

The Balkans and Syria's Civil War: Realities and Challenges

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Abstract

The prime objective of this research paper is to look at the realities and challenges confronting the Balkan states and societies in light of Syria's civil war. By examining the mobilization process of Balkan militants who are joining Syria's rebel cause, especially the Islamic radical groups linked to al-Qaeda, this paper proposes a model that explains why and how Balkan militants are joining the fight in Syria. Drawing upon reliable media reports, personal observations, academic accounts, and other consistent sources, this paper argues that Balkan militants are joining Syria's rebel cause because foreign Islamic radical groups (that have been operating in the Balkans since the early 1990s) have successfully indoctrinated them. This paper challenges the argument that Islam in the Balkans is a threat to the region, and the claim that Balkan Islam and Muslims in the region are becoming an increasing threat to the West. The central findings of this paper exemplify that the future of Balkan militants is bleak and that they will be confronted with a massive modern and democratic resistance that offers them nothing but re-integration into Balkan Islam, their natural "religious nest." Notwithstanding the trends related to Syria's civil war, Balkan Muslims belong to the West, culturally and mentally.

Keywords: Balkan Militants, Balkan Muslims, Foreign Islamic Radical Groups, Sectarianism, and Syria's Civil War

1. Introduction

What began as a secular revolt against the autocratic regime of Bashar al-Assad, the conflict in Syria has now turned into bloodshed. *The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights* recently stated that the death toll in Syria's civil war has risen to at least 125,835, but the real figure is probably higher.¹ It is reported that around 50,000 fighters loyal to Assad and around 27,000 rebel fighters have been killed in the war.² Among the dead on the side of the rebels are 6,000 foreign fighters or unknown combatants, coming from different countries, including Balkan states. While the exact number of fighters coming from the Balkans remains unknown, it is assumed that there are at least few hundred of them currently fighting in Syria.³ As Syria's civil war develops into a complex war with a clear sectarian dimension, an increasing number of Sunni Balkan militants⁴ are being mobilized and joining Syria's rebel cause, specifically the Islamic radical groups linked to al-Qaeda. This reality begs at least four important questions, which critically motivate this paper. Why are these Balkan militants joining Syria's rebel cause? How are they being mobilized? How is this reality, the mobilization of Balkan militants, affecting the inter-religious and inter-state relations in the region? In light of Syria's civil war, can these developments have any impact on the future of the Balkans?

Recently, a number of articles and policy-oriented reports have come out that focus on the civil war in Syria, examine the struggle for power in the

¹ Erika Solomon, "Syria Death Toll Hits Nearly 126,000: Monitoring Groups," *Reuters*, 02 December 2013, www.reuters.com/article/2013/12/02/us-syria-crisis-toll-idUSBRE9B10-ES20131202 (accessed on 22 January 2014)

² Ibid

³ Vesna Peric Zimonjic, "Balkans Feed the Syria Battle," *Inter Press Service*, 02 August 2013, www.ipsnews.net/2013/08/balkans-feed-the-syria-battle/ (accessed on 22 January 2014)

⁴ The term militant is used to describe a radical person who believes in and advocates complete political and social reform to be conducted in a combative and aggressive way. Sunni Balkan militants are a relative small number of Sunni Balkan Muslims who are joining Syria's rebel cause. These militants are being mobilized in individual basis and generally come from discriminated minority groups, such as Gypsies, and from undeveloped poor-hit areas where the state has made minimal or no investment whatsoever, such as in the case of Macedonia and Serbia.

country, look at the regional rivalry context, and speculate on the options of military international intervention against Assad's regime.⁵ These works competently assess the intensified sectarian violence in Syria and the long-term implications for the broader Middle East region, but they fall short of considering the nexus between the Balkans and Syria's civil war. Specifically, the questions of why and how are Balkan militants mobilized and the possible impact this mobilization might have on the region and its future, merit a closer attention by both scholars and policy makers alike. In light of Syria's civil war, what are the realities and challenges confronting the Balkans? This is especially important given that the region has been alleged of fostering radical Islam and considerably feeding Syria's battlegrounds. Placing the Balkans on the spotlight, this paper aims to fill this intellectual gap by offering an explanation for why and how Balkan militants are joining Syria's rebel cause and explore if these developments can have any substantial affect on the future of the Balkans.⁶

Drawing upon various reliable sources, such as security reports, briefings, media reports, secondary sources, and personal observations, the collected evidence will demonstrate that Balkan militants are joining Syria's rebel cause because foreign Islamic radical groups (FIRGs),⁷ which have

⁵ Among others, see:

Ted Galen Carpenter, "Tangled Web: The Syrian Civil War and Its Implications," *Mediterranean Quarterly* 24, no. 1 (2013): 1-11;

Joseph Holliday, "The Struggle for Syria in 2011: An Operational and Regional Analysis," *Middle East Security Report* 2, December 2011;

Elizabeth O'Bagy, "Jihad in Syria," *Middle East Security Report* 6, September 2012;

Amir Taheri, "Has the Time Come for Military Intervention in Syria?" *American Foreign Policy Interests* 35, no. 4 (2013): 217-220;

International Crisis Group, "Syria's Mutating Conflict," *Middle East Report* 128, 01 August 2012;

Center for Social Studies, "The Syrian Civil War: Between Escalation and Intervention," *CSS Analysis in Security Policy* 12, November 2012.

⁶ For the purpose of this paper, the term Balkans encompasses all the states from where the Balkan militants going to Syria come from: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, and Serbia. These states also form the Balkan area that remains outside of the European Union.

