

Islam Emerging in the Balkans

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Islam Emerging in the Balkans

Introduction

The Haemus Mts., or Balkan Peninsula as is widely known today, has been historically a region of strategic importance and a crossroads in the movement of various peoples from North to South and from East to West and vice versa. As a result, the Balkans have been the scene of numerous wars in the effort by various empires to conquer it and consolidate their rule and control over the region as a means of establishing security and taking advantage in the trade routes. In this context various civilizations have coexisted and interacted in the Balkans both in an antagonistic and a harmonious manner.

Being the bridge between East and West, the Balkans could not have escaped the attention of Muslims in the past. Coming from the Middle East and North Africa, they aimed to set foot on the Balkans in their effort to spread Islam in Europe and conquer it. Already in the Middle Ages Islam appeared in the Balkans and gradually Muslims increased their presence and role reaching the climax of their influence and domination in the Ottoman times. After the Balkan Wars (1912-3) and WWI, Islam suffered an unprecedented geopolitical and economic defeat ending up in a massive retreat of Muslim forces and population from the Balkans, leaving behind only a few pockets of population who would become the Muslim minorities of the current national Balkan states.

The global importance of the Balkan Peninsula and the geopolitical significance of Islam for the region make the topic worth of analyzing it. In particular, the recent activities of the 'Sunni Caliphate' in the Balkans make the region one of the potential warfronts of the struggle between political Islam and the West currently and in the future. In this analysis there is an effort to highlight the cultural, religious and geopolitical aspects which give Islam a strategic role in the region.

The Emergence of Islam in the Balkans in the past

Soon after the spread and consolidation of Islam in the Middle East and North Africa, Muslim armies threatened Constantinople (671 and 717 AD).² In the ninth century Muslim Arabs conquered Crete (823), Sicily and parts of South Italy (827).³ In 840 they conquered Taranto and from there they conducted incursions in the Balkans. The Muslim conquest of Spain (8th-9th c.) enabled Muslims to exert further influence in the territories of today's Slovenia and Croatia, with whom Spain had previously enjoyed close relations. Later on a group of Muslim Turkic people settled in South Hungary near the Byzantine border and in the Ohrid Lake, forming the first consolidated pockets of Muslim populations long before the Ottoman rule.

The coming of Ottomans to the Balkans marked the beginning of a protracted period of heyday for Muslims in the region at the expense of Christianity and other religions. The Ottomans were the first Muslim and generally "Eastern" peoples who managed to conquer and rule systematically such a large area like the Balkans, thus consolidating their rule for more than five centuries. This period was associated with the expansion of Islam in the Balkans, culminating in the fall of Constantinople (1453), through forced and voluntary embracement of Islam by local non-Muslims and the spread of Islamic civilization in a region where Christianity had been on the lead until then.

At the peak of the Ottoman rule in the Balkans the Muslim population formed almost half or 2/5 of the total population. This is quite evident in the case of the 19th cent. After 1918 and the decline of the Ottoman rule in the Balkans, the vast majority of the Muslim population followed the Ottoman forces during their withdrawal from the region. However a portion of Muslims remained in the Balkans forming a 10% of the overall population in the peninsula. In the communist era the Muslims of the Balkans continued to adhere to Islam but not openly. Today the same percentage is the case for Muslims in the Balkans, i.e. around 7 million Muslims out of 70 million people.⁴

Islam was spread, not only in the Balkans, both through the sword, and through peaceful economic and social means. In the first case the conversion to Islam was more or less obligatory in a social and political context while in the second case trade involved missionaries as well and this implied a voluntary embracement of Islam by non-Muslims based on the influence of Islamic teachings. The second case may have preceded war or might have followed the Muslim conquest of the peninsula. In the latter case of spreading Islam, Islamic teachings were combined with the social-economic incentives for non-Muslims to embrace Islam.

² Warren Treadgold, *A History of the Byzantine State and Society*, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1997), 325; David Olster, "Theodosius Grammaticus and the Arab Siege of 674-78," *Byzantinoslavica* 56/1 (1995), 23-28.

³ Warren Treadgold, *The Byzantine Revival, 780-842*, Stanford University Press, 1988, 250.

⁴ "Muslims in Europe," BBC, 2005, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4385768.stm>

The current situation

Nation and Islam

The Balkan Peninsula consists of nation-states, the majority of which emerged in the 19th c. and after WW1, acquiring a full national character after the fall of the Soviet Union. Whilst nationalism emerged politically in the Balkans in the early 19th c., it was only Greece and Bulgaria which managed to form a nation-state then. It took other Balkan nations about a century to gain independence and once they had achieved their goal, their nationhood was overtaken by communism as the main stream state ideology. As a result, the nation-making process was delayed by eight decades. When it was re-initiated it was plausible that in the cases of Bosnia Herzegovina and Albania the concepts of nation and Islam would intermix.

In spite of Islam's varied character, there is one common characteristic shared by most Muslims in the region. Nowadays, Islam is deeply entrenched in national identity. There is a substantial link between adherence to Islam, belonging to an ethnic community and "faith" to a national cause. The explanation for this phenomenon lies in the conflicts of the 1990s and the process involving the disintegration of Yugoslavia.⁵

Four ethnic groups of Muslims

Muslim communities in the Balkans belong to four ethnic-linguistic groups, the largest of which is formed by Slavs. Muslims of Slavic ethnic origin and language have mainly settled in Bosnia and to a lesser extent in Kosovo, as well as in the historical regions of the Serb and Montenegro **Sandžak** area. In addition to the Slavs there are Albanian-speaking groups, present in Albania, Kosovo, FYROM and to a lesser extent in Montenegro. As for the Turkish-speaking groups, they are located in FYROM and in some areas of Kosovo; Roma, on their part, are spread all over the region's districts.

Two versions of Islam in the Balkans

Officially Muslims in the region adhere to the Sunni version of Islam. Unofficially, however, the Balkan form of Islam is quite diverse consisting of many local pre-Islamic elements as well as a rich variation of Sufi beliefs which make Balkan Islam unique in the wide variety of Islamic beliefs around the world. Given the strongly Shiite orientation of Sufi Islam, it could be suggested that Islam in the Balkans is divided into two versions: the Sunni one and the Shiite-Sufi versions.

In regard to Sunni Islam there are also many differences among these groups concerning the School of Islamic Law. Most of the communities adhere to Hanafism, one of Sunni Islam's four schools of law. Hanafism has its origins in the Ottoman Sultanate and therefore became the main

⁵ Mattia Del Conero, "The World of Islam, An Unknown Galaxy," 14 September, 2011.

school of thought in the Balkans. Also it is the dominant school in Bosnia Herzegovina, FYROM and the Muslim communities on both sides of Thrace, in Greece and Turkey.⁶

As for the Sufi denominations in the region, they consist of the Alevites, the Bektashis, the Naqshbandis, the Qadiris and others. This Shiite-oriented form of Islam is not connected to the Shiite Orthodoxy; Sufism in the region reflects the Shiite tradition as a whole and thus, the regional religious landscape particularly varies.

