

WESTERN BALKANS EXTREMISM RESEARCH FORUM

Policy brief – Bosnia and Herzegovina

September 2018

COUNTERING AND PREVENTING EXTREMISM IN BIH: LEARNING FROM INTERNATIONAL EFFORTS

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Introduction

A lack of consensus about the narrative of the 1992-1995 war, political disagreements about the future of the country, significant economic problems, and various foreign influences¹ have recently intersected to further intensify ethnic and political tensions in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). Within this byzantine web of potentially destructive factors, the impact in the Western Balkans of the international foreign fighter phenomenon has additionally complicated the security situation in BiH. The attention of security officials was first drawn to Salafi extremism by several terrorist attacks and terrorism-related incidents in BiH in that were carried out by adherents of Salafism.² This focus then intensified as the issue of foreign fighting became a pressing international concern. From 2012 to 2016, Bosnian security agencies estimate that around 240 citizens of BiH departed to ISIS territory. Fears of potential domestic terrorism rose when some of these foreign fighters began returning home. Domestic security agencies have thus focused for the past several years on identifying and repressing the growth of Salafi groups linked to violence; but research respondents have indicated that the increasing friction between ethnic groups and the reinvigoration of radical political rhetoric – which some foreign and domestic analysts argue has brought the country to the brink of a new conflict – must also be given more attention going forward.

¹ BiH has increasingly become part of the imagined or desired sphere of influence of a number of foreign countries in recent years, especially Russia, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia. Much has been written about this, especially in the last year. For example, see: Salvo, D. (2018) *Russia's Efforts to Destabilize Bosnia and Herzegovina*. Alliance for Securing Democracy (blog). Available from: <https://securingdemocracy.gmfus.org/russias-efforts-to-destabilize-bosnia-and-herzegovina/>; Galeotti, M. (2018) *Do the Western Balkans face a coming Russian storm?*. Policy Brief. European Council on Foreign Relations; Mujanovic, J. (22 May 2018) *Bosnia Should Beware of Turkey's 'Sultan'*. *Balkan Insight*. Available from: <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/bosnia-should-beware-of-turkey-s-sultan-05-21-2018>; Mujadžević, D. (2017) *Turkey's Role in Bosnia and Herzegovina*. *Euxeinos*, no. 23: 25-31; Lilyanova, V. (2017) *Saudi Arabia in the Western Balkans*. European Parliamentary Research Service; and Clark, W. K. (11 April 2018) *Don't wait for the Western Balkans to blow up again. The U.S. and the E.U. must act*. *The Washington Post Global Opinions* (blog). Available from: https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/global-opinions/wp/2018/04/11/dont-wait-for-the-western-balkans-to-blow-up-again-the-u-s-and-the-e-u-must-act/?hpid=hp_hp-top-table-main-balkan-warrior%3Ahomepage%2Fstory&utm_term=.ff9b77cf4f89.

² In 2005, police in Sarajevo arrested a Bosnian-Swedish dual citizen and his Danish co-conspirator for allegedly planning a suicide attack against a Western embassy in the city. The two had made threatening videos vowing revenge against sites located in countries with troops in Afghanistan and Iraq, and police found explosive materials and bomb-making instructions in their apartment. Police were themselves the victims of three later, successful attacks – in 2010, when an IED was detonated at the police station in Bugojno and killed one officer and wounded several others; in 2011, when a single attacker at the US Embassy in Sarajevo shot a police sniper in the arm before being neutralized; and in 2015, when an attacker opened fire at the police station in Zvornik and killed one officer and wounded two.

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While it is wrong to label Salafism as an inherently violent ideology and, indeed, the vast majority of Salafists in BiH are non-violent, Salafism came to BiH in its most militant form. It was imported during the war by mujahideen who entered the country, often from the Middle East, to fight on behalf of Bosnian Muslims. Prior to the war, this reductionist ideology was known only to Islamic intellectual elites. The majority of the Bosnian Muslims – who have historically followed the Hanafi legal tradition (*fiqh*) and have practiced an inclusive and open interpretation of Islam – were unaware of it. Thus, it was widely believed that ultraconservative Islamic ideologies could not take root in BiH and would not be accepted by Bosnian Muslims. Yet, while most Bosnian Muslims have remained faithful to the Hanafi school, intensive investment in proselytism by some Gulf countries, particularly Saudi Arabia, has paid dividends for Salafism. The number of Bosnian Muslims who have “converted” to this narrow interpretation of Islam is believed to have grown steadily over the years, though their numbers still represent a relatively small minority.