⁷ Unlike Islamic organizations, which are involved in legal and transparent activities (usually faith-based), Islamic radical groups get involved in illegal and cloudy activities and are often linked to terrorist networks such as al-Qaeda. Islamic radical groups can be based on a single ideology or merge Salafists, Wahhabists, and radical Islamists. The following groups have been active or currently active in the Balkans: Al-Haramain Islamic Foundation, The Saudi Joint Relief Committee, The Om Al Qura Foundation, The

been operating in the region since the early 1990s, have successfully indoctrinated them. Also, it will be shown that the Islamic ideological networks and the Islamic infrastructural mechanisms⁸ that were arranged and built by FIRGs have significantly facilitated the mobilization process of Balkan militants to Syria, and are understood to be essential in leading and controlling this process. The question of how Balkan militants are mobilized will be answered using the first two stages of the four-stages model, which I shall disclose in following pages. In the first stage, it is argued that the political and socio-economic vulnerability in the Balkans, during the wars of Yugoslav disintegration, opened a “window of opportunity” for FIRGs to expand their influence and activities deep in local Muslim communities. In the second stage, taking advantage of this opportunity, FIRGs effectively established their presence in the area and rather quickly infiltrated the minds and hearts of Balkan militants, especially of those living in rural and poor-hit area. Stages three and four of the model will provide a framework to explore how is the reality of mobilization of Balkan militants affecting inter-religious and inter-state relations in the region. Moreover, these stages will lay the ground for exploring if these developments have any impact on the future of the Balkans, in light of Syria’s civil war.

Before I address the questions motivating this paper and disclose the four-stages model, some conceptual clarifications are in order. To place the broader argument into a firmer context the elucidation of terms Islam, civil war, and sectarianism are essential. For our purposes here, the concept of Islam is important for at least three important reasons. First, the Balkans is home to Muslim communities for more than six centuries and there are currently more than 8 million adherents of Islam in the region who comprise majority in Albania, Bosnia, and Kosovo, very large minority in

International Islamic Relief Organization, The Saudi High Committee, The Islamic Relief Agency, The Qatar Charitable Committee, Red Crescent Iran, Kuwait Joint Relief Committee, The Maktab Al Kidmat Charity, and the Islamic Salvation Front. For more on these groups and their activities, please see Shaul Shay, *Islamic Terror and the Balkans* (London: Transaction Publishers, 2007).

⁸ By ideological network I mean a relatively small group of interconnected people who hold similar radical-religious beliefs. By infrastructural mechanism I mean, for example, a religious site such as a mosque or religious school that is utilized by Islamic radical groups as an instrument for achieving their ends. Another way to think about this is by thinking of such mosque as one piece of the bigger machinery - radical Islam. These concepts are elaborated more fully later in the paper.

Macedonia, and significant minority in Serbia (mostly found in Presheva and Sandzak areas).⁹ Second, "Balkan Islam"¹⁰ has been unfairly linked to violence and jihadism, by particular sources and observers. If one wants to understand what Balkan Islam is and means to the Balkan Muslims, one should not look for it among non-Muslims or outside the region rather learn from direct and reliable sources, the voices and souls of Balkan Muslims. Third, only by understanding Islam, its branches, and its various schools of law, one can make sense of the connection between Balkan militants and specific Islamic radical groups inside Syria. The fact that we are no longer only witnessing a revolt against Assad's regime but rather a complex civil war with clear rivalry between opposition groups and Islamists demonstrates the importance of terms civil war and sectarianism.

2. Civil War, Islam, Sectarianism

We often tend to think of civil wars as binary conflicts, understanding them through some overarching issue such as ethnicity, race, or religion. However, in practice, civil wars are much more complex, often comprising a combination of actors, actions, and identities. Civil wars start as uniform "armed combat within the boundaries of a recognized sovereign entity between parties subject to a common authority at the outset of hostilities,"¹¹ but they do have a tendency to develop increasingly intricate and eventually spread outside sovereign borders. In such case the master cleavage becomes hard to define, and the immersion of external actors is practically inevitable. The war in Syria has taken such a turn and is no longer merely a power struggle between Assad and his opponents. The

⁹ Ina Merdjanova, *Rediscovering the Umma: Muslims in the Balkans between Nationalism and Transnationalism* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 108.

¹⁰ Balkan Islam is different from Islam found in Iran, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, or even in Turkey. The Ottoman heritage of Balkan Islam is undeniable, but since the time when the Ottoman Empire left the region Islam in the Balkans has developed in a unique way. For more on Balkan Islam and its uniqueness, see:

Ina Merdjanova, *Rediscovering the Umma; Muslims in the Balkans between Nationalism and Transnationalism* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 108.

Isa Blumi, "Political Islam Among Albanians: Are the Taliban Coming to the Balkans?" *Kosovar Institute for Policy Research and Development*, Policy Research Paper no. 2, June 2005.

¹¹ Stathis Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 17.

conflict has spilled into a sectarian struggle that has situated different groups against each other and has hauled in a number of external actors, some pro and some against the Assad government.¹² Balkan militants are joining al-Qaeda linked Sunni radical groups who are fighting not only Assad's regime but other oppositional groups as well. This reality is the most obvious, if not the only, connection between the Balkans and Syria's civil war.

Though the motivation to overthrow Assad, for majority in the opposition, is based on past injustices and political calculations, Islamic radical groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra are evoking Islam as their source of "true" inspiration for political and social change in Syria. To them, Islam is "feeding" the idea for transforming Syria into an Islamic state under the moral code and religious law. No question that Islam plays an important role for many in the opposition, but it is groups such as al-Nusra that are politicizing Islam and transforming it into Islamism. Islamism is the political manifestation of Islam and it should be understood as an ideology that guides both personal life and political foundations of a group.¹³ At its most extreme, Islamism advocates a return to the fundamentals of Islam. Extreme Islamism is guiding the behavior and conduct of the couple hundred Balkan militants who are now part of Syria's civil war.

