

MILITANT ISLAMISM AS THREAT TO THE BALKAN SECURITY

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Abstract

Twenty five years after the fall of communism, the Balkans is facing numerous security threats. Particularly, the militant Islamism becomes a serious threat for the fragile stability in the region. The expansion of militant Islamist organizations that are able to join global cooperation over fulfilment of ideological goals is a serious threat to the national and regional security. Even though the activities of these organizations do not differ much from those from the other parts of the world, yet Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania and Kosovo deserve special attention. Some of their political and religious leaders have had long and strong relations with the Muslim Brotherhood and Al Qaeda. Also the militant Islamists have established a solid ground for re-islamization of the Muslim population, their radicalization and recruiting for the jihadist's frontlines. In this paper the factors that influence the expansion of the militant Islamism and the specific methods of acting in the countries of the Western Balkan are researched.

Key words: *Militant Islamism, Islam, the Balkans, threat, security*

Introduction

The war turmoil on the territory of former Yugoslavia and political instability that followed have enabled Al Qaeda and other militant Islamist organizations to be infiltrated in some of the states in the Balkan region. Having got assistance from their allies from the

Near East, the militant Islamists have organized recruit centres, training camps and isolated territories organized in the spirit of the traditional Islam law, the Sharia.

After the terrorist attacks against the US on 9/11 the majority of the Balkan states joined the Global coalition against the terrorism. Actually, these are the two key events that strongly influenced further expansion of militant Islamism in the region. The Arab Spring and its consequences have had strong impact on the Balkans too: it ceased to be just a transit region or a destination for rehabilitation of the militant Islamists who fought in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Syria. Having already been a region with weak border control system, and known for abundance of illegal and cheap arms and organized crime but also for the ongoing reislamization of the Muslim communities, the Balkan has become a base for recruiting militant Islamists. By the end of the first and the beginning of the second decade of the 21 century, the militant Islamism could spread towards Central and Western Europe precisely from the Balkan bases. Meanwhile the militant Islamists embedded in the Balkans have performed a series of terrorist attacks, which got the attention of the international public. For instance, the attack of the police station in Bugojno (June 2010) was followed by a series of terrorist attacks by the militant Islamists from Kosovo in Frankfurt (February 2011), the Embassy of USA in Sarajevo (October 2011), and in Skopje (April 2012). They have shown all gravity of the problem and indicate possible future implications for the security of the Western Balkan.

The Breakthrough and Expansion of Militant Islamism

The quest for the roots of organized militant Islamism in the Balkans, particularly on the territory of former Yugoslavia, is often linked to the life-long activism of Alija Izetbegovic (who later became President of Bosnia and Herzegovina). On the eve of the WWII, as a youngster he joined a conspiracy group of like-minded young people who founded the organization „Young Muslims“. Its general goal was a great Muslim state on the territory of the Balkans, the Middle East and North Africa (so called Islamistan) (Bardos February 2014).

The process of Yugoslavia's dissolution (1990-1991) created conditions for growth of the second generation of militant Islamists. Namely, many Jihadists with long experience from Afghanistan got a higher hand in the movement; they were far more dangerous and more extreme than the first generation of Izetbegovic. Many of those who had been united in the mujahedeen unit *Katibat al Mujahedeen*, have gained Bosnian citizenship. With

support of the local extremists, but with foreign aid from Iran and Saudi Arabia, they have developed strong ideological infrastructure of the militant Islamism, which continued to function even after the Dayton Peace Agreement in 1995. In order to avert militants as well as to stop the flow of funds from the Middle East, Izetbegovic was exposed to strong and continuous diplomatic pressure from the West.

The collapse of Albania's state institutions in 1997 provided additional impetus to the process. Furthermore, the KLA and NLA included some mujahedeen units. Hence there were favourable conditions for promotion of Islamism and positioning of the militant Islamist structures in the region. They used apparently legal methods for embedding in the respective societies through establishment of humanitarian organizations, banks and business companies for the sake of alleged economic development. The Middle East partners have used more secretive methods i.e. intelligence services. Thanks to the financial means from the Arab-Islamist funds, these services have succeeded to install their followers in the key institutions in the state systems in these states of the Western Balkan.

