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HERZEGOVINA: IMPRINTS IN SYRIAN CIVIL WAR

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➤ Introduction

The Bosnian Muslims (Bosniaks) witnessed a crisis of identity and a struggle for autonomy following the end of the Ottoman influence over their territory and the fall of the Habsburg Empire in the autumn of 1918. Bosniaks were Serbo-Croat speakers of Slav ancestry and Muslim cultural background. Due to their diverse background, it was difficult to define themselves as Serb or Croat, since these identifications implied that they are either Orthodox or Catholic; and "to describe oneself as Yugoslav was too abstract, generic, and bloodless."¹ Throughout the past decades, many Bosniaks were thoroughly secularized, yet there is no doubt that the old Ottoman practice of defining nationality by religion left its mark in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH).² The terms *nacija* (nation) and *vjera* (faith) were often used as synonyms.³

The Bosniaks ultimate objective was autonomy. Yet they were constantly forestalled either by the geopolitical circumstances they witnessed during World War I (WWI), World War II (WWII), and the Communist era, or by the expansionist and political aspirations of much stronger powers. The annexation of BiH to Austria had its dire impact on the Serbian-Austrian and Serb-Bosniak relations. It led to the 1908 Bosnian crisis and the 1914 assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria in Sarajevo, which was the trigger of WWI.

Meanwhile, the Islamic universalist worldview of the Bosniaks was shattered by the Ottoman collapse, which prompted many of the educated class and the elites to find the ideology of Pan-Islamist attractive and a convenient alternative to Western ideologies.⁴ This leaning was

¹ Gellner, E. (2006). Nations and nationalism. Oxford: Blackwell.

² Judt, Tony. *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945*. Penguin Books, 2005.

³ Kalčić, Špela. "Changing Contexts and Redefinitions of Identity among Bosniaks" S.A.P.I.E.N.S. *Surveys and Perspectives Integrating Environment and Society*, Institute Veolia Environment, Dec. 2005, journals.openedition.org/balkanologie/585?lang=en#tocto1n2.

⁴ Schindler, John R. *Unholy Terror: Bosnia, Al-Qaida, and the Rise of Global Jihad*. Zenith Press, 2007.

first adopted by the Young Muslims (*Mladi Muslimani*) in the 1930s, who supported the idea of an autonomous Bosnia-Herzegovina under German tutelage.⁵ The Nazi racist regime considered the Serbs as a sub-race. Meanwhile, following the Yugoslav coup d'état of 1941 Hitler decided to punish all Serbs as the main enemies of his new Nazi order.⁶

During WWII, the Serb Chetniks, who believed in the establishment of Greater Serbia across all territories inhabited by the Serbs, talked of their intention to cleanse Bosnia of non-Serbs.⁷ Muslims joined in the clashes, and Yugoslavia was plagued by an ethnic-based war. In 1942, Ante Pavelić, Croatian military general who founded and headed the fascist ultranationalist organization known as the Ustaše, said: "Great deeds were done by Germans and Croats together. We can proudly say that we succeeded in breaking the Serb nation, which, after the English, is the most thick-headed, the most stubborn and the most stupid."⁸

After the war, Soviet communism became the dominant influence in Yugoslavia, which included Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, and Slovenia. The Marxist ideology considered "Islam a medieval superstition devoid of redeeming values," evident in the Soviet's policy towards Muslims in the 1920s and 1930s, which witnessed the mass killings of Muslim clergy in Central Asia.⁹ Following the Tito-Stalin split in 1948, late Yugoslav President Josip Tito chose to give singular status to the Bosniak population, which alleviated their fears years after their religious identity was stifled. In the 1970s, "Tito allowed

⁵ Xavier Bougarel. *Bosnian Islam since 1990: Cultural Identity or Political Ideology?*. Convention annuelle de l'Association for the Study of Nationalities (ASN), Apr 1999, New York, United States.

⁶ Pavlowitch, Stevan K. (2008). *Hitler's New Disorder: The Second World War in Yugoslavia*. Columbia University Press.

⁷ Mazower, Mark. "The Balkans: A Short History." *The Balkans: A Short History*, A Modern Library, 2000, p. 262.

⁸ Stavrianos, L. S. *Balkans 1815-1914*. Harcourt College, 1960. p. 772.

⁹ Schindler, John R. Op.cit. pp 37

the Muslim Bosniaks to mature their political identity separately from religion."¹⁰ In 1961, the Yugoslav communist party recognized Muslims as a distinct ethnic group. Subsequently, in January 1969 the Congress of the Bosnian Communist Party proclaimed the full equality of the Muslim ethnic group with other Yugoslav ethnic groups.

Slobodan Milosevic, who ascended to power as the President of the Socialist Republic of Serbia in 1986, became aware of the efficiency of using nationalism as a political weapon.¹¹ Following the disintegration of Yugoslavia during the early 1990s, the territory that remained was dominated by Serbia, which supported Bosnian Serbs rebelling against the central Bosnian state. While Croatia, initially, did the same with Bosnian Croat separatists, its stance changed over the course of war as it sided with the Bosniaks to curb Serbia.

As BiH was targeted by Serb and Croat expansionist plans, its political leadership at that time, namely the Party of Democratic Action (*Stranka demokratske akcije* – SDA), under the leadership of Alija Izetbegović, had no choice but to seek a course of action that guarantees its survival and independence. The lines of friction between the Serb, Croat, and the Muslim "imagined communities"¹² in BiH brutally intensified. The political leadership sought support from Muslim powerhouses, as the Bosniaks were targeted in an ethnic cleansing campaign carried out by the Serbs seeking to establish "Greater Serbia." Ethnic cleansing in the Balkans in 1912 and 1913, and later on in Yugoslavia in 1991-1995 "represented the extreme force required

¹⁰ Zachary T. Irwin, "The Islamic Revival and the Muslims of Bosnia-Herzegovina," *East European Quarterly*, XV11, NO. 4, Jan 1984, 4404-441.

¹¹ Anderson, David. "Yugoslavia: Milosevic and Nationalism as a Political Weapon." *Defence Matters*, 11 Sept. 2016, www.defencematters.org/news/yugoslavia-milosevic-nationalism-political-weapon/.

¹² Anderson, Benedict R. O'G. 1991. *Imagined communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. London: Verso.

by nationalists to break apart a society that was otherwise capable of ignoring the mundane fractures of class and ethnicity."¹³

The role of the Muslim countries in aiding the Bosniaks served as a double-edged sword. At first, this support was necessary, particularly as the international community failed to intervene by using decisive force to put an end to the atrocities committed against the Bosniaks. Yet the inflow of funds from Muslim powerhouses, such as Saudi Arabia and Iran, to aid the Bosniaks came with collateral consequences. With the funds came the foreign mujahidin¹⁴ who were employed to fight in a completely new terrain after engaging in the Afghan-Soviet war. The flow of funds and the mujahidin fighters took place with the knowledge of the U.S., and some European countries, which not surprisingly included Germany and Austria, who had soundless animosity toward Serbia and its expansionist plans.

"Oriental realities," such as the power of religion, and the prevalence of agrarian poverty, are assumed to be the features that have not changed for centuries in BiH.¹⁵ In 1995, after the war ended with the signing of the Dayton Accord, those features served as a breeding ground for the spread of Saudi Salafi ideology and the religious indoctrination of some Bosniaks. The latter coupled with socio-economic issues, devastating war memories, weak ruling elite, and spread of crime paved way for hundreds of Bosniaks to travel to Syria and fight alongside the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The threat was limited to a contained number of rural areas that did not fall within the tight grip of the central government.

¹³ Mazower, Mark. Op.cit. p. 300.

¹⁴ Plural of *mujahid*; a military force of Muslim guerilla warriors engaged in a jihad. The term became well known in the West in the early 1980s as the Afghan mujahidin battled against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

¹⁵ Mazower, Mark. Op.cit. p. 42.

The group under analysis in this thesis is the Bosniaks. The thesis will tackle the role of the mujahidin fighters and Saudi Arabia in spreading fundamentalist Islam in BiH during and after the Bosnian war of 1992-1995. The thesis analyzes the spread of fundamentalist Islam through the phenomenon of the Bosniaks fighting with ISIS in the Syrian civil war. A comparison between "Bosnian Islam" and Salafi Islam is featured in a section of the thesis, offering an in-depth look into Islam as a religion operating in different societies. Furthermore, the thesis dedicates close attention to the geopolitical dynamics that affected both the Balkan region and the Middle East. It also identifies terms and concepts related to *jihad* to help understand its current global appeal.

