Bosnia-Herzegovina social briefing: 
BIH facing and projecting Islamist threat 
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Media perception vs. official data

Every time the problem of Islamic radicalization resurfaces in regional media, Bosnia and Herzegovina gets into limelight. Last few weeks, several dailies re-instigated a discussion on ISIL fighters and supporters going back to domicile European countries from the Syrian front. Apparently, during the last six years, approximately 300-600 Islamic radicals from the Balkan countries went to Syria. Bosnian institutions claim about 260 BIH citizens went to the war in Syria and Iraq, including around 80 women and children. They are now on their way back.

Without clear statistics, it is estimated that almost a half of this number is still in Syria, with 70-90 people being killed during the course of the war. Tracking down the exact number of returnees is even more difficult and Bosnian authorities rely on data provided by foreign agencies. BIH Security Ministry holds that 50 to 60 people have already returned to BIH, with additional 50 people trying to reach BIH. Most of the identified Bosnian returnees are prosecuted or await trial, while the rest are either with dual citizenship (mostly German or Austrian) or unknown whereabouts. Where official data stop, media speculation begins. Some articles published in daily media claim these figures are timid at best. Investigative reports quoted some members of radical para-jamaats (lit. “false” Islamic societies, mostly those non-affiliated with the Islamic Community of BIH, suspected to be close to radical Islamism or offshoots of international terrorist organizations) saying that a flight to Syrian front was not uncommon and could have been easily arranged to be untraceable for Bosnian authorities.

“There are members who flew two to three times to Syria and each time they had returned without any problems”.

Additional headache poses a new migrant wave expected to arrive this spring. Security services have warned on terrorists with false or without any documents trying to sneak into Europe. This was put into focus last week when BIH security officers detained five Afghans suspected to have connections with international terrorist network. Croatian media stirred up security concerns since Croatia is the next destination for the most of the immigrants in BIH. Calls on more stringent control of the state border were raised because of the perceived low-level security controls of the Bosnian side, but they are also placed next to long-standing fears that BIH itself is a country that harbors domestic radicals ideologically belonging to Islamist fundamentalism and linked with international terrorist groups. Since these allegations are
extremely difficult to verify and their sources are usually publicly disclosed indeterminately as arriving from foreign intelligence agencies, the issue of potential threat Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as neighboring countries face in regard to Islamist insurgency and terrorist attacks is prone to be highly speculative one. Statements given by some politicians only tend to add a fuel. Filtering many concerned politicians as well as those using terrorist threat on the false pretenses and with obvious political motives, Croatian President Grabar-Kitarovic stands out as a peculiar case of the leader who has persistently warned against Islamist radicalization in BIH. Recently, she has emphasized the potential threat from Islamist cells in BIH as a topic that remains neglected in discussing regional security and anti-terrorist cooperation. Reactions to her statement varied so as the approaches to security risks in BIH. In general, there is not very clear consensus on whether the phenomenon of Islamic radicalization in BIH is a sporadic or rather an organized process and hence requires more comprehensive set of measures to contain possible threats. Is it only “imported” so its foreign links need to be severed or has already gained a foothold in some parts of BIH?

A country with one constitutional nation predominantly Muslim Sunni, with recidivist war sentiments, in the state of continuous political and social disarray with weak central institutions already qualifies for a raised level of potential terrorist threat. Every news on potential terrorist activities tends to magnify this level and, in similar vein, casts a shadow on Bosnian society as a whole. Yardsticks on measuring the level of this threat are blurred so as the negative impacts on circa 1.8 million Bosniaks, Roma, Turks and other Muslims living in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

**Liberal Islam still dominates**

In order to provide an accurate picture of a phenomenon of Islamist radicalism in BIH and security risks it poses on Bosnian society and regional security framework, a good reference point is an inquiry on radical Islamism in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo conducted by the German Bundestag in April 2018. Based on a report made by German intelligence service BND, Bundestag has concluded that there are no concrete indications as to the strengthening of Islamist tendencies in Bosnia and Herzegovina and in Kosovo. Also, the report said that in both countries is prevalent “liberal” Islam based on a tradition shared by European (Muslim) countries and there is nothing to suggest that it could soon be lost to radicalism and militant influences. Moreover, the report confirmed that there is not established an evidence that in the
past few years BIH has given disproportionally higher number of Syrian fighters than any other European country.

