



**Zoltán Prantner**

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## **The problem of the return of the Islamic State's Balkan volunteers**

### **Abstract**

According estimates, the number of the men and their family members from the Western Balkan countries exceeded 1000 person who travelled to the territory of Iraq or Syria for supporting their Muslim comrades. Most of them joined the Islamic State there, while the minority enriched the ranks of Jabhat al-Nusra or other smaller jihadist groups. However, hundreds of them have already returned from the Middle East to their country of origin in the recent years or months where they faced different treatment depending on their gender and age.

**Keywords:** Western Balkan, Islamic State, foreign fighters and volunteers, religious and violent extremism, anti-terrorism measures, reintegration

### **Introduction**

Following the escalation of the Middle East conflict, there were approximately 42.900 foreigners who traveled to the region from about 120 countries around the world by 2017 to be a fighter for one of the insurgent groups or the Islamic State (ISIL) (Azinović & Bećirević, 2017, 12.). By the time the caliphate collapsed, about a third of the more than 5.000 European volunteers had returned to their countries of origin where their presence was assessed as a serious security risk. This trend has affected more than 1.000 people in the Western Balkans. At least 260 of them have lost their lives and about 475 persons - mostly women and children, many of whom have already been born there - are still in the area. In recent years, however, some 485 people have already returned or repatriated to their home state, where men have been arrested immediately by local authorities (URL1). However, detention can only be considered as a temporary crisis management. In the long run, rehabilitation and reintegration could

be an effective solution, which most affected states in the region have already begun to apply in the case of the returned women and children.

## **Historical background to the travel of Balkan volunteers**

Throughout history, a moderate, tolerant trend in the Sunni branch of Islam has settled in the Western Balkans, based largely on the teachings of the Hanafi School of Religious Law. His followers, who have been culturally integrated in the area over the centuries, have interpreted religious precepts quite flexibly and have not been hostile to Shiites. However, the exercise of the faith was restricted in the former Yugoslavia and outright banned in Albania after World War II. Nevertheless, the Islamic religion could once again be lived freely and openly after the collapse of Yugoslavia and the Albanian isolationist system, which was declared by each national government in its constitution. At the same time, three distinct groups of followers soon emerged within the Islamic communities in the region: 1) members of traditional Islamic communities and those with a liberal spirit (they formed the majority); 2) adherents of a conservative interpretation of Islam who rejected violence (the ‘mainstream’ of the Salafists); 3) members of the hard core sympathized with the conservative orientation of Islam, who also considered the use of violence acceptable and permissible in the spirit of Takfir ideology (rejecting Salafists) (Kursani, 2019, 11.; Qehaja, 2016, 79.).

The renewed daily life of the Islamic faith and the vulnerable situation of the war-torn regions may have simultaneously led to the emergence of various Persian Gulf aid organizations – and through them the militant Salafist trend – in the region, which then significantly intensified the radicalization process in the area. The ideology became particularly popular in states where:

- the domestic political structure proved fragile,
- corruption and nepotism abounded,
- unemployment was high,
- the economy and administrative governance were severely disrupted,
- serious, temporarily stifled ethnic and religious contradictions lurked in the background of the polarized society,
- it proved to be an unresolved issue the self-determination of the state and individual communities, as well as the definition of their relationship to each other (Azinovic, 2017, 12.).

The finding was particularly true for Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, and North Macedonia, despite the lack of a unified Islamic community in the Balkan due to linguistic-cultural differences (Qehaja, 2016, 78.). In Bosnia's Muslim community, jihadist propaganda was relatively easy to influence enterprising young people who were willing to fight voluntarily for their faith in a foreign land at the height of the Syrian conflict. In addition, the Bosnian authorities estimated the number of Salafists in the country at about 3.000 in 2016 (URL2). With regard to the latter, it should be noted at the outset that this significant figure was not one of the consequences of the attack of 11 September 2001, in fact. The mosque construction, which was funded by the Saudi government to the tune of about \$ 500 million, and the restrained-minded diversionary activity came to a halt as a result of attacks on the World Trade Center because Riyadh did not want to get into conflict with Washington. The attack on the Twin Towers also marked a turning point in minimizing contacts between young volunteers in the 2010s and foreign veterans who voluntarily fought on the Bosnian side in the El Mujahedeen detachment during the Yugoslav War. After the Dayton Peace Treaty, which ended the Yugoslav War, a significant number of corps members left the area and traveled to Afghanistan, Chechnya, or Tajikistan to continue their holy war there (Gammer, 2007, 159–160.). At the same time, it is also a fact that hundreds of mujahedeen may have remained in Bosnia and Herzegovina with the tacit support of the Bosnian authorities (URL3). Many of them married local Muslim women, and the number of those who received citizenship in recognition of their merits during the war was also respectable (URL4). However, nearly 30% of foreign militants integrated into local communities were believed to have maintained close ties to terrorist groups that planned assassinations against Western interests and peacekeeping forces stationed in the country. Years later, several of them also joined the Kosovo Liberation Army when clashes erupted between Serbs and Albanians. The new, fundamentally ethnic conflict was then seen by them as a war between Muslims and Christians. Despite all this, the al-Qaeda network was unable to establish itself in the territory of Bosnia, as the vast majority of locals grew up and lived in a more liberal spirit, thus professing a moderate conception of the Islamic faith. The Salafist doctrine was therefore completely foreign to them and they refused to follow it. Furthermore, the foreign warriors themselves did not form a homogeneous community either during or after the war. Their organization was not mature and well-structured, and its members were not only recruited by al-Qaeda, but also represented by a significant number of Arab-Afghan veterans independent of the terrorist organization, as well as young volunteers from the Gulf States (URL3). Their marginalization was accelerated by the

counter-terrorism operations in Bosnia since 9/11. Under Washington's growing pressure, the presence of former mujahedeen was no longer just a burden by this time, but it was downright necessary to take swift and effective official action against them to safeguard foreign relations. Therefore, ten former mujahedeen suspected of terrorism, at least five of whom were Algerians, were detained in Bosnia on charges of preparing attacks against SFOR bases in Tuzla and Bratunac in October 2001 (Lebl, 2014, 9). Bosnian authorities arrested six more Algerian individuals on suspicion of a planned attack on the U.S. embassy in January 2002. After the action, the detainees were soon extradited to the United States (URL5). An embarrassing precedent was set again in 2005 when preparations were detected in Croatia for an explosive assassination attempt. The perpetrators wanted to implement their purpose at the funeral of Pope John Paul II. Investigations later revealed that the attack was planned in Gornja Maoča, northern Bosnia, and that seized equipment and explosives originated from there. In the same year, Bosnian police stormed an apartment which was suspected of being housed by terrorists who wanted to blow up the British embassy in Sarajevo (Lebl, 2014, 9-10.). Later, a fundamentalist placed a bomb next to the police building in Bugojno, which killed a police officer and injured several on June 27, 2010. (URL6). Finally, another local follower of Wahhabi school of Islam opened fire with his machine gun at the U.S. embassy in Sarajevo on October 28, 2011, seriously injuring a police officer. Later investigation found that the perpetrator was radicalized at his former residence, Gornja Maoča (URL7). Due to the above, the Salafist communities in Bosnia, especially after the death of Jusuf Barčić in 2007, clustered around leaders who were in their 20s during the Yugoslav War and became committed believers of the religious trend in the 2000s. Such persons were among these foreign trained religious leaders as Nedžad Balkan (recorded as Abu Muhammed) and Mohamed Porča, or Bilal Bosnić, the recruiter of the Islamic State, and Nusret Imamović, who fully committed himself to al-Qaeda and Jabhat al-Nusra. Apart from radical imams in larger cities, adherents of the trend mostly lived in isolated mountain villages, such as Šišići, Bužim, Bosanska Bojna, Orašac and Dubovsko in the north of the country, or Gornja Maoča, Ošve, Gluha Bukovica and Mehurići in the central regions (URL3). The vast majority of them refused to use violence and only wanted to live their daily lives according to the strict standards of Islam. Of course, it should also be added that there were exceptions here. For example, Gornja Maoča, as well as other settlements, not only gave refuge to foreign fighters and recruiters, but in some places even openly hoisted jihadist flags as a clear sign of their commitment (URL2). The peaceful coexistence of the three dominant religions - the moderate trend of Islam, the Roman Catholic