It is striking that the two major aspects of Islam, i.e. Sunnism and Sufism, exist almost in every Muslim Balkan country. For instance, Bosnia Herzegovina is more inclined to Sunni Orthodoxy and does not have a strong Bektashi presence whilst at the same time there are, of smaller proportions, other Sufi orders, such as the Naqshbandis and the Qadiris. In the case of Albania, however, Bektashism is the predominant version of Sufi Islam.⁷

Extra regional Muslim organizations

In the Post-Communist period the Muslim populations in the Balkans share the same problems that non-Muslims do regarding their economic condition, social circumstances and worldview as a whole. Features such as the low economic performance of the Balkan states, low income and hence restricted quality of life have caused widespread pessimism amongst Balkan Muslims. The latter, just as non-Muslims do, are characterized by disaffection about the worldly economic and political systems of Communism and Capitalism. The concept of nationalism seems to express hope for the formation of their outlook, identity and future but yet this seems to be an incomplete picture for Muslims.

The Muslims of the Balkans, especially their spiritual leaders, know that the concept of nationalism is incomplete and cannot express or fulfill the expectations of the devout masses. In their view, the role of religion is irreplaceable and can be combined with that of nationalism in order to shape a mixed outlook of worldly and metaphysical worldview. This scheme seems to have a particular impact on the Muslim population because it is in accordance with their Islamic beliefs and daily practices, offering hope for a better future and far from the deceitful materialistic promises of capitalism.

Having in mind the problems that Balkan societies have faced in the last two decades, various Islamic groups from all over the world have undertaken the task of exerting their influence amongst Muslims in the Balkans. This influence is displayed through the channels of cultural diplomacy in an

⁶ Rudolph Peters, *What does it mean to be an official madhhab? Hanafism and the Ottoman Empire*, (Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis, 2005), 151. <http://dare.uva.nl/document/2/80493>

⁷ David Nicolle, *The Janissaries* (London, 1995), 29.

Islamic framework and a variety of activities in this context in order to win the hearts and minds of Balkan Muslims.

The charity organizations

By establishing Muslim charity organizations in the Balkan countries which host Muslim populations various donors have established charity organizations in the form of NGOs to represent them in the Balkans and improve the living standards of Muslims in the region by offering them stipends in the form of a monthly income sufficient to support modestly a family with two or three children.⁸

Additionally, other modest amounts of money are offered to young Muslim women in return for wearing the Islamic veil in their public appearances and to young Muslim men for getting married. Given that the majority of the population of this age was born and brought up in an atheist system, the donor countries aim to change the life style of the young women and men and make it more traditional and religious in order to boost the role of family as the cell for the rejuvenation of the Islamic social system which based on family bonds. In the same context another portion of the money is channeled to the support of old peoples who are in need for medical treatment and support.

In the same fashion the charity organizations undertake the task of erecting new mosques or repairing older damaged ones.⁹ Additionally the charities are active in establishing theological schools (seminaries) for the religious education of young Muslims. From these seminaries the future generations of Muslim clerics will form the basis for the local priesthood of Islam in the region. When the young students complete their studies curriculum, they are sent to the seminaries of the donor countries in order to improve their knowledge further.¹⁰

The above examples are indicative of the efforts of the donor countries to establish, consolidate and expand a social network in various aspects of daily and personal life, aiming to influence the public opinion of the Muslim society about the importance of Islam. Each donor country, depending on the variation of Islam it represents creates a special context of Islam which co-exists with the local Muslim tradition and those traditions that are also introduced by other donor countries. The philanthropic aspect of these charities is indisputable but it is only one side of the coin.

⁸ "Saudi 'charity' troubling to Bosnian Muslims," The Centre for Peace in the Balkans, 28/1/2002.

⁹ The case of the new Tirana Mosque financed by Ankara is striking, "New Mosque Plan Catches Albania Muslims Off Guard," <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/new-mosque-proposal-surprises-albanian-muslims>; <http://tiranagrandmosque.com>;

¹⁰ Extremists worry the Balkans, Europe's Muslim heartland May 1, 2015, <http://www.mcclatchydc.com/news/nation-world/world/article24783928.html>.

Geopolitics of Islam in the Balkans

By influencing the Muslim population of the Balkan states, some of the donor Muslim states aim to radicalize the future generations of Muslims in the region and create pockets of Islamic political and cultural resistance in a Peninsula which is inhabited mainly by Christians. As shown below, depending on the donor state, the geopolitical goals vary. Yet the common feature in the activities of some donors is that their ultimate goal is, once Islam is reborn in these previously atheist societies, then to convert non-Muslims to Islam and return to the *status quo ante* WWI. As mentioned above, there are around seven million Muslims out of 70 million people. This 10% is a considerable number which can form a nucleus for further increase of the role of Muslim presence in the peninsula by using modern technology. These efforts are also assisted by the obscure concept of nationalism of the Balkan Muslim populations.

During communism, a protracted period of religious ignorance for most Muslims in the Balkans, the Ottoman legacy faded away in the mind of Balkan Muslims, giving the opportunity to Salafi Islam to enter the stage.

Salafism

The geopolitical challenge of Islam in the Balkans is multiplied by the growth of Salafi movements in Bosnia, Kosovo, FYROM, and the mountainous Sandzak region straddling the border between Montenegro and Serbia. In remote, isolated villages throughout the Western Balkans, Salafi groups have developed a network of extra-territorial, Sharia-run enclaves that over the past two decades have become safe haven and recruiting ground for *mujahedin* from around the world.¹¹ Under the guise of running “youth camps,” Islamist groups in recent years have systematically transported young people into national parks or local hills and forests where they are given military training by former *mujahedin*. The camps are intentionally transitory, re-established in different places and under different auspices each year, to make it more difficult for security officials to track them; yet, despite their *ad hoc* nature, they have been effective in fostering the relationships needed for creating extremist networks.

In the context of these networks, the Salafists have been influential in recruiting Balkan fighters to conduct *jihad*, i.e. holy war, against non-Muslims in various fronts, such as Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria.¹² Thus the importance of Islamic radicalism in the Balkans has a global dimension in terms of security and geopolitical antagonism.

¹¹ “Austria and the Bosnian-Syrian Jihad Connection,” The XX Committee, July 1, 2014.