➤ **Role of Saudi Arabia, Iran in Funding the Bosnian War**

Upon the dissolution of Yugoslavia in 1991, the ancient animosities between Muslims and Christians in the Balkans revived with all the implacable hostility of religious war.¹⁶ Muslim Slavs were the descendants of converts of Islam made by the Ottoman Empire at the time of its Balkan expansion in the fourteenth century.¹⁷ The presence of Muslim Slavs made Bosnia the most ethnically diverse of the Yugoslav republics and its leaders proposed that it would be in effect a mini-Yugoslavia of Serbs, Croats and Muslims living together.¹⁸ Yet, at the onset of the Bosnian war (1992-95), Muslims of Bosnia searched for weapons to protect themselves between "the Serbian hammer and the Croatian anvil."¹⁹ The Bosnian war was labelled a religious war, and it is rightfully surprising that neighbors from different religious backgrounds become arch-

¹⁶ Burr, Millard, et al. "Chapter 4." *Revolutionary Sudan: Hasan Al-Turabi and the Islamist State, 1989-2000*, Brill, 2003, p. 142.

¹⁷ Kepel, Gilles. "The Failure to Graft Jihad on Bosnia's Civil War." *Jihad: The Trial of Political Islam*, translated by Anthony F. Roberts, I. B. Tauris, 2004, p. 237.

¹⁸ Demick, Barbara. "Life and Death on My Street in Sarajevo." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 3 Apr. 2012, www.theguardian.com/books/2012/apr/03/life-and-death-in-sarajevo.

¹⁹ Burr, Millard, et al. Op.cit. p. 142.

enemies with a growing sense of stranger danger overnight. In the words of Norman Daniel, eminent historian on the Middle Ages and intercultural relations, "people seem to take it for granted that an alien society is dangerous, if not hostile, and the spasmodic outbreak of warfare between Islam and Christendom throughout history has been one manifestation of this. Apparently, under the pressure of their sense of danger, whether real or imagined, a deformed image of their enemy's beliefs takes shape in man's mind."²⁰ Yet, it would be faulty to address the Bosnian war purely based on religious motives, particularly since religion has always been a tool utilized for political aspirations, expansionist interests, and, most importantly, nationalism.

As the drums of war were in high tempo, Iran and Saudi Arabia, bolted to find ways to protect Muslims in BiH, based on their religious duty as the leading Muslim powerhouses in the Middle East. A union that may seem unreal in retrospect, particularly since the two powers have had a long history of enmity dating back to the Pahlavi dynasty. In the late 1960s, late Persian Shah Mohammad-Reza Pahlavi sent a series of letters to Saudi King Faisal, urging him to modernize Saudi Arabia, saying, "Please, my brother, modernize. Open up your country. Make the schools mixed women and men. Let women wear miniskirts. Have discos. Be modern. Otherwise, I cannot guarantee you will stay on your throne." In response, King Faisal wrote, "Your majesty, I appreciate your advice. May I remind you, you are not the Shah of France. You are not in the Élysée. You are in Iran. Your population is 90 percent Muslim. Please don't forget that."²¹

The ethos of the relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia did not change with the outburst of Ruhollah Khomeini's 1979 revolution and the toppling of the Shah. However, the row shifted

²⁰ Daniel, N. *Islam and the West: the Making of an Image*. Oneworld, 2009, p. 12.

²¹ Unger, Craig. "House of Bush, House of Saud: the Secret Relationship between the Worlds Two Most Powerful Dynasties." Gibson Square Books Ltd, 2007, p. 89.

from secular Iran urging Saudi Arabia to modernize, into ultraconservative Shiite Iran attacking the Saudi Sunni-Wahhabi religious identity. In the same spirit, during a public address in 1987, Khomeini said: "these vile and ungodly Wahhabis, are like daggers which have always pierced the heart of the Muslims from the back," adding that "Mecca is in the hands of a band of heretics." In essence those statements clearly did not assist in rectifying relations between the two nations, who have been constantly competing for influence in the Islamic world. Yet regardless of the criticism that one may level against Khomeini, the leader of Iran's theology, deeming Wahhabism as "vile" could be justified by the actions of the those who adopt this sect, particularly in this day and age witnessing the rise of Islamist extremism associated with Wahhabism. This comes mainly as Wahhabism was greatly influenced by the teachings of Ibn Taymiyyah -- a controversial medieval Sunni theologian whose teachings on jihad and martyrdom were referenced by Al-Qaida. Muhammad Bin Abd al-Wahhab founded the Wahhabism religious movement in the Arabian Peninsula during the eighteenth century. Through his religious movement, he sought to reverse what he perceived as the "moral decline of the Muslim society." Meanwhile, Muhammad Bin Saud, the founder of the modern-day Al Saud dynasty, joined ranks with Abd al-Wahhab to begin the process of unifying the tribes in the Arabian Peninsula. An obvious example of the meeting of religion and politics for nationalist-driven aspirations, particularly in the case of the Arab world. "Since its emergence, Wahhabism's puritanical and iconoclastic philosophies have resulted in conflict with other Muslim groups [...] as it opposes most popular Islamic religious practices such as saint veneration, the celebration of the Prophet's birthday, most core Shiite traditions, and some practices associated with the mystical teachings of Sufism."²²

²² Blanchard, Christopher M. "The Islamic Traditions of Wahhabism and Salafiyya." CRS Report For Congress, 24

Tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran eased with Khomeini's death in 1989, and in 1991 the two countries re-established relations in light of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, a convergence driven by political interests and joint hatred of late Iraqi President Saddam Hussein. Guided by changes in the international political landscape, Saudi Arabia welcomed future cooperation with Iran. A sentiment that was reciprocated by Iran's President Rafsanjani in a letter to Saudi Arabia in 1992 saying "Iran's foreign policy is based on development and expansion of friendly relations with neighboring countries in particular Persian Gulf countries."²³ Between 1992-1995, after the end of the Afghan jihad, the fall of Kabul in April 1992, and the dilution of the intifada by the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, Bosnia became a major issue for the Islamic world.²⁴ However, the support directed to Bosniaks from Muslim countries did not come as a surprise. The Islamic countries and the Muslim public witnessed the massacres committed against the Bosniaks by both the Serbs and Croats. Evident in many examples, of which a testimony by Bosnian war survivor: "One day, they arrested 120 young men and cut the throats of 10 of them in front of us. One group of people included an old man called Sharif Kapitanovic. He was 70. They cut his throat and sent the rest of the people to a camp in Bileca. Altogether they killed 136 people in Gacko, mostly men but some women and children."²⁵ A single testament that reflects the cruelty of events that unfolded in the Bosnian war, with an effect that lingers in the minds of the Bosnian public. The heinous crimes, which were part of the ethnic cleansing campaign, committed against their fellow-Muslims made it impossible for Muslim governments to just stand by and observe.

Jan. 2008.

²³ Ettelaat Newspaper (1992, 8 February). Ettelaat Newspaper, p. 19. Retrieved October 2018.

²⁴ Kepel, Gilles. Op.cit. pp. 237.

²⁵ Fisk, Robert. "Bosnia War Crimes: 'The Rapes Went on Day and Night': Robert Fisk, In." The Independent, Independent Digital News and Media, 21 Sept. 2015, www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/bosnia-war-crimes-the-rapes-went-on-day-and-night-robert-fisk-in-mostar-gathers-detailed-evidence-of-1471656.html.