Unfortunately, several Balkan observers have referred to this very small minority of Balkan extreme Islamists in attempts to generalize the greater Muslim population in the region and link Balkan Islam to violence and jihad. Such accounts depict the Balkans as a strategic base for Islamic radicals and a region that is becoming a threat to Europe and the West.¹⁴ While FIRGs, their teachings of Islam, and the Balkan militants are a challenge for the region, in no way can or must we associate them and their teachings with Balkan Muslims and Balkan Islam. We must keep apples

¹² See, Mandy Clark and Paul Nassar, "Analysis: Who's Backing Who as Syria's Civil War Threatens to Spread," *NBC News*, 28 July, 2013, www.worldnews.nbcnews.com/_news/2013/07/28/19679903-analysis-whos-backing-who-as-syrias-civil-war-threatens-to-spread (accessed on 3 February 2014)

¹³ On Islamism, see: Sheri Berman, "Islamism, Revolution, and Civil Society," *Perspectives on Politics* 1, no. 2 (2003): 257 - 272

¹⁴ For example, see: Christopher Deliso, *The Coming Balkan Caliphate: The Threat of Radical Islam to Europe and the West* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2007). The columnist Nebojsa Malic and Darko Trifunovic have made numerous attempts, in regional and international media outlets, to depict Balkan Islam and Balkan Muslims as dangerous to the European identity and security.

and oranges separate. In exception to the couple hundred militants, radical Islam is alien and external to Balkan Muslims, and squashing all Balkan Muslims into a single category is a terrible intellectual mistake. In this paper, I categorize Balkan Muslims into four different types: moderate Muslims, incorporated Islamists, unincorporated Islamists, and Jihadists.

Moderate Muslims form the clear majority in Balkan Muslim communities. These Muslims follow the liberal Islamic school of thought, embrace democracy and pluralism, and are often considered the best example of moderate Islam in the world.¹⁵ Incorporated Islamists are Muslims who follow a more conservative Islamic school of thought (than liberals) and accept both their national state and the institution of the Islamic Community as legitimate and representing their interests and communities. A clear significant number of Balkan Muslims fall under this category. Unincorporated Islamists are those who follow a more conservative Islamic school of thought and reject the legitimacy of both their national state and the institution of the Islamic Community. The number of Balkan Muslims who fall under this category is minimal. Finally, the Jihadist category incorporates the most violent Balkan Muslims that aim at fundamentally changing the way politics and society function. These are the couple hundred of Balkan Muslims that have received the epithet of militants and are to be found mostly in Syria's civil war.¹⁶ The four categories are illustrated below in figure 1.

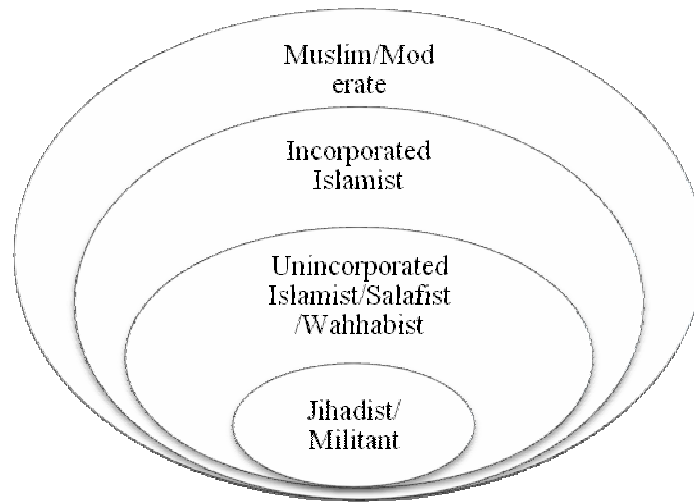
The four categories could also be useful in sorting out different groups fighting in Syria's civil war. For instance, the Free Syrian Army would likely fall somewhere between moderate Muslim/incorporated Islamist category, whereas Suqour al-Sham would fall somewhere between incorporated Islamist and unincorporated Islamist category. Clearly, al-Nusra, Fatah al-Islam, and Hezbollah would fall under the Jihadist category. This categorization of groups is useful because it helps us further expose the major link between the Balkans and Syria's civil war and situate the sectarian dimension of Syria's civil war into a comparative perspective. The reality that Balkan militants are joining Jihadist groups such as al-

¹⁵ See: Stephen Schwartz, "Albanian Islam, The Best Example of Islam in the World," *Center for Islamic Pluralism*, 5 September 2013.

¹⁶ For this categorization I have relied on a research project done by Pew Research Center on Muslims. See: Pew Research Center, "The World's Muslims: Religion, Politics and Society," *Research Report*, 30 April 2013, www.pewforum.org/files/2013/04/worlds-muslims-religion-politics-society-full-report.pdf (accessed on 4 February 2014)

Nusra and al-Islam demonstrates the link between the Balkans and Syria's civil war. Comparatively, while the current ideological differences among Balkan Muslims have been managed relatively peacefully, in the case of Syria it is precisely the ideological tensions among groups that have dragged the country into a "sectarian cul-de-sac."

Figure 1: Religious Identity Atlas



Source: O'Bagy, (2012),

Note: Moderate, Incorporated, Unincorporated, and Militant labels are supplementary to the original atlas.

The activation of sectarian identity, by Assad, in the early months of the civil war, not only caused more deaths but it prompted the opposition to take similar measures. Different groups within the opposition began to activate their specific identities, which helped transform the war from a struggle between the two religious denominations (Sunni and Shia) to a complex war positioning different religious, regional, and tribal groups against one another. Thus, sectarianism is not a religion, rather a form of group belonging that in times of conflict and war calls for hatred and killing members of the other groups. This idea of group belonging, or sectarianism, has attested a powerful force that has pulled into the war a number of external actors, including Sunni Balkan militants who are fighting on the side of Sunni radical groups.

