

WESTERN BALKANS

EXTREMISM RESEARCH FORUM

REGIONAL REPORT

UNDERSTANDING VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN THE
WESTERN BALKANS

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INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND TO THE PROJECT

The Extremism Research Forum is a UK government funded research project¹, examining drivers of radicalization and violent extremism in the Western Balkans – Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia.

The research commenced in 2017, exploring a range of themes and topics with key stakeholders within communities, civil society and government, in order to build a coherent picture of the specific situation in each country. This research seeks to inform and assist in the development of CVE policies and programming, offering key findings that could be relevant to practitioners and policymakers working in the field of countering violent extremism.

Each country study: 1) maps out the forms of extremism; 2) examines drivers and contributing factors of radicalisation (global, regional, national and local drivers, political and socio-economic); 3) develops a profile of at risk communities.

Taking into account the multifaceted nature of extremism, the research also; 4) identifies any potential links with organised crime, money laundering, links to terrorism; and; 5) analyses trans-national co-operation of violent extremist groups.

This study forms one of the six contextual research pieces, presenting findings from in-depth primary research conducted with communities and wider stakeholders with knowledge of the violent extremist threats specific to the country. The findings are based on primary, and where credible, secondary data sources in order to create an informed and nuanced picture of the violent extremist activity or potential threat within the country. Importantly, it is intended that this research usefully informs policy development, providing practical recommendations, while also feeding into an overarching regional report, where broader linkages and key transnational issues that have been identified from the research will be examined.

It is expected that this project will result in an increased understanding of the size of extremist threats emanating from the WB region, and ultimately increased ability of the UK and Western Balkan partners to address radicalisation based on increased understanding of the issues and the problem.

¹ Implemented by the British Council, in partnership with the International Conflict and Research Institute (INCORE), Ulster University.

THE REGION AND THE RISK

The Western Balkans – a geopolitical term coined by EU institutions to describe the countries of Southeast Europe that are not yet members of the Union – encompasses Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Kosovo, Macedonia (former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia), Montenegro, and Serbia. Historically, the Balkans region has been seen as politically volatile and unstable, especially after the end of Ottoman rule in the late 19th century, but also more recently, following the violent post-Cold War breakup of Yugoslavia and the subsequent wars of Yugoslav succession (1991-2001). The fragmentation of the former Yugoslavia into a number of smaller countries reflected another geopolitical term – Balkanization – often used to describe the division of a region or state into reduced territories that are viewed as hostile or uncooperative with one another.

In truth, violent episodes in the history of the Balkans have typically echoed important geopolitical developments, rather than resulting from the alleged “ancient ethnic hatred” of the region, though this argument was persistently used during the wars of Yugoslav succession to justify reluctance by the West to intervene.² **In the past six years, localized reflections of the global foreign fighter phenomenon have been the single most obvious manifestation of violence in the Western Balkans, with fighters departing to Syria and Iraq, and to a lesser extent to Ukraine. This phenomenon was particularly notable in Albania, BiH, Macedonia, and Kosovo which are most affected by administrative dysfunctionality, frozen conflict, and unresolved identity and governance issues.**

Despite early predictions that the phenomenon would be linked to high levels of terrorist violence in the region, many experts and officials in the Western Balkans say this risk was overstated; and in large numbers, these officials reported to researchers that they were actually more concerned about the spread of non-violent extremism, especially in the context of political conflict.³ Still, with the benefit of hindsight, the extent of the foreign fighter phenomenon can now be more clearly assessed and key trends and numbers more accurately determined. **Drivers of radicalization and recruitment in different contexts can also be better understood, and this knowledge can be actuated in the development of situationally-specific prevention programmes.**

For the most part, only males who departed for battlefields are viewed by experts as likely combatants; but overall, law enforcement and intelligence sources in the region now believe that up to 1,075 individuals (men, women, children, and elderly) travelled to Syria and Iraq from the end of 2012 through the end of 2016. Women and children constituted almost 35% of this group, as well as an unidentified number of elderly men, who are also considered non-combatants. The two tables below account for citizens from the region who, according to government officials: (i) remain in Syria or Iraq, (ii) have died in the conflict zone, and (iii) departed but have returned

² This has been widely written about by everyone from journalists to scholars and has been analysed through various disciplinary frameworks by academic researchers (e.g., from the perspective of how the notion was harnessed by media, how politicians used the notion to excuse inaction, etc.). Two oft-cited books published during the war essentially discredited the “ancient hatreds” thesis. See: Donia, R. J. & Fine, J. V. A. Jr. (1994) *Bosnia and Herzegovina: A Tradition Betrayed*. New York: Columbia University Press; and Malcolm, N. (1994) *Bosnia: A Short History*. London: Macmillan. And in 1999, Steven Schwartz asked, “...is the presence of ‘ancient hatreds,’ legendary resentments, and atavistic habits really sufficient to explain the extent and intensity of brutality in the Yugoslav war of the 1990s?” concluding, “This is somewhat akin to blaming Gothic paganism for Nazism.” See: Schwartz, S. (1999) *Beyond ‘Ancient Hatreds’*. *Policy Review*.

³ For example: in Albania, respondents reported that religiously-based violent extremists are isolated but that a majority of Albanian citizens view both religious extremism and the politicisation of religion as potential threats to the country; in BiH, research participants repeatedly noted that the spread of non-violent Salafism was a security concern, largely due to its potential to undermine democratic values in an already dysfunctional socio-political space; and in Macedonia, the political fragility of the country was cited by researchers as a key contextual factor for radicalisation, and one which may make the country more susceptible to the effects of all extremisms, including to the ideological influences of non-violent religious and nationalist extremism. See these chapters for more.

home. Citizens from Kosovo, BiH, Albania, and Macedonia have comprised the bulk of the Western Balkans contingents in ISIS conflict zones.

