

Challenges to International Security: The Case of Bosnia-Herzegovina

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Many recent and rather dramatic media reports and research papers have concluded that Bosnia was, and still is, “a staging area and safe haven” for the Al Qaeda-linked Islamic terrorists on their route between the Middle East and Europe. Some international press headlines also suggest that, in Bosnia, “terrorists are recruiting ‘white Muslims’”, while “militant Islam is turning US allies to enemies”.²

These severe claims seem to require more thorough examination.

It is already a well documented fact that as of 1992, Bosnia had indeed become a meeting point for members of various militant groups arriving directly from training camps in Afghanistan, or from Western Europe, where they had been recruited in mosques and Islamic centers.³ They all felt that genocide was taking place in Bosnia, and that a new Jihad was required. Regardless of their point of origin, these militants all became part of the *mujahideen* once they reached Bosnia. They adopted new identities and acquired their *nomes de guerre*.

The number of *mujahideen* who fought in Bosnia from 1992 to 1995 is estimated to be between three and four thousand.⁴ Initially, they were not under the control of the Bosnian mili-

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² Kole, William, *Terrorists recruiting ‘white Muslims’*, in: Associated Press, 17 April 2006. Maroevic, Rade and Daniel Williams, *Terrorist Cells Find Foothold in Balkans*, in: Washington Post, 1 December 2005. Jatras, Stella L., *Bosnia: The Birthplace of Al Qaeda*, in: Jihad Watch, 9 July 2005. *Al-Qaida-linked Terrorist Operations Escalate in Bosnia as US, International Officials Turn a Blind Eye*, in: Defence & Foreign Affairs Daily (Volume XXI, Number 106) 7 July 2003. Dempsey, Judy, *Al Qaeda cells survive in Bosnia despite Nato raids*, in: Financial Times (USA Edition 1), 7 May 2002. Trofimov, Yaroslav, *Seeds of Hate: In Postwar Bosnia, Militant Islam Turns US Allies to Enemies*, in Wall Street Journal, 18 March 2002. Christoff Kurop, Marcia, *Al’Qaeda’s Balkan Links*, in: Wall Street Journal Europe, 1 November 2001. Pyes, Craig, Josh Meyer and William C. Rempel, *Bosnia Seen as Hospitable Base and Sanctuary for Terrorists*, in: Los Angeles Times, 7 October 2001.

³ It has also been documented that, in some cases, these volunteers were recruited by Western intelligence services and sent to Bosnia to join the mujahideen movement. Numanovic, Sead, *Bosnia: Mujahideen Revival Fears*, in: Institute for War and Peace Reporting: Balkan Crisis Report No. 286, 5 October 2001.

⁴ The boldest estimate puts the number of foreign mujahideen in Bosnia at 15,000 to 20,000, but there is a consensus among the experts that the claim is highly exaggerated. Bodansky, Yossef, *Some Call It Peace (Part 1)*.



tary, but fought alongside Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims); however, in September 1993, the *mujahideen* were integrated into the Bosnian Army's 3rd Corps under the name *El-Mujahideen Unit*.

A few hundred *mujahideen* remained in Bosnia after the war, and a few dozen still remain. They have enjoyed protection and support from the highest ranks of Bosniak political and intelligence establishments. Some of them are believed to be linked to Al Qaeda.

The arrival of *mujahideen* in Bosnia introduced at least two new and important factors into Bosnia's security and social landscape.

One factor was short term: the physical presence of people trained for, and capable of, committing various terrorist acts. When they arrived in Bosnia, many already had a history of involvement in such actions elsewhere. Some were on the Most Wanted lists in their respective countries, while others were listed as Wanted by Interpol.

The other factor was long term. The *mujahideen* brought with them to Bosnia a narrow, puritanical and confrontational interpretation of Islam commonly known as Salafism or Wahhabism. The members of this movement reject these terms and call themselves the "followers of true Islam". In more than five centuries of Islamic tradition in Bosnia, this was a rather new religious experience.

The goal of the Salafi/Wahhabi movement is at least twofold: to purify Islam and to create a global Islamic theocracy. Today we know that this is also the ideology of the global Jihad Movement, spearheaded by Al Qaeda and its network of affiliated terrorist groups.

Due to its character, Salafism/Wahhabism caused tensions in traditional, religiously moderate Bosnian Muslim society from the outset. These tensions have escalated in recent months and in some instances have led to a struggle between Bosniak "traditionalists" and Salafis/Wahhabis for control of important mosques and Islamic centers both in Bosnia and abroad in places of Bosniak diaspora.

This development, however, is not uniquely Bosnian. It is also evident in other indigenous and immigrant Muslim societies where, particularly in recent years, the development mirrors a belief that Muslims have fallen from an earlier position of preeminence in the world because they abandoned their religion and thereby enabled outside powers to destroy the supremacy of Islam.