Reislamization of the Muslim Community

Re-islamization of the Muslim population in the Balkans is a very complex process. It is however directly related to the birth and evolution of the Islamism in the Middle East. The re-islamization represents an intellectual trend that has been launched in the 50-ies as a response and counterbalance of the process of de-islamization, which had been imposed by the Western states in order to establish their own economic and geopolitical interests. According to Abdelwahab Meddeb (2003, 32) reislamization is a term which expresses the insistency of the Islamists for clearing of the society through its social, educational, political and religious institutions, from ideas or people that don't belong to Islamism. Similarly, Olivier Roy defines reislamization as a process of deculturalisation - crisis of the ancient cultures as a result of the influence of the Western democracies - which highlights the over emphasized role of the Islam in the shaping of the modern society (Roy 2004, 35).

The process of reislamization of the Muslim population in the Balkans began in the second half of the 20th century. „Young Muslims“ were formed in 1939 as a formal group; yet it did not imply any intensive or aggressive start of reislamization - i.e. it coincided with the process as defined by Meddeb and Roy. - it can be elaborated in the period of announcement of the Muslim declaration of Izetbegovic in 1970. However, the process of reislamization took full force during the war in the former Yugoslavia when big number of

Islamists from the Arab and Middle East used various humanitarian and religious organizations countries in order to establish wide-spread network of local units for promotion of the Islam. They financed construction of new and re-construction of the old mosques in BIH, Montenegro, Albania, Kosovo and Macedonia, which grossly helped their brothers from the Balkans to rediscover their long forgotten roots. Thanks to the generous financial funds, many young Muslims got possibility to graduate at the most famous religious institutions in the Middle East. The gained knowledge along with the fanatic religious devotion of the newly educated and young religious leaders was a recipe for success: their preaching has eventually been widely embraced by the Muslim population in the Western Balkans. Assisted by the existing network of NGOs and religious organizations under the umbrella of the World Assembly of the Muslim Youth (founded in 1972), these new religious leaders have been gifted rich literature and other material and financial means necessary for promotion of the traditional Islam and encouragement of the Muslim believers to devote significant attention to religion. Their basic goal is to operate actively and to promote internal cooperation within the process of so-called Islamic awakening. In other words, it is a process of indoctrination of as many as possible young people in the spirit of Islam in order to give their personal contribution to the Islam (Margetić 2006, 12).

As a result of its geostrategic position and the geopolitical confrontation between the East and the West, the history of the Balkans went through many turbulent periods which often culminated in wars of wider proportions. Similarly, one can say that today's process of re-islamization is actually a by-product of two simultaneous but different processes that additionally increase the risk of explosion of the hidden conflict between the Christians and the Muslims. The first process refers to the promotion of the Islam is a source of new identity of the Muslim population, which could turn the reislamization into a trigger for new wave of instability and conflict. If the religion turns into a basic fundament of the modern identity of the Muslims, then the Balkans will again become an arena for conflicts of different cultures on its territory - i.e. the culture that have increasing support from the West and the other supported by the East (Orient). In other words, in such a case the young Muslim population, instead of cherishing the roots and culture of their ancestors developed in the Balkans for ages, would rather identify with the traditional Islam and would start calling themselves Islamists.

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As a consequence of the mutual interplay of these two processes, the pragmatic leaders of the Muslim communities are faced with a dilemma: how to preserve the secular form of the Islam typical for the Balkans under the new transnational conditions and influences?

Radicalization and Recruitment

The active participation in the NATO intervention in Afghanistan and the involvement in the global coalition against terrorism had the strong influence on the radicalization of the Muslim population. The attacks in Istanbul (2003), in Bugojno (2010), in Sarajevo (2011), in Skopje (2012) etc. not only showed worrisome level of radicalization but also warned that the Middle East is not the only source of this threat. The indicators that showed that the militant Islamism is integrated in these societies have shocked the public and emphasized the need for thorough research of the radicalization process and its causes. Even though not all instances of radicalism take violent form, yet it could easily produce disturbances of the interethnic, religious and cultural relations.

