

# The Influence of Foreign Islamic Organizations on Islamic Radicalism in the Countries of the Western Balkans

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## **Abstract**

*The ethnic, religious, and strategic influences and interests of the great powers had always intersected in the territory of the Western Balkans. This political and religious turmoil as well as the impacts of geostrategic interests had a major impact on the region so that different cultures, churches, and beliefs, which competed and sometimes also conflicted with each other, had been developing over the course of the last centuries. Irrespectively of the religious and ethnic diversity, the peoples in the Western Balkans customarily endeavored to extend tolerance and understanding to members of other ethnic and religious communities. Unfortunately, ethnic as well as religious tolerance have increasingly come under attack since the breakdown of the Yugoslav state and particularly, since the outbreak of civil war in Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1992, though. This development extended to almost all the countries of the entire Western Balkans. Especially during the civil war in Bosnia-Herzegovina, some organizations financing terrorism invested hundreds of millions of dollars in order to propagate a radical religious ideology and to create incentives for hatred and different conflicts motivated by religion in all the countries of the Western Balkans populated by Muslims. Endeavors by certain Russian circles to fuel Islamist radicalization, radicalism, and extremism in the countries of the Western Balkans have likewise been observed during recent years.*

**Keywords:** *extremism, radicalism, radicalization, Islamism, Western Balkans.*

**JEL Classification:** Z18, Z28

## **1. Introduction**

Islam is often described as an “all-encompassing” way of life that permeates and pervades all the human ranges of action and fields of experience of its believers. The idea of a divine connectedness of everything, which is expressed by the central principle of “tawhid” (“uniformity”, “homogeneity”, “unity”), is often perceived as being contrary to any separation between religion and other areas of life in Islam. In the political area, this is often postulated by the maxim “al-islam din wa dawla” (“Islam is both religion and state”). This phrase acknowledges the option of a conceptual separation between both areas, but rejects it in practical terms for Islam.<sup>3</sup>

Islam’s confrontational stance toward non-Muslim communities has enabled, in historical terms, fundamentalist and terrorist organizations to exploit the Quran in order to legitimize violence and criminal activities on a global scale.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Peter Mandaville, *Islam and politics*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Routledge, 2014, p. 14.

<sup>4</sup> Andra Mădălina Ursu, „Zero sum games – Islam against everybody else, Content analyses and narrative

As a result of Ottoman rule, the countries in the Western Balkans are the sole European countries with indigenous Muslim populations. The numbers of Muslims are low in some countries, such as Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, and Montenegro, but very high in other countries, such as Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Northern Macedonia where Muslims comprise the majority of the population, except in the Republic of Northern Macedonia where they are a minority.<sup>5</sup>

Radicalization is to be understood as a process during which a person or group is embracing more and more extremist political, social, or religious ideas, which reject or undermine the status quo within a society pertaining to existing conceptions, standards, and practices. Based on this definition, something that is considered completely normal within one society may be deemed radical within another one. Saudi dress regulations and restrictions for women would symbolize a radicalization within societies of the Western Balkans where European dress codes and legal systems have traditionally been implemented. Thus, radicalization and radicalism may take different forms. They are not always violent, and they don't always serve a clear political aim in a relevant manner. In the Balkans, they emerged in the form of a series of conservative Islamic movements whose members are usually referred to as Salafists. They are far from constituting a homogenous group in terms of their goals, orientations, or alignments, though. The majority of these groups is not violent, but some of these organizations are considered potential security risks by government authorities, and some include members who fought in Syria or Iraq as foreign combatants or who planned terrorist attacks within the country.<sup>6</sup>

Violent radicalization and radicalism in terms of a participation in terrorist attacks within or outside of the country or in the wars in Syria or in Iraq were observed pertaining to a small part of the population.<sup>7</sup>