Table 1 – Number of adults from the Western Balkans in Syria/Iraq, 2012-2017⁴

Western Balkans	Men in Syria/Iraq	Women in Syria/Iraq	Total
Albania	96	13	109
Bosnia and Herzegovina	177	63	240
Kosovo	255	48	303
Macedonia	140	14	154
Montenegro	18	5	23
Serbia	37	12	49
TOTAL	723	155	878

Table 2 – Estimated number of children from the Western Balkans in Syria/Iraq, 2012-2017⁵

Western Balkans	Children in Syria/Iraq
Albania	31
Bosnia and Herzegovina	57
Kosovo	95 ⁶
Macedonia	no data
Montenegro	4
Serbia	10
TOTAL	197

Traffic to and from Syria reached its peak in 2013 and early 2014, when some 70% of the Western Balkans contingent travelled back and forth with some regularity. The pace of travel then slowed in 2015, and almost completely stopped by mid-2016, when the last departures (of one woman from BiH and four men from southern Serbia) were registered.⁷ This decline in traffic can be attributed to: (1) the overall demise of ISIS; (2) intensified regional and international efforts to criminally prosecute aspiring fighters and returnees; (3) an escalation in fighting in the conflict zones, which in turn became more difficult to cross into and out of; and (d) the gradual exhaustion of the pool of individuals willing to fight in Syria and Iraq.

The end of ISIS as the world has known it certainly does not mean the end of radicalization and recruitment into extremism and into violence. Indeed, for security and law enforcement officials in the Western Balkans, it simply means having to refocus or heighten their attention on other forms and threats of extremism, including many groups that have long instrumentalised ethnic and national identity tensions in the region. Given the socio-political dynamics of the Western Balkans and the prevalence of ethnicity-based identity cultures, it is important that the risk of these types of extremist influences is fully appreciated. Media and political personalities may not declare the region a “hotbed of ethno-nationalist violence” as readily and boldly as they

⁴ This data was reported to researchers in early 2018 by intelligence and police officials in the region.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ It is believed that 55 children under the age of 18 were taken to Syria and Iraq from Kosovo by their parents, and that at least 40 more were born there.

⁷ From interviews with law enforcement and intelligence officials who spoke under condition of anonymity.

proclaimed it was a hotbed of ISIS terrorism,⁸ but the truth is that less violence has been carried out in the region by Salafist militants than by individuals who express anti-Western or nationalist sentiments (for example, see the discussion of far-right violence in the chapter on Serbia).

PATTERNS OF RADICALISATION AND RECRUITMENT

A close look at patterns of radicalisation and recruitment in the Western Balkans reveals a number of trends, three of which are particularly noteworthy:

(1) **Researchers who study foreign fighter departures are frequently tempted to present their data in terms of the number of fighters per one million inhabitants of a given country. While mathematically accurate, such calculations can be misleading.** For example, compared to Belgium, both BiH and Kosovo appear to have had a higher rate of citizen engagement in the fighting in Syria and Iraq. The population of Belgium is around 11,370,000 and there have been approximately 498 Belgian foreign fighters, or 44 per one million inhabitants. The populations of BiH and Kosovo are around 3,530,000 and 1,780,000 respectively, and they contributed some 240 and 303 citizens (men and women) to the Western Balkans contingent in Syria and Iraq (respectively); making the rate of foreign fighters from Bosnia around 68 per one million inhabitants, and from Kosovo 170 per one million inhabitants. This is significantly higher than the Belgian average, which is cited as the highest in the EU. However, this approach fails to recognize an important fact – that nearly all those who departed to join various insurgent groups in Syria and Iraq were Muslim; and if calculated in this context, statistics on radicalization and recruitment in Belgium, BiH, and Kosovo look rather different. As such, there were 83 foreign fighters for every 100,000 Muslims in Belgium (the total number of which is around 600,000). With some 1,790,000 Muslims living in BiH, there were some 13 foreign fighters for every 100,000 Muslims; and in Kosovo, with a Muslim population estimated at 1,700,000, there were some 18 foreign fighters for every 100,000 Muslims. Through this lens, ISIS' recruitment of followers in Belgium could be viewed as far more successful than in BiH and Kosovo.⁹

Table 3 – Foreign fighter (FF) recruitment among general populations in the EU¹⁰

EU	FFs per 1,000,000 people	Prevalence of FFs in general population
Belgium	44	1 in 22,727
France	25	1 in 40,000
Germany	12	1 in 83,333
UK	12	1 in 83,333

⁸ For example, see: Gall, C. (21 May 2016) *How Kosovo Was Turned Into Fertile Ground for ISIS*. New York Times. Available from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/22/world/europe/how-the-saudis-turned-kosovo-into-fertile-ground-for-isis.html>; Georgievski, B. (30 May 2017) *Could Balkan nations become the new hotbeds of Islamist extremism?*. Deutsche Welle. Available from: <http://www.dw.com/en/could-balkan-nations-become-the-new-hotbeds-of-islamist-extremism/a-39045256>; and *Militant Islam gains ground in the Balkans*. (12 October 2010) Deutsche Welle. Available from: <http://www.dw.com/en/militant-islam-gains-ground-in-the-balkans/a-6100488>.