Radicalization

According to the many surveys and analyses, violent and non-violent methods are two key centres of gravity of the radicalization process (Veldhuis and Staun 2009, 4). In violent radicalization, the focus is on the active quest or acceptance of violent methods in realization of the main goal. In non-violent radicalization the emphasis is on the activities aimed to quest and acceptance of long-term changes in society, which could, but they don't have to be threat to the democracy or to use violence for accomplishing the goals. In order to grasp the full idea of radicalization it is necessary to analyse reasons that initiate non-violent and/or violent radicalization.

Definition of the Danish intelligence service (Politiets Efterretningstjeneste - PET), is the most frequently used one in the EU: radicalization is a process in which the individual increasingly accepts use of non-democratic and violent means, including terrorism, in the attempt to achieve certain political or ideological goal" (European Commission 2008, 11). According to the Dutch intelligence service (Algemene Inlichtingen - en Veiligheidsdienst - AIVD) radicalism is a quest for and/or support of the long term changes in the society which could threaten the democratic legal system and include use of non-democratic methods that could damage the functioning of the democratic legal system (Central Intelligence and Security Service 2004, 13). There are certain differences between these two definitions. The Danish definition emphasizes the activity taken for achieving certain political or other goal, in this case, the will for use of violence, while the Dutch definition focuses on the non-democratic intentions of the radicals, which could, but do not have to be accompanied by violence. Having in mind that all Western Balkan countries are aspirants for EU/NATO membership, it is of great importance to note the official definition of the EU. According to the European Commission, the violent radicalization is a phenomenon which unifies the opinions, attitudes and ideas of people that could lead to acts of terrorism (European Commission 2006). Obviously, radicalization is a gradual process which, no matter that it could happen very quickly, do not have a precisely defined start and end condition.

Radicalization of the Muslim population in the Balkans is not an end-result of just one cause. Mental disorder, religious fanaticism, economic and social condition are only part of the reasons that the scholars focus on. Yet, the reasons that could motivate young Muslims to use violence are not very clear. They contain characteristics which are common for the general population that faces similar situations (Roy 2004, 80). The explanations based on the above mentioned causes could contain certain truth but at the same they are not that concrete enough and with practical value. Frustration (from life, social isolation, from one's government or the Western global politics) and influence of religious leaders are the key elements in the process of radicalization. Having in mind that the image that these people create about themselves is a common characteristic of the radicals, it seems that the radicalization has to do with the psychological rather than with the social or economic dimension.

The Process of Radicalization

Recent academic research and findings of the intelligence services in developed democracies identify four phases of the radicalization process (AIVD 2006; Silber and Arvin Bhatt 2007). They are quite applicable to the process that is ongoing in the Western Balkan countries. The first phase refers to the period in which the Muslims become receptive and prone to extremism due to the influence of a number of factors; this phase precedes the beginning of radicalization. The most frequent causes that make potential radicals out of the Muslims include the following: identity crises, discrimination, estrangement and injustice, the living environment, the neighbourhood, the family, personal trauma and the lack of public debate.

The second phase includes three forms of transformation of religious identity or behaviour. Each form of transformation is based on individual factors as a result of frustrations from life, internal or international politics. In this phase, the individuals start the quest of new identity based on religion, they are more interested and research the radical Islamism, and they look up to its followers. In the third phase, there is a belief and indoctrination of the individual. The most critical point in this phase is the moment of total acceptance of the ideology of the militant Islamism and creation of personal belief that the use of force against the non-believers is justified by the ideological goal of the militant Islamism.

The planning, the preparation and the execution of activities of previously selected aims with the use of weapon and explosives, represents the basic characteristic of the fourth and the most critical phase of the process of radicalization. The essence of this phase, which can be the shortest, consists of the fact that each member of the group is committed to the use of force and violence. The intensified training, the moral, the strengthening of their mutual trust and the expressive security culture, pictures their dedication and loyalty to the utter ideological goal of the militant Islamism.