¹² Dr. Aisha Y. Musa, Towards a Qur’anic-Based Articulation of the Concept of “Just War”, International Institute of Islamic Thought, May 5, 2013.

The Sunni Sufi moderate Islam

The Balkan strategy conforms to the old paradigm of the **Green Corridor**. This is a geopolitical concept with two meanings. It reflects the Islamists' goal of creating a chain of Muslim-dominated polities from the southeast of the Balkans to northwestern Bosnia Herzegovina. It also denotes the process of increasing ethno-religious assertiveness among the Muslim communities along that route. That process entails four aspects: (i) Expanding the area of those communities' demographic dominance; (ii) Establishing and/or expanding various entities under Muslim political control with actual or potential claim to sovereign statehood; (iii) Enhancing the dominant community's Islamic character and identity within those entities, with the parallel decrease of presence and power of non-Muslim groups; and (iv) Prompting Muslim communities' ambitions for even bolder designs in the future, even at the risk of conflict with their non-Muslim neighbors.¹³

According to the outlook of Sunni-Sufi Islam, the Balkans can be re-Islamized in the future if the form of moderate Islam is systematically promoted and exported. Given the long and recent Ottoman past of the region, the type of moderate Islam has more chances to prevail. The cultural links between the Balkan Muslims are many including the Hanafi school of Islam they adhere. Thus various organizations are active in signing cultural and economic projects with the Balkan countries that host the Muslim populations, aiming to maximize the Hanafi influence.¹⁴

Economic diplomacy is combined with the expansion of moderate Islam and this is done in an efficient way, combining improvement of living standards, the vision of political autonomy for the Muslim populations residing in Christian states and the transformation of these areas into pocks of regional Islamic interconnection and cooperation in every level and field. This is evident in Bosnia, Kosovo and FYROM.

The strongest presence of the moderate Islam is amongst Albanians, wherever they are in the region, where the Bektashi form of Islam forms a common legacy and heritage. Apart from the Bektashis, who support their own organizational apparatus, Kosovo, western FYROM. and Albania include hundreds of active *teqet* affiliated with the Rifa'i, Halveti, Qadiri, Sa'adi, Gjylsheni, Xhelveti, Hajati, and Tixhani *tariqats*, numbering almost 300 in Albania alone. Many towns in Kosovo and Albania proper have numerous *teqet*, representing the different orders, as well as, especially in southern Albania, many Bektashi centers.¹⁵

¹³ "Correspondent's diary, Day two: Albania and the Ottoman legacy". *The Economist*. Retrieved 2012-01-09.

¹⁴ On April 16, the Organization for Islamic Conference invited Bosnia to join its ranks, <http://www.resetdoc.org/story/00000021731>

¹⁵ Doja, Albert, "A political history of Bektashism from Ottoman Anatolia to contemporary Turkey," *Journal of Church and State* [Oxford], 2006.

The recent developments

Having the aforementioned in mind, it is useful to have a brief look into the recent geopolitical developments in the Balkans. As shown below, the latest events are dramatic in nature and significance since they mark the beginning of a new era of geopolitical antagonism between Islam and the powers of secularism in the Balkans. Additionally Islam puts in doubt the secular progress of the *intermezzo* which has occurred since the fall of the Soviet Union and the defeat of Communism in the Balkans and it echoes the geopolitical gains the Islamic State (Caliphate) has made in Afghanistan, Libya, Mesopotamia and the Levant. These events include the double warnings of the Caliphate that it is ready to operate fully in the Balkans, the assault in Zvornik of Bosnia, the battles in Lazarati (Albania) and Kumanovo (FYROM) and the central role of Kosovo and other Balkan regions in recruiting mujahedin for the warfronts in Libya, Syria and Iraq. The importance of these events is manifested by the vivid interest of the international community and the statements of various officials.

The related developments have been increased in frequency and importance at least in the past six months. They are divided in three categories: the increasing participation of Balkan recruits to the global warfronts; the return of the first Balkan veterans to their homelands and the operational knowhow they bring back; and the communication policy of the Caliphate in the Balkans.

i) The increasing participation of Balkan recruits in the global warfronts

The popularity of *jihad* amongst the Balkan Muslims is increasing. The number of recruits from Bosnia, FYROM, Kosovo and Albania are indicative of this tendency. The news coming from the warfronts and the Balkans reflect this tendency and raise the concern about the challenges lying in the near future.

According to a report of the Centre for Security Studies, Kosovo (Kosovo Center for Security Studies-KCSS), Kosovo is the main source of combatants in clashes in Syria, Iraq and other Islamic states (125 persons per one million people), followed by Bosnia-Herzegovina (85)¹⁶. According to the newspaper "Koha Ditore" Pristina, the report on Islamic extremism states that the reason why people from Kosovo fleeing to fight abroad is a particular extremist ideology espoused Islamic Army (ISIS) and called *takfirism* (en takfiri called the Muslim accuses another Muslim -takfir- for apostasy from Islam). This ideology "came" in Kosovo in 2005 and the "imported" imams from Skopje (FYROM), with studies in Egypt.¹⁷ The group of these fighters is not large, but it still poses a

¹⁶ Shpend Kushani, *Report inquiring into the causes and consequences of Kosovo citizens's involvement as foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq*, The Kosovar Centre for Security Studies, 3/7/2015; <http://www.qkss.org/en/Occasional-Papers/Report-inquiring-into-the-causes-and-consequences-of-Kosovo-citizens-involvement-as-foreign-fighters-in-Syria-and-Iraq-408>.

¹⁷ Tanjung, 10/6/2015.

challenge to security in Kosovo. By mid-January, a total of 232 fighters fled Kosovo in order to integrate the most extremist groups in Syria and Iraq.

On 4/4/2015 there was mentioned in the media that there are hundreds of Bosnian nationals fighting in battlefields abroad, according to the data collected so far by Bosnian police and security agency. There are 26 women among them who have been killed, according to the Interior Minister of the Serbian Republic of Bosnia, Dragan Lukac.

Bosnian nationals are traveling to countries in which they conducted warfare through European countries "to erase their tracks, albeit he did not specify the country of origin of those citizens killed. A new police station with a mission to combat terrorism will be set up in the Republika Srpska Interior Ministry to monitor the movements of these people when they return to country, or those who are preparing to leave in battlefields or those are a potential threat to national security.