⁹ Adapted and updated from: Azinović, V. & Jusić, M. (2016) *The New Lure of the Syrian War: The Foreign Fighters' Bosnian Contingent*. Sarajevo: Atlantic Initiative, 24. Data for BiH is drawn from the country's 2013 census; data for Kosovo is drawn from two sources – the country's 2017 Statistical Yearbook, for total population numbers, and national 2011 census data that found 95.6% of respondents identified as Muslim (this is the rate used by the US State Department in several reports); and data for Belgium, which does not collect or publish statistics on religious affiliation, is thus also drawn from two sources – total population numbers are for 2018 and are from the government statistics agency, and the number of Muslims is estimated based on the 2015 Eurobarometer report on Discrimination within the EU, which identified 5.2% of Belgians as Muslim.

¹⁰ Data for Belgium, which does not collect or publish statistics on religious affiliation, is drawn from two sources – total population numbers are for 2018 and are from the government statistics agency, and the number of Muslims is estimated based on the 2015 Eurobarometer report on Discrimination within the EU, which identified 5.2% of Belgians as Muslim; data for France, Germany and the UK is drawn from Renard, T. & Coolsaet, R. (2018) *Returnees: Who Are They, Why Are They (Not) Coming Back And How Should We Deal With Them?*. Egmont.

Table 4 – Foreign fighter (FF) recruitment among Muslim populations in the EU¹¹

EU	FFs per 100,000 Muslims	Prevalence of FFs in Muslim population
Belgium	83	1 in 1,204
France	30	1 in 3,333
Germany	18	1 in 5,555
UK	26	1 in 3,846

Table 5 – The impact of the foreign fighter (FF) phenomenon in the Western Balkans¹²

Western Balkans	Population	Muslim population	FFs
Albania	2,876,000	1,587,000	109
Bosnia and Herzegovina	3,531,000	1,790,000	240
Kosovo	1,783,000	1,700,000	303
Macedonia	2,074,000	700,500	154
Montenegro	623,000	118,500	23
Serbia	7,040,000	223,000	49

Table 6 – FF recruitment among general populations in the Western Balkans

Western Balkans	FFs per 1,000,000 people	Prevalence of FFs in general population
Albania	39	1 in 26,641
Bosnia and Herzegovina	68	1 in 14,705
Kosovo	170	1 in 5,882
Macedonia	77	1 in 12,987
Montenegro	3.7 (per 100,000 people)	1 in 27,027
Serbia	7	1 in 142,857

Table 7 – FF recruitment among Muslim populations in the Western Balkans

Western Balkans	FFs per 100,000 Muslims	Prevalence of FFs in Muslim population
Albania	7	1 in 14,286
Bosnia and Herzegovina	13	1 in 7,692
Kosovo	18	1 in 5,555
Macedonia	22	1 in 4,545
Montenegro	19	1 in 5,263
Serbia	22	1 in 4,545

¹¹ Ibid.¹² All numbers have been rounded to the nearest thousand(s) to enable easier calculation. These recent assessments of the foreign fighter phenomenon in the region typically omit minors (under the age of 18).

(2) **The mobilization of prospective foreign fighters in the Western Balkans appears to have been more successful in countries where Muslims are a (relative) minority**, such as in Serbia and Macedonia. This lends support to the notion that minority groups, and diasporas in general, are often more susceptible to radicalization into violent extremism. Members of minority communities living outside their original identity corpus sometimes grow to believe that the majority identity group surrounding them is the cause of injustice (real or perceived) and discrimination as well as political, social, and economic marginalisation. The mobilising narrative of militant groups thrives on this victimhood mentality, and groups that target Muslims specifically mechanise the historic (and current) oppression inflicted on Muslims by their non-Muslim neighbours.¹³ What's more, in both Serbia and Macedonia, researchers reported that, among Muslims, trust in state institutions is incredibly low; and in Serbia, this is offset by a higher-than-average rate of trust in religious institutions and NGOs (see these reports for more – ERF Report Serbia 2018, ERF Report Macedonia 2018). This may be related to perceptions of exclusion and may make Muslims in these societies more susceptible to the influences of religiously-affiliated non-governmental organisations and extremist religious leaders, especially if they position themselves in opposition to the state, which should be considered in the context of P/CVE programming.¹⁴

(3) Finally, when comparing the dynamics of radicalisation in the West with those in the Western Balkans, another notable difference emerges related to the rate at which violence is brought to fruition. **Given the number and *modus operandi* of recent terrorist attacks in Western Europe, groups and individuals radicalised in the Western Balkans appear so far to be less violent and less driven by revenge against their respective communities.** Since 2012, the EU countries with the highest numbers of foreign fighters have been exposed to a series of indiscriminate and brutal terrorist attacks, on their home soil, that were linked to, instigated by, or inspired by ISIS. In France, the November 2015 attack in Paris has been the deadliest, resulting in 130 killed, including 90 at the Bataclan Theatre. That same year, in January, 12 people died when the Paris offices of *Charlie Hebdo* were attacked. France also experienced the Nice lorry attack, which left 86 people dead in 2016. In Belgium, bombings at the Brussels airport and a metro station in March 2016 killed 32. In Germany, 12 people died when a lorry was driven into a crowded 2016 Christmas market in Berlin. In the UK, five people were killed in the April 2017 Westminster attack. Then, in May, the Manchester Arena bombing led to the deaths of 22, followed by the London Bridge attack in June, which left 8 dead.