The Shiite-Sunni divide between the two Muslim powerhouses alleviated as they redirected their attention toward a common enemy targeting Muslims in BiH. A decision stemmed from a duty stipulated by Islam, that is, protection of Muslims worldwide. It also highlighted Muslim countries' general enthusiasm about the creation of a new Muslim state in the heart of Europe, particularly having emerged deeply split from the Gulf War of 1991.²⁶ Yet their intervention does not come as part of a united common front but based on the countries' own individual interests. In a platonic world, it would be indeed believable that the two constantly disputing powerhouses decided to open a new chapter by setting their disputes aside in order to save Muslims in BiH, yet it was not the case. Under the guise of aiding Muslims, they were competing for influence over BiH, a future European Muslim state. This comes as part of their general rhetoric as Muslim powers seeking to expand their economic markets, political power, and ideological influence worldwide. In an article published in 1992 by the UK-based *Independent*, prominent journalist Robert Fisk said that "Saudi largesse was being dispensed in an attempt to diminish Iranian influence."²⁷ It was evident in the fact that the Saudis alone spent \$1 billion on Islamic activities in Bosnia between 1992 and 1998.²⁸ Fisk noted that the Saudis, with the support of the U.S., were determined to prevent Bosnia's Muslim refugees from falling under Iranian influence. Indeed, the events that unfolded in BiH "brutally exposed the different strategies of each state and of each opposition movement striving for supremacy within Islam."²⁹

The country-based jihad came in the form of finding ways to arm and fund the Bosniaks. However, the effort to arm the Bosniaks was hindered by the fact that in September 1991 the

²⁶ Kepel, Gilles. Op.cit. pp. 237.

²⁷ Fisk, Robert. Op.cit.

²⁸ Pejic, Nenad. "The Suicide Of Multiethnic Sarajevo?" *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*, 27 Apr. 2010, www.rferl.org/content/The_Suicide_Of_Multiethnic_Sarajevo/2023847.html.

²⁹ Kepel, Gilles. Op.cit. 237.

United Nations Security Council (UNSC) decided to establish an arms embargo that applied to all of the territory of the former Yugoslavia, including BiH, by means of UNSC resolution 713. Despite this reality, the Iranians were able to circumvent the embargo by sending weapons that transited via Turkey and the airport at Zagreb to the Bosnian zone.³⁰ Countries including Brunei and Saudi Arabia provided funds to support Muslim aid agencies, while Sudanese airports became the principal transit ports to BiH for mujahidin, and arms from Iran, Pakistan, and Afghanistan.³¹

The support was channeled by means of relief agencies. In 1987, Sudanese national El-Fatih Hassanayn founded the Third World Relief Agency (TWRA). The TWRA was officially organized as a humanitarian organization in Austria. However, in reality, it transferred weapons through Sudan to Croatia and the Balkans, prospering from the arms trade to become a powerful financial institution.³² Eventually, the organization established itself as the principal front for transferring arms in Bosnia. The organization headed by Hassanayn had the support of Bosnia's President Alija Izetbegovic. The *Washington Post* had deemed the TWRA: "The chief broker of black-market weapons deals by Bosnia's Muslim-led government, and the agent of money and influence for Islamic movements and governments around the world."³³ Muslim preachers also played a role in stirring the emotions of the Muslim public in order to rally support for Bosniaks. Shaykh Abdulaziz Bin Baz, who was Saudi Arabia's Grand Mufti from 1993 until his death in 1999, issued a statement to his followers saying: "Islam underscored the importance of jihad and cooperation, in particular when a Muslim is threatened by an enemy." Adding: "Oh Muslims,

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Burr, Millard, et al. Op.cit, p. 142.

³² Ibid, pp. 139–140.

³³ "Profile: Third World Relief Agency (TWRA)." *Context of 'June 9, 2005'*, www.historycommons.org/entity.jsp?entity=third_world_relief_agency_1.

don't hesitate to support your brothers in BiH with all possible means including weapons, financial assistance and prayers to the Almighty Allah."³⁴

"Saudi Arabia funded a \$300 million covert operation to channel weapons to the Muslim-led government with the knowledge and tacit cooperation of the United States, in addition to \$500 million in Saudi humanitarian aid."³⁵ The International Islamic Relief Organization (IIRO), founded in 1978 in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, was another major channel for sending funds, fighters, and weapons to BiH. According to Dr. Farid Qurashi, IIRO's former general supervisor, "the IIRO was the first relief organization to enter BH and the Balkan region, from the very beginning of the Bosnian war."³⁶

The war was funded with the implicit acceptance of the United States. According to senior U.S. officials, Iran delivered large quantities of arms to Bosnia's Muslim-led government over a period of six months.³⁷ *Guardian* journalist, Richard J Aldrich, cited Amsterdam University Professor Cees Wiebes, who had unrestricted access to Dutch intelligence files, saying that arms purchased by Iran and Turkey with the financial backing of Saudi Arabia made their way by night from the Middle East.³⁸ An intelligence report on Srebrenica stressed that the U.S. was "very closely involved" in the airlift of weapons to Bosnia. The measures adopted by the Muslim states to arm and fund the uneven war launched against the Bosniaks can be deemed as an adequate and necessary act of support, particularly since supporting a targeted segment of society or a country at times of war has been an approach adopted by countries worldwide. The Bosnian

³⁴ Kohlmann, Evan F. *Al-Qaida's Jihad in Europe*. Berg, 2004.

³⁵ Dobbs, Michael. "Saudis Funded Weapons for Bosnia, Official Says." *The Washington Post*, WP Company, 2 Feb. 1996, www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1996/02/02/saudis-funded-weapons-for-bosnia-official/

³⁶ 'IIRO saves forty thousand Bosnians from starvation.' *Moneyclips*, 4 July 1993.

³⁷ "U.S. Allowed Iran to Supply Bosnian Muslims with Arms." *The Tech - Online Edition*, tech.mit.edu/V115/N18/arms.18w.html.

³⁸ Idlich, Richard J. "Richard J Aldrich: America Used Islamists to Arm Bosnian Muslims." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 22 Apr. 2002, www.theguardian.com/world/2002/apr/22/warcrimes.comment.

government depended on outside aid to obtain and pay for weapons. Yet with weapons and funds came the mujahidin and their jihad, making the Bosnian war an intriguing case in modern-day history, as foreign and outlandish winds infiltrated into a European territory for the first time.

➤ **The Spirit of Jihad in the Bosnian War**

The Bosnian jihad attracted around 6,000 foreign fighters, 25 percent of whom were Saudi nationals.³⁹ The year 1992 marked the establishment of the mujahidin battalion (*El Mudžahid*) in Bosnia, which was part of the Bosnian Army's Third Corps and was mainly composed of Arab volunteers. The unit was created by Rasim Delić, supreme commander of the BiH armed forces. He was later indicted by The Hague Tribunal for atrocities carried out by the foreign mujahidin. *El Mudžahid* was led by the Algerian national Abdelkader Mokhtari, also known as Abu al-Mali, who was deemed by US officials as "a junior Osama Bin Laden."⁴⁰ Islamism received a boost with the arrival of the mujahidin to fight alongside the Bosniaks. Even though their military value has been disputed particularly when compared to the Serbian military capabilities, yet the accompanying financial and military support from Saudi Arabia and Iran was vital to the Bosniak war effort.⁴¹

According to the findings of The Hague Tribunal, the first mujahidin arrived in the summer of 1992 to the Travnik and Zenica areas, entering through Croatia. After fighting in the Soviet-Afghan War from 1979 until the fall of Kabul in 1992, the mujahidin moved to the BiH frontiers as they were lured both by the flow of funds and the attractiveness of fighting in a European territory. Shaykh Abu Abdel Aziz, also known as Abdul-Rahman Al-Dosari, was a senior Al-

³⁹ Atwan, Abdel Bari. *Islamic State: The Digital Caliphate*. Saqi Books, 2016.

⁴⁰ Deliso, Christopher. *The Coming Balkan Caliphate: The Threat of Radical Islam to Europe and West*. Praeger Security International, 2007.

⁴¹ Lebl, Leslie S. *Islamism and Security in Bosnia-Herzegovina*. Strategic Studies Institute and U.S. Army War College Press, 2014.