However, the sole presence of Salafism/Wahhabism and the remaining *mujahideen* does not qualify Bosnia as a particular threat to international security. What does pose a significant threat is the fact that Bosnia is increasingly becoming a failed state.⁵

Available online at: http://members.tripod.com/Balkania/resources/geostrategy/bodansky_peace/index.html (Last checked on 12 January 2007).

⁵ According to a recent *Foreign Policy/Fund for Peace* survey, Bosnia-Herzegovina is among 60 most vulnerable countries where the risk of failure is running high. "The Failed State Index 2007", *Foreign Policy*, July/August 2007. This notion is shared among Bosnians themselves. In a poll conducted by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in the spring of 2007 more than 88 percent of (out of 3,500 interviewed) described the situation in Bosnia as "bad" or "really bad", while more than 62 percent of those under 30 years of age declared they wished to emigrate. Oxford Research International, *The Silent Majority Sleeps: Snapshots of*

The Dayton Peace Accord may have ended the armed conflict, but through the establishment of the Serb Republic (Republika Srpska), it incorporated rather than resolved the fundamental dispute over which the war was fought - namely, whether Bosnia is a single or divided country.

This dichotomy provides a permanent incentive for Bosnia's internal instability. It prevents the establishment of a viable state structure and a self-sustainable economy. It destabilizes democratic institutions and creates internal frictions, thus hindering the reconciliation process in this fragile, post-conflict society. The establishment of a functioning state is also undermined by money-laundering, corruption and weak law enforcement. As a result, the state's borders are porous and susceptible to illegal human and drug trafficking. The police force is still fragmented and sectarian, and large amounts of weapons and ammunition from recent war are still readily available for purchase.⁶

In short, the country is an ideal breeding ground for any extreme ideology, let alone Salafism/Wahhabism, which typically injects itself into troubled zones on a tide of substantial cash flow, and is able to provide, in this case, extreme yet simple answers to almost every challenge that arises from the grim postwar reality in Bosnia.

In addition, since 2002, the West, and particularly the US, has been shifting resources and political energy from Bosnia to other regions in the world where security threats seem more immediate.

So, while discussing the alleged propensity of Bosniaks to join the global Jihad Movement, one should look not just at whether there are individuals in Bosnia ready to put on suicide vests and blow themselves and others up, but also at factors that prompt people to embrace extremist ideologies.

While Al Qaeda-linked groups and individuals in Bosnia remain rather elusive, overwhelming evidence, particularly in the last several months, indicates that the ideology behind the movement is gaining ground rapidly.⁷

However, Bosnian society does not seem sufficiently capable or mature enough to deal with this problem decisively, and international involvement is often more of a hindrance than a help, for it typically deals with the consequences, instead of the root causes of the problem.

Today and Visions of the Future of the Bosnia-Herzegovina, UNDP, 2007. Available online at: <http://www.undp.ba/index.aspx?PID=7&RID=413> (Last checked on 20 July 2007).

⁶ Bosnia is increasingly becoming an important point on a transit route for heroin trafficked to Western Europe. It is believed that a significant portion of the drug money is used to finance terrorist-related activities. Despite intense smuggling, in 2006 the Bosnian police discovered and confiscated less than 7 kilograms of heroin and 1.6 kilograms of cocaine. Kalamujic, Az and D. Pavlovic, *Narko-poslove vode albanska i sandzacka grupa*, Oslobođenje, 6 July 2007. The establishment of a functioning state is also undermined by money-laundering, corruption and weak law enforcement. CIA, *The World Factbook 2007*, Available online at: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/bk.html> (Last checked on 8 August 2007).

⁷ According to a recent public survey, some 66 percent of Bosniaks are aware of the presence of the Wahhabi interpretation and practice of Islam in Bosnia. The majority, some 69 percent, oppose (strongly or partly) the presence of Wahhabism in Bosnia, while some 13 percent support that form of Islam. The survey was conducted by Sarajevo-based polling agency Prizma ("Prism") between 21 May and 26 July 2006. (and published ? if so, where/when?)

The “War on Terror” cannot be successful if fought solely against those already recruited and indoctrinated with jihadist ideology. Terrorism does not grow in a vacuum. No one is born a terrorist; terrorists are bred. Therefore, the social, economic and political origins of terrorism should be addressed with equal resolve. The failure to understand this may force the West to eventually fight the “War on Terror” against the birth rate of Muslim nations around the world.

Precisely to avoid such an outcome, and in the context of the Washington’s “War of Ideas”, abandoning Bosnia and leaving it to its own devices in a post 9/11 world would be tragic. Instead, by helping the country to accelerate its transformation into a nation of entrepreneurship, political responsibility, and popular sovereignty, the West could use Bosnia as an example to promote a vision of modern, and moderate, Islam.

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