During this same period, countries in the Western Balkans have witnessed just 2 isolated lone-actor attacks in BiH (both in 2015) aimed at police and armed forces, along with one foiled terrorist plot in Albania (2017) that was aimed at the Israeli national football team and involved accomplices in Kosovo and Macedonia. Given this relatively low level of violent extremism in the region, despite having been swept up in the global foreign fighter phenomenon, it would be interesting to examine whether drivers of radicalization and extremism in the Western Balkans result in an individual or group mentality that is less likely to compel actual engagement in violence, especially in home communities, and if so, why. This is particularly important in the region at this time due to the frightening perception

¹³ For more, see Piazza, J.A. (2018) Transnational Ethnic Diasporas and the Survival of Terrorist Organizations. *Security Studies* (accepted and forthcoming). Also see: Allen, H. et al. (2015) Drivers of Violent Extremism: Hypotheses and Literature Review. RUSI, which found that "shared experiences of discrimination and exclusion" are strongly linked to the susceptibility of individuals to radicalization.

¹⁴ For comparison, in BiH, a 2017 IRI public opinion poll that disaggregated data by ethnicity shows considerable agreement among respondents of all ethnicities (which can be roughly assumed to align with religious affiliation) regarding whether religion is a positive or negative influence (more than half of respondents from each of the three major ethnic groups said it is somewhat or mostly negative).

created by some media and political elites that BiH and Kosovo are “terrorist safe havens” and, as such, immanent threats to regional and international security.¹⁵

As the scale of the foreign fighter phenomenon became clear to analysts several years ago, they and other experts began emphasising the need to both view the phenomenon holistically and also treat radicalization in a locally-specific manner, avoiding one-size-fits-all approaches. Meaning, solutions to the problem of radicalisation must incorporate all of society and must recognise the role that systemic factors play as drivers, but de-radicalisation and prevention programmes must be designed to untangle the unique web of factors that drives any given individual toward extremes. Indeed, time and again, researchers add to a chorus of voices reporting that “there is no single profile of a foreign fighter...”

In the Western Balkans, the role of systemic factors – often called “push factors” – are a special concern, because “countries in the region are young and have brittle institutions.”¹⁶ Interviewees in each of the countries evaluated in this research cited the pressing need to address systemic factors such as economic deprivation, corruption, and political and institutional dysfunction. Along with these push factors, individual-level drivers called “pull factors” also contribute to the radicalisation process. Across the Western Balkans, and from respondents of all types, personal and community-level crises of identity – especially among youth, who face very high levels of unemployment and social disenfranchisement – were highlighted as a key potential driver of extremism (see individual reports – ERF Report Albania 2018, ERF Report BiH 2018, ERF Report Kosovo 2018, ERF Report Macedonia 2018, ERF Report Montenegro 2018, ERF Report Serbia 2018). As Peter Neumann has observed, “fault lines that have emerged from the wars of the 1990s...can easily be activated. Given how deeply shaken an old and seemingly strong country like France has been by recent attacks, one can only imagine the kind of impact that a large-scale jihadist attack would have in many of the countries in the Balkans.”¹⁷

Still, as noted above, Western Balkans states have thus far been spared such an attack, and security and intelligence officials across the region report that fears about returned foreign fighters inciting violence have not manifested. That is not to say these former fighters have been successfully de-radicalised or reintegrated, but that they are not considered to represent a significant threat of violence. Some research respondents did express concern that regional prisons are ill-equipped to deal with radicalised inmates, and thus that returnees who are imprisoned may potentially radicalise other prisoners. This issue is quite salient in Kosovo, which has aggressively prosecuted returned fighters; but there, one official noted that imprisoned radical imams, who tend to be more charismatic than most returned fighters, may represent an even greater radicalisation risk (see ERF Report Kosovo 2018).

Though they may not display a propensity for violence upon their return, the radicalisation of former fighters, as well as radicalisation into extremism more generally, presents another concern for many experts and authorities in the region – the subtler threat of *non-violent*

¹⁵ Both countries have been consistently portrayed as “hotbeds of radical Islam,” “terrorist safe havens” and “springboards for terrorism in Western Europe.” For more, see: Gall, C. (21 May 2016) *How Kosovo Was Turned Into Fertile Ground for ISIS*. New York Times. Available from:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/22/world/europe/how-the-saudis-turned-kosovo-into-fertile-ground-for-isis.html>; Radicalization in Bosnia: Islamists Gaining Ground. (27 March 2018) Deutsche Welle (video). Available from: <http://www.dw.com/en/radicalization-in-bosnia/av-43144123>; Georgievski, B. (30 May 2017) *Could Balkan nations become the new hotbeds of Islamist extremism?*. Deutsche Welle. Available from: <http://www.dw.com/en/could-balkan-nations-become-the-new-hotbeds-of-islamist-extremism/a-39045256>; *Militant Islam gains ground in the Balkans*. (12 October 2018) Deutsche Welle. Available from: <http://www.dw.com/en/militant-islam-gains-ground-in-the-balkans/a-6100488>; Neubert, N. (21 March 2015) *Sarajevo's struggles to contain jihadism*. Deutsche Welle. Available from: <http://www.dw.com/en/sarajevos-struggles-to-contain-jihadism/a-18331506>; Feilcke, A. (23 December 2016) *Is Kosovo a breeding ground for Islamists?*. Deutsche Welle. Available from: <http://www.dw.com/en/is-kosovo-a-breeding-ground-for-islamists/a-36898392>; and Mayr, W. (5 April 2016) *Bosnia's Islamic State Problem*. Der Spiegel.

