Bosnia’s Role in the Syrian Conflict
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Introduction

During and after the 1992-95 Bosnian war, foreign Muslim volunteers came to Bosnia to fight in the Bosnian Army’s 3rd Corps (El – Mujahedeen Unit), to protect the Bosnian Muslim civilian population; many stayed on and received Bosnian citizenship, and may have retained links to Islamist groups. After the war, there was a rise in Islamic fundamentalism, especially Wahhabism and Salafism (who believe they are true followers of Islam, and do not accept other sects), with Bosnia becoming a source of new recruits for Global Jihad. Although the Wahhabi community only constitutes around 3000 out of 1.4 million Muslims in Bosnia, financial support from Saudi Arabia has helped Wahhabis to violently challenge the Bosnian Muslim community, and made it possible to develop a network to attract the next generation of Islamic extremists.

The purpose of this report is to identify and evaluate Bosnia’s role in Islamic conflict. The report presents information obtained through research, which focuses on the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in Bosnia. The report is divided into four main sections. The first section will look at connections between Bosnian Wahhabi and Salafi communities and Islamic groups in Syria. It will then go on to explore the facilitation of fighters and possible support players. The third part considers the impact of returning fighters in Bosnian communities. Finally, the last section will examine if Al Qaeda is present in Bosnia, and if there is potential for it to launch attacks in Bosnia.

Throughout the report, we use several terms in reference to groups of, and actions by, Islamists. These terms are: Lesser Jihad (henceforth Jihad) - a war or struggle among Muslims against unbelievers, seen as a sacred duty by some Muslims. Mujahedeen – Islamic militant groups, especially those who are fighting against non-Muslim forces, often associated with radical Islam. Salafism – Orthodox Sunni Muslim sect, associated with fundamentalist Islamic thought and imitation of the Prophet. Wahhabism – Unitarian conservative Sunni Muslim sect, an orientation within Salafism who believe in a literal interpretation of the Qur’an, and that all non-Wahhabis should be put to death. Salafi and Wahhabi communities do not appreciate being compared. Takfir – Where an individual is deemed un-Islamic or non-Muslim for their actions and excommunicated.

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6 A. Zalman, ‘Mujahideen’. Online. Available at: [http://terrorism.about.com/od/m/g/Mujahideen.htm](http://terrorism.about.com/od/m/g/Mujahideen.htm)
9 P. Tristam, ‘Takfir’. Online. Available at: [http://middleeast.about.com/od/glossary/g/me081213.htm](http://middleeast.about.com/od/glossary/g/me081213.htm)
Are there connections between Wahhabi/Salafi communities in Bosnia and Islamist groups in Syria?

Imamović/Ikanovic Group

According to the Middle East Media Research Institute, Jusuf Barčić led Bosnia’s first Salafi community in the village of Donja Bočinje until it was closed down in 2001, and moved to Gornja Maoča, in the Srebrenik municipality.9 Barčić, who died in a 2007 car accident, was funded by Muhamed Fadil Poča, representative of the Saudi High Commission for Aid to Bosnia.10 After his death, leadership passed to Sheikh Nusret Imamović, an open supporter of Al-Qaeda, having lectured on the armed struggle to kill infidels.11

About 20 to 50 families are living in Gornja Maoča under strict Islamic law.12 There have been repeated anti-terror raids and most of the residents have been linked to terrorism cases or illegal possession of weapons;13 including former resident Melvid Jašarević, attacker of the US embassy in Bosnia on 28th October 2011,14 and suspects of the Bugojno police station bombing, in June 2010.15 The Bosnian newspaper ‘Slobodna Bosna’, has written on Gornja Maoča as a waypoint for Wahhabi followers embarking on Jihad, where visitors are indoctrinated and were transported to jihad fronts in Iraq and Yemen.16 However, ‘There Must Be Justice’ blog, states that Nusret Imamović now lives in Sarajevo suburb Butmir, in the former house of Montenegrin Wahhabi Sead Redžematović.17

According to ‘Balkan Insights’ and ‘Tandem Post’, fighters from a Wahhabi community in Hadzici, Sarajevo (around 20 minutes’ drive from Butmir) are active in Syria. This community was set up by Bajro Ikanovic (37); jailed for 8 years in 2007 for plotting European bombings, he was freed after 4 years. After release, Ikanovic began organising volunteers to fight in Syria, according to a former official in the Bosnian State Investigation and Protection Agency.18 The men from Hadzici, including Ikanovic, are fighting for Al-Nusra in Homs. The other men have been identified by Bosnian security services as: Edin Alijev; Elvedin Memic; Armen Dzelko, 22; Muaz Šabić, 41 from Puhovac near Zenica; Jasmin Keserovic, 20 from Zavidovici. Keserovic has returned from Syria.20