In the following pages, I turn my full attention to the realities and challenges confronting the Balkans. The mobilization of Balkan militants is perceived as both a reality and a challenge that needs to be addressed objectively. Questions such as, why Balkan militants are joining Syria's rebel cause, how are Balkan militants being mobilized, and who are the main actors in the process, are all at the center of what follows. Of great interest are also the questions dealing with the affects of the mobilization of militants on the region's inter-religious and inter-state relations. The re-integration process of the Balkan militants, and the challenges they may transmit to the region are also carefully considered. What do these challenges hold for the Balkans and its future? Only by examining such quandaries objectively can we arrive at an explanation that is likely to be useful to scholars and valuable to policy-makers who are dealing with the Balkans.

3. Dreaming the "Land of Jihad"

Why are Balkan militants joining Syria's rebel cause? I argue that radical religious indoctrination is the main causal factor that explains this reality. Balkan militants are joining Syria's rebel cause because FIRGs have successfully indoctrinated them. The militants have been imbued with a new set of attitudes and beliefs of a specific religious radical ideology, which now creates a sense of obligation for each of them to go aid their "Islamic brethren" emerge victorious and establish an Islamic state in which the principal basis of government is Sharia (Islamic religious law).¹⁷ Indoctrinated in this way, Balkan militants are now placed into a mystical and conceptual mindset, which guides them toward dreaming the land of jihad.

By no means is this indoctrination process simple and easy to explain. However, it is important that we attempt to reduce its complexity and try to grasp the process and its central players. One good way to make sense of it is by thinking about it as a process which involves repetition of the Islamic radical doctrine over and over until the target becomes "immunized" against any other belief or ideology. Once the target is

¹⁷ This argument is based on personal observations that resulted from my recent stay in various Balkan Muslim communities in Bosnia, FYROM, and Kosovo, as well as personal communication with unincorporated Islamists and people close to few Balkan militants.

entirely immunized, he is willing to sacrifice everything in the name of Jihad and for the sake of Allah. In the case of Balkan militants, there is an impression that there is a higher purpose to die for - not for a nation, but for the love of Allah.

Two players are central to this indoctrination process: Islamic ideological networks and Islamic infrastructural mechanisms. While other factors might play a role in the process at large, ideological networks and infrastructural mechanisms play the key roles in controlling and guiding this process. Islamic ideological networks are basically the “governing bodies” of the process. These networks are usually led by a radical cleric who leads these loose and unstructured small groups and operates with three objectives in mind. First, these networks aim to create a source of “inner trust web,” where only those who are part of the network are to be trusted. Second, they tend to emphasize the “facts” about the “true” religion, and teach to reject all external alternatives. Finally, they seek to create a narrow cynical mentality in those being indoctrinated. These three objectives have very much shaped the whole indoctrination process; however, the process would have not been as successful if infrastructural mechanisms were not in place. Mosques, religious schools, and other religious venues played an important role in the process of indoctrination. Since the early 1990s, FIRGs have built or helped built thousands of mosques and religious sites in the region, precisely with this goal in mind. Utilizing these infrastructural mechanisms, FIRGs kept Balkan militants totally occupied with religious prayers, meetings, get-togethers, and other activities, just so that they are kept completely separate from other Balkan Muslims until they are totally detached both ideologically and emotionally from the masses, in some cases even from their immediate families.

In sum, this indoctrination process has not only enabled the mobilization of Balkan militants to Syria but it has also inculcated the convictions that there is nothing more enjoyable than conducting Jihad, set foot on the land of al-Sham (the Levant) and the land of Jihad for the sake of Allah, give victory to the oppressed Muslims, and die for the love of Allah.¹⁸ This reality is affecting not only the relations between moderate Muslim majority and unincorporated Islamist minority in the Balkans, but

¹⁸ A quick search for Balkan Jihadists in Syria or Albanian Jihadists in Syria, on YouTube, will bring up a number of videos that show Balkan militants fighting in Syria, calling on other Balkan Muslims to join them, and how they want to cleanse Syria from the infidel.

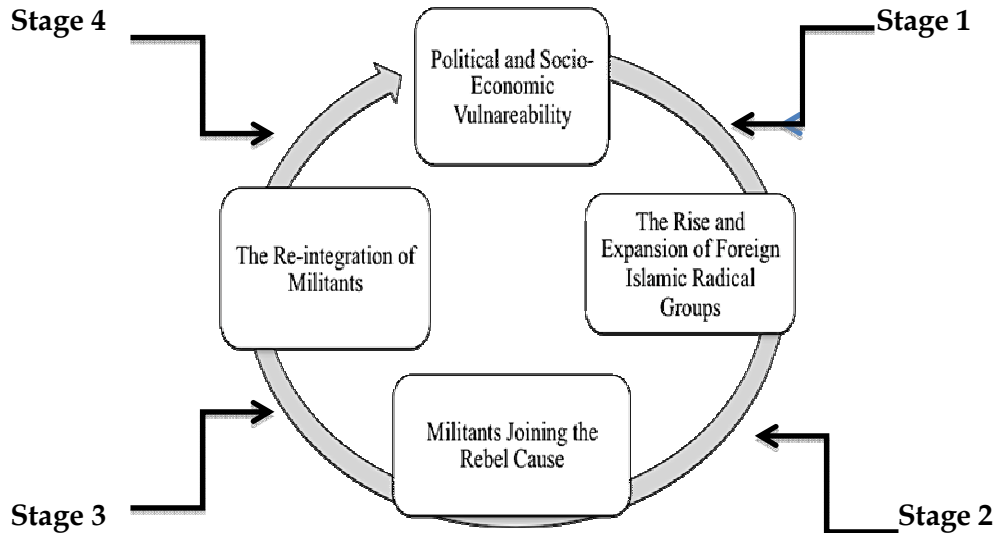
also the inter-religious and inter-state relations in the region. The re-integration process of Balkan militants (upon their return) is likely to deteriorate these relations further. How will these militants cope with their return? Will they seek to challenge the pluralistic and democratic order of the region? More broadly, what kinds of challenges will they bring to the Balkans and how will these challenges impact the future of the region? Before we explore these questions it seems logical that we first take a look at the process of mobilization of Balkan militants to Syria.