During post-conflict times, some sociological and political factors, which complicated, in combination, the radicalism problem, came together. They include(d) both motivational and attractional factors. Among the motivational factors in the Western Balkans, there are post-war traumas, distrust and prejudices toward other ethnic groups, broken and dysfunctional families as well as mental health issues. Political and economic motivational factors, such as irresponsible and corrupt governments, the overall lack of economic prospects, and high youth unemployment, are just as relevant. Adding up, those factors are leading to relevant segments of the population having no more positive future prospects and being disappointed by their political (and sometimes also religious) leaders, whom they deem politically and morally corrupt. External attractional factors of the radical ideology consist of national or foreign clerics, relief organizations, or radical internet platforms, which are likely more effective with those

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techniques in Islamic Primary sources", *Romanian Intelligence Studies Review*, no. 2 (30), 2023, p. 85.

<sup>5</sup> Edoardo Corradi, „Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans: Re-Shaping the Islamist Terrorist Phenomenon” in *South-Eastern Europe, Polish Political Science Review*, Volume 8 (2020): Issue 1 (June 2020), p. 25.

<sup>6</sup> Testimony of Dr. Majda Ruge, Fellow, Foreign Policy Institute Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) Johns Hopkins University, Senate Committee on Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Europe and Regional Security Cooperation, Hearing on: Southeast Europe: Strengthening Democracy and Countering Malign Foreign Influence June 14, 2017.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

segments of the population.<sup>8</sup>

In the 90s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the situation within the countries in the Western Balkans was characterized by political tensions, grave economic crises, and a state apparatus which didn't function properly. Those circumstances, which were additionally accompanied by a rapid decline of the Communist ideology as a source of inspiration, impacted the increasing corruption, the breakdown of health and educational systems as well as the disruption of family structures. And more occurrences impacting Islamic radicalism in the countries of the Western Balkans came to pass against the backdrop of these societal conditions.

After Albania had joined the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), Albanian government authorities abolished or eased visa requirements for the majority of the Arabian countries in 1992.<sup>9</sup> This visa liberalization was exploited by different radical and extremist Islamist structures from the Arabian world in order to infiltrate not just Albania, but also all the other countries in the Western Balkans. This was also borne out in 1999 by the trial in Cairo against the "Arabs from the Balkans" when 107 persons stood accused of terrorism. Among them was also Osama bin Ladin's deputy, Al Zawahiri, who was again sentenced to death (in his absence). During this trial, it was also argued that Osama bin Ladin had founded or co-founded, together with other terrorist leaders, humanitarian organizations in the Balkans that had sponsored the emergence of the first extremist Islamist cells in some regions in the Balkans, which also served as refuges for terrorists or for money laundering or international arms trafficking purposes, etc.<sup>10</sup>

After the outbreak of the war in Bosnia-Hercegovina (1992-1995), the organized influx of mujahideen from the war between Russia and Afghanistan started, which impacted the radicalization of the Muslim population across the territory of the former Yugoslavia. After the Soviet forces had withdrawn and the "Islamic State of Afghanistan" had been proclaimed in 1992, the mission of thousands of mujahideen was accomplished. Then, these mujahideen, who were financed by different Arabian circles, came to Bosnia-Hercegovina in order to fulfill their jihadist ambitions and to propagate an excessively radical religious ideology, which would enable certain Arabian states to increase their influence on the Western Balkans.

At first, the mujahideen units operated as independent formations in Bosnia-Hercegovina. After their numbers had increased, they demanded that they be incorporated into the Bosnian army by the Bosnian Government, though. So, the mujahideen unit "El Mujahid" became part of the 3<sup>rd</sup> corps of the Bosnian Army under the command of General Enver Hadžihasanović in 1993, and Alia Izetbegović was appointed its honorary commander.<sup>11</sup> Afterward, the "El Mujahid" unit lured and

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Marrvëshjet e nenshkruara nga viti 1992-1996; [http://www.puneteshjeshme.gov.al/files/userfiles/Marreveshjet\\_Dypaleshe\\_me\\_te\\_gjitha\\_vendet.pdf](http://www.puneteshjeshme.gov.al/files/userfiles/Marreveshjet_Dypaleshe_me_te_gjitha_vendet.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> Mihael Pophly, Khalid Durán, *Osama bin Ladin und der internationale Terrorismus*, Ullstein, 2001, p. 50.