The factors underpinning the rising popularity of Salafism in BiH are varied and operate at both structural and individual levels. They include:

- The disenfranchisement that results from poor socioeconomic circumstances; the multiple weaknesses of state level institutions; the traumas of war and of the post-war period; a sense of collective victimisation; crises of national identity; and structural and personal weaknesses within the official Islamic Community (IC) of BiH.
- The simplicity of the Salafi narrative, the seduction of generously financed Salafi humanitarian activities, and disappointment in the political West – which, in the view of many people, allowed genocide to be perpetrated against Bosnian Muslims (Bosniaks).
- The return of a number of students from Islamic faculties in Gulf countries, where religious scholars are entrenched in a far more conservative ideological framework, has helped to normalise religious rhetoric that was once completely foreign to Bosnian Muslims. And many of these scholars and religious leaders are still receiving significant financial support from abroad.

This policy brief – which draws on field research conducted from June to October 2017 as part of the Western Balkans Extremism Research Forum (ERF), led by the British Council, explores the threat of violence that stems from Salafi extremism, yet also examines the security problems that may arise from non-violent but ultraconservative proselytism. It also highlights the problem of mutual extremisms, reflecting concerns repeatedly expressed by research participants. Indeed, in a country such as BiH, which features a highly sensitive security environment, reciprocal radicalisation has been an obstacle to state building for more than 20 years and will continue to obstruct progress if it is not addressed.

The Bosnian context: The relativity of “extremism” and main extremist threats

Defining extremism and radicalisation is a difficult task, and especially so in BiH. For one, scholars have not reached consensus on the definition of terrorism or of related terms, such as radicalisation, violent extremism, and non-violent extremism; and importantly, radicalisation does *not* always lead to violence.

BiH has been a member of the international anti-terror coalition since 2001, has worked to criminalise terrorism-related activities since 2003, and has developed successive strategies to prevent and combat terrorism since 2006. While these efforts have largely been motivated by specific concerns about Salafi extremism, the true complexity of the security challenges facing BiH were recognised in 2016 by the Ministry of Security, which acknowledged in its *Annual Report on the State of Security in Bosnia and Herzegovina* that a broad spectrum of political and ideological movements pose a serious threat to the stability of the country. The report emphasised that certain violent Salafi groups as well as members of the modern Chetnik movement (Četnički Ravnogorski Pokret) represent a particular danger due to their promotion of radical views that include rhetoric intended to delegitimise the state. This was echoed by officials and experts in BiH who were interviewed for this research, who cited the following radicalising forces and forms of extremism in BiH as the most concerning:

- militant forms of Salafism (and/or takfirism),
- non-violent but extremist Salafism,
- the Serb nationalism of Četnički Ravnogorski Pokret, and
- ethnic nationalism and religious extremism

These respondents also expressed significant concern about the increasing role the Internet may be playing in radicalising Bosnian youth, the influence that radical figures from the Diaspora are sowing in BiH, and the impact of certain streams of foreign investment on Bosnian society.

The research underpinning this paper determined that: (1) **Salafists in BiH represent less of a threat of violence** than is often insinuated in media and by some public figures, but may pose a more subtle and **non-violent threat to liberal democratic values** in a still-dysfunctional Bosnian society; and (2) **No forms of extremism exist in a vacuum** and the focus on Salafism in BiH, which has drawn attention away from other forms of extremism, risks obscuring the threat posed by mutual extremisms and reciprocal radicalisation.³

³ See: Bailey, G. & Edwards, P. (2017) Rethinking 'Radicalisation': Microradicalisations and Reciprocal Radicalisation as an Intertwined Process. *Journal for Deradicalization* 10: 255-281; and Lenos, S. (2016) *Tackling the challenges to prevention policies in an increasingly polarised society*. RAN Issue Paper.