4. From the Balkans to the Battlefields

This paper offers a modest four-stage model that explains the process of mobilization of Balkan militants to Syria and provides the framework for exploring how the mobilization and re-integration process of militants might affect the stability and the future of the region. Stages one and two directly address the mobilization process, whereas stages three and four provide the context in which we can explore the affects of the mobilization on the inter-religious and inter-state relations in the region, and potential challenges that might emerge from the re-integration of militants into Balkan society. The model is illustrated below in figure 2.

In the first stage, I argue, the political and socio-economic vulnerability that had gripped the region, during the 1990s, opened a window of opportunity for FIRGs to expand their influence and activities deep in local Muslim communities. The collapse of Yugoslavia and the fall of Communism, which for nearly five decades succeeded in preserving coexistence among different religious and ethnic groups, turned out to be an important juncture that significantly shaped the fate of religious radicalism and inter-religious and inter-ethnic relations in the Balkans. Particularly the war in Bosnia was envisioned as a golden opportunity for FIRGs to penetrate deep in the Balkans.

Figure 2: The Four-Stage Model



Source: Author's own work

The Bosnian war, as soon as religion became the defining feature of it, attracted hundreds of foreign Islamic militants, mainly from Saudi Arabia and Iran, who joined the Muslim Bosnian forces. Several hundred of Islamic militants remained in Bosnia after the war came to a close, some marrying Muslim Bosnian women and others gaining citizenship through other means. Additionally, a number of "faith-based" Islamic groups were stationed in the country right after the war ended. Very soon these organizations were discovered to have had primarily an ideological rather than humanitarian agenda, and many of them close links to groups such as al-Qaeda. These FIRGs together with the remaining foreign Islamic militants played an important role not only during the course of planting the first seeds of the ideological networks and infrastructural mechanisms but also during the greater regional expansion of these networks. Soon after the Bosnian war ended, these groups rather quickly established themselves and their activities in other Balkan states, Albania, FYROM, Kosovo, and Serbia.

In the second stage, FIRGs fairly quickly expanded their activities and infiltrated the minds and hearts of Balkan militants, especially those found

in rural and poor-hit areas. Collecting billions of dollars, mainly from the Arab world, FIRGs made staggering investments, some grounded on humanitarian basis but most grounded on ideological foundation. According to Esad Hecimovic, by 2006, investments were around two billion dollars, which covered more than 500 reconstructed mosques, 145 new mosques, 147 in a phase of reconstruction, and 289 mosques were still waiting for repair.¹⁹ Similar investments by FIRGs, though at slower pace, continued even after 2006 and extended in Muslim communities throughout the region. Even though the Islamic Community of Kosovo and the Islamic Religious Community of FYROM have claimed to be the sole investors in the building and rebuilding of all the mosques in their respective communities, since the early 1990s, some reports have shown the close cooperation of Kosovo and FYROM's Islamic Communities with FIRGs such as Al-Waqf Al-Islami and Al Haramain, groups linked to Al-Qaeda.²⁰ Islamic communities in Kosovo and FYROM as well as the one in Bosnia might formally claim to be the sole investors in religious investments in their respective communities, but their links to FIRGs is hard to deny.

All of these investments together with weak internal structures in the Balkans smoothed the rise and expansion of Islamic radical groups in the region. Once the ideological networks and infrastructural mechanisms were set in place the conversion from moderate Muslim to incorporated Islamist and unincorporated Islamist, and in some instances directly to Jihadist became much easier. Economic incentives certainly played some role in the process of conversion, but the evidence emerging from Balkans and the battlegrounds confirms the claim that Balkan militants who are fighting and dying in Syria are doing so for the love of Allah.²¹

¹⁹ Esad Hecimovic, "Radical Movements - A Challenge for Moderate Balkan-Islam," *Austrian Armed Forces*, August 2008, www.bmlv.gv.at/pdf_pool/publikationen/rel_exterm_vs_fried_beweg_05_radical_movements_moderate_balkan_islam_e_hecimovic_17.pdf (accessed on 11 February 2014)

²⁰ See: "Radikalizimi i Islamit, Rrezik apo Fobi," *Koha*, 17 August 2012, www.preportr.com/sq/Sociale-Kulture/Radikalizimi-i-Islamit-rrezik-apo-fobi-186; (accessed on 10 February 2014); Besiana Xharra, "Kosovo Turns Blind Eye to Illegal Mosques," *BalkanInsight*, 12 January 2012, www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/kosovo-turns-blind-eye-to-illegal-mosques (accessed 10 February 2014)

²¹ A number of recent news articles demonstrate this point. Among others, see:

The first two stages of the model, which I presented above, show not only the process through which the FIRGs established their presence in the Balkans but also the process of how Balkan militants are being mobilized to Syria. Religious radical indoctrination and the mobilization of militants to Syria (which is an outcome of the former) are realities that are affecting the region at both domestic level and international level. The last two stages of the model, which I shall explore in what follows, are rather hypothetical given that developments in the region (those related to Syria's civil war) are currently unfolding.

5. Back to the "Sacred" Balkans?

The reality that Balkan militants are joining Syria's rebel cause, specifically the Sunni Islamic radical groups linked to al-Qaeda is concerning for the region. While there is a consensus among experts that the Balkans is not a key region harboring or funding Islamic radical groups or their activities, the reality is that the region's continuing problems continue to leave the Balkans vulnerable.²² One such problem is the mobilization of Balkan militants and their expected return from Syria's civil war. Both of these matters will be explored using stages three and four of the model. More precisely, in stage three I will look at how this reality of Balkan militants joining Syria's civil war is affecting the region at both domestic and international levels. In stage four I explore how are militants likely to cope with their return to the Balkans. Will they merely seek re-integration into moderate Muslims societies or will they challenge the pluralistic and democratic order. And more broadly, what kinds of challenges they are able and likely to bring to the region.