and the Orthodox Christian - has long been looked back on in Albania, which was well known for its religious tolerance. In the spirit of this, the secular nature of the state was incorporated into the transitional constitution shortly after the fall of the communist dictatorship. At the same time, the right to religious freedom was recognized and the creation of conditions for religious practice was supported. Although a number of laws limited the increase in the influence of religion in political and educational life in the coming years, the relationship between the state and denominations deepened, as evidenced by the 1998 constitution, which defined the country as neutral instead of hitherto secular. Freedom of religion, like the other Balkan states, led to the growing prevalence of Arab states, which resulted in the formation of the first local Salafist and Wahhabi groups here in the 1990s. With their support, young men were able to pursue extensive religious studies at Middle Eastern universities and madrassas<sup>1</sup>. However, the different interpretations of the acquired knowledge, and especially of the Islamic religion, caused a kind of generational crisis with the leaders of the Muslim Community of Albania, who had no chance of pursuing higher religious studies in isolation from the Muslim world during decades of communist rule. However, in addition to the differences in religious identity, the emergence of radicalization was more significantly influenced by the more pronounced commitment of Muslim identity in political life, which was clearly aimed at obtaining foreign aid and subsidies. In this spirit, Albania became a member of the Organization of the Islamic Conference in 1992 as the first European and communist successor state. This event virtually institutionalized the political influence and financial support of the Gulf States in Albania, which turned into a transit country for arms shipments and jihadist militants to Bosnia<sup>2</sup> (Qirjazi, 2018, 47.). Many of the Bosnian war veterans later wanted to settle in Albania to establish Islamist bases there. However, like Bosnia, the attacks of 11 September 2001 put an end to the rise of fundamentalists. The operating Islamist individuals and organizations had become uncomfortable for the Albanian leadership, which had previously sought a balanced relationship with the United States, tried to follow a pro-Western foreign policy, and aspired to accession to the European Union. As a result, many people have been deported as well as the assets of foundations and individuals suspected of supporting extremist groups have been frozen since December 2004. In parallel, the government made an attempt to reduce the Arab presence in the country. However,

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1 Mohammedan Ecclesiastical College for the training of theologians and lawyers.

2 There were about six major Islamic NGOs operating in Albania between 1991 and 2005 that were linked to terrorist organizations.

hopes for a greater Turkish role soon proved disappointing, as it failed to break the dominance of the Gulf States on the one hand, but at the same time resulted in further polarization within Muslim communities.<sup>3</sup> (Dyrmishi, 2017, 27.). Despite strong official actions and reforms in the Muslim community in Albania, the state and the Muslim Community of Albania have gradually lost control over self-appointed imams and foreign-funded mosques, which gave growing popularity for religious extremists even before the rise of ISIL<sup>4</sup> (Dyrmishi, 2017, 22–23.; Spahiu, 2016, 66–69.).

In Kosovo, Islamist volunteers appeared in the ranks of the Kosovo Liberation Army in 1998. Following the fighting with Serb forces, private schools and mosques were built here with Saudi support, in which - or in addition to them - imams trained in Saudi Arabia spread their radical religious and political views from 1999. Among these religious leaders were such persons as Zekerija Qazimi and Lulzima Qabashi, who were later arrested for recruiting volunteers. Their rise was helped by the widespread frustration that prevailed after the declaration of independence in 2008 due to the economic downturn and the lack of hope for overall development. Following the Arab Spring and the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, the central leadership in Kosovo assured the Syrian opposition of its support, in agreement with several Western governments and trusted in the rapid fall of President Bassar el-Assad. Politicians have repeatedly called for resignation of the Syrian head of state, whose violent actions against the civilian population have been repeatedly paralleled by the massacres which was committed by the Milošević regime against the Kosovars in the late 1990s. In addition to the religious community and the negative image of the Assad regime, there were also pragmatic and promising perspectives in their manifestations: the Syrian Free Army, which was immediately supported by the West after its formation, was ready to open diplomatic relations with Pristina after its victory. Kosovo could also have gained Syrian recognition of its sovereignty after Egypt and Libya, which President Bassar el-Assad had previously denied him with regard to Serbia. Moreover, the country could also provide further evidence of his determination to stand up for Western interests and values. For all these reasons, Kosovo's Minister of Foreign Affairs Enver Hoxhaj received a delegation from the Syrian opposition

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3 The influence of the Arab states was well reflected in the fact that Arabic, which was expected of the preachers and leaders and several staff of the Ministry of Culture from 2002, was officially introduced in 2005 as the ceremonial language of the Muslim Community of Albania.

4 According to a poll, as early as 2011–2012, 12% of the Muslim population supported the introduction of sharia legislation, and 6% considered it justified to commit suicide bombings in defense of the Islamic faith.

forces in April 2012, which he assured of his country's financial support. One month later, it was announced that certain diplomatic relations had been established between the parties. At the time, the Kosovo leadership seemed to be hoping to gain a kind of leading role in foreign interventions in the Syrian conflict, while being able to apostrophize itself as a supporter of democratic transformation in the Middle East and North Africa (Kursani & Fetiu, 2017, 85–87.). At the same time, the open stance of Kosovo's state institutions in favor of the Syrian opposition ignored two aspects that seemed even less decisive at the time. First, they thought of a united opposition, as each of the insurgent groups committed itself to overthrowing the Assad regime. However, this superficial approach ignored that only the main goal was the common in these armed clusters. Otherwise, fundamental differences were between them about their proclaimed program and the values they professed, as well as in their foreign relations, allies, and enemies. Second, for the above reasons, no particular importance has been attached to the emergence and spread of Islamism among the Syrian insurgents. As a result, Pristina did not attach much significance to the presence of Kosovar volunteers in Syria in the early stages of the civil war, despite the fact that 191 persons traveled there until the end of 2013 (Kursani & Fetiu, 2017, 87–88.). In addition to the highest level of state support, the Islamic Community of Kosovo has also openly supported Syrian civilians and refugees. Beyond the official position, it condemned the terrorist nature of the Assad regime, commemorated the bloodbaths of the Milošević regime and the tribulations of the civilian population as well as commended the values of Levant. In addition to this, it has already given a kind of religious dimension to the conflict, as the imams also voiced in their sermons the negatives of the Alawite trend, their relations with Shia Iran, and their brutal and oppressive rule over the Sunni majority (Kursani & Fetiu, 2017, 89–90.). In addition to state and religious leadership, the press also played an active role in shaping public awareness when the first dead were portrayed as a kind of hero who sacrificed their lives in the fight against the dictator. In addition, radio and media channels featured experts who praised Kosovar volunteers fighting on the Syrian front with unwavering pride (Kursani & Fetiu, 2017, 92.). However, there has been a sharp turnaround in the standpoint of Kosovo's central leadership so far by early 2014, as a result of the events and changes that have taken place in the meantime. The first and perhaps most important development in the rewording of the position so far took place in early autumn 2013, when a Kosovar and an Albanian volunteer's call for the accession to fight against infidels was first time published in Albanian language. In November, Kosovo's security forces detained six al-Qaeda-linked individuals suspected of preparing

for a terrorist attack.<sup>5</sup> In the first months of 2014, additional videos appeared on the Internet, in which Kosovar volunteers posing with ISIL symbols called again in their native language their potential sympathizers to join their struggle. In their communication, those who stayed at home were declared traitors to their faith and the leaders of coalition forces were threatened with beheading (Kursani & Fetiu, 2017, 93–94.). In addition, terrorist activities involving foreign warriors have become more frequent in the West, and especially in the European Union, since 2013. These violent incidents, coupled with the threats associated with them, appeared almost daily in media reports. Most Western governments have therefore declared a number of Syrian opposition gatherings with militant Islamist ties as terrorist group. For all these reasons, the imams of the local Islamic Community gradually distanced themselves from the events in Syria and Iraq. In addition, Kosovar state institutions have also been forced to reconsider their previous position and assess the domestic presence of their citizens returning from the Middle East, as well as the activities of foreign Islamist organizations in Kosovo, now a serious security risk. Accordingly, four individuals were arrested on 26 June 2014, 47 alleged Islamist militiamen on 11 August and 15 individuals on 17 September, including several well-known conservative imams, on suspicion of having previously fought on the side of insurgent groups in Syria and Iraq. In addition, the national authorities revoked the operating licenses of 16 non-governmental organizations (NGOs) during the year, which were suspected of supporting terrorist activities (Jakupi & Kraja, 2018, 7.; Kursani, 2015, 29.).