The battle against terrorism is a mission of the State Bureau of Investigation and Protection (SIPA) of Bosnia - Herzegovina, but Mr. Lukacs announced the creation of a specific Directorate of the Interior Ministry of Republika Srpska, the Directorate for the Fight against Terrorism and extremism. With all that is happening in the world, the fight against terrorism must to intensify, according to Mr. Lukacs, who also announced the creation of a special address with the mission to protect "important facilities and people." The leaders of the opposition parties in Republika Srpska condemned the establishment of the new directorates Ministry of Interior Bosnian Serb entity, claiming that additional structures were created to protect the President of the Serbian Republic of Bosnia, Milorad Dodik from the expected massive discontent of the citizens. Lukacs rejected the allegation and stressed that 350 special armed policemen will take orders from Banja Luka planned to settle in East Sarajevo with the mission of protection officials of Republika Srpska participating in government institutions of Bosnia, in Sarajevo.¹⁸

Along with the fighters' recruits, the issues of illegal shipments to the warfronts from Bosnia and other Balkan countries are also of crucial security importance. On 7/4/2015 Serbia denied any involvement in arms sales to organizations of "Al Qaeda" in Libya when the issue became known by Bosnian media reports, according to which a Serbian company buys weapons in Bosnia and sells the "Al Qaeda" in Libya.¹⁹

According to the federal public television of Bosnia (FTV), the Serbian company "Tehnoremont" mediates export of arms from Bosnia to Libya, where the final consumer is Khalid Sharif, deputy head of the organization "Al Qaeda", which acts in the region .The ambassador of Serbia to the UN Milan Milanovots categorically denied any involvement Serbian company in the sale of weapons

¹⁸ "Bosnian Police Arrests Six Alleged Islamist Militants," Balkan Insight, 18/4/2015.

¹⁹ "Serbia and Montenegro sell guns to Al-Qaeda," 7/4/2015,

<http://infosot.com/serbia-dhe-mali-i-zi-i-shesin-arme-al-kaides/?lang=en>

to terrorist organizations. "Serbia tops the list of countries that observe strictly all the rules of transparency, which is recognized by the UN. Each export weapons to countries that are under sanctions made exclusively with UN Security Council authorization" refers to statement by Ambassador Milan Milanovic.

The Bosnian TV FTV revealed that the coordinator of the Security Council Committee of Experts UN Libya Simon Ntilgouei, in a letter to the Permanent Representative of Serbia Milan Milanovic, asked to be informed of the company's transactions "Tehnoremont" the deputy leader of "Al Qaeda" in Libya Khalid Sharif.

Mr. Ntilgouei, in his letter, also stated that "if found suspicious transactions, sent a copy of the contract to the UN Committee, and information pertaining to the material, method of transport, dates of delivery of material and bank accounts, through which they were repaid. "The public television of Bosnia also states that arms sales to terrorists involved in Libya and the company from Montenegro "Montenegro Defence Industry", which many times in the recent past had occupied the Montenegrin authorities for smuggling weapons.

Kosovo

In the battlefields of Iraq and Syria, there are many war volunteers alongside guerilla groups that come from Kosovo.²⁰ The influences come from abroad, i.e. the ideology that attracts mostly young people, but also people who have recently embraced religion. Other factors are the poor educational system in Kosovo and the families' reluctance to accept the religion of members them. In Kosovo, as elsewhere in the world, most of the volunteers recruited through the Internet, where they are brainwashed.

The Ambassador of Norway to Serbia, Nils Ragknar Kamsvagk, said that Europe must find a strategy to prevent the recruitment of fighters and that it is very important to conduct an open dialogue on security in the region. According to the director of the Center for Security Policy, Belgrade, Sonja Stojanovic Gkagits, some of the findings of the Kushani study are significant for the early conclusion that specific social groups have Serbia and neglected more than others risk becoming prey for Islamists, the "Islamic State". This study shows that in Kosovo they are mainly people from remote rural areas where the level of development is very low and there are many young people.

²⁰ Kushani, *op.cit.*

ii) The return of the first Balkan veterans to their homelands and the operational know-how they bring back

Bosnia-Herzegovina

On 19/5/2015 the authorities of Bosnia-Herzegovina declared of a member of the extreme Islamic movement Salafi originally from FYROM a threat to national security and ordered his deportation from the country, as announced by the foreign affairs management service. The agency ordered the measure of deportation and entry ban for three years for a FYROM national named as SB (Birth year 1984), who is considered a threat to national security of Bosnia-Herzegovina.

The inspectors of aliens' affairs identified the suspect's links with extremist supporters of the Salafi movement in the area of Zenica; they arrested him and took him into custody in an immigration center. The suspect lived in Bosnia-Herzegovina with temporary residence permit because he has an affair with a Bosnian national. The agency announced that in the future will continue intensive checks on the movements and stay of foreign nationals in Bosnia and actions that contribute to the security of the country.

The Zvornik attack

In May the situation regarding security in Bosnia-Herzegovina became tense after the terrorist attack in the police station of the city of Zvornik and the armed conflict in FYROM, said Minister of Interior of Republika Srpska, Dragan Lukac.²¹ The Republika Srpska Interior Ministry in cooperation with the law enforcement agencies at the state level of Bosnia took operational measures to maintain a high level of security.

The terrorist attack in Zvornik increased tensions between ethnic communities and politicians, contributing to the inflammatory rhetoric and realizing that the most important is to reduce tensions and allow those who conduct research to provide answers to many questions underlined.

The guerillas see their disturbed relations as an opportunity for action.²²The "Islamic State" has no boundaries and can create cells and branches in any part of the planet, where there are believers of his ideas and that Bosnia and FYROM, the countries from which comes a large number of volunteers of the organization are considered interesting as sites for the implementation of the rules used to support the "Islamic State." Apparently it is important that the authorities need to be faster based on a pre-emptive strategy to ensure that intruders can be identified to prevent or neutralized.

²¹ Dragan Lukac in an interview with the newspaper "Vetserni Liszt, 21/5/2015.

²² Mr. Lukacs reported that the Directorate for the fight against terrorism and extremism recently established in the Republika Srpska Interior Ministry of Bosnia and focuses its work on preventive action.

The Islamist attack on Serbian Prime Minister in Srebrenica

On 14/7/2015 the anniversary of the Srebrenica massacre in Bosnia, Serbian Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučić decided to attend the ceremony in memory to 8,000 Bosnian Muslims were executed before 20 years by forces of the Bosnian Serbs in 1995, but was attacked with stones and other objects from the collected crowd and left hurriedly for Belgrade.²³ The attack proved once again the weakness of the security and intelligence system in Bosnia - Herzegovina in terms of timely coordination.

The representative of Muslims in the tripartite presidency of Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bakir Izetbegovic rejected the Serbian media allegations that his colleagues are responsible for the attack on the Serbian Prime Minister, Aleksandar Vucic, in Srebrenica.²⁴ Mr. Izetbegovic said that the incident caused "freeze" in communication with Mr. Vucic and efforts to come into contact with Serbian Prime Minister after the attack proved futile, stressing that Mr. Vucic not answering his text messages.