Addressing non-violent radicalisation

Long before the past two decades of post-war state building and democracy promotion, BiH was known for its multi-ethnic character and celebrated for its tradition of inclusivity. Yet, for various reasons, these features of the Bosnian ethos have never been successfully harnessed in the post-war period, and some would argue that these values are no longer widely shared among Bosnians and can thus no longer serve as a basis for P/CVE efforts. But in fact, it is because these values strongly align with the goals of liberal democracy that they are actively undermined by radicalising forces of all types; which alone, should highlight the necessity of their role in combatting these forces. What's more, individuals who are radicalised into violence inevitably pass through non-violent stages of radicalisation, making it incredibly difficult for security and law enforcement officials to draw clear lines between non-violent, not-yet-violent, and violent extremists. This is especially challenging when those same liberal values demand that people have a right to freely practice their religion as long as they remain non-violent.

In the context of Salafi extremism in BiH, the boundaries between Salafi networks – both those inclined toward violence and those who espouse non-violence – is therefore blurred. The case studies presented in the research on which this brief is based demonstrate that the radicalisation process of foreign fighters began in every case in non-violent networks. For this reason, intelligence and police sources are concerned about the activities of non-violent Salafi preachers who, by accepting the authority of the official Islamic Community, can now promote their ideology with no restrictions. While these preachers have toned down their messaging, their rhetoric is still far more extreme than that of traditional Bosnian Islam, but their association with the IC and the fact that some even lecture at official IC mosques serves to legitimise Salafism as a viable alternative for Bosnian Muslim believers. This is a cause for concern, since the inclusion of these religious leaders in the IC combined with the growth of Salafi networks in larger Bosnian cities means they now have nearly unfettered access to youth in urban centres like Sarajevo, Zenica, Tuzla, and Bihać, where they can access and influence much higher numbers of people.

Returnees from Syria and Iraq, “failed” and “frustrated” fighters, and de-radicalisation

Despite the understandable security focus on returned foreign fighters, who are invariably viewed as potential violent extremists, most of the officials and experts who spoke with researchers asserted that the threat posed by these former fighters had been blown out of proportion; though, there was some disagreement as to who among this group should be considered a threat and just how significant a threat they represent. These differences of opinion point to problems of coordination and information sharing between and among different security agencies in BiH, and while it appears that professional networking around the issues of terrorism and violent extremism largely make up for deficits in

institutional coordination, this inconsistency points to a serious gap that cannot be ignored, especially given that these experts do tend to agree on one key point: overall, extremism of various strains is on the rise in BiH.

Of the approximately 240 Bosnian adults who are thought to have departed for Syria and Iraq between 2012 and 2016, officials report that 53 men and 3 women, as well as 4 children, have subsequently left Syria and Iraq. Of these, 10 have returned to countries other than BiH, mostly in Western Europe.

According to intelligence sources, only two returnees to BiH have known criminal histories, which is surprising given the previous finding that at least one-quarter of the Bosnian men believed to have departed to Syria and Iraq had criminal records.⁴ The fact that so few returnees have exhibited previous criminal behaviour beyond their choice to engage in foreign fighting may help explain the lack of security incidents related to these returnees.

On the other hand, as this paper was being written (in April 2018), Bosnian law enforcement officials arrested two Salafi men who have never travelled to ISIS territory, for allegedly planning a terrorist attack on police and security agencies in the town of Tuzla.⁵ Their arrest confirms that the focus of authorities must not be set only on returned fighters but also, and perhaps specifically, on militant Salafi extremists who did not travel to Syria or Iraq, who have been described by a number of researchers and experts as “failed” or “frustrated” foreign fighters. Because these extremists were unable to prove themselves on the ISIS battlefield, they may feel a greater need to demonstrate their militancy and dedication to violent jihad. Further, the arrest of these men underscores the need to develop programming that focuses not just on de-radicalising known extremists but on **preventing and intervening in processes of radicalisation before violent acts are committed.**