Qaida recruiter, who was a veteran of the mujahidin forces in Afghanistan during the 1980s (Savich, 2005).⁴² He had travelled to BiH to "check out the landscape and determine if the Balkans would serve as fertile ground for the displaced Arab-Afghan movement." He advised Jamal al-Fadl, Sudanese militant and former associate of Osama bin Laden, that Al-Qaida was planning on establishing training camps in Bosnia, building relations with relief agencies, and establishing businesses to support Al-Qaida economically.⁴³

With the arrival of the mujahidin, the war took on a more aggressive religious dimension. On this note, Ayman Dean, a Saudi national who travelled to BiH in 1994 and volunteered in the ranks of the mujahidin, said "There is a war between the West and Islam," while noting that "Bosnia gave the modern jihadist movement that narrative. It is the cradle."⁴⁴ The crisis was deemed by Muslim clerics as part of a Western conspiracy to extinguish Islam in Europe. In the words of Shaykh Salman al-Awdah, controversial Saudi Islamist cleric: "What occurred in BiH was not merely a war between Muslims and the Serbs, but it was a war between Islam and Christianity. And this is how we must understand it. It was a war carried out by the entire West against the Islamic world."⁴⁵ (Kohlmann, 2004)

The mujahidin were taking part in the *Al-Jihad al-Asghar* or "Lesser Jihad," which is the mainstream form of jihad that stipulates fighting on behalf of the community in its defense -- is a duty incumbent on a Muslim provided he is attacked.⁴⁶ It is important to note; however, jihad is both complex and multilayered in terms of its definition and implementation in Islam. In his

⁴² Savich, Carl K. "Al-Qaeda on Trial: The Hague and Bosnian Muslim War Crimes (Part 1)." Greece RSS, 16 Mar. 2005, www.balkananalysis.com/blog/2005/03/16/al-qaeda-on-trial-the-hague-and-bosnian-muslim-war-crimes-part-1/.

⁴³ Kohlmann, Evan F. Ops.cit.

⁴⁴ Urban, Mark. "Bosnia: The Cradle of Modern Jihadism?" BBC News, BBC, 2 July 2015, www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-33345618.

⁴⁵ Kohlmann, Evan F. Ops.cit.

⁴⁶ Noorani, A. G. *Islam & Jihad: Prejudice versus Reality*. Zed Books, 2002.

book "Islam Means Peace," writer Amitah Pal cites Professor Reuven Firestone saying: "The semantic meaning of the Arabic term jihad has no relation to holy war or even war in general, adding that the word is a verbal noun of the third Arabic form of the root jahada, which is defined classically as exerting one's utmost power, efforts, endeavors, or ability in contending with an object of disapprobation. There are, therefore, many kinds of jihad, and most have nothing to do with warfare." On this note, *Al-Jihad al-Asghar* is made complete with the duty of *Al-Jihad al-Akbar* or "Greater Jihad." The goal of the Greater Jihad, the jihad *al-nafs*, translated as self, ego, and soul is to purify one's consciousness in order to reach an inner equilibrium reflecting the Divine Qualities.⁴⁷ Thus, far from justifying an aggressive and arrogant attitude, the Qur'an requires precisely the opposite: "*The servants of the Beneficent are they who walk on the earth in humility and when those who do not know address them, they say: Peace.*" [Partial Qur'anic verse, Al-Furqan, 25:63]. Greater jihad seeks to contain the base impulses, "yet that does not imply that these impulses are simply suppressed or repressed, but rather that their true nature is brought into the full light of awareness, so that human consciousness reclaims the freedom of will to make decisions that are not in thrall to these impulses."⁴⁸ In short, it is a call for Muslims to struggle against "powers of lust, anger, and insatiable imagination, placing all of them under the dictates of reason and faith." The form of jihad is evidently absent in the hearts and minds of the so-called Islamist mujahidin terrorizing people in the name of religion. As a result, the exploitation of religion and its improper utilization and interpretation has caused the worst atrocities in history.

This recipe of funds, arms, and jihad led to collateral repercussions to the generally moderate Bosniaks. Back in the 1990s, "those foreign fighters took up arms alongside those whom they

⁴⁷ "Greater Jihad." *Perennial*, perennialvision.org/greater-jihad/.

⁴⁸ Ibid

understood to be their besieged Muslim brethren, and although this act of trans-border mobilization can be framed as an act of cosmopolitan citizenship, the subsequent ‘problem’ of the mujahidin in a post-9/11 context destabilized their original cosmopolitan act through a re-enactment of borders and the revocation of their (literal) citizenship.”⁴⁹ On this note, the revocation of literal citizenship is evident in the fact that it was not the Palestinians who shot up the Bataclan, it was people from afar saw videos of the destruction the Israelis wreaked in Gaza and it was not Afghan victims of American bombardments who attack Christians in Pakistan: It is Pakistanis who see Islam oppressed by Christians, except in their own country, where they themselves are the oppressors.⁵⁰ Those foreign fighters in Bosnia were deemed mujahidin and not terrorists, despite the fact that they are the same people responsible for organizing and carrying out terrorist operations around the world, most traumatic of which are the 11 September 2001 attacks. Among the graduates of the Bosnian mujahidin battalion was Khalid al-Hajj, who went on to command Al-Qaida in Saudi Arabia, Nawaf al Hazmi and Khalid Mihdar, two of the 9/11 hijackers, Ramzi bin al-Shid, who murdered American hostage Danielle Pearl, and Khalid Sheikh Mohammad, who visited Bosnia to talent scout for Al-Qaida.⁵¹

The society in Bosnia, which includes communists and atheists, accepted the jihadis as mere fighters supporting them in surviving the violent war. The profile they had during the 1990s was of a starting-level terrorist with limited experience at war. The world was getting to know them by means of the limited information about their background circulated on mainstream media outlets. They were known as underground fighters who fought the war against the Soviets in

⁴⁹ Jennifer Mustapha (2013) The Mujahideen in Bosnia: the foreign fighter as cosmopolitan citizen and/or terrorist, *Citizenship Studies*, 17:6-7, 742-755, DOI: 10.1080/13621025.2012.751718

⁵⁰ Roy, Olivier. *Jihad and Death: The Global Appeal of Islamic State*. Translated by Cynthia Schoch., pp. 9,10.

⁵¹ Urban, Mark. “Bosnia: The Cradle of Modern Jihadism?” BBC News, BBC, 2 July 2015, www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-33345618.

Afghanistan, which later became known as the birthplace of Al-Qaida. In an interview with Al-Da'awah magazine, Al-Qaida figure Abu Abdel Aziz confessed: "At this point, we were unable to understand where Bosnia was, was it in America or in the southern hemisphere or in Asia? We had no idea where it was. When we found out that is a part of Yugoslavia in Eastern Europe, we still had no idea how many Muslims were there, and we had no idea as to how and when Islam reached there."⁵² The Bosnian war was the stepping stone for jihadis to branch out in Europe, create links with fundamentalists there, and intensify their threat worldwide. The terrorist web grew and trespassed national boundaries. As extreme-oriented individuals across the world sharing hatred of existing societies, regardless if the societies were Muslim or Western, were able to find a common platform in BiH. Their true colors back then were not as apparent as they are today, as their label was mujahid, that is, struggler.

In his book "Unholy Jihad," Schindler (2013) reveals new information about the war events in BiH, wherein he notes that in mid-June 1994 a team, hand-chosen by unnamed SDA officials, left for Iran to undergo training on the use of a wide range of small arms, light machine guns, several pistols, and RPGs, in addition to bomb-making. Schindler adds that "Iran's intelligence service (VEVAK) and especially its paramilitary Revolutionary Guards Corps (Pasdaran) played a major secret role in the Bosnian war, training Al-Qaida-linked mujahidin groups, as well as radical units of the Bosnian Army that were responsible for numerous war crimes."⁵³

The Al-Qaida-linked mujahidin employed inhumane and gruesome acts of violence suggestive of the current modern-day activities. Their activities were not exposed due to the absence of an impartial media coverage of the crisis, in addition to social media reporting. The

⁵² Kohlmann, Evan F. Op.cit, p. 18.

⁵³ Ibid

mujahidin were accused of torturing and killing Serbian prisoners. One story details that after the mujahidin tortured Serbian prisoners “[they] decapitated them with cleavers or chain saws, and those who were still alive were forced to kiss severed heads that were later nailed to the tree trunks. Prisoners were hung upside down by ropes, they were nailed, or the Mujahidin tied bricks to their testicles and penises, and pushed them into barrels where they slowly drowned pulled down by the weight of the bricks.”⁵⁴ According to Vaughan Kent-Payne, who was a major commanding a company of British troops involved in those battles, the foreign fighters were “way more aggressive” than local Bosnian troops, while stating in a secret message to army chiefs in 1993: “My opinion is that behind [the mujahidin] there are some high-ranking politicians and religious leaders.”⁵⁵ An accurate speculation of fighters who are now part of the ISIS that is threatening global security. A process made feasible not only with the support of local politicians and religious leaders, this time it was with the financial and military support of Middle Eastern and Western world powers.