In northern Macedonia, with a population of about 2.1 million, almost all of the volunteers came from Muslim Albanians, who make up approximately 25% of society. The reason for this was basically along ethnic and religious fault lines, i.e. it was most evident in the long-standing tensions between the dominant Orthodox Christian community and the Muslim Albanians. Conflicts of interest and segregation of the Albanian minority culminated in a short, open clash in 2001 between security forces and the Albanian National Liberation Army, who were supported by a number of veteran volunteers from the neighbouring Kosovo. The fighting was ended by the Ohrid Framework Agreement, which gave more rights to members of the Macedonian Albanian ethnic group, and formally provided for a political division of power between Macedonians and Albanians at the same time. Despite forward-looking efforts, differences have not only persisted since then, but have deepened further in the interests of individual policy circles. All of these created adequate conditions for radicalization and the functioning

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5 Later the investigation revealed that one of the detainees had previously been in the Syrian crisis zone.



of extremist groups on both sides<sup>6</sup> (Qehaja & Perteshi, 2018, 23–24., 26.). In northern Macedonia, we can also speak of Salafist communities. The fellowships centred around various charismatic leaders, who operated independently from the Islamic Community. As a result, a unified Salafist movement did not develop either inside or outside the country. Like several Balkan states, this conservative trend in Islam was able to settle in the country through humanitarian aid organizations funded by Saudi Arabia and Qatar. These associations gained enormous influence during the Kosovo war of 1998-1999, when hundreds of thousands of refugees sought housing there. Most of the fundamentalists lived peacefully. They withdrew from the world, thus received little attention. They were fundamentally aware of the idea of jihadism and the essence of its global support from which they were mostly distanced in the early 2010s, apart from the manifestation of a few extreme imams. Proponents of the religious trend were therefore not seen as a security risk until the Syrian conflict escalated, and religious radicalism was reported quite rarely in the media. Moreover, the Islamic Community of Macedonia repeatedly expressed its sympathy for opposition forces in the early stages of the fighting in Syria when its imams were repeatedly calling on believers in the mosques to support Syrian citizens and refugees. Although, it was essentially concerned with humanitarian aid according to their interpretation of the latter, it indirectly inspired many to take an active part in the armed struggle. The case of Sami Abdullahu, a Skopje originated imam who fell in Syria in 2014, had a similar effect and proved to be a role model for dozens of his compatriots (Qehaja & Perteshi, 2018, 33–34.). Like the other Balkan states, the departure of the volunteers could therefore be divided into three main stages:

- 1) the initial period of the Syrian conflict when they joined one of the opposition groups out of solidarity with Muslim countrymen due to the retaliation of the Assad regime;
- 2) the period following the proclamation of the Islamic State when a significant proportion of them settled in the territory controlled by the terrorist organization;
- 3) criminalization and official sanctioning of the activities of those involved in the Middle East conflict which has radically reduced the number of trips (Šutarov, 2017, 104.).

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6 The case of the killing of five young Macedonians of Albanian descent at Lake Smilkovci on 12 April 2012 also warned of growing ethnic tensions. The shooting that broke out between police officers and members of the National Liberation Army on 9 May 2015 was also a cause for concern. At the end of the firefight, which claimed a total of 18 lives, 28 Albanians were arrested. It also showed well the discrimination and segregation of Albanians in 2017, that while they accounted for only a quarter of total Macedonian society, their proportion reached 60% among detainees and prisoners.

In Montenegro, with a population of nearly 680.000, the proportion of Muslims is also 20% who have lived peacefully with Christians for many centuries as followers of the Sunni trend. Here the Yugoslav War was also the milestone in the conflict-free relationship between the denominations in the first half of the 1990s. Some border guards illegally detained dozens of Bosnian refugees in 1992 who were then deported to the Serb-majority part of Bosnia. Almost all of the captives were executed later. Although the Montenegrin government apologized for the incident and promised financial compensation to the victims' families in 2008, the case was a serious break for many local Muslims. At the same time, foreign Islamist groups have already started operating in the country, especially in the Sandzak region bordering Serbia. However, the dissemination of extremist doctrines has not proved as successful here as it has in Kosovo or Bosnia. Security authorities considered the Wahhabi trend to be a serious national security risk that is why Serbian and Bosnian supporters were expelled from the country on several occasions. Nevertheless, no special importance was given to the trips starting from 2012, as politicians were distracted by the growing domestic political crisis and there was no religiously motivated terrorist attack in the country. Decision-makers only recognized the importance of the problem when the first Montenegrin citizen fell in Syria and the news of his death spread and then the first fighters start to return from the crisis zone (Bećirević, Šuković & Zuković, 2018, 6.).

The tribulations of the predominantly Bosnian Muslim population in the Sandžak region began with the declaration of the autonomy in 1991 and the proclamation of an independent government. Belgrade tried to prevent the secession, so it declared the events as a coup and virtually excluded the countryside from political decision-making. The problems culminated in the fact that the region suffered from serious economic and social problems after the end of the war, due to the sanctions imposed on Serbia, which could not be remedied in the absence of political advocacy. In addition, the region was practically divided between Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro following the creation of the new states. War crimes were committed, the population suffered heavy losses, the economy and infrastructure lay in ruins, and poverty was exceptionally high in the area which remained under Belgrade's control. Serbian nationalist central leadership isolated native Bosnian inhabitants, local politicians represented their personal interests instead of the community, hate speeches and statements were made in the media, as well as young Bosnians and Muslims were often discriminated on ethnic grounds in education. In summary, all the conditions were given for radicalization (Ćorović, 2017, 126.). The first Wahhabi and Salafist groups are believed to have come from

Sarajevo and first appeared in Novi Pazar in 1997. The extremist trend of Islam soon became popular among members of the disenfranchised Muslim community. In addition to the Prophet's call, the religious deepening was helped by the fact that the accession was financially worthwhile, because the poor were supported with significant sums in the economically underdeveloped region as they entered and possibly even increased the size of the community with new members. Moreover, many were closely linked to neighbouring Bosnia on ethnic and religious grounds, where several of them secretly learned the basics of Takfir ideology and warfare in the extremist camps operating there. As a result of the latter, extremist interpretations of Islam became more frequent in violent manifestations from the mid-2000s. Due to a series of incidents in mosques, the official Islamic community banned Wahhabis from places of worship under its control and several have been arrested by Serbian authorities on national security grounds<sup>7</sup> (Qehaja, 2016, 88–89.). In response, Wahhabi groups distanced themselves from other Muslims and majority societies and gathered in informal spaces, avoiding the horizons of the Islamic community and official bodies. They gathered at unofficial places and avoided the horizons of the Islamic community and official bodies. In addition to the actions of the security forces, the concerns of Serbian Muslims were heightened by the open celebration of Serbian war criminals and the vehement denial of their horrors, as well as the demonstrative military marches of the extremist nationalist groups and their violent actions which were then only slightly or not sanctioned. All of this reinforced the fears of local Muslims about a repeat of the ethnic cleansing of the 1990s while easing the situation of radical preachers at the same time, who preached the danger of continued Serbian aggression (Ćorović, 2017, 126–129.).

## **The conditions of departure**

Like the Yugoslav War, many Sunni Muslims around the world felt the urge to travel to the scene as the Syrian conflict deepened to help their comrades against the Shia Assad regime which was considered secular and anti-religious. Their numbers peaked at the time of the proclamation of the caliphate in 2014, when Abu Bakr al-Baghdad called on them to join. The number of people from the Western Balkans, who often traveled to the conflict zone with the support and

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7 The most significant, high-profile armed clash took place in Zabren, near Sjenica, where a training camp was suspected by Serbian authorities. During a police raid, the leader of the Salafist community lost his life and two people were arrested.

mediation of local fundamentalist communities, was estimated more than 1,000 individuals by 2018. Due to their relatively high number, they formed a separate unit within the ISIL armed forces which was called Balkan Battalion.<sup>8</sup> (URL8; URL9). The distribution of volunteers for each state was as follows (Table 1).

**Table 1:** *The number of citizens of the Western Balkans in Iraq or Syria until mid-2018*

Country	Total Affiliates	Female Affiliates	Minor Affiliates (includes travelled and born in theatre)	Died
<b>Albania</b>	157–163	29–35	38–41	26
<b>Bosnia and Herzegovina</b>	500	70	230	71 (3 females and 4 minors among them)
<b>Kosovo</b>	446	55	98	74 men, 1 female and 1 minor
<b>North Macedonia</b>	161	15	6	30
<b>Serbia</b>	59	12–15	15	11
<b>Montenegro</b>	27	5	4	5

*Note.* Cook & Vale, 2019, 19.; Shtuni, 2019, 18.