11 A. Ceresnjes and R. Green, op. cit.
14 S. Schlesinger, op. cit.
16 A. Ceresnjes and R. Green.
17 IDEE, op. cit.
19 IDEE, op. cit.
Srna (Bosnia-Serb news agency), states that Nusret Imamović is the financer of this operation, giving fighters 3000 Convertible Bosnian Marks ($2084.50/£1277.35).21 ‘Independent European Daily Express’ (IEDE) mention individuals being paid $600 per month to fight in Syria, disguised as “humanitarian agencies”. Joining the fight in Syria is seen as an opportunity in an area where unemployment is 45%.22

Web site ‘Vijest i ummeta’ (News for Muslims), quoted by ‘World Bulletin’, states Emedin Velic, from Sarajevo met Ikanovic, at some point before Velic died fighting Syrian government forces. Dervis Halilovic Omar, from Zenica, is also stated to have died fighting the Syrian government.23

**Sandžak Group**

A group from Bosnia and South-West Serbia (referred to as Sandžak by Islamists), specifically the town of Novi Pazar, is fighting in Syria, and appear to have met other *Jihad* fighters at training camps, and in Syria itself. IEDE state that group members Eldar Kundakovic and Adis Salihovic, under battle names Abu Bera and Abu Merdia, were two individuals who died during a bomb attack24 trying to free prisoners from the Al-Safira jail near Aleppo.25

**Insha’Allah Group**

A member of *Wahhabi* group called ‘Insha’Allah’, apparently a sub-group or affiliate of Al-Nusra has been quoted on blog ‘SyriaBashar’, stating that recruits do not need training, or religious background to fight, as all can be given in Syria, specifically Aleppo. However, the group may be low on weapons, having a “waiting-list” of 2-3 months for rifles, and encouraging recruits to buy their own Kalashnikov. ‘SyriaBashar’ mentions bribing Turkish border guards and buying groceries in Turkey, indicating self-sufficiency, rather than a network.26 The group mentions having around 20 recruits from Sandžak, including Novi Pazar.27

**Other Groups**

A group led by Semir Telebic (or Čelebić), also known under Internet pseudonym Sammy al Cavalry, meet in Konjic, and are seen as future *Jihadis*.28 Toulouse shooter Muhammad Merah spent time in Bosnia before his attacks, with the Bosnian branch of German organisation ‘Call to Paradise’.29

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22 IEDE, op. cit.
25 IEDE, op. cit.
27 Ibid.
29 IEDE, op. cit.
Facilitation of fighters and support players in Bosnia

The Wahhabi community in Gornja Maoča is also said to serve for frequent stays of Bosnian Salafis from Austria, Germany, Serbia, and the Sandžak region, who intend to be trained by Nusret Imamović. Moreover it is assumed to be a stopover for Muslim fighters who are on their way to conflict zones like Iraq or Syria30.

Reports state that 14031, 300,32 or up to 50033 Balkan Muslims are fighting in Syria, including 5234,6035 Bosnian Muslims. However, 32 of the Bosnian fighters are reported to have returned from Syria.36 Many are believed to fight for Al-Nusra (or Jabhat Al-Nusra), designated a terrorist organization by the U.S.37

According to the statement of Goran Zubac, director of the Bosnian State Investigation and Protection Agency (SIPA), at least eight Bosnian Salafists are suspected to be linked with the organized transport of Bosnians to Syria.38 This includes Bajro Ikanovic39, it is assumed that he may gather fighters at his house, and then transport them.40

The main transit route for Bosnian Jihadis appears to begin with meeting in either Sarajevo or Zenica,41 moving to Mostar (Bosnia). Then travelling to Istanbul, and to Anatakya (Turkey). Finally, illegally42 crossing the border at Bab el-Hawa43 and into Sarmadā (Syria) (around 35 miles). Recruits are given directions for their journey via Facebook.44 However, these movements may change for different groups/individuals; for example, Muaz Šabić may not have been to Mostar.45 Dževad Gološ (from the Daru-i-Quran Foundation46), in Mostar is the middleman in sending Bosnian Muslims to Syria.47 Mostar appears to be in disarray, according to the International Crisis Group.48 Recruits receive training in Sarmadā from the Free Syrian Army (FSA).49 Some fighters stay with the FSA,50 or go on to join Al-Nusra.51 There is also dispute as to whether the FSA provide “religious training”.52

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30 A. Ceresnjes and R. Green, op. cit; V.P. Zimonjic, op. cit.
32 IEDE, op. cit.
35 World Bulletin, op. cit.
38 T. Milos and R. Synovitz, op. cit.
39 V.P. Zimonjic, op. cit.
42 CNN, op. cit.
44 Syriabashar, op. cit.
45 IEDE, op. cit.
46 V. Nincovic, op. cit.; Milos and R. Synovitz, op. cit.
49 IEDE, op. cit.
51 IEDE, op. cit.
A popular medium to propagate global *jihad* and celebrating fighting in Syria are websites. Nusret Imamović is said to spread his teachings about *takfir*, *jihad* and the relation between Muslims and infidels on the websites ‘Put Vjernika’ ("The Way of the Believer") and ‘Stazom Islama’ ("In the Path of Islam"). ‘Put Vjernika’ practices the most active propaganda on the Syrian war, posting pictures of killed fighters from the Balkans, glorifying them as martyrs. All movements by the rebel forces, especially those by Al Qaida affiliated groups and foreign *mujahedeen* are documented and celebrated by ‘Put Vjernika’. Bajro Ikanovic has also glorified *jihadists* in Syria on this website. Through this propaganda, they are motivating Bosnian Muslims to global, and particularly Syrian *jihad*. Some of those pictures from Serbians were recently published by the Serbian website ‘Sandzak Press’ with the headline “See the smiles of the martyrs in Syria”.