Furthermore, Serbs were expelled from their villages, a matter that was documented in 1993 by British journalist Joan Phillips, who said that “out of 9,300 Serbs who used to live in Srebrenica, less than 900 remain, only three Serbian villages remain and around 26 have been destroyed.” On the same note, the *Book of the Dead*, which was jointly published by the Research and Documentation Centre (IDC) and the Humanitarian Law Center of Serbia, listed names of 3,287 Serbs from the Srebrenica region who were killed in the three years before July 1995. General Lewis Mackenzie, Canadian military officer who commanded the United Nations Peacekeeping Forces in Sarajevo during the disintegration of Yugoslavia, said that “evidence to

⁵⁴ Kohlmann, Evan F. Op.cit, p. 130.

⁵⁵ Urban, Mark. Op.cit.

date suggests that he Naser Oric, Bosniak commander in Srebrenica, was responsible for killing as many Serb civilians outside Srebrenica as the Bosnian Serb army was for massacring Bosnian Muslims inside the town."⁵⁶

According to a report issued by the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY), an estimated 69.8% or 25,609 of the civilians killed in the war were Bosniak (with 42,501 military deaths), with the Bosnian Serbs suffering 7,480 civilian casualties (15,299 military deaths), the Bosnian Croats suffering 1,675 civilian casualties (7,183 military deaths), amounting to a total of 104,732 casualties, spread between the Bosnian Croats (8.5%), Bosnian Serbs (21.7%), Bosniaks (65%), and others (4.8%).⁵⁷ Numbers that reflect the dangers of the rise of nationalist aspirations and the improper management of crises by the world powers. The citizens of BiH were affected by war trauma, and then had to pick up the pieces and move forward and settle on an unstable platform, characterized with economic, social, and political disparities. This is coupled with the threat of extremist sleeper cells residing in rural areas, which became a topic of discussion after they were activated with the global rise of ISIS.

➤ **Bosnian Islam Versus Salafi Islam**

The Bosnian war was casted as a religious war between Christians and Muslims. This categorization was used by the Bosnian government to attract support from Muslim countries and validate the means and methods of its war conduct. Indeed, the actions of the Bosnian government during such turbulent and critical times were very much understood and justified, wherein throughout history nations at war have exploited whatever means possible to survive. It

⁵⁶ Herman, Edward S., and Emily Schwartz Greco. "Serb Demonization as Propaganda Coup - FPIF." *Foreign Policy In Focus*, 17 May 2013, fpif.org/serb_demonization_as_propaganda_coup/.

⁵⁷ "The 1992–95 War in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Census-Based Multiple System Estimation of Casualties' Undercount" (PDF) ICTY. 1 February 2010.

is definite that they will continue to adopt the same approach during the age of nation states. Yet, this does not necessarily mean that the Bosnian government's utilization of Islam as a mobilizing force to acquire more support reflects the potent belief of the BiH society in Islam. This is evident in the fact that the relatively low number of 4,000 Bosniak men joined the ranks of the Bosniak army, but were unable to transform the war into a jihad in any meaningful way because the "term struck no chord in the local Muslim population, as it had done among the Afghans."⁵⁸ Regarding the failure of the mujahidin to recruit a large number of local Muslims, a spokesman for the town of Zenica attempted to explain what had happened "Those who came here from the East came ill-informed about the Bosnian Muslims, who are both easterners and westerners. Their plan to impose their way of seeing the religion and teach us how to pray has failed. They tried to plant trees here, palm trees, which can't grow in Bosnia."⁵⁹ The war served as an opportunity for the Bosnian government to seek independence, while the Western countries sought to curb Serbia at whatever cost.

The signs of Islam being utilized by the BiH government to advance its desire for a nation state dates back to World War II. It has been reported that during the Nazi occupation of Yugoslavia in World War II, Alija Izetbegović had been a recruiter for the Bosnian Muslim Handzar (Dagger) Division, which swore loyalty to the Nazis, in order to attain autonomy as part of Hitler's New Europe.⁶⁰ Yet, the latter was denied by Bakir Izetbegovic, the son of Alija Izetbegović and the Bosniak member of the tripartite presidency, who threatened to sue Republika Srpska leader Milorad Dodik over claims his father was a member of Handzar

⁵⁸ "Croats and Serbs Are (Un)Suitable." *Polybius at The Clickto Network*, Fox News, 2 Aug. 1996, web.archive.org/web/20100828161826/http://www.ex-yupress.com/oslob/oslob7.html.

⁵⁹ Kohlmann, Op.cit. pp.115.

⁶⁰ Deliso, Christopher. *The Coming Balkan Caliphate: the Threat of Radical Islam to Europe and West*. Praeger Security International, 2007.

Division. Islamism first appeared in Bosnia in 1941 when Izetbegović and others formed the Young Muslims, a group patterned after the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), yet was dismantled by Tito's government in 1949.⁶¹ In 1970, the year of Egyptian leader Abd al-Nasser's death and Khomeini's publication of *Towards an Islamic Government*, a text entitled Islamic Declaration authored by Izetbegović was secretly distributed in Sarajevo.

Izetbegovic was first imprisoned for his ideas in 1946, and then again in 1983, following the trial of thirteen Muslims accused of Islamic fundamentalism in the aftermath of the Iranian revolution.⁶² This does not necessarily mean that Izetbegović sought to establish a Muslim non-secular state in the heart of Europe, it was his way to distinguish "his people," the Muslim Bosnians, so as to establish a nation-state. At the early days of his political career, he was exploring ways to reach his goal and was influenced by his Muslim peers outside Europe since they were people to whom he could relate based on a shared background. This said, even if he sought to establish a Muslim non-secular state he would have encountered opposition from his own society, which is more European than Muslim.

Some Western countries, who had a history of animosity with Serbia, were involved in allowing the transfer of weapons to Bosniaks and allowing the events to transpire as they did. "The strong historical animosity that both Austria and Germany had for Serbia, the only regional rival that had ever stood up to their invasions, had by the early 1990s added a vicious element to an interventionist policy driven by economic interests."⁶³

The Bosnian society has always been a European society and cannot be compared to a typical Muslim Eastern society. During the war, the Bosniaks had a desire to fight in order to

⁶¹ Lebl, Leslie S. Op.cit.

⁶² Kepel, Gilles. Op.cit

⁶³ Deliso, Christopher. Op.cit.

attain independence and live in peace in "their" territory, which comes in contrast with the mujahidin's desire to kill and die in combat. A Bosnian army soldier who served alongside the foreign mujahidin confirmed to journalists: "They like to kill, whenever they could kill with their knives, they would do so."⁶⁴ Even during the war days, Bosniak soldiers, who are very much a product of society, did not share the mujahidin's desire to die, wherein an Algerian fighter who fought the war in Bosnia said: "You know, when we stage an attack, the Bosnians come with us but they do not want to die. They go forward and then they turn back again. Several times, I have been out in front, up in the hills above the city, and we have broken through the Serbs. But just when they are winning, the Bosnians want to go back home. They want to live."⁶⁵ Their desire to live also included enjoying the "pleasures of life" sort to speak and adopted leniency in practicing their religion, a matter expressed by a Bosniak local "emir" who "casually joked that the Arabs ask us to pray five times a day, but we prefer to have five drinks a day."⁶⁶

According to Enes Karic, former Minister of Education, Science, Culture and Sports with the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina from 1994-1996: "Bosnia is on the soil of Europe, and it is very important that Bosnian Muslims have for many years before now accepted the principle that they should practice Islam within the context of a civil society and a civil state." For him religion should be able to function without political interference, which will never be the sole property of anyone, nor a tool in the hands of politicians who use for worldly and egotistical ends.⁶⁷ This comes contrary to the mujahidin's conviction, who believe in "[the] dialogue of bullets, the ideals of assassination, bombing, and destruction, and the diplomacy of the cannon and machine-

⁶⁴ Dahlburg, John-Thor. "'Holy Warriors' Brought Bosnians Ferocity and Zeal.' The Los Angeles Times, 6 August 1996, p. A11.

⁶⁵ Kohlmann, Evan F. Op.cit. pp.91.