At the domestic level, the reality of Balkan militants joining Sunni Islamic radical groups in Syria is generating not only inter-religious but

"Kacaniku Jep edhe Nje 'Shehid' ne Siri," *Gazeta Tribuna*, 8 January 2014; Express, "I Vrani ne Siri ishte Veteran I UCK'se," *Express*, 7 January 2014,

www.gazetaexpress.com/?cid=1,15,130886; (accessed on 11 February 2014);

"Shqiptari nga Shkupi vritet ne Siri," *Telegrafi*, 3 August 2013;

"Krvave Borbe Odnose Zivote Bosanaca" Vernes Vehabovic iz Zenice Poginuo u Sirij," *Slobodna Bosna*, 5 December 2013, www.slobodna-bosna.ba/vijest/11617/krvave_borbe_odnose_zivote_bosanaca_vernes_vehabovic_21_iz_zenice_poginuo_u_siriji.html (accessed on February 14 2014)

²² On this account, see: Steven Woehrel, *Islamic Terrorism and the Balkans* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, July 26, 2005).

also intra-religious tensions within the Balkan Muslim community. Like never before, unincorporated Islamists (supporters of the militants) are situating themselves against the state and the moderate Muslim majority, and have begun to question the fundamental aspects of the current social and political order in the Balkans.²³ The wearing of hijab in public schools, building of new mosques in the city centers, and the role of Islam in the social and political life are some of the hot issues that define the current intra-religious tensions and that have sparked serious debates over the identity and direction of the Balkan countries. Like Balkan militants fighting in Syria, unincorporated Islamists are “fighting” in the land of the Balkans for the love of Allah. For example, even though for the majority in Kosovo the headscarf is not seen as part of Kosovar identity, unincorporated Islamists are trying hard to make the case that state authorities are discriminating against them and that the state is becoming increasingly an anti-Islamic dictatorship.²⁴ In Bosnia, unincorporated Islamists are seeking to generate greater support to forge and maintain their unincorporated Islamic identity. As the assertion of Nusret Imamovic shows, “unlike secularism and democracy, we [unincorporated Islamists] say there is only one truth – law of Allah and Sharia.”²⁵ These scrimmages between the moderate Muslims and unincorporated Islamists are nurturing further division between the two groups, causing further radicalization of the latter. Stephen Schwartz rightly noted, moderate Balkan Muslims are being targeted by radical groups, who call for rejection of national institutions and for destruction of religious site that belong to moderate Muslims.²⁶

At the inter-religious level, this reality is feeding the already fragile relations between Muslim and non-Muslim communities in the Balkans. Tensions are most obvious in Bosnia, FYROM and Kosovo, to a lesser degree in Albania and Serbia. In Bosnia, Islam is a major force shaping

²³ To mention but a few important and leading figures that fall under the unincorporated Islamist category are: preacher Harun Mehicevic and Nusret Imamovic in Bosnia, preacher Irfan Salihu in Kosovo, and preacher Muamer Zurkolic in Sandzak.

²⁴ See: “Kosovo: Muslims Protest Ban on Hijab in Schools,” 9 October 2010, www.ndtv.com/article/world/kosovo-muslims-protest-ban-on-hijab-in-schools-58362 (accessed on 13 February 2014)

²⁵ Robert Coalson and Maja Nikolic, “Radical Islamists Seek to Exploit Frustration in Bosnia,” *Radio Free Europe*, 1 March 2013

²⁶ See: Stephen Schwartz, “Moderate Balkan Muslims are Targeted by Wahhabis and the Muslim Brotherhood,” *Center for Islamic Pluralism*, 4 October 2013.

Bosniak national identity, and more recently the Islamic Community in Bosnia has begun to play a more active role in both political and socio-economic spheres because of the dysfunctional government in Bosnia, the renewed Croat and Serb challenges to the state's territorial integrity, and the governments inability to solve numerous social and economic issues. This reality has irritated Serbs and Croats to a great extent, and the mobilization of Bosnian militants to Syria only adds more fuel to the fire, seriously upsetting the relations between Bosnian Muslims, Catholics, and Orthodox. In FYROM, the most ethnically heterogeneous and politically unstable country in the Balkans,²⁷ the mobilization of Islamic militants to Syria is having a significant affect on its multi-ethnic and multi-confessional society. The presence of radical Islam symbols, such as flags, during a recent Albanian protest²⁸ is suggestive that the long ethnic struggle between Albanian Muslims and Slav Orthodox in FYROM might have a radical religious dimension to it. Because FYROM's stability and its very existence very much rests on the goodwill of Albanian population there (who are almost entirely Muslim), the mobilization of militants and their anticipated return should be understood as a potential threat to the existence of this state. Lastly, in Kosovo, the Serb Orthodox minority has been very active in trying to depict the reality of Kosovo militants fighting in Syria not only as a challenge to Kosovo's history and Serb civilization there but also to their immediate security. The anger among Orthodox Serb rose even higher when the first Balkan Islamist political party, The Islamist Group Join (*Bashkohu*), was formed in Kosovo in 2013.²⁹

At the international level, the reality of Balkan militants joining Sunni Islamic groups in Syria is affecting the Balkan states in three important ways. First, the reality is being exploited by some Balkan states for their political and geostrategic advantage. For instance, "Serbian and Bosnian Serb politicians often make charges of Al Qaeda training camps in Bosnia and Kosovo in an effort to discredit Bosnians and Albanians."³⁰ More recently, Kosovo has been accused, by Serbian sources, for re-opening their

²⁷ See, George Papavizas, "FYROM: A Source of Balkan Instability," *Mediterranean Quarterly* 23, no. 2 (2012): 42-63

²⁸ See "Muslim Albanians in Macedonia Protest Over Arrests of 'Radical Islamists,'" CNN, 11 May 2012, www.ireport.cnn.com/docs/DOC-788600 (accessed on 16 February 2014)

²⁹ Katerina Nikolas, "Kosovo's Radicals Form First Balkan Islamist Political Party," *Digital Journal*, 6 March 2013.

