macedonia, 50 Serbia, and 30 Montenegro. Two hundred sixty of them died during the seven years of the struggle, and 460 returned home, making the region the most concentrated with FTF returnees in Europe. Compared to all other EU countries with a population of around 500 million, 1,500 FTF returned. While Kosovo had 134 returnees per million inhabitants and Macedonia 42 returnees, the figure was six in the UK and only four in Germany and France. Despite the fall of the caliphate, there were still about 1,500 FTF returns in the Middle East. Five hundred people from the Western Balkans remain. Some of them remained in Syria and Iraq, such as the Albanians from the combat unit Xhemati Alban operating at the Al-Nusra Front, which was carried out military operations in the province of Idlib.³⁵ Some of them remained in Turkish, Syrian, and Iraqi prisons, and some moved to other countries (including Libya) to continue fighting. Monitoring of this phenomenon is a demanding task since the vital transit point is Turkey, where the FTF have many transfer possibilities to various hotspots.

The problem of returning fighters posed a serious threat to the region's countries and is, therefore, a challenge for the institutions there. In response to the phenomenon, Kosovo adopted a completely new

³⁴ P. Á. Kiss, *Europe's Second Front: The Risks and Challenges of The Balkan Peninsula's Fundamentalist Islamist Organizations*, "Defence Review", 2016, vol. 144, no. 2, pp. 26-37.

³⁵ A. Shtuni, *Western Balkans Foreign Fighters and Homegrown Jihadis: Trends and Implications*, "CTC Sentinel", 2019, vol. 12, no. 7, pp. 18-20.

law regulating the FTF, while other Western Balkan countries have adapted their legislation and penal codes in line with the requirements of United Nations Security Council Resolution 2178. Participation in foreign armed conflicts, traveling to war zones, recruiting fighters, or providing financial support for terrorists face results in penalties ranging from 6 months to 15 years in prison. There were numerous arrests of returnees in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, as well as arrests of imams who preached radical ideology and recruited fighters, e.g., Bilal Bosnic (ISIS recruiter in Bosnia) and Nusret Imamovic, who recruited volunteers for Al-Qaeda and Al-Nusra Front.

As of October 2019, the Sarajevo authorities had sentenced 25 persons for involvement in fighting for ISIS and another 16 persons for other activities related to the conflict in Syria (recruitment and financial support). In both cases, acts were qualified as terrorist activities following local law. Sentences were less than two years in prison, and in cases of support for terrorist activities, ended with a penalty of 15,000 EUR and a suspended sentence. More radical measures were taken by the Albanian authorities, where nine imams responsible for terrorist financing, radicalization, and recruitment of combatants were sentenced in May 2019 to an average of 14 years in prison.³⁶ In Northern Macedonia, where 80 FTFs had returned by the beginning of 2019, only 18 people were sentenced. However, it should be noted that after numerous counter-terrorist operations, it was possible to limit the activities aimed at recruiting volunteers. As a result, the imams responsible for radicalization and recruitment (including Rexhep Memishi, sentenced to 7 years in prison) were arrested. At the same time, the most significant number of FTFs were sentenced in Kosovo, where 85 men (over 70% returnees) were sentenced for fighting in Syria and Iraq. It should be stressed, however, that the penalties imposed by the Kosovo courts are not very strict (3.5 years on average). By comparison, the average sentence in EU countries is 7 years, and in the USA 13.5.³⁷

Although authorities in Pristina consider the phenomenon of religious extremism a relatively new challenge, it does not mean that

³⁶ Between..., p. 110.

³⁷ A. Shtuni, *Western...*, pp. 20-21.

before 2012 there was no problem with Islamic fundamentalism. However, the Kosovo authorities seemed to underestimate it and did not take any preventive measures. By the end of 2019, about 250 people had returned to Kosovo from Syria and Iraq. The most massive wave of returns occurred in April when 110 people (mainly women and children) came back at one time and fled to the Kurdish-led centre in Al-Hol after the fall of the last jihadist bastion in Syria (Baghouz). The Kosovar authorities decided not to judge the majority of the women as “victims of extremism” and to be a minor security risk (in 87% of cases).³⁸ There were, of course, exceptions, such as Qamile Tahiri, who held a senior position within ISIS and was responsible for a training camp for female fighters. Sanctions against women who went to Syria and Iraq following their husbands but who did not participate in fighting and other terrorist activities are limited to home supervision. These persons are also covered by de-radicalization and reintegration programs. Government support subtracts medical and psychological assistance, accommodation, social care, and education, among other things.³⁹ In the case of men convicted of terrorist activities, prisons’ rehabilitation and de-radicalization programs play a particularly important role. They involve, among other things, the imams giving a moderate message to prisoners, talking to former FTFs who have abandoned terrorist activities, education and training, psychological support, meetings with family and loved ones, and so forth. That is one of the critical elements of the re-socialization and subsequent reintegration of ex-combatant terrorists into society.⁴⁰ Counteracting the spread of Islamic extremism in prisons is of strategic importance because it is a very suitable environment for indoctrination, radicalization, and recruitment by terrorist organizations.