The Belgrade press reported, based on anonymous police sources, a person identified as Asim S., as allegedly responsible for the episode in Srebrenica and that is an associate of Izetbegovic. The newspaper "Blic" presented Asim S. as the master mind and reported that he is a high-ranking official of the ruling Party of Democratic Action (SDA).

Although it requested urgent investigation for which SIPA would have to collect the necessary information, the Prosecution of Bosnia so far received no information. The head of the Directorate of Coordination of Police Bodies Mirsad Vilitis said that 100% security does not exist anywhere and that could be present in Potocari. He said the officers did everything they could confirm lack of cooperation.

The next day three suspects of involvement in the attack against the Prime Minister of Serbia, Aleksandar Vucic were interrogated and released.²⁵ Members of the State Investigation and Protection Agency (SIPA) arrested Almir Merntits, Elventin Chimzits and Mujo Dizdarevic, villagers Gelach located in the northern part of Bosnia. Press reports indicated that the Merntic has connections with extremist organizations in Bosnia, the former commander of the Army of Muslims

²³ *"God forbid! I have said that I am ashamed about what happened to Prime Minister Vucic. In him I saw a chance to improve relations in the Balkans, to improve relations between Bosnia - Herzegovina and Serbia, among Bosnian Muslims and Serbs and still have it hope"* said Mr. Izetbegovic at a press conference in Sarajevo. "Three detained in connection with attack on PM, then released," B92, 22/7/2015.

²⁴ "Attack on Vucic at Srebrenica Widely Condemned," Balkan Insight, 13/7/2015.

²⁵ "Three detained in connection with attack on PM, then released," B92, 22/7/2015.

in Srebrenica, Naser Oric and with the representative of Muslims in Bosnia's tripartite presidency, Bakir Izendbegkovic. In photographs published in the press, the distinguished Merntic was dressed in black t-shirt and wore black berets moving around the Prime Minister of Serbia, who came with the security men outside the cemetery Potocari. In spite of any breakthrough in this process, the Minister of Security of Bosnia - Herzegovina, Dragan Mektic, spoke of significant progress in the investigations, he stressed that identified potential actions.

The aforementioned recent developments in Bosnia and the major Muslim community of the country reflect the geopolitical and cultural importance of the country as the main hotspot of political Islam in the Balkans. The multicultural nature of this federal state along with the tense relations between the various sects and ethnicities unravel the significance of Bosnia further, drawing thus the attention of political Islam and the international community in their wider antagonistic context.

Albania and Albanian communities in FYROM, Montenegro and Kosovo

The case of Albania is of particular importance in the efforts of political Islam to return to the region because of the strong cultural links between Albanians - not only in Albania but also in other parts of the Balkans - to Islam in various contexts. The transitional timing of the Albanian society from communism to nationalism coexists with the simultaneous influence of Islam in various contexts, including politics. For now political Islam is not the driving force in the country but it has the ambition to become so. In this context the developments are intriguing.

The Lazarati battle, Albania

On 25/6/2015, three members of the Albanian elite police forces were wounded in an operation against a group of young 17 to 22 years, supporters of the "Islamic State" (ISIS). The operation was prompted by previous armed attacks against the police in the village Lazarati. The 17 year old, called Juliano Mali, was arrested by the police while driving a private car, carrying ammunition and weapons, which were destined for the armed group to which he belonged. He comes from a village near Tepelene, but was born and lives in the town of Gjirokaster.²⁶

According to his testimony to the police, this group consists of 15 members young and has its own hierarchical structure. There is a secret residence and exercise facilities in the forest outside the village and they have been reinforced with six sophisticated sniper rifles, who bought and introduced secretly into the country during the last two months.

Mali also said that they prepared the attack against the police long time ago. Three of the team members, who allegedly murdered in cold blood the unlucky man of elite forces, were wanted

²⁶ 25/6/2015, <http://hubii.com/article/55902fe57ec3c6047d7935dd/lazarati-policia-e-gjirokastres-zbardh-ngjarjen-ibrahim-basha-nderroi-jete-gjate-rruges-per-ne-spitalin-rajonal>

since April this year for bombings in the village. Also, their profile can be easily noticed on photos, symbols, slogans and other propaganda material of ISIS.

In today's commentary by the "DITA" newspaper of Tirana, which is based on reliable information from abroad, it is noted that the incident in Lazarati is connected with the action of extremist groups linked to ISIS. It is the first practical application of the threats launched a few days ago Albanian members of ISIS, that soon the ISIS will act in Albania, Kosovo and the Balkans. The same sources said that since last year the team from Lazarati has cooperated with extremist Islamic organizations operating in Albania and abroad and financed by them.

Lazarati has become the place of some of the violent manifestations of extremist Islamic movement in Albania. "In some parts of central Albania, particularly in the region of Elbasan, there have been observed in the past similar cases. In Lazarati there are young people who admire the ISIS and load cars of cocaine, a typical ideology of the guerilla legions who finance terrorism with drugs.

The new raid of the Albanian police in Lazarati mobilized 400 policemen, who yesterday afternoon managed to enter the village. Until now it still controls the homes of fugitives. Of the 21 people whose names announced yesterday by the police as suspects for the "armed attack against the police, the 14 surrendered themselves or were arrested by the police without resistance. This occurred after a police warning that in case of resistance there will be relentless gunfire.

Strong police forces in a rapid intervention scheme narrowed its grip in Lazarati. Two army helicopters patrolled the area for days. The shooting, which resumed during the midday hours interrupted. An armed group is entrenched in a disused building a poultry near the village entrance. According to the police by this part they came under fire that caused the death of the member of elite forces of Albania and wounding two others. The injured were taken to a military hospital in Tirana by stating that there is no risk for their lives.

However, the aim of police is to prevent the escape of possibly other armed men. In a private car which the police seized there was found a real arsenal, consisting of semi-automatic and automatic rifles, cartridges of various millimeters, grenades and drugs. The driver was arrested. The Public Order Minister, Saimir Tahiri, the police chief Khaki Tsiakas, the Advocate General Heavy Criminal Offences and other senior executives arrived in haste in Gjirokaster to coordinate the police operation.

While there is no official information about the causes of shots and disturbances, increasingly there are multiple estimates related to the armed attack against the police on the first anniversary of the fall of inviolability, for many years, "status" of the village of drugs from police. The incident was condemned by all the leaders of political parties in the country.