⁶⁶ Vulliamy, Ed. 'Town feels Winter and War Tightening their Noose.' The Guardian (London), 15 September 1992, p. 8

⁶⁷ Kepel, Gilles. Op.cit.

gun. Islamic governments [...] are established as they always have been by pen and gun, by word and bullet, but tongue and teeth."⁶⁸

Islam in the Middle East, which dates back to the start of the 7th century, approximately 600 years after the founding of Christianity and is prevalent by means of the teachings of the prophet of Arabia and the Holy Quran, has been woven into the fabric of the different Arab societies. The some generalization nowadays makes it challenging to explain to a non-Muslim or non-Arab that Arab societies are multi-layered and despite the fact that the Arab states share a common language and religion, yet their overall cultural, political, and historical backgrounds are different, wherein it would be erroneous to compare a Muslim country in the Levant to a country in the Gulf sort to speak. This said, it is also faulty to compare the Muslim society in Bosnia and Herzegovina to a Muslim society in the Arab world, particularly since societies are influenced by many parameters and not only religion. The geographic location of Bosnia in the Balkan Peninsula in southeastern Europe allowed the society to witness the evolution of Western thought and the promotion of individual rights and freedoms, coupled with the society's exposure to atheism, secularism, and communism. Moreover, Bosnia imported its Islam from the Ottoman Turks in the 16th century, namely the Sunni Hanafi Islam based on the teachings of 8th-century Sunni Muslim theologian and jurist of Persian origin, Abu Hanifa, "who utilized analogical reasoning as a method of legal reasoning, and relied extensively on personal opinion, wherein the Hanafi doctrine has always been considered among the most flexible and liberal in Islamic law, including in the areas of criminal law, treatment of non-Muslims, and individual

⁶⁸ Kohlmann, Evan F. Op.cit

freedoms, to name a few."⁶⁹ Their form of Islam sides with tolerance and is not rigid and square minded as the orthodox Salafi doctrine. The latter doctrine succeeded in attracting a small margin of the mostly moderate society. However, this small margin has been able to threaten security in Europe as this cancer cell is linked to a quite large and vicious cancer tumor that has spread its threat worldwide.

Islam in the Middle East failed to transform or modernize because the political regimes in the region failed to separate state politics and religion. This is contrary to the evolution of the Christian religion in Europe. A number of dictatorships and the authoritarian regimes in the Middle East, Afghanistan, and Pakistan made religion a tool, while tempering Islam and its principles, particularly as those regimes used it to appeal to the masses in order to solidify their power and prolong their presence. An example of which is Iraq under the rule of atheist Saddam Hussein, who used Islam to appeal to Muslims in his fight against the West, despite not being a devout believer himself and coming from the secular Al-Ba'ath Party.

The secularism of the state politics in Europe influenced Christianity, allowing people to privately practice any religion away from state intervention. The majority of the constitutions of the Western states have no mention of God. In the Muslim world, regimes most often use religion to mobilize the public and impose personal truth or more loosely personal belief in Islam, requiring everyone to share it with the state. The personal truth can only be imposed by means of persuasion or violence and the rigidity of the psyche of those regimes have prompted them to influence the public by means of force and persuasion, which have ultimately led to religious wars, sectarian conflicts, and interethnic-civil wars. The main problem in the Arab

⁶⁹ Warren, Christie S. "The Hanafi School - Islamic Studies - Oxford Bibliographies - Obo." *Oxford Bibliographies* - - Obo, 28 May 2013, www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780195390155/obo-9780195390155-0082.xml.

countries is that there have been no political developments or a real improvement in the socio-economic sphere that has led to the establishment of a new movement that will replace radical Islamic movements, so radical Islam will continue to be a threat to the secular Arab regimes.⁷⁰

➤ **The Spread of Salafi-Wahhabism**

The spread of Salafi-Wahhabism came about following the end of the Bosnian war with the remnant influence of both Saudi Arabi and the mujahidin on a vulnerable segment of society. The proliferation of the ideology gained momentum through the spread of aid organizations funded by Saudi Arabia that carried out activities to promote Wahhabism under the guise of humanitarian assistance. The worldwide exporting of Wahhabism has been a major goal of Saudi Arabia. By means of its oil wealth, "the kingdom is able to project power in the form of humanitarian organizations, educational institutions, cultural centers, orphanages, banks, businesses, and more, wherein wherever Wahhabism has spread, it had shown all the aspects of cult behavior, drawing in chiefly the poorer and less educated members of Muslim society."⁷¹

The Wahhabism imprint in the BiH society served as evidence that Saudi Arabia was able to win the war of influence against Iran by spreading its religious ideology in the European state. Between 1992 and February 1996, the Supreme Committee for the Collection of Donations for the Muslims of Bosnia, a special board established in 1992 by Saudi Arabia, "provided \$356 million to the Bosnian Muslims, of which \$103 million came from King Fahd himself."⁷² The Bosnian War was a personal case for the Saudi ruling family, whose appeal gained stride amid a fallible economic situation and weak political leadership in BiH. The Saudi-funded organizations

⁷⁰ Mura, Andrea (2012). "A genealogical inquiry into early Islamism: the discourse of Hasan al-Banna". *Journal of Political Ideologies*. 17 (1): 61–85

⁷¹ Deliso, Christopher. Op.cit.

⁷² Burr, J. Millard., and Robert O. Collins. *Alms for Jihad: Charity and Terrorism in the Islamic World*. Cambridge University Press, 2006.

were able to exploit people's deteriorating financial circumstances and lure a segment into following the orthodox form of Islam, which contradicts with the overall free mindedness of European societies at large, and the moderate Muslim Bosniak community, in particular. The organizations attempted to meet the demands of the Bosniak public, wherein nearly one in five rural Bosniaks are poor,⁷³ and in turn gave positive publicity to Wahhabism as a sect that caters to the needs of Muslims in Europe. A report published by the Borgen Project, a Seattle-based non-profit organization dedicated to address global poverty, notes that BiH, with a population of 3.8 million, includes around 640,000 people living in "absolute poverty." Adding, aside from the one-fifth of the population already in poverty, approximately 50 percent of the country is vulnerable to becoming poor.⁷⁴

A 15-minute video report by *France 24* published on December 21, 2015, discusses the rise of Salafism in Bosnia and sheds light on Azra and Mirsad, a married couple both born in Sarajevo who chose Salafism in the wake of the civil war. Azra, a woman wearing the niqab, and Mirsad, a bearded Salafi, devoted their energies to Islamic-inspired social work. In the video, they are shown handing a wheelchair to a 7-year-old girl suffering from a serious sickness following an appeal by the girl's mother, who is incapable of financing the costly medical treatment or health insurance for her daughter. According to the video report "standing in for the state's failures allows Azra to depict Salafism as a pillar of society." Meanwhile, Azera, a widow of a fallen Bosnian Muslim soldier, noted that she receives monthly pension from *Islam Sans Frontiers* in exchange for sending her son to attend a daily session of religious lessons at the society's office in Zenica. She acknowledged the cynical tragedy of Bosnian families like hers,

⁷³ Davies, Simon. Op.cit.

⁷⁴ Cline, Matthew. "Top 10 Facts About Poverty in Bosnia and Herzegovina." *The Borgen Project*, 10 Aug. 2018, borgenproject.org/facts-about-poverty-in-bosnia-and-herzegovina/.

and said that "they use our children to spread Islam, children who have already lost their fathers. But I do not have any other income and I have to agree to this. It means we are getting paid for believing."⁷⁵

One of the reasons for social despair is unemployment, and in 2011, the year the Syrian war started, the unemployment rate in BiH was 56.83 percent, it increased by one percent in 2012, and went up again in 2014 and 2015 reaching 62.66 percent and 62.32 percent respectively.⁷⁶ Furthermore, according to a 2017 study by Transparency International on perceived levels of public sector corruption, BiH ranked 91, along with Guyana and Sri Lanka, out of 180 countries and territories, with a score of 38 over 100 indicating the perceived level of public sector corruption on a scale of 0 (highly corrupt) to 100 (very clean). Furthermore, the lack of democratic and institutional accountability, the lack of socio-economic prospects, and the lack of mental health services are worsened by widespread corruption, organized crime, the availability of arms, and drug and alcohol addiction.⁷⁷ The socio-economic conditions in BiH provided a window of opportunity for Islamic activity, which was taking place under the full knowledge of the government that was permitting those activities and the activities of aid organizations, as it felt abandoned by the EU and the US. The latter and the former take some responsibility for contributing to the political and economic vacuum in war-torn BiH, which has no prior experience in leading its own affairs as a nation state. BiH should have been treated as a vulnerable entity that has been through abusive and traumatizing experiences throughout its struggle for independence. It was exploited by a self-centered elite with a limited strategic vision on how to advance the country politically and economically in order to enrich the country

⁷⁵ Kohlmann, Evan F. Op.cit. pp.118.