**The influence of returning fighters from Syria**

In July this year, EU interior ministers discussed potential security threats that may be posed by young Europeans returning from fighting alongside rebels in Syria. Adding to the threat is the unemployment rate of around 20 percent in Bosnia, fostering support for radical movements. Ivan Babamovski, former chief of the Macedonia State Security Service estimates foreign militants who join *Jihadis* are paid $10,000-$15,000 a month. Re-integration upon their return becomes problematic when faced with joining the *Wahhabi* community, with rewards of papers, work and money, or staying unemployed.

De-radicalization is more difficult than radicalization. ‘The Daily Newspaper’ in Kosovo was worried that “these young people will return home with military experience inspired by ... *jihad*”. Serbian Police noted that fighters are going to Syria as extremists, but coming back as terrorists. These individuals are coming back with potential to be “lone-wolves”, such as Muhammad Merah. Fighters’ involvement with dangerous global Islamic networks may facilitate Islamist infiltration of the Balkans, and may pose a threat to Bosnia according to Babamovski; it is likely that once returned “[the fighters] will be doing what they have learned in Syria”. The importance of preventive means is emphasized in the fight against terrorism. Prof. Xhavit Shala, and security expert in Tirana suggests that the individuals returning home from Syria should be identified and monitored upon their return as many of them have been ranked in the radical groups with a “clear extremist religious inspiration”.

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53 V. Nincovic, op. cit.  
59 I. Jovanovic, L. Karadaku and M. Trajkovski, op. cit.  
60 IEDE, op. cit.  
61 I. Jovanovic, L. Karadaku and M. Trajkovski, op. cit.  
62 Ibid.
Al Qaeda’s impact in Bosnia – the impact of Al Nusra

Michael Scheuer, a former CIA analyst, has stated that radicalized fighters will pose a threat to their home countries when they return.63 Fighters’ knowledge is important in boosting mood and recruitment. They will most likely have a list of contacts among their fellow mujahedeen from whom they can seek advice or more material forms of assistance.

Mention of “Al-Qaeda affiliated groups” being active in Bosnia is often made in a variety of sources. However, there is no evidence of an organized group which has formed in Bosnia – there is never any mention of a specific group, except Al-Nusra.

Al–Nusra forms platoons based on ethnicity. The single-nationality units help create “a core jihadist group to take back to their own country”,64 allowing Al–Nusra to export the jihadist ideology (and with Bosnians fighting with Al–Nusra65 there is a possible risk of Al-Qaeda inspired action in Bosnia). Reports suggest Bosnia is now a ‘transit or recuperation’ zone for the mujahedeen fighting in Syria.66

Conclusion

There is evidence of fighters from the Balkans in Syria, many of whom are fighting with Al-Nusra. There are two groups of fighters who left Bosnia, one originating in Gornja Maoča, facilitated by Nusret Imamović and led by Bajro Ikanovic in Syria, the other from the Sandžak region. Some Bosnian fighters have joined a group already in Syria called Insha’Allah.

Many potential foreign fighters stop off in Gornja Maoča, run by Nusret Imamović, to receive support, and rest on their way to battlefields. Nusret Imamović is active on jihadist website ‘Put Vjernika’, encouraging Muslims to become more radical and fight for Islamist causes.

Most Bosnian fighters travel from Sarajevo or Zenica, to Mostar (facilitated by Dževad Gološ). To Istanbul, then Anatakya, crossing the Turkey-Syrian border at Bab el- Hawa, and into the town of Sarmadā. Training is probably given by the Free Syrian Army, with jihadis joining Al-Nusra later.

Bosnian fighters may pose a threat once they return. Due to the number of contacts they will have made during the Syrian conflict, skills they will have learnt, and low employment rate, there is an expectation of Islamist action in Bosnia in the future.

Bosnian fighters appear to have only been in contact with Al-Nusra, and not al-Qaeda. Whether the potential Islamist threat from returning fighters will be linked to al-Qaeda is unknown.

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64 N. Benotman and B. Roisin, op. cit.
66 S. Plana, ‘Syria/ Bosnia, Part II: Islamic Fighters’, Notes on the periphery [blog], 28th of March 2013. Available at: http://noteontheperiphery.wordpress.com/2013/03/28/syriabosnia-part-ii-islamic-fighters/
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