In Albania the existence of this ISIS cell raises the concern of the aims of the organization at this part of the country. A main reason for the active ISIS presence in Lazarati is the fact that this primarily

Muslim village in a mainly Christian region of Albania is inhabited by Muslim Kossovars who migrated there in late Ottoman times. The role of the Kossovars is central in spreading the ISIS message in the Albanian-speaking region of the Balkans. Combining the contributions from various foreign NGOs along with the income coming from other activities this ISIS cell seems to be quite effective in building up its capacity.

FYROM

Special operations and arrests in FYROM

On another incident nine people were arrested by the FYROM authorities in a large police operation to identify and arrest individuals associated with the organization Islamic State or recruit young people to fight in Iraq, Syria or other war fronts abroad.²⁷ The FYROM Minister of Interior Mitko Tsavkof said that raids took place in 28 locations across the country, including the mosque Tutunsuz in Skopje, and arrested nine people, according to state news agency MIA. Moreover there is an arrest warrant for another 27 people in connection with participation in foreign military or paramilitary organizations, under a new law passed recently in order to prevent young Muslims from being integrated into the structures of the Islamic State in Syria or Iraq.

The FYROM Interior Minister said that the operation had been planned since September 2014 and all this time the ministry gathered data on participation groups that recruit members to foreign military formations. Approximately 130 citizens of FYROM, according to MIA, are allegedly affiliated to foreign military groups and 16 were killed while on combat. Among those arrested, according to Mr. Tsavkof, are people who have already fought in Syria, where he traveled through Turkey and then returned to FYROM. Those arrested are between 19 and 49 years, while during the investigation seized computers, mobile phones etc.

Special police units FYROM made a total of 28 raids, 21 in Skopje, four in Gostivar and one in Tetovo, Kumanovo and Struga. Surveys were done in homes, offices a humanitarian organization and NGOs. According to local media, one of those arrested is the imam of the mosque Tutunsuz Skopje. The Islamic Community of FYROM has a history of divisions, with some imams are beyond the control of the Community, as the Imam said to have been arrested, Recep Memisi.

The FYROM Interior Ministry gave no information on the identity of the arrested, confirmed, however, that this is the country's citizens from various ethnic groups. The US Embassy in FYROM issued a statement, welcoming the police operation.

Kosovo

In Kosovo it seems that the emergence of political Islam in the region has caught the secular Kosovo administration by surprise. In an interview with Austrian news agency APA, Hashim Thaci

²⁷ "M. arrests 9 suspected of having ties to ISIS," The New York Times, 6/8/2015.

stressed Salafi Islam as threat to stability of the region. He does not view Kosovo as a place where political Islam flourishes and in this context he cited the Austrian model, which Pristina adopted in a law that prohibits participation in conflicts abroad. Thaci noted that there was consensus among the political elite and the society in the fight against Salafism and emphasized that Kosovo is a secular and tolerant society where Islam is moderate. He also added that "99.9% of the inhabitants of Kosovo are European."²⁸ The Prime Minister of Kosovo has denied that the former "Liberation Army of Kosovo" were *mujahedin*.

"I was a political leader of the UCK and never allowed in our struggle to join religious war fighters, mujahedin, tarnish our struggle," said Mr. Thaci adding that political Islam arrived in Kosovo after the war through "supposedly religious humanitarian organizations from the Middle East."

However, with Islam and nationalism being at odds in the Balkans, including Kosovo, the possibility of having UCK in dilemma between the two is on the table. Actually the increasing influence of political Islam amongst the Albanians of the Balkans, a nation currently undergoing its national political and cultural spring, poses a challenge to the secular Albanian elite in the region. The emerging Islamic elite is expected to challenge the political gains of the nationalists in the coming years. Already the modus operandi of Albanian Islamists is an early sign of the strong conflict between nation and Islam in the years to come. The out come of this inner conflict will determine the future of the Albanian political and cultural mentality and worldview.

Funding Islamic education in Kosovo

According to a foreign service information report, kindergartens, schools and suspicious dormitories funded NGOs linked to Islamic organizations.²⁹ The article cites data in the report according to which 50 NGOs and 11 individuals are involved mostly with the spread of political Islam, operating in Kosovo with the consent of Kosovar institutions, while Kosovo is described as cradle of religious influence, starting from preschool institutions, .e.g. the kindergarten "Lulishtja e Dritave", the owner of which Driton Maxhuni has allegedly the strongest connections with Hassan Ampazin, one of the leaders of Seventh Division Mujahedin in Bosnia. The person in charge of finances of the children station is Hasan Ali Al Sarah originating from Iraq. The station was licensed in 2006 while all stations, schools and homes have ties to the Islamic organizations licensed by the Education Ministry of Kosovo. According to this article which is based on different sources, many organizations and NGOs who had settled in Kosovo after the 1999 war, such as Al-Kharamaini and IIWC, were removed but they have been re-established in the form of other NGOs. Thus they continue their work with imams and other people associated with those organizations.

Pouring poison to the Gratsanitsa Lake

²⁸ "Kosovo is fully behind America's fight against ISIS," The Guardian, 13/8/2014.

²⁹ "Islamic extremists fund education in Kosovo," Koha Ditore, Pristina , 20/5/2015.

On July 11, 2015, July 11 the Kosovo police arrested five people accused of attempting to poison a large quantity casting the lake, which draws its water from the major part of the capital, Pristina, Gracanica and surrounding villages.³⁰ On July 20, 2015 the Kosovo police found two bags containing weapons and military uniforms near the Lake Bantovats or Gracanica (artificial reservoir on the river Gkratsanka), 300 meters from the area where on. "In one of the bags were found black military uniforms, one letter believed to be written in Arabic and two Kalashnikovs (AK-47s) and there are suspicions that the second bag containing explosives and ammunition," said a source in the information web site *Indexonline*.

The water supply company proceeded immediately after the arrests in stoppage of water supply to the areas to be run for any suspicious substances, after which, the head of the Institute of Public Health, Naser Ramadani assured that the water in the lake Bantovats contains no toxic. The Prosecutor of the Special Prosecutor of Kosovo, Drita Hajdari told Kosovo TV station that during the arrest of suspects found no toxic substances.