Building on current C/PVE initiatives

So far, BiH has not implemented any de-radicalisation programmes and discussion of such programming has overwhelmingly centred on returnees from ISIS territory. Given the short time returnees typically spend in prison, security officials and experts believe it is necessary to develop post-penal programmes. But, while it is certainly important to ensure that former foreign fighters do not return to violence, it is equally important to prevent a new wave of violence that could emanate from “failed” fighters, the numbers of which are far harder to estimate. This will require more than ex post facto suppressive or rehabilitative measures meant to re-educate and reintegrate. Indeed, it demands innovative and psycho-

⁴ See: Azinović, V. & Jusić, M. (2016) *The New Lure of the Syrian War: The Foreign Fighters' Bosnian Contingent*. Sarajevo: Atlantic Initiative, 40.

⁵ *Zastrašujuće namjere Maksima Božića i Edina Hastora: Planirali napad na SIPA-u i MUP u Tuzli*. (14 April 2018) Avaz.

socially relevant interventions that address some of the underlying structural drivers of radicalisation, which play a role in the radicalisation process of extremists of all ideologies.

While BiH developed a Strategy for Preventing and Combating Terrorism in 2015, as well as an Action Plan for implementation, to date, prevention initiatives have been limited in number. Some P/CVE-related projects have been implemented over the past few years in BiH, but few organisations have remained dedicated to addressing this issue in the long run and in coordination with BiH authorities. Many of these efforts have been research-based while some others focused on awareness raising (e.g. OSCE) and community-based support for youth (e.g. IOM). In an attempt to improve efficiency, international community members in BiH and relevant state agencies and institutions (i.e. those with P/CVE in their portfolio) have established a coordination group in order to share information about CVE activities.

Many participants in this research, especially government officials, raised the concern that the P/CVE projects implemented thus far in BiH have led to numerous events and conferences that have spent funds but missed the point by “preaching to the converted.” Respondents agreed that concrete action must be taken with returnees, whether imprisoned or not, and in developing a referral mechanism for PVE in BiH. Preparations for the drafting of a referral mechanism have been undertaken by the Ministry of Security with the support of IOM – including an analysis of the legal framework, visits to vulnerable communities, and the organisation of workshops and conferences to educate relevant actors about international experiences and practices with referral mechanisms – but final decision on the design has yet to be made.

Learning from International Efforts

Ultimately, it is necessary to not only find a balance between “hard” and “soft” approaches to countering terrorism and extremism, but also between bottom-up and top-down approaches. The Aarhus Model – developed in Denmark – is considered by many to achieve these aims most successfully, by accounting for both early prevention and exit processes and by finding a middle ground between community-led, individualised programming and state-level institutional cooperation. However, as Holmer and Shtuni pointed out in a 2017 report, Denmark has a strong and established commitment to human rights and social welfare, and an existing dedication to rehabilitation in prison and sentencing practices.⁶ In states lacking such well-developed rehabilitative norms, implementation of the Aarhus Model demands sweeping social reforms. Prevention and de-radicalisation efforts must be culturally appropriate and take into consideration the dynamics of each state’s institutional framework; otherwise the ‘one-size-fits-all’ approaches are essentially doomed to fail. Still, the ‘microlevel’ interventions imagined by the Aarhus

⁶ USIP. (2017) *Returning Foreign Fighters and the Reintegration Imperative*. USIP Special Report 402. Available from: <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2017-03/sr402-returning-foreign-fighters-and-the-reintegration-imperative.pdf> [Accessed October 11, 2017]

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Model, and its focus on creating trust between seemingly disparate groups, such as authorities and extremists, are elements that should be considered in the Bosnian context.

Given the complicated constitutional structure of BiH, implementing a referral mechanism on the local level may be the most realistic approach; and the Belgian town of Mechelen may serve as a good model.⁷ The mechanism there is based on the recognition of early signs of radicalisation and on the active integration of community members into society. Mechelen has also prioritised early intervention by developing policies and narratives of inclusiveness that focus on positive identity formation, celebrations of diversity, and strengthening social cohesion. This approach, especially its attention on activating the social engagement of youth by anchoring it to the love of town and community, could be remarkably effective in BiH. Indeed, it might be that the only approach that has the potential to lift the heavy weight of history and combat the divisive rhetoric of Bosnian politics is the development of a sense of community-level mutuality and belonging. Mechelen has not escaped the problem of returnees from Syria and Iraq, but the town has an internal consultative forum that brings together police, prosecutors, intelligence actors, and government representatives with consultative bodies that liaise between the office of the mayor and local mosques, schools, and youth leaders. In BiH, this research found that police are likely to continue carrying a large burden in the area of P/CVE, and so a similar model may be one way to better share that burden.