⁷⁶ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/811689/youth-unemployment-rate-in-bosnia-and-herzegovina/>

⁷⁷ Kohlmann, Evan F. Op.cit. pp.125.

through promoting diverse patterns of thought like humanism, individualism, secularism, etcetera.

The abundance of state funds coming from the Saudi Kingdom tilted the political power influence to the kingdom's favor as compared to the influence of the European Union (EU), and the U.S. The impact of Saudi Arabia is not only taking place along religious lines. Its aura as an "illiberal and autocratic" model of governance is influencing the local elites, while the EU's influence is "almost strictly financial," a coupling that is leading to elites remaining in power, as citizens are promised jobs and pensions, "an idyllic authoritarian arrangement."⁷⁸ The fact that the Western powers somehow deserted BiH after weakening the Serbian influence prompted some Bosniaks to find ways to survive the difficult circumstances that transpired following the war. Western policymakers continually traded their commitments to genuine political and economic transformation in the Balkan region for security guarantees, especially following the events of 9/11.⁷⁹

As a result, Bosniaks tended to align themselves with peoples and governments that share the same religious background. It created an imaginary canton uniting oppressed Muslims against the supremacy of the Western powers. The ideas of Islamic movements tend to be inclusive and based on the Bosniak's desire to be included, both the Islamist thought and Pan-Arabism, by means of its affiliation with Islam, gained rise in the Bosniak society. The latter thoughts came as replacements to the Western orientation that failed to understand the needs of society and treated it as a liability and a constant source of political and economic turmoil. "Western leaders refused

⁷⁸ Mujanović, Jasmin. *Hunger and Fury the Crisis of Democracy in the Balkans*. Hurst & Company, 2018. p. 120.

⁷⁹ Kanin, David B., "Big Men, Corruption, and Crime", *International Politics*, Vol. 40, Issue 4, 2003. Pp491-526.

to manage the Yugoslav crisis constructively and as a result each aspect of their involvement was short-sighted, short-lived, and geared toward fending off rather than resolving the issue."⁸⁰

The Muslim community in the Balkan are most able to represent the model of moderate and secular Islam. They link between the Islam of the East and the civilizing force of Europe. Albanians serve as a good example of moderate and secular Muslims. According to Stavrianos, "Muslem and Christian Albanians lived side by side for centuries, and, although quarrels between tribes and individuals were only too common, religion was rarely the issue in dispute. Tolerance went so far that members of the same family not infrequently professed different religions. More than one traveler reported that infants were both baptized as Christians and circumcised as Muslims, and that adults who had begun life in that fashion used two names, one Christian and the other Moslem, depending upon the circle in which they happened to be moving at the time." Muslim modernists are those who largely accept the mix of secular and Islamic concepts, while Islamists are looking for a system based solely on Islamic law and practices that they believe can cope with the needs and demands of modern society and maintain its moral and spiritual commitment.⁸¹ Therefore, with the rise of religious fundamentalism, and the spread of sectarian and ethnic wars in the Middle East, the issue of secularizing and modernizing Islam should take center stage in the Muslim religious circles.

➤ **2,800 Kilometers Away From Home**

For almost a decade, the mujahidin had been brewing a bigger plan, which they chose to freeze in a cryo-chamber. The plan of a global jihad had been carefully contained and eventually unleashed in Syria and Iraq. The Bosnian War was a crucial period in the history of modern

⁸⁰ Ibid. p. 75.

⁸¹ Roberson, Barbara. *The Middle East and Europe: The Power Deficit*. Routledge, 1998.pp. 108

Islamic jihadism. In many respects, "Bosnia is where contemporary jihadism took shape, culminating in the rise of the ISIS."⁸² ISIS created an international jihad brigade that fights in the front lines in Syria and then it proclaimed a caliphate, which turned a regional Al-Qaida subsidiary into a leader of world jihad.⁸³

The Bosnian war was exploited by outside players to serve singular interests and ideologies that very much happen to be alien to the mentality of the European Bosniaks, who were seeking protection from war and the establishment of their own nation state. The international powers, which did not want to get involved, operated based on the "end justifies the means" through the erroneous utilization of foreign fighters to justify the protection of Bosniaks, which in turn led to a dire outcome. They believed that the Soviet-Afghan war conduct could be replicated in BiH, which is a purely linear approach.

It is worth noting that globalized jihad did not start with Al-Qaida and its successor ISIS. "It developed as early as the late nineteenth century with the anarchist movement, culminating in the first manifestation of global terrorism with the alliance formed by the Baader-Meinhof gang⁸⁴, Palestinian extreme left groups and the Japanese Red Army⁸⁵ in the 1970s (Roy, 2017)."⁸⁶ The contemporary form of jihad launched by Muslim mujahidin transpired as a result of the prosecution of Islamists in the Arab world. According to Writer Olivier Roy, the conceptualization of terrorism came about in the wake of late Egyptian President Abd al-Nasser's crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1960s.

⁸² "How the Bosnian War Paved the Way for ISIS in Europe." *Timeline*, 12 Apr. 2016, [timeline.com/how-the-bosnian-war-paved-the-way-for-isis-in-europe-53c023c3bd7e](https://www.timeline.com/how-the-bosnian-war-paved-the-way-for-isis-in-europe-53c023c3bd7e).

⁸³ Roy, Olivier, et al. *Ops.cit.* pp. 81.

⁸⁴ West German far-left militant organization founded in 1970.

⁸⁵ A communist terrorist group founded by Fusako Shigenobu early in 1971 in Lebanon. Its main goal was to overthrow the Japanese government and the monarchy.

⁸⁶ Roy, Olivier, et al. *Ops.cit.* pp. 1.

The Muslim mujahidin, who traveled to BiH after fighting in the Afghan war, shared a love for martyrdom, or in a less romanticized term death. The dark aura surrounding those extremists has prompted people worldwide to treat them as mere nameless human beings, as the level of violence they committed and continue to commit has stripped them of this privilege. Writer Olivier Roy affirms: "Today we do not wish to see the radicals face, know his name or hear his voice. We want him to remain in the realm of the unknown." Those radicals are almost all born again Muslims who after living a highly secular life, they decided to suddenly renew their religious observance, either individually or in the context of a small group (Roy, 2017).⁸⁷

The perfect personification of this claim is Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the founder of Al-Qaida in Iraq, which was the precursor of ISIS. As a teenager, Al-Zarqawi abandoned school and started to abuse alcohol and drugs while acquiring his first tattoos. Already at a young age, Al Zarqawi had acquired the reputation of being a pimp, drug dealer and a thug. His mother signed him up for religious classes in Jordan's town of Al-Zarqa in an effort to help him deal with his troubled youth.⁸⁸ Al-Zarqawi joined the ranks of the mujahidin after the preacher at the local mosque asked for volunteers to fight against communists in Afghanistan. The indoctrination of Al-Zarqawi, coupled with the dire socio-economic situation he witnessed growing up, and his psychological state of mind, geared him up to be the leader of a group that was responsible for unthinkable savagery. He perplexed millions with a "new form of highly intimate terrorism: the beheading of individual hostages, captured on video and sent around the world, using the Internet's new power to broadcast directly into people's homes."⁸⁹

⁸⁷ Ibid, pp. 8.

⁸⁸ Warrick, Joby. *Black Flags*, Transworld Publishers Ltd, 2016, p. 46.

⁸⁹ Ibid

The power and influence of ISIS is steering some youth to choose the path of terrorism, as world powers, including but not limited to Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Iran, the U.S., and some countries in the EU, most recently the Netherlands, continue to provide arms and funds to the low-lives and vile terrorists in Syria. The world powers did not learn from the mistakes they had committed during the Afghan War and the Bosnian War, and chose to adopt the same approach of utilizing mujahidin or more accurately terrorists in the Syrian war also based on the immoral principle of the "end justifies the means." The mobilization of foreigner fighters in the Syrian war "has been the largest since the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan (1979-1989); with over 20,000 engaged up to the beginning of 2015."⁹⁰

The mujahidin planted the seed of extremism in BiH. Their contribution to society was the radicalization of a segment, which received combat training, and grew acquainted to their ideology as they witnessed their abuse of power. Back in the 1990s the events that unfolded in BiH helps explain why the country has more men fighting in Syria than any European country, over 300. The dynamic of jihad has been reversed and it is Bosnians who are travelling to Arab lands.⁹¹ After the war, charitable organizations funding mosques and educational establishments, based in or backed by Gulf states, flourished across the Balkans, particularly in BiH, and played a role in disseminating the conservative Salafi interpretation of Islam, which resulted in a substantial outflow of foreign fighters to militant Islamist groups in Syria and Iraq.⁹² Religious figures in BiH were responsible for the revival of fundamentalism, as they played a role in brainwashing and gearing extremist human resources to fight in the ranks of ISIS in the Arab

⁹⁰ Azinović, Vlado, and Muhamed Jusić. *The Lure of the Syrian War: The Foreign Fighters' Bosnian Contingent*. Atlantic Initiative, 2015, wb-iisg.com/wp-content/uploads/bp-attachments/4798/Foreign-Terrorist-Fighters_-BiH.pdf.