According to statistics, about 80% of the volunteers joined one of the Syrian insurgent groups between 2012 and 2014, and the Islamic State only became attractive to them after the proclamation of the caliphate. In connection with the trend, it could also be said that trips decreased significantly in 2015 and were almost completely abolished from the beginning of 2016 due to the arrest of recruiters, the Islamic State's repression in Iraq and Syria and the stricter controls at the Turkish border. In addition to all this, presumably, the desire of the leaders of the terrorist organization was also a consideration for fanatics who were called upon to stay and operate in their place of residence (Azinovic, 2017, 11.). A significant proportion of volunteers (67%) were single young men between the ages of 20 and 35. They were followed by married couples with wives and children. The lowest proportion were persons who joined a terrorist organization with another relative or friend<sup>9</sup> (URL10; URL11). It could also be said about the men that although there were veterans of the Yugoslav War among them, most of them did not have

8 Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo ranked among the top five European emitting countries in terms of the proportion of volunteers in the total population.

9 Among the Kosovo volunteers, the Demolli family was particularly represented: 19 of them - women, men and children - were living in a camp near Raqqa, Syria, in January 2018. At least two of their male relatives had already died by then. One of the widows was able to return to her homeland in April 2019 with her five children, after six years presence in Syria. The youngest child was born in her second forced marriage with another ISIL fighter.

any combat experience before they left<sup>10</sup> (Šutarov, 2017, 107.). For the latter, the mortality rate of Balkan volunteers was almost twice that of other European originated fighters<sup>11</sup> (Azinović & Jusić, 2016, 31.). With regard to women, it can also be stated that their proportion was high, especially within the Bosnian contingent<sup>12</sup> (Azinović & Jusić, 2016, 28.). The vast majority of them were married women in their 20s or early 30s who followed their husbands or children to the Middle East rather of duty than of religious belief. The other part left their relatives behind and traveled to the civil war zone to start a new family there<sup>13</sup> (Azinović & Jusić, 2016, 27–28.). They also had in common that they came mostly from a similar, geographically, socially and economically marginalized environment, as well as from a traditional patriarchal environment<sup>14</sup> (Jakupi & Kelmendi, 2017, 13.). Due to traditional, more conservative values, they were clearly subordinated to the male-female relationship and faced a higher rate of domestic violence than female volunteers in Western Europe<sup>15</sup> (Kelmendi, 2019, 22.). They were discriminated in the local labour market, had no independent and stable income, and had no private property. With few exceptions, they had a low level of education and minimal work experience as a housekeeper (Azinović & Jusić, 2016, 44–45.). During their stay outside, they did backyard work and did not actively engage in armed conflict. Albanian native speakers, regardless of their country of origin, tried to group together because of their linguistic identity. It was also observed that Albanian and Kosovar widows remarried, preferably with a Macedonian, Kosovar or Albanian jihadist, after the death of their first husband (Kelmendi, 2019, 23.). Mostly single men traveled to Syria or Iraq in the first half of the conflict. Entire families settled in significant numbers mainly after the proclamation of the Islamic State and the start of state-building. Among the children, 5 months old was the youngest and 17 years old the oldest. Determining their exact number was made more difficult by the fact that several of them were not registered by the authorities of their home

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10 For example, the vast majority of senior Macedonian war veterans traveled specifically with the intention of dying as a martyr.

11 For example, the mortality rate of Bosnian volunteers was estimated at 25%, while an average of 14% of warriors from other countries on the European continent were lost.

12 The proportion of women among volunteers was estimated at 30-36%. By comparison, the proportion of women was 20-22% for France and Germany, 12% for Kosovars and 9-19% for Albanians.

13 For Bosnians, the proportion of women who were already married or married at the time of their arrival in Syria / Iraq was 93%. In addition, their average age of 30 was seven years higher than their female counterparts' age from Kosovo and nine years higher than the other female volunteers' age from Western Europe.

14 Previous research has already shown that women from the patriarchal environment were much more involved in terrorist acts or in supporting them than those raised in a less father- and male-centered environment.

15 According to a poll conducted by the Kosovo Statistics Agency and UNICEF, about 33% of Kosovo women it was legitimate for a husband to abuse his spouse if the wife neglected their children, had an extramarital affair, denied sexual intercourse with her husband, or simply burn food there.

country even during their stay in their country of origin. Many also entered adulthood during their absence for several years, while others were born far away from their homeland, under the rule of the terrorist organization. Only rough estimates of the number of the latter were published, as their parents could not or did not want to keep in touch with their relatives. Their family members could only find out about their birth on the basis of photographs published on the social network. With regard to children raised in the territory of ISIL, it was also found that about a quarter of them lost at least one parent during their stay. In addition, the boys underwent military training between the ages of 13 and 14, after which many were assigned to combat units. Armed clashes and air strikes also claimed the lives of several of them (Azinović & Jusić, 2016, 29.). There was a fundamental difference compared to Western Europe that while radicalization in the West was marked by a high proportion of the second-generation, economically and socially marginalized immigrants who were unable to integrate successfully, the idea of extreme violence has been able to spread within local communities dating back centuries in the Western Balkans. Based on identified individuals, it was well defined in which districts and cities was ISIL popular among the inhabitants.

**Table 2:** *The issuing regions*

Country	Settlement
<b>Albania</b>	Tirana, Elbasan, Librazhd, Leshnicë e Poshtme, Zagoracan, Rrëmenj, Pogradec
<b>Bosnia and Herzegovina</b>	Sarajevo, Zenica, Tuzla, Travnik, Bihac
<b>Kosovo</b>	Prizren, Prishtina, Hani i Elezit, Kacanik, Mitrovice, Gjilan, Viti
<b>North Macedonia</b>	Skopje (Cair and Gazi Baba), Aračinovo, Saraj, Kumanovo, Gosztivar
<b>Montenegro</b>	Podgorica, Plav, Gusinje, Rozaje, Bijelo Polje, Bar
<b>Serbia</b>	Sandzak region of Novi Pazar, Smederevo, Zemun

*Note.* URL12.

Volunteers often lived in single-parent or unhappy families. They were lonely people who struggled with post-war trauma, mistrust and prejudice, accumulated debt, privacy and identity crisis as well as mental health problems<sup>16</sup> (Azinović

16 According to research, many of the men and women who traveled secretly complained to their family or friends that they had been possessed by a genie. Others suffered from severe drug and alcohol dependence. Because mental illness and addiction were publicly stigmatized in traditional communities, they could not openly talk about their problem and hope for help in addressing it in the local health care system. According to police records, this is why Bosnian Salafist leaders were approached, who executed the so-called ruk in the spirit of the Qur'an to drive out evil spirits. Almost immediately after the procedure, they went abroad, where the men lost their lives within a few months.

& Jusić, 2016, 62–65.). Most of them received secondary education at most<sup>17</sup> (Speckhard & Shajkovci, 2018, 84.). They grew up in a secular spirit or in a family in which they did not practice their religious beliefs. They had only superficial religious knowledge for this reason<sup>18</sup> (URL13). They considered the state and the leaders of their community to be politically and morally corrupt. They mostly did not have a permanent job<sup>19</sup> (Speckhard & Shajkovci, 2018, 91; URL13; URL14). They considered their future hopeless in their homeland and the proportion of public law offenders was high among them<sup>20</sup> (Kursani & Fetiu, 2017, 84.). In the economically more backward regions, they tried to make a living from farming, animal husbandry or seasonal work in one of the neighboring countries<sup>21</sup> (Speckhard, Yayla & Shajkovci, 2018, 30.). At the same time, it can be said that many of them had high education and used to live a secular life. Moreover, several of them have lived and worked in a Member State of the European Union for years. However, they were forced to return home after the unfolding of the economic crisis, where they could not assert themselves and settle, which made them susceptible to extremist ideologies. In the often marginalized Muslim communities in the Orthodox Christian-majority of the Balkan states, many have also given up their daily lives. They were attracted by the fact that they could freely practice their religious beliefs under the auspices of the Islamic State as required by Sharia law. In addition, they no longer had to fear anti-Islamic manifestations and the observation or intervention of national governments<sup>22</sup> (URL13). It was also crucial for the Macedonian warriors that most of them were of Albanian descent. Therefore, they joined Kosovar or Albanian groups in the battle zone due to their common linguistic and ethnic

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17 About 80-85% of Kosovo volunteers had a high school education and 10% had a college degree.

18 For example, experts estimated that the Islamic faith was novelty for 70% of young Kosovo people who fought in Syria and Iraq under the teachings of radical orators because they grew up in a family where they did not practice their religion.

19 According to a World Bank survey, the unemployment rate was 25.6% of the adult Bosnian population in 2017. This ratio showed an even more shocking result for young people: in the starting age group, only one in three people worked in a declared job. In the case of Kosovo, the rates were even higher: official state statistics registered 65% of young people and 35% of the total population as unemployed in 2016. In Novi Pazar, Serbia, the 2011 census officially showed a 37% unemployment rate similar to that of Kosovo. In reality, however, 50% of the population, including 75% of those under 30, did not have a secure source of livelihood.