³⁰ Steven Woehrel, *Islamic Terrorism and the Balkans*, p. 2

terror training camps for Syrian rebels.³¹ The lack of sufficient facts backing such accusations forces one to reject these allegations as true. Xhabir Hamiti, a Professor of Islamic Studies, rightly urged Kosovo and Albanian intellectuals not to fall into the trap of the enemies who are trying to weak the Albanian nation by trying to divide it along religious lines, as they have attempted before.³²

Second, this reality is affecting the region's European Union (EU) ambition. All of Balkan states under analysis have clearly expressed their desire to join the EU. However, this desire is currently facing a shocking resistance that comes from the heart of the EU. As Albania's recent experience demonstrates, Muslim identity of the country is the problem for extremist forces in the EU that see the Union as a special club for Christians only.³³ While the EU does not formally link the refusal of Albania's EU candidacy to country's Muslim identity, there is no question that the reality of Balkan militants joining Syria's radical groups has played a role in shaping the Dutch, Danish, German, French, and British veto for Albania's EU candidacy status.³⁴ The Muslim identity of Bosnia and Kosovo also seem to be conclusive issues when it comes to EU membership.

Third, the reality is also affecting each state's relationship with the United States, and the U.S. terms of engagement with the area. This is important not only because the U.S. is the world's superpower but also because of its commitment to fight any effort aimed at installing radical Islamism, especially in a part of Europe such as the Balkans. The attack on American embassy in Bosnia in 2010, by an Islamic radical from Novi Pazar, Serbia, is but one instance that confirms the vulnerability of the region and the reason why active American engagement (both at diplomatic and security levels) is crucial. However, American policy makers should be vigilant when drafting security policies for the Balkans. There have been numerous works that exaggerate the threat of radical Islam in the Balkans, depicting it as the greatest threat to the region and

³¹ See: Srdja Trifkovic, "Kosovo Terror Training Camps Re-Open for Syrian Rebels," *Global Research TV*, 4 May 2103.

³² See: "Hamiti: Mos e Keqperdorni Fene ne Dem te Kombit," *Tribuna*, 5 January 2014, www.gazetatribuna.com/?FaqeID=2&LajmID=38228 (accessed on 15 February 2014)

³³ See: "Fajin e Ka Muslimanizmi Shqiptar: BE Bashkimi I Vendeve Kristiane," *Opozita*, 29 December 2013, www.opozita.com/2013/12/29/fajin-e-ka-muslimanizmi-shqiptar-rama-be-bashkim-i-vendeve-kristiane-na-refuzojne/ (accessed on 15 February 2014)

³⁴ See, Ariola Imeri, "European Union Doesn't Grant the Candidate Status to Albania," *Independent Balkan News Agency*, 12 December 2013.

from the region. Such works should be read with suspicion, especially since policy analysts and scholars have shown time and again that the real instability and violence are more likely to come from sources such as poverty,³⁵ clashing ethno-nationalisms,³⁶ and anti-Americanism,³⁷ than from the “imported” radical Islam.

As I have shown above, the reality that Balkan militants are joining radical groups in Syria is generating numerous challenges that are affecting the region in various ways. These challenges are both domestic and international, and they affect the political and socio-economic realms of the region. The return of Balkan militants could turn out problematic for the region and affect the future of the Balkans. The war in Syria is still unfolding but an assessment of potential challenges that Balkan militants might bring to the region will be of value to both scholars and policy-makers dealing with the region.

6. The Future of the Balkans in Light of Syria’s Civil War

A report published by the *German Institute for International and Security Affairs* identifies four possible outcome scenarios for Syria’s civil war: regime survival, implosion, full-blown civil war, and international military intervention.³⁸ These outcomes will be critical for Syrian people and Syria’s neighbors, but virtually irrelevant for the Balkans. Whatever the outcome, the Balkans and Syria will move on in two different paths. The Balkan states will continue with their objective of EU integration, while the post-civil war Syria most likely will resemble the neighboring Iraq. Yet, the issue of Balkan militants who will return from Syria remains thought provoking. How are militants likely to cope with their return to the Balkans? Will they merely seek re-integration into moderate Muslims societies or are they likely to challenge the pluralistic and democratic order? And more broadly, what kinds of challenges are they likely to bring to the region? In this last

³⁵ Steven Woehrel, *Islamic Terror and the Balkans*, p. 3

³⁶ Janusz Bugajski, *Return of the Balkans: Challenges to European Integration and U.S. Disengagement* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute and U.S. Army War College Press, May 2013), p. 3.

³⁷ Perparim Gutaj, “Beyond Independence: Anti-Americanism and Serb Resistance in Kosova,” *Iliria International Review*, issue 2013/1, p. 183-214.

³⁸ See: Muriel Asseburg and Heiko Wimmen, “The Violent Power Struggle in Syria: Scenarios and Policy Options for the International Community,” *German Institute for International Security Affairs*, March 2012.

part of paper, or stage four of the model, I address these hypothetical questions.