Factors

Radicalization is a process which could not be explained in a simple way because quantity and variety are the fundamental characteristics of the factors which bring to its appearance (Veldhuis and Staun *ibid.*, 21). There is no standard profile according to which it can be concluded if a person is prone to radicalization or not. Religious beliefs and

dissatisfaction with the Western politics towards the Muslim world in the second decade of 21 century seem to be key factors which brought to the use of force by the militant Islamists in the Balkans. The factors of motivation of the young Muslims to join the radical structures are set in three groups: basic, activating and opportunistic factors.

According to the phase model, the most frequent basic factors include: identity crisis; discrimination, estrangement and injustice; living environment, the neighbourhood and the family, and relative lack of public debate on the Islamism. The second and the third phase could be elaborated as a transitional period, which is directly conditioned by the activating factors such as: the foreign politics and isolated provocations; glorification of the Jihad, activism and the quest for cause, and existence of a charismatic person, leader and spiritual counsellor.

The readiness of the Muslims from the Balkans to join the jihadists in Iraq and Syria indicates the level of influence of the Western foreign policy on their radicalization on one hand, and active support of the militant organizations on the other. The readiness for use of violence or terrorist activities is a complex phenomenon, which is not related only to the involvement of home country in the coalition forces in Iraq, Afghanistan or any other operation led by NATO. For example, Blerim Heta from Uroshevac came from a country that was not directly involved in any peace or military operation in the Muslim world; on 24th March 2014 he undertook a suicide bomb attack in Baghdad in which 52 people were killed. He was not a socially endangered person, he did not live in poverty nor did he face social isolation. But under the influence of the local radical structures in Kosovo and Macedonia, he got involved in the radical circles. Having completed the final phase, he left to Syria in order to "fight for his own religion because the other people were bad" and because „he was ready and it was his honour to die for Allah" (Pressly 2014).

The opportunistic factors refer to the numerous locations where the potential radicals have the opportunity to contact or to be inspired by the like-minded people, or places which in the final phase from the process of radicalization serve as locations for recruiting militant Islamists. As most frequent locations or events where the young Muslims have the opportunity to meet and eventually accept the ideology of the militant Islamism are the internet, prisons, mosques, schools, universities, various youth clubs or jobs/organizations, and sport activities.

Recruitment

Recruitment includes ways and methods by which organizations enlarge the number of members, active supporters and followers. According to Michael Taarnby (2005, 6), the recruitment for the jihad means activity whose goal is obtaining the militant Islamist in a particular terrorist cell. The recruitment is the relation between the personal belief and the act of violence". For the Dutch intelligence service, the recruitment for the jihad means finding (quest for, and detecting of potential recruits) surveillance and manipulation of people with an aim for their internalized Islamist belief, with an utter goal, in any way to be involved in the jihad (AIVD *ibid.*, 7).

From the point of view of militant organizations, the recruitment has the same meaning. It is conditioned by many social and individual factors. The act of active involvement presupposes previous interaction between the potential recruit and the system for recruitment of the radical structure. The beginning of interaction is often initiated by the potential recruit. In other words, before the act of active recruitment the individual may show interest for deeper involvement in the process of radicalization. Hence the process of recruitment correlates with the process of radicalization.

In the interest of the conceptual clearness, it is necessary to make a difference between recruitment and radicalization. Two concepts are mutually closely related yet they describe two different matters. Recruitment is a process in concrete steps in the direction of involvement in the group and acceptance of opinions, attitudes and ideas which could lead to terrorism, while radicalization is a process initiated by the unique combination of cause-consequential factors that provoke drastic changes in the attitudes and the behavior of individuals and groups. In other words, recruitment is directly conditioned by radicalization.

The recruitment of the militant Islamists in the Balkans could be elaborated in two stages. The first one begins with the appearance of the Islamist ideology on the territory of former Yugoslavia and continues till the end of the conflict in Macedonia in 2001. The influence of the militant Islamists from Yemen, Algeria, Egypt and Afghanistan, that in the time of the war in former Yugoslavia, fought on the side of the Bosniaks, presents the main factor which had initiated the process of recruitment in the Western Balkan. After the Dayton Peace Agreement, part of them and their followers continued to spread the ideology as a key factor in the process of recruitment, first in Albania and then in Kosovo and Macedonia.