20 For example, 40% of Kosovo volunteers had a Prius.

21 Due to the above, a particularly attractive alternative for them was the high monthly fixed income offered by the Islamic State, as well as free housing and car use. In addition to financial stability, their compatriots who appeared in ISIL's propaganda materials in their mother tongue promised arranged marriage and sex slaves for single men in addition to public esteem, rising to the social ranks, conservative Islamic living, and martyrdom.

22 For example, many of the volunteers who often left the territory of Serbia as family members were Muslim Roma discriminated by the majority society, while others were members of the Bosnian community.

identity (Šutarov, 2017, 106.). Finally, there were those who were merely driven by a desire for adventure to engage in armed struggle on the side of one of the opposing parties. It was also found that, especially in the case of Bosnians, many of the volunteers had been in online contact with jihadist recruiters on the Internet in media and social forums prior to their departure. Others lived in well-known Salafists communities for a longer or shorter period of time, or at least visited them regularly, or made personal acquaintances with extremist religious organizations and mosques. Most of their families were unaware of their radicalization. Their relatives found out about their departure only afterwards, surprisingly. Others, especially before 2014, were motivated by childhood traumas, humanitarian goals, and a community of destiny with Syrian commoners rather than fundamentalist ideologies. They wanted to help the Syrian people in their own way in their fight against the Assad regime<sup>23</sup> (Kursani & Fetiu, 2017, 98–99.; Speckhard, Yayla & Shajkovci, 2018, 30.). However, some of them spent barely a few months away from their homeland. Many were disillusioned with the struggle when the militias began to confront each other therefore they returned to their country of origin. After their arrival, they were arrested by the law enforcement forces and treated as criminals for their actions, stigmatized by the public, and their kinship severed all contacts with them, which was noted with sincere shock and outrage. The official action intended as a deterrent had the opposite effect and many of them preferred to return to the area with their wives and children to continue living together under the auspices of the Islamic State (Speckhard, Yayla & Shajkovci, 2018, 36–37.).

## The security risk of returning ‘warriors’

A significant number of Balkan volunteers have resettled during the caliphate’s existence who previously have sworn allegiance to the Islamic State<sup>24</sup> (Barrett,

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23 In the consciousness of many members of the Muslim communities in the Balkans have left an indelible memory the indiscriminate attacks from the 1990s and foreign volunteers who came to help them from religious solidarity. In the initial period of the outbreak of the armed conflict, volunteers traveling to the Middle East therefore felt obliged to now, out of gratitude, protect the Syrians from the atrocities of the Assad regime. In addition, detained Kosovo volunteers said they initially traveled out to fight on the side of opposition groups with the conviction that, according to official statements, their country would also support it.

24 About 30% of European volunteers traveling to Syria or Iraq returned to their countries of origin by mid-2017. The picture is nuanced by the fact that for some countries this proportion has approached 50%. By comparison, President Putin announced that 10% of the approximately 9,000 volunteers from the territory of the former Soviet republics had returned to their homeland while only a few jihadists had returned in Southeast Asia.



2017, 10.). Their decision was often motivated by a variety of reasons in addition to family reasons. It was influenced by their opposition to ISIL’s ideology and methods, their frustration with the failure of their previous expectations, ethnic and racial discrimination against volunteers of different origins, deteriorating living conditions, war injuries, as well as the growing number of defeats and increasing losses suffered by the terrorist organization. However, the number of voluntary repatriations from the conflict zone almost completely disappeared at the same time as the expulsions, due to the austerity measures introduced by national governments from 2016 onwards. In addition, escalating clashes have also made it more difficult to enter or leave the crisis area.

**Table 3:** *The number of volunteers returning to the Western Balkans till April 2018*

Country	Number of returnees	Number of individuals who remained in the combat zone
<b>Albania</b>	45 persons	18 men and 55 relatives
<b>Bosnia and Herzegovina</b>	48 men, 6 females and 2 minors	102 persons
<b>Kosovo</b>	123 men, 7 females and 3 minors	59 men, 41 females and 95 minors (at least 41 children were born in the theatre)
<b>North Macedonia</b>	72–86 persons	30 persons
<b>Montenegro</b>	8 men, 1 female and 1 minor	–
<b>Serbia</b>	7 persons	–

*Note.* Cook & Vale, 2018, 16.; Shtuni, 2019, 18.

Returning volunteers can endanger the security of the home state in several possible ways. The most obvious, but also the least frequent is the case of veteran fundamentalists attempting to commit an assassination, which has already occurred in Paris in November 2015 and in Brussels in March 2016. The existence of a security risk in the Balkans was demonstrated by the fact that ISIL’s self-appointed caliph promised to send jihadists to the area to slaughter unbelievers following the introduction of counter-terrorism measures in Kosovo. This was followed by a video from the ISIL Media Center published in June 2015. In the recording, Kosovar, Montenegrin, Albanian and Bosnian militants from the region now jointly called on their compatriots to immigrate to the territory of the Islamic State, and the remaining ones were threatened with terrorist attacks. Barely a month later, another video was released declaring the states of the Western Balkans to be the territory of the Islamic State (Šutarov, 2017, 113–114.). The Kosovo counterterrorism arrested five men in the same month on suspicion of poisoning Pristina’s water network on behalf of ISIL (Bytyqi & Mullins, 2019, 26.). A year later, Albanian and Kosovar security forces jointly

prevented an attempted attack on the Israeli football team in Shkodër. The assassination attempt was directed and funded by ISIL's Balkan leaders in Syria.<sup>25</sup> (URL15; URL16). Furthermore, the lonely action against the Zvornik police station on 27 April 2015 as well as the incident on the outskirts of Sarajevo on 18 November 2015, which resulted in the deaths of two military officers and the detonation of the perpetrator, were also declared terrorist attacks in Bosnia.<sup>26</sup> (URL17; URL18). An attempt to assassinate NATO peacekeepers stationed in the country was successfully thwarted in June 2018, according to Kosovo authorities. A few months later, the Macedonian authorities detained 20 alleged ISIL supporters on 15 February 2019. (Shtuni, 2019, 23.). In addition, the June 2017 article in the Bosnian fundamentalist *Rumija* was also thought-provoking. The author clearly threatened Croats, Serbs and traitor Muslims with bloody retaliation for their role during the Yugoslav War (URL19). Finally, it should be added that many of the emigrants had dual citizenship and diversified links in Europe's diaspora communities.<sup>27</sup> (Azinović & Jusić, 2016, 38.; Perteshi, 2018, 30.; URL20). Returnees thus pose a security risk not only to their own country but also to Western states, which remain a key target for ISIL.<sup>28</sup> (Šutarov, 2017, 116–117.; URL21).

Despite the examples mentioned above, former volunteers, although they do not commit acts of violence, may use their combat experience and charisma to integrate into a network of existing cells, where they form and lead another group to support and finance terrorist acts as well as recruit potential activists.

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25 As a result of the action, a total of 19 people were arrested in Albania, Kosovo and Macedonia in November 2016. During the investigation, the six Kosovo detainees were also suspected of attempting to carry out assassinations in France and Belgium, as well as blowing up temples in Gracanica, Mitrovica, Pei and Prizren during Orthodox Christmas. The latter ultimately failed only because no volunteers were found to carry out the suicide mission. Following the incident, several key figures in the radical trend lost their lives within a year. These events with the emerging power vacuum within the leadership noticeably reduced the popularity of fundamentalists in the region.

26 All of the perpetrators were found to be local residents who had not been to the Middle East before.

27 For example, the parents of Austrian teenagers Sabina Selimovic and Samra Kesinovic, who left for Syria in 2014 and became known as the '*Poster Girls of the Islamic State*', fled Bosnia during the Yugoslav War and settled in Austria. In addition, more than 20% of Bosnian volunteers were thought to have similar connections and acquaintances across Europe. In the case of Kosovo volunteers, the proportion of young people who were already born and raised in the West as children of emigrant parents is also 20%.

28 For example, five people, including a Swedish national, were detained in Bosnia and Herzegovina in March 2015. The perpetrators were suspected of making a homemade bomb which they then tried to smuggle into Scandinavia to commit a terrorist act there. Two Kosovo-born brothers were arrested in Duisburg by German authorities on suspicion of preparing to attack one of the shopping malls in Oberhausen in December 2016. In Austria, an Albanian was arrested in January 2017 who was planning to carry out a terrorist attack in Vienna. Back in the same month, the Austrian authorities carried out a widespread raid on the Balkan diaspora communities in Graz and Vienna which resulted the arrest of 14 people. All of the detainees were to be linked to Mirsad Omerović, a notoriously radical preacher who had already imprisoned for 20 years for recruiting foreign volunteers by that time.