¹⁶ Neumann, P. (2017) Foreword in *Between Salvation and Terror: Radicalization and the Foreign Fighter Phenomenon in the Western Balkans*, ed., Vlado Azinović. Sarajevo: School of Political Sciences and the Atlantic Initiative, 7.

¹⁷ Ibid.

extremism. In fact, many respondents linked a lack of psychosocial programming for returnees to the risk of their continued commitment not to violence but to spreading radical ideology and growing the extremist movement, within the confines of the law. Indeed, returnees very often come home to face the same economic deprivation and social exclusion that made them vulnerable to radicalisation in the first place. Even if one takes the optimistic view that former fighters “regret what they have done and want to go back to their families and lives as quickly as possible,” as one prosecutor in Kosovo asserted (see “New/Evolving Threats” in the ERF Report Kosovo 2018), the conditions of that life may make it extremely difficult for an individual to effectively reintegrate or further de-radicalise. Somehow, regional governments must develop initiatives aimed at intervening in the cycle of poverty and marginalisation that has underpinned the foreign fighter phenomenon and continues to make many citizens in the Western Balkans susceptible to radicalisation.

In 2017, officials in the region reported that over 300 adults had returned to the Western Balkans from Syria and Iraq (see Table 8). They also estimated that some 460 individuals from the region remained in ISIS territory, more than half of whom were believed to be non-combatants who accompanied male fighters (see Table 9); but these assessments were made well before the fall of Mosul, Raqqa, and Deir ez-Zor, which were considered the last bastions of ISIS control in Syria and Iraq. Given that over 200 men, women, and children from the region, or 1 in 5, have died in the military theatre since 2012, and considering the extent of fighting and bombardment that preceded the capture of these cities, it is reasonable to assume that remaining Western Balkans contingents in Syria and Iraq were severely decimated in the last year. This also means that any citizens who return to the region in the future, including minors, may have witnessed or survived particularly brutal atrocities or inhumane treatment and may thus be in even greater need of coordinated services that support their reintegration, re-socialisation and, if appropriate, de-radicalisation.

Table 8 – Number of adults returnees from Syria/Iraq to the Western Balkans, 2012-2017¹⁸

Western Balkans	Adults who have returned from Syria/Iraq
Albania	40
Bosnia and Herzegovina	50
Kosovo	130
Macedonia	80
Montenegro	9
Serbia	10
TOTAL	319

¹⁸ This data was reported to researchers in early 2018 by intelligence and police officials in the region.

Table 9 – Make-up of the Western Balkans contingent in Syria/Iraq in 2017¹⁹

Western Balkans	Combatants	Non-combatants	Total
Albania	23	50	73
Bosnia and Herzegovina	59	50	109
Kosovo	58	136 (41 women, 95 children)	194
Macedonia	37	4	41
Montenegro	3	6 (4 women, 2 children)	9
Serbia	17	21 (11 women, 10 children)	38
TOTAL	197	267	464

Individuals who may wish to return to their respective homes now face a number of obstacles, including simply managing to escape ISIS territory, especially for those whose personal or travel documents have been confiscated. Still, an unknown number of individuals from the region who remain in Syria and Iraq are thought to reject the idea of returning to the “apostate” countries from which they originally migrated. Projections made by some analysts and political figures that foreign fighters would return to the region *en masse* were clearly farfetched given that less than one-third of the citizens who departed to Syria and Iraq from the Western Balkans have returned, even after the functional defeat of ISIS.²⁰ While it remains important that intelligence services in the region monitor returnees in case they make contact with extremist networks or become involved in recruiting activities, there is a risk that continued politicisation of this issue will detract from or delay the necessary work of developing context-specific programmes to prevent and counter all extremist threats, even those less brazen.

In the context of religious radicalisation, one of the blurry lines that must be toed by those seeking to prevent or counter extremism lies between democratic religious rights and freedoms on one side and, on the other, an understanding that any person who is radicalised into violence was once non-violent. Throughout the region, the problem of drawing this line was raised by respondents, particularly those in law enforcement, some of whom have adopted Schmid’s term “not-now-violent” as a way of categorising certain individuals.²¹ This reflects a desire by many experts to distinguish between people who may be intellectually and socially radicalised but show no propensity for violence, and those who appear to be passing through a phase of non-violent radicalisation on the path to a violent extreme. In this way, authorities and analysts appear increasingly sensitive to the context specificity of what is viewed as “extreme” and the need to remain open to changing relativities within extremisms.

The lack of prior religious knowledge among radicalised individuals was repeatedly highlighted by research participants as well, suggesting that a shallow understanding of religion makes one vulnerable to radicalising forces who present reductionism as piety. Some analysts have called the ideology promoted by Salafi extremists a “pseudo-theology” that “distils concepts to their least complex form,” and have called for religious counter-messaging to educate citizens in the

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ For instance, in 2015, analysts predicted that the wave of migrants coming from the Middle East through Greece into Macedonia could serve as cover for untold numbers of former ISIL fighters to enter or return to the region. For example, see: Deliso, C. (2 July 2015) *Five Ways ISIS Can Destabilize the Balkans*. Balkananalysis. Available from: <http://www.balkananalysis.com/albania/2015/07/02/five-ways-isis-can-destabilize-the-balkans/>. And in 2017, several EU leaders made false assertions that thousands of ISIL fighters had returned or were set to return from Syria and Iraq to BiH. For example, see: Spaic, I. (7 September 2017) *Bosnia War Victims Slam Croatia President’s Terror Claims*. Balkan Insight. Available from: <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/bosnia-war-victims-slam-croatia-president-s-terror-claims-09-07-2017>.