Two of those arrested, as reported press Pristina members of the organization "Islamic State" and in 2013-2014 were in the war zone Syria. The five suspects, Besnik Latifi, Ennis Latifi, Milazim Chatzigjai, Gazment Haliti and Fehmi Muse imposed custody and 30 days after the incident, all lakes and drinking water facilities in Kosovo maintained with additional security measures.

iii) The ISIS communication policy in the Balkans

On 5/6/2015, the "Al Hayat Media Center", the "wing" media of the Islamic State (ISIS), aired documentary on the Balkans, containing threats against Albania, Kosovo and FYROM. In the documentary, the Albanians considered "atheists" in the video, among others occur two Albanian men who fight alongside Islamic State -the one from Albania and one from Kosovo- and are known by the names Abu al Bilkis Albani and Abu al Moukatil Kosovo. The two men appear at the 6th and 10th minute respectively video, with Abu Moukatil stating: "We are sending a message to all those who worship other gods, and not Allah in Albania, Kosovo, FYROM and throughout the Balkans . Do not think that we have forgotten the evil that you do to the Muslims. Do you think we have forgotten your hostility toward Allah ... dark days will come for you. You will not be afraid to walk the streets. You will not be afraid to work. You will not be afraid in the same your homes ... We will win with the help of Allah. We will come with bombs. "

Meanwhile, young journalist network "News 24" Tirana, covering the police reports and has addressed the issue of recruitment of young Muslim Albanians to fight in Syria, was threatening message on her Facebook account by Albanian Muslim, the who is wanted by the authorities, on charges of inciting religious hatred and jihadist recruitment. The message says: "You have to pay."³¹

³⁰ 'Suspected ISIS Members Arrested in Kosovo,' Independent, 20/7/2015.

³¹ "IS to Balkan Muslims: 'Either join or kill over there!'" 5/6/2015, http://www.b92.net/eng/news/region.php?yyyy=2015&mm=06&dd=05&nav_id=94345

Ten days later a new IS video was aired calling for the establishment of a Balkan Caliphate. The new video, beginning with quotations from the Koran, continues in the form of a poem. "People from the Balkans be happy, better days are approaching, Muslims are coming, we are the Islamic caliphate," the first statement said. They call for the conquest of Serbia while other countries are shown through sniper sight, covered with the black ISIS flag. Then they call for warfare activities in Bosnia, Croatia, Albania, Kosovo, Montenegro and FYROM, promising that democracy in these countries will be destroyed and sharia law established in its place. At the end, death threats are addressed to US President Barack Obama with the words: "Be happy you too Obama, victory belongs to us, we are the sons of Islam, we are the Islamic caliphate." Police in Serbia have not yet commented on the video's authors and authenticity and what danger it may represent.³²

iv) The reaction of the regional governments

Zvornik - Bosnia

The Bosnian political and religious authorities are quite instrumental in facing the ongoing challenges from the Middle East. On 17/06/2015 the Head of the Islamic Community in Bosnia - Herzegovina Saddam Kavazovits said, "All those who kill innocent people in the name of Islam is actually his opponents and bring the greatest damage and Bosnian Muslims will not accept such or any other, imposed by force interpretations of their faith."³³ In an interview with the newspaper "Ntevni Avaz" Sarajevo, addressing the public, especially the Muslims, before the start of the month of Ramadan, Saddam Kavazovits strongly condemned the crimes committed in Syria and Iraq in the name of Islam. "Those who kill innocent children, women and elderly in Syria and Iraq are not heroes. They are killers," said the head of the Islamic Community in Bosnia - Herzegovina, warning that the lack of more decisive action on the part of Muslim religious leaders in condemning violence and the protection of members of the Islamic minority that is in real danger in many countries, such as Myanmar, is unacceptable. Those who remain silent in front of this violence and talk about themselves as successors of the Prophet Muhammad, is simply terrified of terrestrial life and refuse to face the real tests, he said. For this reason, estimated Saddam Kavazovits, "confusion among Muslims" has become a natural state and the murder and persecution of innocent today proclaimed good works. In this state, the Muslim scholars and clerics in Bosnia - Herzegovina have a special responsibility to defend the spirituality of the Bosnian Muslims, which they inherited from their fathers and their grandfathers. Saddam Kavazovits even stressed that Muslims in Bosnia - Herzegovina will not and can not accept the imposition of interpretations of Islam, which do not consider their own.

³² A professor of the Faculty of Security in Belgrade, Zoran Dragisic, said the danger of terrorist attacks in the Balkans was real <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/new-isis-threats-to-balkan-countries>

³³ Bosnia: Gunman 'kills officer in Zvornik police station,' BBC, 27/05/2015.

Kosovo

On 13/3/2015 the Parliament of Kosovo adopted a law banning citizens to fight in armed conflicts abroad in an attempt to block the accession of people, mainly young age in Salafi groups in Syria and Iraq.³⁴ Of the 79 members of Parliament, 60 MPs voted in favor of the bill, 17 voted against and two abstained. The law provides for imprisonment up to 15 years for anyone to violate and participate in military conflicts abroad. Specifically it is prohibited joining foreign armed forces to police forces or paramilitary formations in any conflict outside the territory of Kosovo. According to the Foreign Ministry, about 300 citizens of Kosovo joined the "Islamic State" (IS) in Syria and Iraq. In recent months, about 40 people were arrested in Kosovo and are facing charges of terrorism and juvenile recruitment to fight alongside the ISIS in Syria and Iraq.

The Islamic State plans terrorist attacks in the Balkans, said the Kosovo media, citing police sources on 16/06/2015.³⁵ According to these reports, fighters of the Islamic State are in contact with supporters in Kosovo and FYROM, trying to organize terrorist attacks, in June, Skopje and Pristina.

The news sites "Lajmi.net" from Pristina, today publishes staff talks of Kosovo security services, from which it appears that the organization of terrorist attacks has taken people of FYROM, ethnic Albanians, who is fighting in Syria and their name is known to the authorities.

The report also mentioned that the person was recruiting terrorists in FYROM and Kosovo to carry out bombings in June, advising them to choose points in Skopje and Pristina, where crowded, regardless of their national and religious identity victims. Media in Pristina report that the Kosovo police for days have been in a state of utmost readiness. It is revealing that the Kosovo security services in early June, they found dramatic increase in extremist Albanians contact fighting alongside Islamic State, with people in Kosovo. This coincided with the publication on the internet, the propaganda center "El Chatzant" the Islamic State, where video material is defined as action fields of Islamic FYROM, Kosovo, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Albania, Serbia and Montenegro. In the video it made particular reference to Kosovo, FYROM and Albania three fighters of the Islamic State hailing from the Balkans calling Muslims to take immediate action, making attacks in these countries.

The stance of the international community

While these developments take place, the international community is alarmed and taken by surprise by the swift expansion of the ISIS networks and influence in the Balkans. Various government officials from the US and Europe as well as international organizations, i.e. the Council of Europe, have expressed their concern about these developments and their allegiance to the Balkan states.

³⁴ "Kosovo slaps ban on citizens fighting in Syria, Iraq war," The Lebanon Daily Star,13/3/2015.

³⁵ "Kotevski: MOI is ready to respond to all threats," META News Agency, 16/06/2015.