Their motivation in this regard, in addition to their fundamentalist attitude, is heightened by the fact that the Islamic State refused to acknowledge its defeat despite its collapse. Terrorist groups sworn to loyalty to al-Baghdad continued to be loyal to their leader and to his successor after the caliph's death in late October 2019. Due to the modest economic and social situation of the states in the region, their extreme views may be more likely to motivate sympathizers living in local poverty, often unemployed with minimal education, to join a cell or even commit a terrorist act in their home country as a lone wolf<sup>29</sup> (Spahiu, 2016, 60.). The latter finding is particularly true of persons who have tried to join the terrorist organization in recent years in which they have been prevented by the national authorities of their home country or one of the transit states. In their case, their frustration over failure is not coupled with negative experiences gained under the rule of the caliphate and a sense of facing death. Their determination and condemnation of the authorities can increase their impatience, aggression and reinforce their propensity for extreme violence. All of this can encourage them to make their original idea a reality in another way. On the other hand, it may inspire them to follow the extremist guidelines of a fundamentalist who has returned from the Middle East or to commit extreme action (Barrett, 2017, 15–16.). Beside them are not less dangerous those who did not try to get out of the conflict zone but took allegiance to al-Baghdad and considered themselves soldiers of the caliphate. They are the ones who have virtually embraced the call made by Abu Mohammad al-Adnani, the official spokesman for ISIL, in September 2014 to attack enemies of the Islamic State wherever and whenever they can, without receiving any instructions. Although the vast majority of these individuals have refrained from extreme actions despite their ideological commitment, they can still easily give up their hesitant position under the influence of a veteran who has visited the conflict zone (Barrett, 2017, 16.). Finally, the most common danger could be that volunteers may further fuel social contradictions through their home presence (URL22). It can help to assess the danger of an individual if the authorities are aware of the reasons for which he or she traveled back to his or her place of origin. Some were forced to leave the area by disappointment due to frustration, poverty, and the brutality they experienced. Others, who were previously motivated by financial gain, lost their livelihoods after the failure of the caliphate. There are also

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29 For example, Albanian authorities struck a supposed Islamist recruitment network centred around the Unaza e Re and Mëzez mosques on the outskirts of Tirana as early as March 2014. Two self-appointed imams, Bujar Hysa and Genci Balla, were among the thirteen people arrested on charges of supporting terrorism and inciting religious antagonism. It was a proven fact that the religious leaders had demonstrably used religious doctrines to radicalize their followers and promote jihad.

fanatics who have escaped or have been captured by coalition forces. Many of them see what has happened as just a temporary setback. They still firmly believe in the ultimate victory. In their view, they can do more to make this happen in their country than in Syria or Iraq. Finally, we must also mention the people who were sent back to their country of origin by ISIL specifically for the purpose of setting up a local network and carrying out terrorist attacks on behalf of the terrorist organization (URL23). It can also help assess the threat posed by former volunteers if the authorities are aware of the date of leaving the territory of the Islamic State. For many of them were unable to accept the principles and precepts of ISIL, so after a short stay there they left the caliphate behind when its star was still in its ascending stage. Others returned later, in the period of decline, because of their disillusionment with the leaders of the caliphate and the methods they used<sup>30</sup> (URL16). Later several of the frustrated fighters became actively involved in destroying the image built around the Syrian war and detaining sympathizers when they reported their negative experiences to a large community.<sup>31</sup> (Speckhard, Shajkovci & Bodo, 2018, 6–9.). It was therefore vital to win over these people who were willing to work together, which proved to be an extraordinary challenge in the absence of adequate rehabilitation and integration opportunities. Indeed, local authorities have so far taken indiscriminate austerity and punitive measures against returnees in the vast majority of cases. This coupled with social isolation, lack of education and employment opportunities, as well as traumatic experiences, can exponentially increase frustration and propensity for violence among them (Spahiu, 2016, 77–78.). Finally, the issue of foreign volunteers is also closely linked to the migration crisis, as there is a serious chance that foreign jihadists will mingle with refugees and try to come back to the European continent among them<sup>32</sup> (Shtuni, 2019, 21.). Regarding the reality of the threat, Bosnian prosecutors have already drawn attention to the fact that the Salafists, donated by Qatari charity funds and private persons, bought several hectares of land from local Serbs near Bosanska Bojna, not far from the municipalities of Šišići and Bužim on the Croatian border, where it was possible to cross the nearby border section practically unnoticed due to

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30 For example, national authorities considered just 15 people' presence as a security risk among the 40 fighters who returned to Albania.

31 For example, the International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism conducted a number of interviews with returned and imprisoned ISIL activists as well as their relatives. In addition to reporting on their experiences, the speakers unanimously condemned the terrorist organization at the end of the videos and warned potential sympathizers about the dangers of joining.

32 For example, a recruiter of ISIL from Kosovo secretly returned to Bosnia-Herzegovina in January 2017. He hid with fake passports in Sarajevo for nearly six months until his arrest. In another case, another jihadist Kosovo citizen was detained in February 2019 when he tried to enter Italy by boat with a fake Macedonian passport.

lack of control<sup>33</sup> (URL3). The security services of the Balkan states, aware of the seriousness of the threat, initially argued that their limited resources did not allow them to monitor refugees, returning volunteers, fundamentalist recruiters and those susceptible to radical ideologies at the same time (URL13). However, effective border control with the help of Frontex and the relevant counterparts in the region will become a vital issue following Croatia's accession to the Schengen area, as the extremists who circumvent it now pose a security risk to the European Union as a whole.

## Reception of returning volunteers

At the time of writing this study, experts have estimated the number of Balkan volunteers and family members in Syria at around 475. (URL1). Two-thirds of them were women and children, held mainly in overcrowded al-Hol, al-Roj and Ain Issa refugee camps controlled by Kurdish forces. However, Turkey's intervention in Syria has brought decisive changes in the situation of many of them. The fighting affected several areas where ISIL supporters were detained. Due to the intensity of the clashes, the Kurdish authorities were forced to reinforce the fighting forces with the camp guards, allowing more detainees to escape. Thousands have also been taken as prisoners by Turkish troops, whose return to their country of origin is currently one of Ankara's main goals<sup>34</sup> (URL24). At the same time, their country reacted reluctantly against their return in most cases. They argued that members of the terrorist organization had only sporadically appeared in the past. However, if the Turkish demand were met, fanatical adherents of ISIL's fundamentalist ideology would return in a concentrated and significant number, whose determination, network and abilities would pose an extremely serious security risk (Dworkin, 2019, 6–7.). Alongside them, some of the men who escaped captivity supported the struggle of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham in Idlib province. Within this Sunni Islamist militant group, the Albanians formed a separate unit with their own command structure. In addition, the number of people returning from the conflict zone to their country of origin has been estimated at around 485 in recent years (URL1).

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33 Low or no level of security measures were also observed at Jovića Most, Dugopolje, Vaganj / Bili Brigne and Una National Park on the Dalmatian section of the Croatian border.

34 Turkey has neutralized 3.500 people and arrested 5.500 people during its counter-terrorism operations against ISIL. About 780 of the captured foreign volunteers were deported back to their country of origin in 2019.

In the Balkans, official action against extremist believers, recruiters and adult men returning from the Middle East fighting zone has not been the subject of any particular debate, but has been seen as a legitimate criminal justice claim, in line with the vast majority of issuing countries<sup>35</sup> (Kelmendi, 2018, 10–16.). However, the prosecution of perpetrators has been hampered by the fact that new, tightened legislative changes<sup>36</sup> were introduced only in 2014-2015, after the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 2178. For this reason, it was not officially possible to apply the restrictions retroactively to persons who had already returned to their home country before the new legal regulations entered into force. Another problem with the changed legal environment was that it treated all returnees as non-discriminatory terrorists, despite the fact that in most cases there was no clear evidence of the person's activities in the conflict zone. Nevertheless, 25 people were found guilty of recruiting, inciting, traveling to, or attempting to travel to the fighting zone in 16 cases in Bosnia. They were sentenced to a total of 47 years and two months in prison until April 2019<sup>37</sup> (Shutarov, 2019, 2.; URL25).