²¹ See: Schmid, A. P. (2014) *Violent and Non-Violent Extremism: Two Sides of the Same Coin?*. ICCT Research Paper, 14.

region about the complexities and nuances of Islamic practice.²² Interviewees for this research also recommended that religious education and counter-narratives could serve as a moderating force and should be integrated into broader prevention programming.

Finally, nearly all research participants expressed concern about the role of the Internet in the process of radicalisation. Whether used to disseminate extremist messaging, facilitate networking, or fundraise, it is clear to experts and citizens alike that web-based platforms and activities serve as drivers or force multipliers of radicalisation in the Western Balkans. In fact, in a public opinion survey conducted in Serbia, nearly half of respondents (47%) rated social networks (Facebook and Twitter) as the most valuable tools of extremist propaganda (see ERF Report Serbia 2018, Figure 3). One powerful feature of the Internet in the context of radicalisation is that content can outlast its creator or can be updated and maintained even when its creator is no longer free to interact with the public; such is the case with notorious Macedonian jihadist recruiter Rexhep Memishi, whose online platforms remain highly active despite his imprisonment and continue to host radical content (see ERF Report Macedonia 2018).

STATE RESPONSES TO THE FOREIGN FIGHTER PHENOMENON

As yet, none of the countries in this study have fully implemented comprehensive programmes aimed at preventing and countering radicalisation, beyond mostly repressive, top-down, securitised initiatives that fail to involve society at large. Given that citizens in the region appear to be strongly influenced by religious figures as well as by family ties and links to diaspora communities, it is important that grassroots-level participation is encouraged in both the planning and implementation stage of whole-of-society efforts to counter extremism. While the necessity of this engagement is acknowledged in the CVE strategies and action plans of each country, putting this into practice has proven quite difficult, not least because these countries all face considerable economic obstacles and sometimes limited or conditional political will.

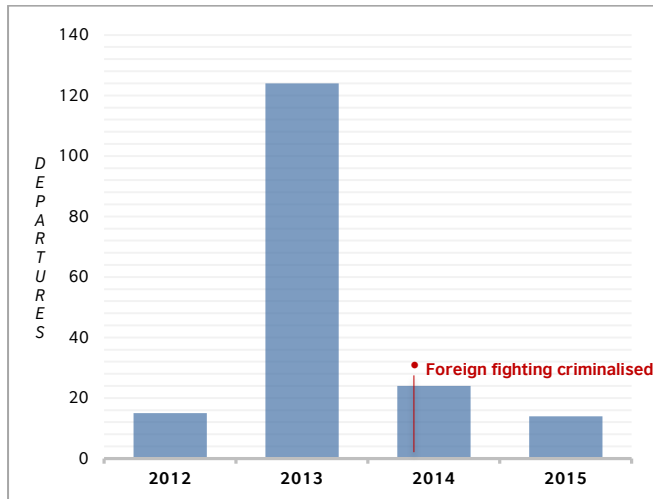
Nevertheless, updated frameworks for action exist in each country. As authorities in the Western Balkans began recognising the role of their citizens in the global foreign fighter phenomenon, and as pressure grew from multilateral organisations and international partners, regional governments adopted or amended various legal mechanisms related to terrorism and extremism. In every country, foreign fighting was explicitly criminalised. This process took place throughout 2014 and 2015 – following a 2013 peak in departures from the region to Syria and Iraq – and it appears to be causatively linked to a significant slowdown in departures in 2015.

As an example of this pattern, Figure 1 (below) shows the departures of male fighters from BiH (2012-2015), which occurred in 2013 at a rate over five times higher than the next highest year. Foreign fighting was criminalised in April 2014 in BiH, coinciding with a drop-off in departures after the early part of that year. Since 2014, increased vigilance by law enforcement and border authorities has also prevented dozens of aspiring foreign fighters from traveling to the Middle East in the first place, and agencies across the region have improved their cooperation and intelligence sharing to inhibit foreign fighter recruitment and thwart a number of plots aimed at

²² Azinović, V. & Jusić, M. (2016) The New Lure of the Syrian War: The Foreign Fighters' Bosnian Contingent. Sarajevo: Atlantic Initiative, 74.

carrying out terrorist attacks against critical infrastructure and international or security sector targets.²³

Figure 1 – Departures of men from BiH to Syria/Iraq, 2012-2015²⁴



Departures from the Western Balkans to Syria and Iraq almost completely ended in 2016, surely due in part to prosecutions of foreign fighters, vigorously pursued in several countries after legislation was passed. While these legal responses to foreign fighting have been criticised for their lack of standardisation across and within systems, as well as for an over-reliance on plea agreements, prosecutors in the region have faced considerable challenges in producing witness testimony that firmly establishes the presence and role of accused fighters in foreign conflict zones.²⁵ Yet, even when prosecutions are successful, the question remains as to whether prison systems in the Western Balkans have the capacity to appropriately house and rehabilitate radicalised inmates, or whether they may even serve as sites of radicalisation. Regional corrections facilities are already burdened by overcrowding and a lack of specialised staff, and without external support, prison officials are unlikely to play an effective role in de-radicalisation or prevention initiatives.²⁶

Over the last four years, hundreds of suspected terrorists and militants have been detained and questioned in the Western Balkans; and despite some obstacles to prosecution mentioned above, dozens have been charged and sentenced for their involvement in radicalising, recruiting, and financing for, or participating in, terrorist groups such as ISIS or Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (formerly al-Nusra Front). Since 2015, courts in the region have issued guilty verdicts against tens of individuals for offenses related to foreign fighting and terrorism, with sentences totalling more than 450 years (see Table 10). In 2017, more than 70 people were incarcerated for these crimes (see Table 11).

