

## BOOK REVIEW

### **Aspects of Islamic Radicalization in the Balkans After the Fall of Communism**

*Reviewed by Shaul Shay*

*Aspects of Islamic Radicalization in the Balkans After the Fall of Communism, edited by Mihai Dragnea, Joseph Fitsanakis, Darko Trifunović, John M. Nomikos, Vasko Stamevski and Adriana Cupcea, Published by Peter Lang Publishing Inc., New York, USA Peter Lang, Oxford, 2023.*

This study attempts to illuminate the processes that caused the Balkans to become a focal point of radical Islam and Islamic terror in Europe and the threats that are posed due to this phenomenon. The study analyzes the roots of radical Islam in the Balkans as well as the processes that led to the strengthening of Islamic terror infrastructures in this region. The chapters in this volume have covered the risk of radicalization and Jihadi extremism in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Albania, Macedonia, Montenegro, Romania and Bulgaria.

In the study the authors used and explained different terms such as “fundamentalism”, “Islamism”, “Salafism”, “Wahhabism” and “jihadism”, all of them appear to share the same features of Islamic radicalism and extremism that were introduced in Balkans by the foreign fighters ("jihadists") that arrived to support the local Muslims in the wars.

The “Islamization” processes that the Muslim population underwent in the Balkans during the war years (in BiH and Kosovo), has created a supportive political and social environment for radical Islam. The Muslim radical vision in the Balkans fits in well with the global vision of Al Qaeda the Islamic State and other radical groups, which aspire to achieve the triumph of Islamic culture over Western culture (and other Islamic foes), and to establish the” Umma” – the community of faithful Muslims which will unite all Muslims and position Islam as the main global force. Michalis Marioras made a special reference to the dynamics of transnational identity, as it develops in the context of the Islamic "Umma" that unites all Muslims around the world in a twinned community. The author also examines the role of foreign fighters as multipliers of radicalized Islam.

Since the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the outbreak of ethnic conflicts, the area of the Balkans became a focal point of attraction to Islamic terror entities, particularly for some of the Afghan “alumni.”

In the course of the war in BiH, the Muslim world rose to the aid of the Muslim minority, and countries like Iran, Libya and Saudi Arabia sent money, humanitarian aid and weaponry to the Muslim side, thus circumventing the UN embargo on arms shipments to the fighting parties. In the framework of the mobilization of the Muslim world on behalf of the struggle of the Muslims in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), volunteers arrived in the country, mainly Afghan “alumni,” and their numbers were estimated at several thousand fighters.

Islamic radicalization in Bosnia and Herzegovina is analyzed by Mijo Beljo and Lucija Zadro in the chapter "Mujahideen in Bosnia and Herzegovina from 1992 until 1995". The authors analyze the mujahideen arrival and activities in BiH from 1992 until 1995. The chapter Foreign Fighters and Global Jihad in the Balkans: The Case of Bosnia and Herzegovina authored by Michalis Marioras highlighted the special features that unite Muslim foreign fighters and connecting them with particularities of BiH. The volunteers joined the various Bosnian militias that fought the Croats and Serbs, but they were quickly incorporated into special units that were established for them (the Mujahidin brigades), with the blessing of Ilia Izetbegović, leader of the Muslims in BiH.

The Islamic volunteers' contribution to the success of the Muslim Bosnians was significant. They helped to boost the morale of the Bosnian fighters, infused them with enthusiasm and a fighting spirit, and deepened their consciousness and Islamic knowledge. The volunteers fought on the various fronts, but also dealt in the training of the Muslim Bosnian fighters. The Mujahidin brigades were active throughout the country and carried out many military campaigns, in which their daring and considerable operational skills were demonstrated.

In November 1995, the war in BiH ended in the Dayton Agreements. BiH dismantled the Mujahidin brigades but many of the volunteers remained in Bosnia, established families and became part of the Muslim Bosnian society. According to estimates, some 1,000 Mujahidin remained in BiH and settled in the cities and villages. They also built their own villages, incorporated local supporters and established autonomous societies governed by the Sharia and strict Islamic lifestyles.

The involvement of the radical Islam and Islamic terrorist entities in the Balkans has continued after the end of the wars in BiH and Kosovo and has been perceived by local elites and global stakeholders as a serious threat as highlighted by the attacks of September 11, 2001 and militant Islam has come to represent a critical challenge to the West's secular and liberal social order.

Following the September 11, 2001 attacks and the US declaration regarding the war on terror, increased pressure was placed on the BiH authorities to take action against Islamic terror entities which had found a haven in their country.