In northern Macedonia, 25 people were arrested in three major counter-terrorism operations ('Cell 1' in August 2015, 'Cell 2' in July 2016 and 'Cell 3' in cooperation with the Turkish police in August 2018). A total of 13 of them, including an imam, were sentenced to between five and nine years in prison in two criminal suits, and only 6 of the suspects were released (Comission Staff Working Document, 2019, 39-40.; URL26). In Kosovo, 119 people have been indicted on the same charges and another 156 have been investigated since September 2014 (URL27). In Serbia, the Special Court in Belgrad found seven people guilty of collaborating with terrorism and jihadist groups in April 2018, and a man was arrested in Novi Pazar in January 2019, who were suspected of planning terrorist attack in the name of ISIL (URL28).

At the same time, it poses an additional security risk if detained and convicted jihadists are locked up with civilian criminals in overcrowded prisons. Extremists can easily radicalize their fellow prisoners, from whom they can learn crime techniques that they can later use to plan or execute more elaborate, spectacular, and devastating acts of terrorism (URL29).

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35 According to a 2017 poll in Kosovo, 74% of respondents considered religious extremism as a threat and 71% of respondents rated returned volunteers as a risk to national security. In addition, 62% did not want to live with them in their neighborhood or even in a community and only 11% said they did not find their presence problematic.

36 The criminal courts of the Western Balkan states can sanction terrorist offenses with up to 6 months to 20 years in prison. In Kosovo, convicts may also lose their citizenship as an ancillary punishment.

37 In the legal environment changed in 2014, most returning volunteers were sentenced to about one year in prison. However, the judgement could be triggered by the payment of a fine by some. The most severe sentence - 7 years in prison - was given to the aforementioned radical preacher, Bilal Bosnić.

Finally, it should be noted that in the case of several of the Balkan states, e.g. Serbia or Montenegro, a kind of double standard can be observed in the assessment of foreign volunteers. Pro-Russian far-right extremists who have returned from the Ukrainian front are being subjected to much milder sanctions than Middle Eastern volunteers who have been declared terrorists. In addition to undermining the belief in the impartiality of the judiciary and the principle of equality before the law, this may also fuel the ethnic and religious differences that have already emerged (URL8).

In addition to the jihadists, we must not forget their family members, namely their wives and the widows of the fallen, as well as their children, who were trapped in a refugee camp controlled by Kurdish forces after the collapse of the Islamic State. The most obvious question is whether they want to return to Europe or whether they want to stay in place despite the harsh conditions, trusting in the favorable turn<sup>38</sup> (URL30). A key consideration in judging those wishing to return could be the level of commitment to ISIL's ideology, the extent to which they have been afflicted and retaliated by the grief over the loss of their spouse / child, as well as their radicalization during the months they spent in Kurdish-controlled camps. Their situation was complicated because the vast majority of them did not commit a crime under the law because they did not swear allegiance to the terrorist organization and did not take an active part in the operation and / or support of the terrorist organization<sup>39</sup> (Speckhard & Shajkovec, 2017, 25.). For this reason, they do not have to fear that if they return home, they will be found guilty by a court in their home country and sentenced to a custodial sentence<sup>40</sup> (URL31). In addition, a significant proportion of children were born in the Middle East, making them stateless in the Balkan states. In their case, it is also questionable whether they were only victims of violence or participants in it due to their age. It is also unclear how their personality development was influenced by fundamentalist ideologies, war experiences and the effects of a foreign cultural environment during the months / years they

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38 For example, Dora Bilić was one of the seven ISIL volunteers with Croatian citizenship - 2 men and 5 women. According to eyewitness accounts, the lady, who was ideologically radicalized to extremes, was in the Syrian al-Hol refugee camp in February 2019. The fanatical woman severed all contact with the Balkan women and did not appear to want to leave Syria even though Croatia had not been banned from participating in the foreign war, so she should not have feared being prosecuted if she returned home.

39 However, it should be added that some women were members of the religious police al-Hisba. In addition to this, some of them were proven to be involved in online recruiting or even to assist the terrorist organization as a teacher, health worker, or administrator.

40 At the same time, it is thought-provoking that there has been a demonstrable increase in the participation of women in conspiracies to commit various terrorist acts across Europe. Their proportion was around 23% among exposed organizers in the first half of 2017.

have spent in the (anti) socialization milieu of the region. Their further fate is therefore currently not clear enough. In the absence of a uniform practice, it depends crucially on the judgment of each state, despite the fact that the issue practically affects hundreds of minors<sup>41</sup> (URL32; URL33).

The Balkan states are trying to find a different approach to tackling and solving the phenomenon. Although no reintegration and rehabilitation program has been introduced in Albania, the new curriculum introduced in January 2017 in ten selected schools is encouraging to increase religious tolerance and displace extremism from religious education. An action plan to implement the National Strategy against Violent Extremism was also adopted in October 2017. (Kursani, 2019, 22.). At the same time, the local judiciary imposed extremely severe penalties on those involved in the recruitment of jihadist volunteers when they sentenced nine individuals, including two self-appointed imams, to a total of 126 years in prison in May 2016. (Lamallari, 2016, 5.). In addition, the central leadership has consistently distanced itself from the readmission of ISIL fighters and their families<sup>42</sup> (URL34). Northern Macedonia was one of the first European states to formally consent to the repatriation of its captured citizens in the Middle East in 2018 with American assistance. In addition to readmission, the legislature adopted two developed concepts - *'Prevention of Violent Extremism'* and an updated *'Counter-Terrorism Strategy'* - on 6 March 2018 and signed the EU-Western Balkans Joint Counter-Terrorism Action Plan to prevent radicalization and to curb the extreme views and groups that have already emerged (URL35). In parallel, Kosovo has adopted a counter-terrorism strategy that has seen ISIL fighters returning from the Middle East as one of the country's biggest security risks. Nevertheless, Prime Minister Ramush Haradinaj has announced his readiness to take full responsibility for their citizens, who, however, will be answerable for their actions before the law upon their return (URL10). In the spirit of the latter, 110 were able to return with U.S.

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41 The gravity of the problem is well illustrated by the fact that about 20 Serbian women were in one of the camps controlled by Kurdish militants in April 2019.

The Belgrade government did not take concrete steps for their readmission despite repeated requests from relatives. Furthermore, according to a report by the Bosnian intelligence agency, SIPA, about 70 children had been born in Syria by early 2019. One or both of their parents were Bosnian citizens. Twelve of the minors lost their lives in the clashes. Next to them, the number of Albanian, Kosovar and North Macedonian children is set at 85 who were born in the area.

42 Only an 11-year-old Albanian boy could return from the Kurdish-controlled al-Hol camp. However, he was transported to Italy (and not to Albania!) because he was already born and raised there until his mother - without his father's knowledge - took him to the Middle East.



assistance on April 19, 2019<sup>43</sup> (URL36). The double standards and security risk reservations naturally had an impact, as 32 of the returnees were women and 74 were children, nine of whom were orphans. The four men were detained by the authorities immediately upon their arrival, while the women and children were transported to one of the centers of the asylum authority to carry out the administrative tasks and necessary medical examinations. The latter were able to return home to their homes after 72 hours of observation, where the women were placed under house arrest<sup>44</sup> (Shtuni, 2019, 19.; URL27). Of these, 11 women were prosecuted by the Kosovo judiciary and the first judgement was announced in January 2020<sup>45</sup> (URL38). At the same time, Kosovo has already negotiated with Ankara to repatriate another 100 citizens from Syria (URL39). A similar trend has emerged in Bosnia-Herzegovina in the meantime. The Bosnian presidency gave up its initial aloof stance and first allowed one person to return home from Syria in April 2019 and then a group of 25 people - 7 men, 6 women and 12 children - at the end of the year. Measures were also taken to repatriate an estimated 235 people trapped in camps in the Middle East. As in the Kosovo proceedings, men were still detained at Sarajevo airport, while women and children were taken to a reception center (URL40). Finally, it should be noted that Serbia has maintained its previous rejection position and has still not taken any measures to allow the return of 20 Serbian women detained in camps in northern Syria (URL41).

## Conditions for providing a reintegration background

In addition to assessing the security risks inherent in readmitted persons and addressing potential threats, there is a difference in how much attention each national authority pays to the emergence of politicized Islam in their local communities. However, the importance of the latter is justified by the fact that it

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43 In addition to the returnees, a further 108 citizens of three Balkan nations - 10 women and 38 children from Kosovo, 14 of whom were born in Syria; 11 women and 41 children from Albania, 13 of whom were born in Syria; 2 women and 6 children from North Macedonia - stayed only in al-Hol camp in Syria.