²³ For example, in 2014, Bosnian law enforcement undertook Operation Damascus in which recruiter and Salafi leader Bilal Bosnić; in 2015 and 2016, Macedonia carried out Operations Cell, Cell 2, and Cell 3, to break up the country's recruitment network; and, also in 2016, a joint operation was undertaken by police in Albania, Kosovo, and Macedonia to prevent a planned attack on a World Cup qualifying match between Albania and Israel.

²⁴ Adapted from Azinović, V. & Jusić, M. (2016) *The New Lure of the Syrian War: The Foreign Fighters' Bosnian Contingent*. Sarajevo: Atlantic Initiative, 32.

²⁵ See: Azinović, V. & Bećirević, E. (2017) *A Waiting Game: Assessing and Responding to the Threats from Returning Foreign Fighters in the Western Balkans*. Sarajevo: Regional Cooperation Council.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 7-9.

Table 10 – Total years imprisonment sentenced by courts in the Western Balkans for crimes related to foreign fighting in Syria/Iraq, 2015-2017²⁷

Western Balkans	Total years imprisonment
Albania	126
Bosnia and Herzegovina	39.5
Kosovo	187
Macedonia	33
Montenegro	0.5
Serbia	68.5
TOTAL	454.5

Table 11 – Number of individuals incarcerated in the Western Balkans for criminal offences related to foreign fighting in Syria/Iraq, as of 2018²⁸

Western Balkans	Individuals incarcerated in 2017
Albania	9
Bosnia and Herzegovina	5
Kosovo	43
Macedonia	11
Montenegro	1
Serbia	4
TOTAL	73

Governments across the Western Balkans have participated in capacity-building programmes to strengthen criminal justice institutions, sometimes jointly, and are all actively involved in international and regional cooperation efforts involving law enforcement. Agencies in the region tasked with preventing and combating terrorism have also gradually enhanced their investigative capacities in recent years, especially in the field of cyber-counterterrorism. Still, some institutions continue to suffer from limitations, particularly in terms of resources and experience; and ultimately, preventing radicalisation in the region will require moving from a whole-of-government approach toward a whole-of-society security model.

This model envisions a cross-disciplinary effort that engages legal and healthcare professionals, community leaders, civil society representatives, media, educators, and family members alongside parliamentarians and policymakers, religious leaders, law enforcement officials, and intelligence experts. Though the need for such an approach is reflected to some degree in the CVE strategies and national action plans of all Western Balkan countries, the level of coordination and cooperation it demands will require both capacity and coalition building to set the foundations for truly society-wide engagement. This will also mean that governments and civil society must partner to facilitate bottom-up initiatives driven by needs that are defined at the most local levels. And given findings that family and peer-to-peer interaction remains a strong

²⁷ This data was reported to researchers in early 2018 by intelligence and police officials in the region.

²⁸ Ibid.

force for radicalisation in the region, it would be wise and potentially very effective to harness this as a powerful force of *de*-radicalisation.

REGIONAL CHALLENGES

Several key common challenges in the countries under study stood out as especially notable. First, **officials and analysts routinely described the challenge they face in determining what constitutes non-violent, not-yet-violent, and violent extremism.** The dilemma is that, while all violent extremists have at one time been non-violent, the opposite is *not* true; which means that most non-violent extremists will never become violent. Authorities in democratic societies must therefore monitor and even suppress radical activity that may incite or be linked to violence while maintaining respect for the legal right of non-violent individuals to think extremist thoughts and adhere to extremist beliefs. Already a very grey area, some emerging theories suggest the importance of establishing a unique radicalisation continuum for each context, linking this issue to specific and potentially shifting local realities.²⁹

Second, it was noted by officials throughout the Western Balkans that **foreign organisations and figures have the potential to dangerously influence domestic extremist movements** of all kinds. These include members of respective diaspora groups, religious foundations, and educational institutions, as well as radical ideological figures with large followings in Western Europe. Interviewees from across the region attributed recent spikes in radicalisation in their countries to many years of earlier investment on the part of foreign governments that laid the groundwork for extremism. This was especially highlighted in BiH and Kosovo (see these reports – ERF Report BiH 2018, ERF Report Kosovo 2018), where Gulf-funded humanitarian and social rehabilitation efforts in the post-war space were often conditioned on religious requirements aimed at shifting Balkan Muslims away from their traditional religious practices and toward the relative conservatism of Wahhabi/Salafi teachings. However, there is little evidence to suggest that these efforts were aimed at turning local communities or individuals to violence.