Building the concept of inclusivity in this way also seems like an appropriate approach in BiH given that research respondents identified the spread of non-violent extremism, not as the threat of violent extremism, as the country's most pressing problem. Many narratives of non-violent extremism reflect concerning themes, such as the prerogative of men to control women and the promotion of hegemonic masculinity more generally, and it is important that efforts are made to develop awareness and resilience among youth on issues of gender. The approach of Mechelen, which has provided the support of experts to teachers so that they can effectively address issues related to identity, gender equality, and sexual harassment could be very valuable in BiH. And notably, schools, which play a big role in the Mechelen Model, are the most frequent source of referrals there. However, in designing the local level referral mechanism, policymakers should also think of the ways to prevent abuse of minority rights by local authorities. This approach could work only if local authorities are willing to recognise that Salafi extremism does not exist in a vacuum and that referral mechanism should be used for the prevention of all kinds of extremisms.

⁷ Mayor of Mechelen Bart Somers recently authored a useful insiders' reflection on his city's PVE model. See: Somers, B. (2017) "The Mechelen Model: An Inclusive City" in *Resilient Cities: Countering Violent Extremism at Local Level*, ed., Diego Muro. Barcelona Centre for International Affairs, 57-62. It is worth noting that this article reflects an in-depth understanding by Somers – who won the 2016 World Mayor award for his integration efforts in Mechelen – of a whole host of issues related directly and indirectly to P/CVE, and that this degree of commitment and knowledge on the part of community leaders may be necessary for local-level prevention mechanisms to be truly effective.

Recommendations for policymakers

The results of this research make clear that the Bosnian context demands a wide-angle view by policymakers, who can develop effective prevention and de-radicalisation initiatives only by appreciating the full spectrum of radicalising forces at work in BiH, as well as how different forms of extremism feed one another. In BiH, identity and belonging play key roles in radicalisation. Yet, these factors are difficult to directly affect through policy. But radicalisation is also driven by socioeconomic factors that are indeed possible to affect. For example, BiH has the highest youth unemployment rate in the world and one of the highest overall rates. This research also confirmed a strong link between perceived grievances and extremism, and the country's economic and political dysfunction must be understood in this context.

We recommend that policymakers and officials recognise and promote the need for further research in BiH to:

- (1) map community-level susceptibility to various radicalising forces;
- (2) determine how mutual extremisms feed and inspire each other;
- (3) develop a taxonomy of extremist influences on the Internet; and
- (4) examine how and how much the influence of foreign actors shapes domestic ideological narratives.

Further, we recommend that policymakers:

- (1) confront unemployment, especially among youth, not only as a matter of economic policy but as part of broader de-radicalisation efforts;
- (2) use research outcomes, including perhaps from the studies recommended above, to develop evidence-based initiatives that address specific structural factors of radicalisation in a way that is context-specific and locally-owned, and that seeks to reinvigorate traditional values of tolerance and inclusion in order to supplant or at least minimise the ethnic and/or ideological frame through which so many domestic issues are viewed;
- (3) take risks in the area of P/CVE, more fully engaging a wide range of community, religious, and government actors in prevention efforts that incorporate early intervention elements that strengthen social cohesion, with the understanding that developing effective programming may

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require some experimentation and must rely on regular evaluation of successes and failures to ensure that needs are met on the ground; and

- (4) prioritise the de-radicalisation of returnees from Syria and Iraq, including women and children who may have no interaction with the judicial system, by supporting the development of context-specific programming that is flexible enough to meet the unique needs of individuals but has universal and achievable objectives and by building the capacities of certain actors (prison staff, psychologists, social workers, teachers, etc.) to effectively deliver such programming.

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