<sup>11</sup> Izetbegović was on the list of those who obtained payments from the Iran. During the election campaign in 1996, he received approximately 500000 USD from Iranian foundations. For more information, see: Gordon Bardos, *The War on Terrorism in the Balkans: A Report Card on US Policy After 9/11*, in John Davis (editor), *The Global War on Terrorism: Assessing the American Response*, US: Nova Science, 2005, p. 117. See also: Noel Malcolm, *Bosnia: A Short History*, New York University Press, New York, 1996, p. 57.

recruited Bosnians and Albanians to serve within its ranks, which helped to propagate the radical and extremist Islamist ideology among the population of the respective countries. The mujahideen units were notorious for their brutality, as they tortured and committed mass murders among the civilian population. Frequently, the members of the “El Mujahid” unit in Bosnia even cut people’s heads off, which became a well-known symbol and strategy of the “Islamic State”.<sup>12</sup>

After the end of the war, some mujahideen who had served in Bosnia were incorporated into the higher structures of different international terrorist organizations. Among them was also Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, who became the initiator of the terrorist attacks in the USA in 2001. Ramzibinal-Shibh, who became a member of the terrorist cell in Hamburg that planned the terrorist attacks in the USA on September 11, 2001, belonged to that group of persons as well. Approximately 5000 jihadists are supposed to have entered Bosnia-Herzegovina during the war. Some of them are still living there while the other ones were incorporated into different jihadist movements in Afghanistan and Pakistan as well as in the Middle East.<sup>13</sup>

The participation of such large numbers of jihadists in the war in Bosnia (1992 – 1995) definitely also served to test the option of organizing a global jihadist movement in order to launch a new war for bringing the Islamic caliphate of their dreams to life.

## **2. The subversive activities of foreign Islamist organizations in the countries of the Western Balkans**

Alongside the start of democratic movements in the countries of the Western Balkans, some Islamist non-government organizations also emerged in order to offer aid with the primary goal of reviving Islam. After the outbreak of the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina (1992 – 1995), the armed conflicts in Albania (1997), the war in Kosovo (1998 – 1999), and the armed conflicts in Macedonia (2001), all the required pre-conditions for the uncontrolled entry of dozens of extremist Islamist non-governmental organizations from the Middle East and for their unhindered destructive activities in all the regions in that part of Europe with Muslim populations had been created.

From the very onset of their activities, those “religious” or “humanitarian” organizations promoted in the countries of the Western Balkans a radical religious ideology, which had been unknown there till then, by sharing radical religious literature, opening different religious schools and teaching diverse religious courses, sending hundreds of young people to Islamic centers in the Middle East in order for them to obtain further religious education, and providing humanitarian assistance with strings attached.

Thus, the International Islamic Relief Organization (IIRO) had carried out its destructive operations by financing a radical religious ideology through different material incentives.<sup>14</sup> Afterward, the “Muwafaq” Foundation propagated the Salafist

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<sup>12</sup> Charles R. Shrader, *The Muslim-Croat Civil War in Bosnia: A Military History, 1992-1994*, Texas A&M University Press, 2003, p. 52-55, 128-129; <http://derstandard.at/3039658/Kriegsverbrecher-Video-islamischer-Freiwilliger-aufgetaucht>.

<sup>13</sup> Context of August 23, 2001: 9/11 Hijackers Alhazmi and Almihdhar Are Finally Added to Terrorist Watch List' <http://www.historycommons.org/context.jsp?item=a082301watchlistadd#a082301watchlistadd>.