Third, given that the so-called Islamic State has all but disintegrated (in mid-2018) and foreign fighter returns have largely come to an end, security concerns linked to ISIS or other jihadist groups have transformed. Indeed, despite the brutal way in which the utopian dream of Islamic theocracy envisioned by ISIS came to an end, the organisation lives on and is transitioning into what many experts are already referring to as ISIS 2.0.³⁰ Still, while the shape and sway of jihadist organisations remains a worry to many officials in the Western Balkans, in interviews, a number of experts emphasised that they are **less alarmed about the prospect of a former fighter returning home with a desire to commit violence than about a “lone-wolf” who makes him/herself known to authorities for the very first time by committing terrorism.** For the most part, returnees from Syria and Iraq are known to officials and are tracked by intelligence actors. This offers “home-grown terrorists” a relatively greater freedom of movement and the ability to communicate without monitoring, making them potentially more of a risk to society.

Finally, the growing role of the Internet as a force of radicalisation in the region adds to fears about the potential that lone-wolf actors could become radicalised without tipping off intelligence officials. Traditionally, radicalisation and recruitment in the Western Balkans have been facilitated

²⁹ For example, see: Schmid, A. P. (2014) Violent and Non-Violent Extremism: Two Sides of the Same Coin?. ICCT Research Paper, 14.

³⁰ Coker, M., Schmitt, E. & Callimachi, E. (18 October 2017) *With Loss of its Caliphate, ISIS May Return to Guerilla Roots.* New York Times. Also see: Berke, J. (18 October 2017) *ISIS' loss of its caliphate signals the end of one type of ISIS – and the beginning of a new one.* Business Insider; and Barnard, A. & Saad, H. (19 October 2017) *As ISIS' Role in Syria Wanes, Other Conflicts Take the Stage.* New York Times.

by the “human touch;” that is, in-person contact with a figure of authority, followed by peer-to-peer interaction, often in congregation with like-minded individuals who collectively reinforce a very specific worldview through group dynamics. This process, once centred in Salafi strongholds in remote areas across the region, has spread to congregations that have mushroomed over the last few years in and around major cities, particularly in Albania, BiH, Kosovo, and Macedonia. And so, until recently, the radicalising influence of the Internet in the region was considered rather limited and was thought to be only a secondary or even tertiary factor, serving mostly as a force multiplier. However, increased focus by security agencies and analysts on radicalisation and recruitment efforts in the region has revealed that **both the radicalisation process and the dissemination of extremist narratives have gradually shifted into less visible online spaces**. To avoid public exposure and possible investigation or prosecution, quite a few prominent militant preachers of Salafism have turned to the Internet, and to social media platforms specifically, as a forum for proselytisation. This shift provides access for these preachers to a much larger prospective target audience while simultaneously affording them the relative safety of the unregulated online environment.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

In recent years, the ISIS-linked foreign fighter phenomenon has turned international and academic attention toward the issues of radicalisation and extremism into violence. But the danger of extremist ideologies has been clear to citizens in the Western Balkans for decades, at least since radical ethno-nationalist rhetoric played a key role in the violent breakup of Yugoslavia. Indeed, this rhetoric continues to mark political speech in the region to this day, which research respondents all acknowledged as highly problematic. Initial concerns by authorities across the globe that foreign terrorist groups would find footholds in the region may have been reasonable, particularly given the history of conflict, political corruption, and economic dysfunction that mark many former Yugoslav states. But now, with the shape and direction of ISIS unclear and the threat of violence from returned fighters viewed as minimal by many Western Balkans officials, it is important that the problem posed by the foreign fighter phenomenon and related activities is rightsized. In other words, authorities must not become overly focused on addressing outdated theoretical threats that distract them from very real and very worrying developments in other risk areas.

One of these risks in the region is the growing influence of foreign figures – from religious leaders to politicians to entertainers – who are in some cases part of apparently systematic efforts to impact the political, economic, and social course of Western Balkans countries. In the past decade or so, there has been a mushrooming of “soft power” diplomacy in the region by Russia, Turkey, the Gulf States, Iran, and China. Beyond economic development initiatives that deepen business ties and financial obligations between the Western Balkans and these states, less publicised investments directed at supporting authoritarian leaders and nationalist movements appear in many instances intended to undermine democratic transitions and stall or stop the accession of regional states into the EU and NATO. Some of these leaders openly espouse the oppression of certain groups and routinely make anti-Semitic or Islamophobic statements, and financial or other support for their cause is nothing short of complicity in the very dangerous game of identity politics.³¹

As researchers increasingly recognise the ways in which political conflict and crises of identity can set the stage for radicalisation, as well as how the interplay between and among extremist movements can serve as a sustaining force for such movements, these external influences must be understood as part of a wider matrix of forces that are combining in some places to increase the vulnerability of citizens to radicalisation and extremism of all kinds. It is vital, too, that officials in Western Balkans countries understand the importance of tackling not just the most obvious manifestations of extremism but also underlying drivers, which may be exacerbated by certain foreign influencers. This presents regional officials with something of a quandary; on one hand, they are tasked with reinvigorating and even re-envisioning local economies – a mandate that demands a global view as well as deal-making with any number of foreign governments – but on the other, they must be cognisant of the potential longer-term impact of certain bilateral relationships on the social fabric of their countries and communities. A failure to appreciate the risk some of these relationships may pose and thus to act to mitigate their impact could not only destabilise peace and security in the region, though, but in Europe as well.

³¹ For background, see: Talking Policy: *Jasmin Mujanovic on Democracy in the Western Balkans*. (27 April 2018) World Policy (weblog). Available from: <https://worldpolicy.org/2018/04/27/talking-policy-jasmin-mujanovic-on-democracy-in-the-western-balkans/>; and Galeotti, M. (4 April 2018) *Do the Western Balkans Face a Coming Russian Storm?*. European Council on Foreign Relations, Policy Brief no. 250.



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