Nevertheless, some red flags are stitching out. First, there is a concern that a certain number of Islamist guerilla fighters (regionally also known by generic term: Bosnian mujahedeen) who joined Bosnian war from 1992 to 1995 have never left BIH, but has since set up militant cells across Muslim-dominated areas and made contacts with various jihadist groups. The existence of “Salafi villages” run by groups ideologically clustered around Islamic fundamentalism has been confirmed, yet the link with militant and terrorist activities has been established only seldomly and mostly on individual basis. Second, Bosnia and Herzegovina was a target of terrorist attacks far more than any other regional country. Moreover, some attacks in neighboring countries (such as the 1995 Rijeka bomb attack) are frequently linked to groups or individuals coming from BIH. In the post-9/11 period, the concern was aggravated after the attacks on Bugojno police station in 2010, the US embassy in 2011 and Zvornik police station in 2015. Third, suspicious trails of Petro-dollar in Bosnia and Herzegovina. As it is commonly acknowledged, in the post-war reconstruction the role humanitarian organizations and charitable trusts from the Gulf countries (primarily Saudi Arabia) was to finance (re)construction of mosques and religious objects, providing relief and assistance to war afflicted population. However, some purported humanitarian organizations financed dubious long-term projects (mostly in education, assistance to vulnerable groups, etc.) or run a slush funds for financing radical Islamists. For some, such as Benevolence Intl Foundation was established to be a front for al-Qaeda, while some are still under investigation by Bosnian and foreign agencies. Fourth, and related to the fact that this funding has been almost exclusively allocated through or to Muslim communities, is unfavorable perception of non-Muslim communities regarding the projects and investments financed by the Arabs. Serb and Croat politicians tend to be vocal in “denouncing” suspicious links between the Arab capital and domestic organizations, which curries favor to terrorist threat narratives and increases perceived threat domestically. It is not surprising, therefore, that BIH on the Economic and Peace Institute`s Terrorist Index ranks as one of the countries with the highest risk of terrorist acts in the region.

**ISIL “returnees” and para-jamaats**

As a member of the Global anti-terror coalition, Bosnia and Herzegovina has adopted a strategy for the prevention and fight against terrorism (2015 – 2020). The strategy is said to
further strengthen national capacities in the fight against terrorism by intensifying coordination
with international partner organizations. The level of cooperation on tracking down migrants
with terrorist background and domestic ISIL fighters has been, according to the US Coordinator
for Counterterrorism Nathan Sales, satisfactorily. In order to prevent departure of citizens of
Bosnia and Herzegovina to foreign battlegrounds, mainly in the Middle East, BIH amended the
Penal Code, which now treats every act of participation on foreign battlefields and joining to
foreign paramilitaries as a criminal offence. So far, more than 20 people have been prosecuted
and BIH courts have still some cases involving terrorist planning and joining foreign
battlegrounds. The main challenge is organization and coordination. BIH Security Ministry
together with BIH security services (SIPA, OSA) are state-level institutions with “passing
grade” in border protection and coordinating activities in protecting the state from external
threats. However, internal threats and coordination with local and entity-level police institutions
is a field that is often criticized as leaving much to be desired. Jurisdictions and responsibilities
are often mutually disputed, as seen during the September 2018 migrant crisis, to the extent that
the crisis threatened to slip out of control.

The main challenge to security (also impacting inter-ethnic relations) is identifying
potential threat from Islamist groups that operate without the official consent of the Bosnian
Islamic Community, aka Riyasat. Their number and militant& terrorist aspirations tend to be
highly disputed. Although in some media they are all brought in connection with Wahhabism,
they tend to adhere to hybrid denominations, including Salafi purists and jihadists. Bosnian
Riyasat, a head organization of Bosnian, Croatian, Serbian and Montenegrin Muslims in 2016
has identified 38 “suspicious” communities (para-jamaats) who refused to be integrated within
the Community. Some of these para-jamaats were already confirmed to harbor terrorists or to
serve as terrorist hideouts. In 2018, Bosnian police has cracked down one Wahhabi-affiliated
para-jamaat in Sarajevo and few cells across the country. The police operations are usually
followed with public demands to cut down the source religious legitimacy these groups are
believed to enjoy by rather tolerant stance of the Islamic Community. According to some critics,
Reis-L-Ulema (Head of Bosnian Riyasat) Husein Kavazovic had no intention to abolish the
para-jamaats, but merely sought to put the property of these parallel communities under the
control of the Riyasat. However, given the situation, his tolerance for different Islamic
movements increasingly tends to be misinterpret as support for terrorist groups. This equation
shared by a many in BIH is expected to be put on test with upcoming new migrant wave and
the return of domestic ISIL fighters.