<sup>14</sup> Reinhard Schulze, *Islam im öffentlichen Raum oder der Islam als öffentliche Religion*. Published in the book Mariano Delgado (ed.), *Religion und Öffentlichkeit, Probleme und Perspektiven*, Stuttgart, 2009, p.

doctrine in Albania, Northern Macedonia, and Kosovo. The branches of this organization in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Somalia, and Sudan operated also with the aim of tapping into financial resources for furthering international terrorist activities.<sup>15</sup>

The Al-Haramain Islamic Foundation (AHIF) had also provided funding to Al-Qaida and to other international terrorist organizations, such as Jemaah Islamiyah, Egyptian Islamic Jihad, and Lashkar-i-Tayyaba. Besides, it had even tried to initiate an “Albanian Islamic Jihad (AIJ)/Xhihad Islamik Shqiptar”.<sup>16</sup>

Al Waqf Al Islami invested more than 10 million Euros in Kosovo. Pursuant to estimations by Kosovar authorities, this organization spent merely 7% of its (officially declared) budget on charitable activities. The other part of its budget, which was financed by Saudi-Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, and Bahrain, was destined for the secret maintenance of dozens of clerics, who propagated the Salafist ideology and movement in Kosovo and promoted Islamist radicalism there.<sup>17</sup>

The common characteristics of foreign Islamist organizations which operated or are operating in Kosovo and other countries in the Balkans consist of their tendencies to cooperate with each other, exchange trustworthy staff among them, share funds in order to realize common Islamic projects, and create partnerships in order to launder money and finance terrorist activities directed against Western values.

After the activities of dozens of foreign radical and extremist organizations that had been operating in some states in the Western Balkans, such as Kosovo, Northern Macedonia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Albania, Bulgaria, etc., had been outlawed, some of them changed their names and are now operating under new names, or they transformed themselves into domestic “humanitarian” or “cultural” organizations, and they are continuing their camouflaged activities in order to fuel hatred and religious radicalization.

Knowing that religion can easily be exploited as a tool for implementing the Russian strategy, Russia is endeavoring to increase its influence on the non-Slavic countries of the Western Balkans that are mainly populated by ethnic Albanians, i.e., Kosovo, Albania, and a part of Northern Macedonia, through corruption and Islamic religious organizations.

In order to facilitate Russian influence on the Muslim world, President Putin declared during a speech he delivered in Malaysia in 2003 that Russia was “closely related to the Islamic world” and that Orthodox Christianity was “much closer to the Islamic religion than to the Catholicism of the West.”<sup>18</sup> In accordance with this strategy, Russia is trying to increase its influence on the Muslim population of the Western Balkans through the controversial organizations, “European Muslim Forum” and “Ahmad Kadyrov Trust Fund”, which are operating as a “fifth column” in these

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<sup>15</sup> International Crisis Group, Bin Laden in the Balkans; The Politics of Antiterrorism, Balkan Report no. 119, 9.11.2001, p. 5.

<sup>16</sup> The United States District Court for the District of Columbia, Civil Action No. 09-0108 (JDB), 19.03.2012, p. 18; [https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/USCOURTS-dcd-1\\_09-cv-00108/pdf/USCOURTS-dcd-1\\_09-cv-00108-0.pdf](https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/USCOURTS-dcd-1_09-cv-00108/pdf/USCOURTS-dcd-1_09-cv-00108-0.pdf), accessed 01.03.2024.

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/22/world/europe/how-the-saudis-turned-kosovo-into-fertile-ground-for-isis.html?mcubz=1>, accessed 01.03.2024.

<sup>18</sup> <https://global-strategy.org/islam-russia-challenge-opportunity/>, accessed 01.03.2024.

territories by engaging in systematic negative propaganda against the USA and other Western powers, whom they accuse of “thriving Islamophobia” and of committing war crimes against the Islamic world. Simultaneously, they are bolstering the Russian state and politics in relation to the Muslim world in order to enhance the reputation of Russia in these territories.