The end of the conflict in 2001 in Macedonia as well as the invasion of Afghanistan marked the beginning of the second stage in the recruitment of militant Islamists from the Balkans. The formation of the International coalition against terrorism with participation of almost all Balkan countries, and the extension of the military campaign to Iraq, resulted in rapid increase of the number of recruits who responded to the call for global jihad. Radicalized from the local leaders of the Wahhabi communities, the young Muslims from the Balkan states became an easy target. According to the media reports, between January 2013 and January 2014 between 218-654 fighters from Albania, BIH, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia participated in the battles in Syria (Holman 2014). According to CIA, at the battlefield of Syria and Iraq, there are around 700 militant Islamists from BIH, Montenegro, Kosovo, Serbia, Albania and Macedonia (Bardos 2014, 19). This figure may not look very big but the tendencies should not be underestimated.

Methods of Activity

In the last several years the Western Balkan has grown into a new frontline of the militant Islamism. In early 2010 the militants committed a series of terrorist attacks on the state institutions, diplomatic-consular offices, the critical infrastructure and civilians in the region. The return of the Jihadists from the battlefields in Syria and Iraq is a big problem, not only from the aspect of spreading of ideology, radicalization and recruitment of new militant Islamists, but also from the point of view of changing the methods of their activities in the region. Having been inspired and motivated by the deeds and the experience of the veterans from Iraq, Afghanistan, Chechnya, Libya and more recently from Syria, they have been engaged in formation of infrastructure and expansion of religious intolerance and anti-Semitism. Nowadays however they turn to terrorism as a more frequent form of activity in the Balkans.

The local collaborators, secure locations, NGOs and the media are part of the necessary infrastructure for the operation of the militant Islamists. The essential meaning of the local allies in the political and security structures for a militant Islamist could be illustrated the best by the example of Abu Hamza, the instigator of the terrorist attacks of the transport infrastructure in London. Thank to the local allies from BIH, Abu Hamza along with numerous like-minded people got new identities and passports, which enabled safe travel, operating and spread of ideology of the militant Islamism across the world. According to the International Crisis group (ICG 2001, 11), during the war and in its

aftermath the regime of Izetbegovic granted Bosnian citizenship to approximately 12000 militant Islamists who had fought on the side of the Bosnian army.

In some locations - such as Gornja Maoca and Donja Bocinja in BIH - the militants succeeded to develop isolated Islamic communities, i.e. they built parallel societies to some degree. The Constitution of BIH and the federal regulations were replaced by the Sharia law. According to the former leader of Islamic Religious Community of Bulgaria Nedim Gendzev, the militant Islamists have an aim to form a „fundamentalist triangle” among Bosnia, Macedonia and the west side of the Rhodope Mountains in Bulgaria. They are supposed to serve as safety shelters for international jihadists but also as key centres for radicalization, recruitment and expansion of the Islamist ideology in the Balkans (Bardos 2014).

The NGO and humanitarian organizations financed by various donators close to Al Qaeda are one of the key components that make the infrastructure of the militant Islamists in the Balkans function well. The official CIA report claims that around one third of the NGOs were helping the activities of the militant Islamist organizations like the Egyptian Al Gama'a al Islamiyya, the Palestine Hamas, the Algerian Armed Islamic group and the Lebanese Hezbollah (CIA 1996). Some of them were singled out as most active in the process of reislamization of the Muslim population in the Western Balkan. For example, a Sudanese organization for help to the countries of the third world, founded by Muhammad Elfatih Hassanein, collaborates not only with the National Islamic front and Al Qaeda but also established exceptionally well-organized cooperation with the former leader of BIH. Namely, he was a personal friend with the Bosnian leader Alija Izetbegovic, who received financial help from the organization, necessary for the purchase of military equipment for the Bosnian Muslims (Shay 2009, 61).

One of the most frequent forms of activity of the militant Islamists in the Western Balkan is extreme interpretation of some parts of the Quran in order to provoke ethnic and religious intolerance. One of the most exploited parts of the Quran that confronts the fragile inter-ethnic and inter-religious relations in the Balkans is the following quote (5:51): „O you who believe, do not take [certain] Jews and Christians as allies; these are [in fact] allies of one another. Those among you who ally themselves with these belong with them. God does not guide the transgressors.” (Куран на македонски).