44 In addition to the returnees, 30 other suspected ISIL fighters and 39 women and 8 children were still in the Syrian conflict zone, according to Kosovo police. Alongside them, a Kosovar citizen and a Macedonian person were sentenced to life imprisonment in Turkey.

45 Qendresa Sfidhta was sentenced by a Pristina court to two years suspended imprisonment for involvement in a terrorist organization in the first instance.

can significantly deepen the conflict not only between individual states<sup>46</sup>, but also among the inhabitants of ethnically and religiously highly heterogeneous areas, as well as increase the chances of extremist nationalist, neo-fascist and anti-Islamic tendencies against minority groups<sup>47</sup> (Ćorović, 2017, 131.; Šutarov, 2017, 120–121.; URL17). It is not negligible that the readmitted persons most often returned to a medium where conditions had practically not improved or did not change at all during their absence<sup>48</sup> (Jakupi & Kelmendi, 2017, 11–12.). The conditions for radicalization therefore continued to exist, especially when returnees sought more contact with each other and like-minded people because of the rejection of the domestic collective and tried to distance themselves from the outside world. Involving religious congregations, especially imams, relevant relatives, leaders and members of local communities, doctors and mental health professionals, and educational institutions in reintegration processes is therefore crucial<sup>49</sup> (Bytyqi & Mullins, 2019, 27.).

Most of the Balkan states concerned also attach increasing importance of monitoring the family background of returnees, as many of the volunteers' conservative relatives have also been susceptible to violent extremism. They were proud of their war-torn family members, whose deeds were glorified and considered duty, and those who fell were reputed as heroic martyrs. As a result, those persons, who were previously detained / sentenced to imprisonment, actually returned to the same radicalization medium after their release. These distrustful and aloof families, often living in deep poverty and insecurity, have so far been in contact almost exclusively with religious organizations, unofficial

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46 For example, Serbian politicians have repeatedly accused Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as Kosovo of operating al-Qaeda camps on their territory. At the same time, the leaders of the two states indicted Belgrade for hiding war criminals and state-sponsored terrorism.

47 In retaliation for the Zvorniki attack mentioned above, Serbs detained more than 30 Bosnians on suspicion of arms smuggling, which caused serious outrage on the part of Bosnians. The overreacted Serbian action, which was considered unnecessary, was seen as repression, as they said the arrests were directed against former Bosnian refugees who returned to their homes after the Yugoslav War. Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, almost all of the Macedonian volunteers were of Albanian descent. The Macedonian authorities, including law enforcement agencies, have therefore paid particular attention to ensuring that their actions do not appear to be directed against the Albanian minority as a whole. In addition, the legislature and the media have been careful to avoid any statements that could imply condemnation and / or discrimination against any ethnic group. In contrast, discrimination against Serb Muslims in the Sandzak region would not only have eased but intensified. The latter carries the danger that Muslims who have hitherto rejected extremist interpretations of Islam will also be radicalized over time due to the condemnatory attitude of the Serbian public, frequent hate speeches and growing social segregation.

48 For example, many of the women who returned to Kosovo were left without a head of family in the past. Therefore, they were forced to remarry due to a lack of state support.

49 We can consider as a positive development the establishment of Prevention and Rehabilitation Department in Kosovo, which can widely support the returning women and children. A separate school class has also been set up for children to catch up and women are being helped with food, clothing and other everyday items offered by international NGOs.

religious groups, and individuals professing similar principles. It is therefore an urgent task for local communities and public authorities to work effectively with them to resolve the problem as soon as possible (Perteshi, 2018, 33–34.). As a result of the brutality experienced, several of those who returned showed symptoms of PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder). Measures have also been taken for the psychological treatment of these mentally (also) disabled people. In addition, initiatives have been taken in Kosovo since 2018 to launch effective socialization programs for persons deprived of their liberty, with the assistance of sociologists, psychologists, psychotherapists, other health professionals and other highly qualified experts<sup>50</sup> (Shutarov, 2019, 5.). The authorities also sought to isolate the most vulnerable persons as effectively as possible from fanatics and recruiters held within the penitentiary<sup>51</sup> (Azinović & Bećirević, 2017, 37.).

Finally, individual intelligence and police agencies appear to be trying to communicate more effectively with each other in order to share information more quickly<sup>52</sup> (URL13). They are seeking to involve agencies in their cooperation such as Europol, Frontex, Interpol or relevant US institutions and departments more closely than before.<sup>53</sup> However, in order to implement ambitious initiatives, each state must create a stable social background - which presupposes a more effective fight against poverty, unemployment, corruption, organized crime - and the development of the education system.

## Summary

Most Balkan fighters who have left for the Middle East have not yet returned to their countries of origin. Nevertheless, efforts to prevent potential terrorist attacks and jihadist infiltrations are now a top priority. In this regard, the main task lies with the intelligence services of each of the Balkan states, which must

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50 In Kosovo, imams from the local Islamic Community have joined the prison rehabilitation program, giving lectures to detained extremists. In addition, libraries in nine prisons were reviewed and religious literature of questionable content / origin was replaced with books translated / published by the Islamic Community.

51 For example, 95% of prisoners convicted of terrorism charges are held in the heavily guarded Podueva penitentiary in Kosovo.

52 The withholding of information, often under political pressure, has been a serious problem not only among the Balkan states but also among law enforcement agencies in individual countries. The latter finding is particularly true in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the state-building entities - the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republika Srpska - have their own legislative powers and police institutional systems that treat each other in a spirit of mutual distrust.

53 In terms of information sharing, the formation of a joint coordination center is an evolutionary development which was set up between 30 countries as well as 8 agencies and international organizations at Europol's headquarters in The Hague on 5-8 September 2019.

clearly identify among returnees those who have been disappointed and offended by what has happened and who continue to pose a threat to the state and public security. This would also be particularly important as it would increase the discretion of the local judiciary and allow courts to impose more selective, but much harsher, penalties on those who pose a threat to a given society. At the same time, it could be the other side of the coin and also be considered, that in this case it would not be necessary to imprison all returnees indiscriminately. Of course, the latter would not call into question the legitimate criminal claims of local judicial institutions. Following a number of Asian and European examples, it would also be thought-provoking that overcrowded prisons, as a deterrent, do not necessarily help de-radicalization processes but, on the contrary, often force those who do not want to return there to take extreme action. Based on experience to date, we should also not forget that, in the absence of appropriate and effective precautions, prisons have often proved to be an ideal place for fundamentalists to spread their extreme ideology and recruit potential believers / volunteers. In addition, each national government urgently needs to develop an action plan for the effectively reintegration of spouses and children most at risk of radicalization and discrimination into local societies. The challenge is exacerbated, especially in Bosnia, by ethnic divisions and nationalist sentiments, which can be a breeding ground for violent extremism and terrorist acts in the area in the absence of a successful regional cooperation policy. For this reason, it would be particularly important above all, to extend control over all mosques of the state-sponsored Islamic communities and to close unofficial spaces for practicing the Islamic faith. The above considerations are of vital importance not only for the maintenance of regional stability but also for the process of accession of the states of the region to the EU. Securing the borders of the European Union is closely linked to European integration and enlargement. Accession negotiations have therefore been hampered from the outset by concerns that the entry of the Balkan states will bring Islamic majority states within the Union's borders with flourishing religious extremism and high levels of violence. Doubts, anti-Muslim sentiments and far-right populist manifestations in the union were further heightened by the news of the departure of Balkan volunteers and their return. For this reason, the arrests in Kosovo or Bosnia-Herzegovina simultaneously served as a beheading of extremist local communities, a demonstrative stand for EU directives, alienation from the radical lines of the wider Muslim world, and an emphasis on the presence of secularized Islam. As a result, more effective action against local fundamentalists, effective reintegration of returned volunteers and their families, and further deepening cooperation with EU security bodies are also key issues for the

Balkan states in gaining EU membership. This is because some members of the community may consider several candidate countries to be a security risk in the absence of expedient de-radicalization. They do not want to risk the entry of radical Islamic communities within the borders of the Union, which could serve as a kind of advanced base for anti-Western fundamentalists outside the community. They also fear that by breaking down national borders and exercising their right to free movement, extremists will be able to keep in contact more easily with second- and third-generation members of Islamic communities in the EU who are susceptible to extremism. In view of the above, compliance with the EU's security policy criteria is particularly important for Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, the two largest jihadist emitters in the region. This is evidenced, inter alia, by the fact that Northern Macedonia and Albania have already been approved to start accession negotiations at the end of March 2020. In addition to the rule of law reforms, the EU's decision was based, among other things, on more effective action against organized crime and the renewal of intelligence agencies.

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