However, the authorities’ actions in Pristina are insufficient, and trends in Islamic radicalism in Kosovo should be considered as worrying, especially given the indoctrination of Islamists on the Internet.

³⁸ K. Bytyqi, S. Mullins, *Returnee Foreign Fighters from Syria and Iraq: The Kosovar Experience*, “CTC Sentinel”, 2019, vol. 12, no. 7, p. 27.

³⁹ B. Begisholli, *Kosovo Detains More Returnees From Syrian Battlefields*, Balkan Insight, 24.04.2019, <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/04/24/kosovo-detains-more-returnees-from-syrian-battlefields/> [06.05.2020].

⁴⁰ A. Muji, *Reintegration of returning foreign fighters: what approach best suits Kosovo?*, “Report by KCSS”, 2017, no. 4.

In March 2019, in the *Telegram* application, there were 27 active channels distributing jihadist content in Albanian and supporting ISIS and the Al-Nusra Front, and almost 6,500 people subscribed to them.⁴¹ Moreover, the political elite in Pristina avoids the subject of religious extremism and has not taken rigorous steps to combat this phenomenon. Particularly worrying is the fact that many sympathizers of extremists are found in the assessment of those who fight radicalism within the state structures, including within the ministries of power.⁴²

4. Consequences for regional security

Since 2015 the Western Balkans have begun to play an increasingly important role in the propaganda of the “Islamic State.” In films prepared by the ISIL’s al-Hayat Media Center, Balkan terrorists in the ISIS ranks called on their countrymen to hijrah (pilgrimage to the Caliphate) and carry out terrorist attacks on “Slavic crusaders.” The Balkans were referred to as an “ISIS territory where Quranic Sharia law should be introduced.” With the implementation of counterterrorist measures by countries in the region, the “caliph” Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi threatened to send jihadists to “kill infidels.” Thanks to efficient intelligence work between 2015 and 2019, it was possible to prevent a dozen or so terrorist attacks on government buildings, international institutions (such as NATO bases in Kosovo), diplomatic missions, religious sites (Orthodox monasteries and Catholic churches), critical infrastructure (such as the attempt to poison Kosovo’s water supply system), and sporting events (such as the Albania-Israel football match).⁴³ These attacks were planned and directed from Syrian territory and were to be performed by the returning FTF. Although the WB6 states, in cooperation with foreign partners, manage to reduce the risk of terrorist threats, the phenomenon of returning foreign fighters has significant long-term consequences. The lack of compe-

41 A. Shtuni, *Western...*, p. 23.

42 The interview conducted by the author with one of the Kosovo imams involved in fighting Islamic radicalism in the Balkans.

43 Cf. annual reports published by EUROPOL: *European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2016-2019*, <https://www.europol.europa.eu/tesat-report> [16.03.2020].

hensive measures aimed at combating extremism sources will foster the development of home-grown terrorism.

After the break-up of the “Islamic State,” jihadists were forced to return to their roots in terms of their operations. Direct military action was replaced with the clandestine activity of the terrorist cells, consisting of radicalization, recruitment, and planning of terrorist attacks. Currently, the structures of Islamic extremists operating in the Western Balkans have the limited capacity to launch large and complex simultaneous attacks. Instead, selective and small-scale attacks on police, military, religious institutions, and international structures (e.g., EUFOR, KFOR, EULEX, UNMIK, and others) are real threats. Such incidents occurred in Bosnia and Herzegovina in April 2015 in Zvornik, where one police officer was killed by a Salafist and another wounded. A similar situation occurred in November in the suburbs of Sarajevo (Rajlovac), where two soldiers were killed during the detention of an Islamist from France. In the vicinity of Mostar, there was a failed bombing of General Anto Jeleč, the Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina.⁴⁴

Disregarding the problem of foreign terrorist fighters can have severe consequences for the security of the region, as it is linked to other threats such as organized crime and arms trafficking. The Western Balkans is a human resource for the world’s jihad and a source of armaments. According to an investigation carried out by the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) and the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP), between 2012 and 2015, EUR 1.2 billion of arms were flown to the Middle East (by air and sea) via the Balkans. These were mainly light weapons (e.g., an AK-47 rifle, mortars, grenades, rocket launchers, anti-tank weapons, heavy machine guns, and ammunition supplies) from Bosnia, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Montenegro, Slovakia, Serbia, and Romania, which were delivered to Saudi Arabia, Jordan, the UAE, and Turkey. Then, they were delivered to various armed groups fighting in Syria,

⁴⁴ D. Gibas-Krzak, *Terrorism...*, p. 329.