Abdul Vahed Niyazov is the leader of the European Muslim Forum. He is loyal to the Russian president, Wladimir Putin, and he is closely cooperating with the Chechen leader, Ramazan Kadyrov. In reality, this imam is also working together with some Russian right-wing organizations as well as with some political and religious leaders from Turkey.<sup>19</sup>

During the visit of the European Muslim Forum’s delegation to several countries in the Western Balkans in June and July 2021, agreements were entered into with the countries’ respective Islamic Associations on the construction of a religious Muslim school named after Ahmad Kadyrov in Novi Pazar in the South of Serbia, on naming a street in Zavidovič, Bosnia after Ahmad Kadyrov, on the construction of a friendship monument named after Ahmad Kadyrov in Tetovo in Northern Macedonia, and on naming a park in Skopje “Ahmad Kadyrov Friendship Park.”<sup>20</sup>

Thus, the European Muslim Forum is attempting to promote Ahmad Kadyrov as a holy religious figure and to portray his son, Ramazan Kadyrov, the present Chechen leader and faithful ally of Putin, as a protector of the Islamic religion everywhere in the countries of the Western Balkans.

This is to explain that Ahmad Kadyrov was appointed leading mufti of the Chechen Republic by the Chechen leader, Dzhokhar Dudayev, during the first Chechen war against Russia from 1994 - 1996. At the beginning of the second Chechen war (from August 1999 until April 2009), Ahmad Kadyrov was fighting on the Russian side against his own people. After Russia had conquered Chechnya in 2000, he was appointed leader of the Chechen government. He was killed in Grozny on May 9, 2004 by Chechen Islamists during a military parade in remembrance of the “day of victory.” His son, Ramazan Kadyrov, who had led the paramilitary formations of his father, was appointed President of the Chechen Republic in 2007 by decree<sup>21</sup>.

In this manner, Russia is endeavoring to increase its influence on the countries of the Western Balkans through corruption and Islamic religious organizations.

### 3. Conclusion

During the last two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, all the countries of the Western Balkans were gripped by deep economic crises and various political conflicts. The period in question was accompanied by the uncontrolled arrival of dozens of Islamist extremist organizations from the Near East to the Western Balkans, to incite religious fanaticism in all regions inhabited by Muslim populations in this part of Europe.

These organizations have invested in the spread of radical Islamist doctrine,

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<sup>19</sup> <https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/das-european-muslim-forum-und-seine-verbindungen-zu-putin-dlf-01269348-100.html>, accessed 01.03.2024.

<sup>20</sup> State Security Department of Lithuania, ‘Kremlin Tries to Exploit Muslim Communities in Europe’, <https://www.vsd.lt/en/reports/information-security/kremlin-tries-to-exploit-muslim-communities-ineurope>, accessed 01.03.2024.

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2004/may/10/guardianobituaries.russia>, accessed 01.03.2024.

funding an entire army of religious preachers to spread a radical religious current. Then they stimulated the continuation of learning in the various religious schools, rewarding the children with regular monthly payments (usually from 50 euros) for memorizing verses and surahs from the Koran. While widows, unemployed people, peasants, young people and some "intellectuals" have been rewarded with 150 euros per month, to demonstrate their religious commitment according to the Salafist doctrine.<sup>22</sup>

A common feature of Arab Islamist associations and organizations that have operated or are operating in Kosovo is their tendency to cooperate, the exchange of reliable personnel from one association or organization to another, the exchange of funds for joint Islamic projects, the establishment of partnerships for money laundering and the financing of various extremist and terrorist activities in Kosovo and other countries.

The Government of the Republic of Kosovo, in 2014, suspended the activity of 14 radical Islamist humanitarian organizations. Similar decisions were also brought in 2015 and 2016, prohibiting the illegal activity of some camouflaged humanitarian associations and organizations, which had carried out activities against the democratic order and constitutional regulation of Kosovo. Such measures have also been undertaken in other countries of the Western Balkans, such as in Albania, North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria.

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<sup>22</sup> <http://old.zeri.info/artikulli/50225/maqedoni-vehabisteve-100-euro-per-mjeker-e-200-euro-per-pantallon-a-te-shkurter>. Krahaso: Dimal Basha, *Globalization and the Rise of Salafism in Kosovo. How Gulf Countries Spearheaded a Transnational Advocacy Network that is Challenging a New Democracy*. MA thesis submitted to The New School, 2013, p. 56-78.

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