The growth of anti-Semitism and hate towards the Western allies are also among the most common and the most frequent forms of activity of the militant Islamists. The essence of this method could be found in the Islamic declaration of Alija Izetbegovic, in the part referring to the Palestinian question: „... for Islamic movement and all Muslims in the

world there is only one solution: continuance of the fight, its everyday expansion and support, no matter of the victims and the period, until they are not forced (the Jews) to return each piece of stolen territory (Palestine)" (Izetbegović 1970, 29). This attitude of Izetbegovic with regard to the Jews was not any novel political course. It was not only taken from the Quran but it also referred to the determination of „The great mufti of Jerusalem" Amin al Hussein i.e. one of the key figures in of the militant Islamism.

In addition to propaganda by the radical imams and media, the civil war in Syria has additionally enforced anti-Semitism and the anti-Western sentiments among the militant Islamists in the Western Balkan. The fighters on the side of the Islamic State and Al Nusra in Syria, shoulder to shoulder with the most extreme jihadists in the world, are a typical product of the influence of the ideology of the militant Islamism related to the Jews. The best illustration of that is to be found in the following statement of Bajro Ikanovic, war veteran from Syria: „ ... The goal of all of us is death, especially in the battle against the Jews. Syria is not important at all to us. Our goal is Jerusalem" (Source.ba 2013).

Unlike the continuing terrorist campaigns of various separatist, left-wing or right-wing terrorist organizations, the militant Islamist organizations generally use terrorism as a tactic for carrying out individual attacks. In the period from 1995-2014, the militant Islamists who were directly or indirectly connected to the Balkans were involved in thirty terrorist activities around the world. The organizers and/or direct perpetrators of those attacks had undisputable relations to the Balkans. Until 2010 Western Balkan countries served more as logistic bases from where the terrorist attacks were planned and prepared by the militant Islamists with long experience from the Jihadist fronts throughout the world. In meantime they also influenced strongly the young Muslim Diaspora that after 9/11 marks has gone through a process of intensive radicalization and use of violence against the Western targets. The terrorist attacks are a serious indicator: from a logistic base for conquering the Western European states, slowly but certainly the Balkans is becoming a new front of the militant Islamists.

Conclusion

The expansion of the militant Islamism in the Balkans is directly related to two events with strong influence on the birth and spread of this security threat. The first event was the formation of "Young Muslims" and promotion of the idea of greater Muslim state on the territory of the Balkans, Middle East and North Africa. The second event is directly

related to the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia, in which mujahedeen forces were directly involved and remained influential in the war/conflict aftermath. As a result the process of reislamization has begun; it intensifies by day as more young people get convinced that the Islam is a fundamental unifying force and the only way towards nation-building and shaping of society in which the Muslims would dominate. By the force of personal examples and through the strong influence on the local population as well as on the political and religious elites, the militant Islamists have developed their infrastructure for promotion of religious hatred, anti-Western propaganda, anti-Semitism, but more importantly for terrorist activities against the ideological enemies. Through these specific methods of activity in the Western Balkans, they actively support global jihad.

The expansion of the militant Islamism should be seen as a growing potential threat to the internal and the regional security. Individually no Balkan state is able to effectively deal with such a threat. Therefore any solution to this problem has to be based on the principles of regional security, with an accent on intensifying the regional cooperation of the national security services of the respective states in the region. As a member of the global coalition against terrorism, Macedonia has to prepare for a generational struggle as the militant Islamist ideology will not vanish any time soon. Compared to the EU states, and even with some neighboring ones, the current measures do not cover the overall militant Islamist structure. New measures should not only be focused towards returnees from Syria and other battlefields, but also to some NGOs, religious and political structures that serve as cover-up for international terrorism. Given the multi-ethnic and multi-confessional character of the Balkan societies, some preventive measures are likely to cause ethnic or religious tensions. Yet the seriousness of these threats call for an effective strategy for dealing with asymmetric threats.

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