The Balkans is not an empty space! The region is home to more than 7 million moderate Muslims, and other religious and ethnic groups. These moderate Balkan Muslims are proud of Balkan Islam and the way Islam “serves” their daily needs. Indeed, they are very protective of Balkan Islam: this type of Islam that allows them to practice their faith while embracing democracy and enjoying interfaith dialogue. Balkan Islam has been a definitive feature of the local population for centuries, and there is a real determination among moderate Muslims to do everything necessary to come in defense of Balkan Islam, regardless if the threat is coming from Islamist Radicalism or Orthodox radicalism, or any other religious ism for that matter. With that said, Balkan militants returning from Syria are likely to encounter aversion upon their return and experience difficulty dealing not only with personal psychological concerns but also with seclusion. There is little room for them to maneuver in this cramped and moderate Balkan space. So, radical Islam in the Balkans is real, just as it is in London, Madrid and Paris, but it is far from being an immense challenge to the region, let alone a major threat to the West. To reiterate, policy-makers should focus on indigenous issues such as poverty, corruption, rule of law, territorial disputes, and weak state structures that have a far greater potential to threaten the security and stability of the region.

The reality that clear majority of Balkan Muslims perceive themselves as European, and completely reject any close cultural, economic, social, and political ties with the Arab world, leaves little hope for Balkan militants returning from Syria. Balkan militants will not be welcomed as heroes. To the majority of Balkan Muslims, including incorporated Islamists and Islamic institutions, these militants are fighting a foreign war that brings nothing but emotional and physical destruction to them. Given the indoctrination “dose” these militants received from FIRGs, and the experience they have gained in Syria, there is no question that they will seek to challenge the existing social and political order in the region. However, my impression, generated from my recent visits in the region, is that these militants are likely to encounter a massive popular resistance from moderate Balkan Muslims as well as from other internal and external forces. Certainly, there is no such alternative as Balkan Caliphate, as one

Balkan observer wrongly concluded.³⁹ If there is a return with successful re-integration, it must be one within the Balkan Islam. Ahmet Alibasic, the Bosnian professor of Islamic Studies rightly claimed that we [Balkan Muslims] belong to the West, culturally and mentally.⁴⁰

The claims that Balkan Muslims belong to the West and that the return of militants from Syria is likely to prove no big challenge for the region can be supported by plenty of evidence. To begin with, Balkan Muslim societies are largely secular, in which women and men are subject to the same laws, dress in Western style clothing, and enjoy the same political and socio-economic opportunities. Take for example the case of Kosovo. This Muslim majority European country has a female president, two female deputy Prime Ministers, and many females that occupy high posts in the highest state institutions. In addition, females are a vital part of Kosovo's civil society and important actors within the business community. Economically, the region is closely linked to the Western Europe. Balkan countries are home to direct investments coming from EU countries such as Austria, Germany, Greece, Italy and Slovenia. Moreover, with the exception to *Bashkohu*, the Islamic party in Kosovo (which has no parliament seats), there is no registered Islamic political party in the region. This reality is another indication that Islamic radicalism is far from being a significant force in the political realm in the region.

All of this implies that the reality of couple of hundred Balkan militants fighting in Syria should not be negatively exaggerated to the level it has by some observers. Radical Islam and its teachings (supported and conducted by FIRGs) are alien and a challenge to the region. Islam and Islamic customs are a reality and part of the region. Islam and Islamic rituals have a long tradition in the Balkans dating back to the Ottoman era, and any association of this long and rich tradition with the "imported" radical Islam, which has been introduced to Balkan Muslims only about two decades ago, is an intellectual error. Balkan Islam has a history of peaceful coexistence with other faiths. Balkan Muslim communities have successfully developed effective models of social and political cohabitation with other religions in the past. Policy-makers dealing with the region can

³⁹ Christopher Deliso, *The Coming Balkan Caliphate*.

⁴⁰ Charlotte Wiedemann, "We belong to the West culturally and mentally," *IslamiCommentary*, 19 October 2012, www.islamiccommentary.org/2012/10/ahmet-alibasic-we-belong-to-the-west-culturally-and-mentally/ (accessed on 22 February 2014)

utilize aspects of these models, with the appropriate adjustments.⁴¹ Balkan Islam also has a high potential to serve as a bridge-builder not only between the Balkans and the Muslims world, but also between Europe and the Muslims world.

7. Conclusion

In 2013, assessing the security challenges facing the Balkans, Janusz Bugajski, a prominent Balkan policy analyst, identified the following as factors with direct impact on the security of the region: territorial disputes, administrative borders, and legitimacy of statehood.⁴² For Bugajski, political and legal disputes among Balkan states are far greater threats to the security of the region than the “imported” idea of radical Islam. Bugajski’s conclusions are in agreement with the findings of this paper. While FIRGs, their teachings, and radical Islam in the Balkans are certainly challenges that deserve to be kept in check, they are far from being the greatest threat to the security and stability of the region, let alone to Europe and the West.

In summary, I have shown that Balkan militants are joining Syria’s rebel cause because FIRGs, which have been operating in the region since the start of the Bosnian war in 1992, have been successful in indoctrinating the militants first into unincorporated Islamists and eventually in Jihadists. This process of indoctrination was possible because FIRGs effectively arranged and built Islamic ideological networks and Islamic infrastructural mechanisms that significantly facilitated the mobilization process to Syria’s battlegrounds. Although this reality of Balkan militants joining Islamic radical groups linked to al-Qaeda (inside Syria) is affecting the region at both domestic and international levels, the prospect of these militants in the Balkans is bleak. In sum, Balkan militants will be confronted with a massive modern and democratic resistance that offers them nothing but re-integration into Balkan Islam, their natural “religious nest.”

⁴¹ See: Ina Merdjanova, “Whither European Islam? Muslims in the Balkans and in Western Europe Compared,” *Academia.edu*, www.academia.edu/944775/Whither_European_Islam_Muslims_in_the_Balkans_and_in_Western_Europe_Compared (accessed on 22 February 2014)

⁴² Janusz Bugajski, *Return of the Balkans*, p. 3

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