Yemen, and Libya.^{45,46} What is more, weapons from the region were also used in terrorist attacks in Europe (e.g., in January 2015, the attack on Charlie Hebdo editorial office in Paris used weapons and ammunition from Bosnia and Herzegovina).

Illegal arms trafficking is, in addition to drug trafficking, one of the main activities of organized crime groups operating in the Western Balkans and is facilitated by the weakness of state institutions, especially the high level of corruption, and the geostrategic position for smuggling routes, access to seaports, and the region's geographical proximity to Syria and Iraq.⁴⁷ The role of the WB6 region in the illegal trade in arms and explosives is a legacy of the armed conflicts that took place in the 1990s and also affects the level of militarization of society. According to UN data, 19.5% of citizens own weapons illegally. In the Small Arms Survey ranking, the countries of the Western Balkans are among the 25 countries with the highest ratio of firearms owned by civilians per 100 people. Montenegro and Serbia are ranked third (after the USA and Yemen), with 39.1 firearms units per 100 inhabitants. Bosnia and Herzegovina rank 10th (31.2), North Macedonia 12th (29.8), and Kosovo 17th (23.8).⁴⁸ The high level of weaponry among the civilian population, combined with ethnic and religious tensions, the activities of extremist organizations, and the involvement of external actors (especially from the Gulf States), generates high risk for local conflict. Foreign terrorist militants returning from either Syria or Iraq may be the spark that will light the “Balkan powder keg.”

Conclusions

In the 1990s, the Balkan region “imported” foreign volunteers fighting in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The situation turned 180 degrees in

⁴⁵ Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, *Making a Killing*, 27.07.2016, <https://www.ocrrp.org/en/makingakilling/> [17.11.2020].

⁴⁶ I. Angelovski, L. Marzouk, M. Patrucic, *Making a Killing: The 1.2 Billion Euro Arms Pipeline to Middle East*, Balkan Insight, 27.07.2016, <https://balkaninsight.com/2016/07/27/making-a-killing-the-1-2-billion-euros-arms-pipeline-to-middle-east-07-26-2016/> [17.11.2020].

⁴⁷ See: The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, *Hotspots of Organized Crime in the Western Balkans*, Geneva 2019.

⁴⁸ A. Karp, *Estimating Global Civilian-Held Firearms Numbers*, “Small Arms Survey Briefing Paper”, June 2018, p. 4.

2011 when the first fighters started to go on jihad to Syria and then to Iraq, joining ISIS and the Al-Nusra Front. The returning FTFs are particularly troubling for the security and stability of the entire region, and Western Balkan countries should take specific steps to counteract their development. Given the difficult socio-economic situation, the high level of organized crime, the high saturation of the population with light weapons, the continuing ethnic/religious tensions and territorial disputes in the region, uncontrolled migration, a high degree of militarization, and the involvement of external actors, the risk of destabilizing the region is observed. Due to the weakness of state institutions, the authorities should cooperate with foreign partners.

For the internal dimension, a critical role seems to be played by police and security services, especially counter-terrorism departments, and consists of recognizing, monitoring, and combating radical environments responsible for conducting ideological indoctrination and recruiting volunteers to fight in places of armed conflict. Preventive measures against persons in prison are particularly significant here. It should not be forgotten that in the long term, the focus should be on eliminating the structural causes (political, social, and economic) of religious and nationalist extremism.

In the cross-border and international dimension, there is a need to exchange intelligence on individuals and groups who travel to other countries intending to take part in hostilities. It is necessary to strengthen controls at border crossing points, which is particularly crucial since returning FTFs benefit from fake documents and illegal routes through the Balkans. Given the chaos caused by the mass influx of migrants and refugees, border services may have severe difficulties in detecting them. To combat FTF or restrict their freedom of movement, strategic approaches to the management of border crossing points should include, among other things, measures such as extending the powers to refuse entry, revoke a visa, refuse or withdraw a passport, and enable the collection of biometric data and the exchange of intelligence.⁴⁹ In the case of the FTF from the Western Balkans, this is particularly relevant as some of them (around 10-15%) have more

⁴⁹ M. Hamaid, *Foreign fighters: a five eyes border management perspective*, "Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism", 2017, vol. 12, no. 1, pp. 54-65.

than one nationality. Some of them are representatives of the Albanian or Bosnian diasporas in Germany or Austria⁵⁰ and hence hold EU passports. Therefore, these countries may be the target of their return, where they may carry out terrorist activities such as radicalization, recruitment, and assassination. It should be remembered that it is only thanks to the international cooperation of the police, border guards, secret services, and international institutions (including Interpol, Europol, Frontex) that the international community increases its chances of preventing, detecting, and combating the phenomenon of foreign terrorist fighters.

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