The Council of Europe

Tensions on the European continent is large and mostly threaten the southeast, according to the chair of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe Anne Brasseur, whereas the latest events in FYROM are a serious warning that such challenges should be a decisive response.³⁶ Speaking at a meeting of the Standing Committee of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in Sarajevo, she mentioned that the representatives of Bosnia - Herzegovina, which earlier this week took over the six-month presidency of the Council of Europe, "have a great responsibility for the entire region, in which tensions are very strong".

The period was full of major challenges, such as the wave of immigrants in the European continent, human rights abuses, apparently different forms of hatred and intolerance, but the terrorist threats and the crisis in Ukraine, stressed Mrs. Brasseur.

"The Presidency of Bosnia - Herzegovina is not easy, because we face a major crisis" said Mrs. Brasseur and added that "Bosnia now leads Europe and did not follow." The chairman of the House of Representatives of Bosnia Sefik Tzaferovits and the country's Foreign Minister Igor Tsmantak announced that representatives of Bosnia, in the next six months, will actively work to address all the problems that are common to the 47 states - members Council of Europe.

At the same time, they expressed the hope that the Presidency of Bosnia and the oldest European organization will be an incentive for further implementation of reforms in the country itself, such as the implementation of the decision of the European Court of Human Rights in the case "Seintits-Finci", which requested Sarajevo to eliminate discrimination against members of national minorities in the electoral process.

The US

The special envoy of US President Barack Obama to build the international coalition against "Islamic State", General (ret.) John Allen, visited Bosnia - Herzegovina, and informed the country's political leaders and officials of the security sector efforts degradation of the jihadist organization.³⁷

In his tour of the region with stops in Croatia and Kosovo, Allen met yesterday in Sarajevo with members of the tripartite presidency of Bosnia - Herzegovina and representatives of judicial institutions and security services and police services and expressed gratitude for the participation of Bosnia - Herzegovina in the international coalition, and working groups to fight against the recruitment of foreign militants fighting alongside the "Islamic State" and to prevent funding of the organization.

³⁶ 22/5/2015, <http://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/News/News-View-EN.asp?newsid=5617&cat=17>

³⁷ The visit of General John Allen,9/6/2015, http://sarajevo.usembassy.gov/event_20150608.html

General Allen, who has served as commander of coalition forces in Afghanistan and in Bosnia - Herzegovina, emphasized that improving the exchange of information and will help stem the flow of foreign fighters and to establish a fully coordinated response to terrorism. He also stressed that Bosnia should harmonize the legal measures and security measures with neighboring countries and to apply their existing laws. At the same time, he thanked the Bosnian authorities for the donation of ammunition to Iraqi forces fighting against the "Islamic State" and for close bilateral Bosnia-US cooperation in the fight against terrorism.

During his stay in Sarajevo he met with the head of the Islamic Community of Bosnia, Hussein Kavazovits, and discussed support the international coalition in the battle against the propaganda directed at population groups with torque in radicalism.

Austria

The foreign minister of Austria, Sebastian Kurz warned for Islamic tendencies in Bosnia - Herzegovina and the growing influence of Saudi Arabia.³⁸ Mr. Kurt, who today begins a visit to Sarajevo, told reporters that in Bosnia there is radicalization and that decisive action is needed against Islamists.

Islam is part of Europe, as part and Austria, said the Austrian Foreign Minister and added that it is necessary to take action against those who sow hatred against this religion. At the same time he stressed that in some parts of Bosnia and observed dangerous spread of the Salafi movement. Mr. Kurtz mentioned the influence of Saudi Arabia which is present through building mosques and financing clergy abroad. The Austrian Foreign Minister announced that during his visit to Sarajevo to his interlocutors, among them will be representatives of the Islamic community and the Catholic Church clearly demonstrated that there is no room for extreme religious trends in Europe. Mr. Kurtz emphasized that Bosnia - Herzegovina is one of the countries of the Western Balkans to the highest concern, noting that in the country there is stagnation in the system and that it is necessary stimuli to build civil society, which is an important pillar in a functional democracy.

³⁸ Bosnia press Review, 18/6/2015,

<http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/bosnia-press-review-june-18-2015>.

Closing remarks

Obviously nationalism and Islam coexist in the Balkans. This dualism is incorrect according to both the nature of Islam and nationalism, reflecting the transitional period that Muslims in the Balkans undergo from modernity-communism, then to nationalism for a short period and then back to religion possibly.

In geopolitical terms, a transitional period of religious antagonism between major Muslim donors in the Balkans will probably go on for years. However, the future of Islam in the Balkans is closely associated more with Sunni Hannafi and Sufi Islam.

The general situation in the Balkans favors the re-arrangement of power share and the development of new players in the region (despite the strong influence of the EU and the US): the Balkan countries are economically underdeveloped and there is high youth unemployment, marking thus the huge public dissatisfaction with the current economic hardships; the region is less inhabited than it used to be in the past; the forest-like and mountainous landscape of the region enables the development of guerilla networks in a hypothetical scenario; there is a considerable percentage (ca. 10%) of Muslim population which is an asset for extra regional donors investing in political Islam. Last, there is no collective vision for the future of the Balkan societies because of consecutive delays in their efforts for accession to the EU.

Regardless of which form of Islam prevails in the end, the Balkans will be a region from which Salafists will be able for a long time to draw manpower in order to conduct global *jihad* and pose a regional challenge. In this sense the Balkans could become a scene for major geopolitical and security antagonism in the mid-term between the West and the Muslim world, unless measures are taken to prevent this.

The presence of various Islamist networks in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Albania, FYROM and Kosovo reflects the endeavor of the Salafist groups to establish, sustain and consolidate a trans-Balkan network between these specific regions. These networks aim to promote the Islamic influence in the Balkans in every sense: economic, cultural and eventually political. The Islamist agenda in the region involves five levels of activities: attacking touristic resorts in every shore of the Balkans; targeting liberal and secular Balkan Muslims as apostates; eradicating Islamic mysticism from the region; targeting Christian communities of the Balkans, especially in countries where Muslims and Christians live side by side peacefully, e.g. Albania; exploiting illegal migration routes through the Balkans to recruit and settle new Muslims in the Balkans.

The presence of Salafi networks in the Balkans raises the concern of the various regional and non-regional governments in terms of security and stability. It is expected that the agreements between the Balkan governments for cooperation will multiply in the months and years to come. Such a response to the Salafist activity would entail preventing the Balkan veterans from Syria and Iraq to return to their homeland, to dismantle the already operating groups and ensure that any

challenge can be faced effectively. This type of governmental cooperation will probably instigate a Salafist response and this tit-for-tat antagonism will raise tensions with unpredictable results.