The instability and the chaotic situation that prevailed in the Balkans for many years left their stamp and turned this arena into an optimal operational theater for the Islamic terror organizations and Iran. They view the Balkans as a springboard and a convenient front base for the networking of terror infrastructures on European soil with the aim of exploiting them for the promotion of their activities throughout Europe and at other locations worldwide, including the United States.

Darko Trifunović in the chapter "Islamic Terrorism" in the Serbian Sandžak under Salafi Influence analyzes the emergence of radical Islamists in the Balkans in the guise of members of the Salafi movement. At the same time, the historical and political preconditions which made

possible this movement are explained and in particular how radical Sunni Islam has been manipulated to oppress both Christians and Muslims in the region.

Klemen Kocjančič in the last chapter *Beyond the Balkans: "Islamist Terrorism in Europe with Balkan Connections"* analyzed the causes of Islamist terrorism with Western Balkan connections. The author analyzes the role of Balkan diasporas in European countries (especially Bosniak and Albanian), the connections with the countries of origin (in the Western Balkans) through jihadi recruiters, and to the connection between organized crime and terrorist groups.

With the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War in 2011, there was a significant increase of jihadist mobilization and terrorist activity in Europe, which can be predominantly connected with the Islamic State and to a lesser extent with al-Qaeda. From Europe, at least 5,000 foreign fighters left to fight in Syria or Iraq as members of different Islamic terrorist groups. Some experts estimate that over 1,000 Western Balkan fighters travelled to Syria and Iraq to fight for the so-called Islamic State during 2012–2016. That is five times the number of Western Europeans, when estimated per capita.

After the collapse of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, several hundred people (men, women, and children) who left Europe for the Islamic State returned to their home (or host) countries and some were prosecuted because of their actions abroad.

Indeed, the greatest risk posed by radical Islamists is due to fighters returning to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Albania, from so-called Islamic State territories, as well as due to the existence of networks seeking to destabilize neighboring nations, such as North Macedonia, Kosovo and Serbia.

John Nomikos and Joseph Fitsanakis claim that many of the chapters make clear that Turkey wants to be perceived as a natural ally to the Muslim population of the Balkans, and to pose as a moderate alternative to Salafi influences. In essence, Turkey seeks to protect its own position as a “guardian” of Muslims in the Balkans, while at the same time striving to thwart and counter Salafi influence.

Aside from Turkey and the Islamic terror organizations like Al Qaeda and the Islamic State, Iran has also played a central role in supporting Muslims in the Balkans and it has established a widespread infrastructure of terror and intelligence entities which stand at its disposal in order to promote Iranian goals in the European continent. The book does not discuss the contribution and impact of Iran and radical Shia in the Balkan arena upon the course of the wars and their consequences. and to discuss how Iran and these organizations took advantage of the wars in the Balkans to reinforce infrastructures that serve them today in their activities in Europe and worldwide.

John Nomikos and Joseph Fitsanakis claim that Jihadist recruiting, as well as the recruiting of individuals to join terrorist groups, is currently a primary concern amongst the Balkan diaspora

in Europe. It can be expected that these concerns will remain with us in the future. In fact, given the ongoing disintegration of Afghanistan, which opens up the prospect of a new safe haven for training Islamist militants from around the world, terrorist activities may escalate. This could be enhanced by the endemic instability of the Balkan region, as state governments and institutions are lagging behind in countering the developing threats.

As many of the authors in this volume explain, in the last decade, several nations in the region, such as Albania, North Macedonia, Kosovo, and Bulgaria, have enacted legislation aimed at combatting radicalism. Additionally, a host of measures have been introduced to pursue those guilty of criminal activities, such as the use of volunteers, financing terrorism, and prohibiting participation in foreign military conflicts. This demonstrates that governments in the Balkan region—though not always sufficiently effective—have realized the risks posed by the arrival of radical Islamic ideas from the outside.

John Nomikos and Joseph Fitsanakis concluded that regional governments in Balkans have taken the lead in a worldwide effort to combat terrorism, and are working to enhance cooperation with local police, intelligence and judicial services. As part of a concerted attempt to combat these risks, Western Balkan states have implemented new national schemes that give importance to programs to reintegrate returning foreign combatants and their families.

In conclusion, the book contributes a new layer to the knowledge about the reasons for the development of radical Islam in the Balkans and the effects of this phenomenon in the Balkans and beyond.

The study presents these developments through case studies in different countries and regions of the Balkans (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Montenegro and more). The study points to unique characteristics for the Islamic radicalization in each region, but provides as well a comprehensive picture of the entire Balkan region.