⁹¹ Urban, Mark. Op.cit.

⁹² Ignjatijevic, Marija, and Jelena Beslin. Op.cit.

world. Bosnians fighting with ISIS in Syria and Iraq were recruited domestically by Bosnian Salafist clerics, one of whom is Husein Bilal Bosnić, known as the nation's top extremist cleric currently serving seven years in prison for recruiting ISIS fighters.⁹³

In a radio exchange recorded in Kobani, northern Syria, ISIS-affiliated fighters are heard speaking Bosnian. As part of their activities in Syria, Bosniak fighters released propaganda videos addressing people at home, wherein they said: "You must fight there, fight them over there! If you can put explosives under their cars, in their homes, everywhere. If you can, take poison and put it in their food, put it in their drinks." Such threats were taken seriously by the Bosnian authorities, who launched a number of security campaigns to avert possible threats at home and in Europe.

In 2015, Bosnić was arrested in a security named Operation Damascus, which led to the arrest of 35 radical Islamists from Sarajevo, Kiseljak, Zenica, Maglaj, Srebrenik, Buzim, and Teslić accused of financing and inciting jihad. Many of Bosnić's disciples will never return back, including 24-year-old Swad, who was killed in January 2015 during ISIS battles in Syria. During Bosnić's trial, Swad's father said "I am Bosniak. I am Muslim. My religion is Islam. I dare to say it in front of you all. But you [Bosnić], you tell our children that they are not real Muslims, you should be ashamed! Bilal Bosnić- you destroy every home you enter!" Islamic radicalization and recruitment of Balkan foreign fighters was carried out both in person and via internet propaganda channels and the most prominent points of radicalization and recruitment were certainly

⁹³ Mayr, Walter. "Sharia Villages: Bosnia's Islamic State Problem - SPIEGEL ONLINE - International." SPIEGEL ONLINE, 5 Apr. 2016, www.spiegel.de/international/europe/islamic-state-presence-in-bosnia-cause-for-concern-a-1085326.html.

extremist 'hotbeds', secluded Muslim communities set in remote areas which operated under Sharia law, such as Ovše and Gornje Maoce.⁹⁴

Meanwhile, according to Igor Golijanin, head of Bosnian's Ministry of Security Cabinet, Islamist extremists are now disguising their training camps as "non-governmental organizations". On this note, Michael McCabe, chief executive of risk awareness experts Intelligence Fusion, told *Daily Star Online*: "This is part of the wider growth of Islamic extremism across Europe. "The war in the 90s not only roused local Muslims but also foreign fighters, who left roots of jihadism in the country." He went on: "There are worrying statistics that there are between 5,000-10,000 radicalized Bosnian Muslims." McCabe also described Bosnia as a "training and logistical zone" for Islamic fundamentalism.⁹⁵

A journalistic report by Patrick Hill and Ed Wight published by the UK-based *Mirror* website on 22 July 2015 noted that 12 ISIS fighters were trained in Ošve, a hilltop village situated in the municipality of Maglaj, 96 kilometers from Sarajevo, and left for Syria. The report noted that "terrorists are secretly buying land in the isolated village," including notorious ISIS supporter Harun Mehicevic, who escaped Bosnia during the 1990s Balkan wars and settled in Australia. Mehicevic had bought two hectares of land in the area before being reportedly killed with his wife in Syria, according to a report published by Australian news website, ABC, on 2 March 2016.

In statements to the UK-based Telegraph in April 2016, Izet Hadzic, the imam of Ošve, rejected any links to extremism and denied the presence of a training camp in the village. Hadzic

⁹⁴ Ignjatijevic, Marija, and Jelena Beslin. Op.cit.

⁹⁵ Blair, Anthony. "New ISIS Training Camps Just MILES from Music Festival Hotspots Popular with Brits." *Dailystar.co.uk*, Daily Star, 25 Aug. 2018, www.dailystar.co.uk/news/latest-news/725371/terror-attack-holiday-europe-isis-islamic-state-croatia-bosnia-outlook-dimensions

used to be a former front-man of a heavy metal band called Black Lady who gave up alcohol and music to dedicate himself to Islam, although he rejects the terms Salafist or Wahhabi. He is married to a lady who wears the niqab and adheres to a traditional life in Ošve.⁹⁶ It is worth noting that A significant number of foreign fighters from BiH, as well as their families, "have at some point either resided or visited well-known Salafist communities in Gornja Maoča, Ošve, and Dubnica, or frequented Salafist mosques that operate outside the official structures of the Islamic Community in BiH, usually in and around major cities such as Sarajevo, Zenica, and Tuzla."⁹⁷

A *Reuters* image published in 2015 showed the flag of ISIS painted on a wooden surface and set up at the entrance of Gornja Maoca village, located in northeastern Bosnia within the administrative border of Srebrenik municipality in Tuzla Canton. In February 2015, the Bosnian antiterror security forces raided the village following reports of houses flying the ISIS flag. During an interview with the UK-based *Telegraph* news website, Edis Bosnic, the Salafi imam of the village of Gornja Maoca -- where Salafist cleric Husein Bilal Bosnic was arrested -- refuted claims that the village is an extremist stronghold, wherein he said "We are enemies of the state only because we are calling people away from vice, drugs and alcohol and urging them to come back to decent values." He condemned the terrorist attacks in Paris and Brussels "as much as I condemn French air strikes in Syria," adding ISIS had "deviated from the path" of true Islam, as he denied there was a terrorist training camp in or near his village.

⁹⁶ Mulholland, Rory. "Muslim Radicals in Mountain Villages Spark Fears in Bosnia." *The Telegraph*, Telegraph Media Group, 30 Apr. 2016, www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/04/30/muslim-radicals-in-mountain-villages-spark-fears-in-bosnia/.

⁹⁷ Ignjatijevic, Marija, and Jelena Beslin. Op.cit.

According to the 2015 findings of Azinović, Vlado and Muhamed Jusić, who published a report titled *The Lure of the Syrian War: The Foreign Fighters' Bosnian Contingent*: "Citizens of BiH travelled to Syria mainly by plane, primarily from Sarajevo International Airport via Istanbul. Once in Turkey, they have continued their travel on internal flights with Turkish airlines, usually to cities in close proximity to the border with Syria. Most frequently, they have travelled to Gaziantep and then by road through Kilis to Azaz. Others have flown from Istanbul to Hatay, then travelled by road to Reyhanli, across the border at Bab al-Hawa, and then on to Aleppo. A flight from Sarajevo to Gaziantep or Hatay via Istanbul is relatively inexpensive – just a little over 100 Euros." The same report notes that BiH citizens that travelled to Syria from December 2012 through December 2014 were: 156 men, 36 women, and 25 children, adding that by January 2015, 48 men and 3 women have returned, while 83 men and 32 women still presumably remain in Syria or Iraq and a total of 26 (25 men and 1 women) BiH citizens have been killed. Two of the most wanted terrorists in the world are among them: Bajro Ikanovic, for many years the commander of the largest IS training camp in northern Syria; and Nusret Imamovic, a leading member of the Nusra Front in Syria, a group tied to al-Qaida. The emergence of Islamist fundamentalists in BiH reopened an unhealed wound and created rifts within local communities and within families, who have only until recently been conversant with such form of extremist thought. Balkan jihadists are mostly young people, typically between 20 and 35 years of age, coming from remote rural areas, being marginalized and stigmatized in deeply divided societies burdened with the legacy of war also accentuates the vulnerability of these individuals to Islamist propaganda.⁹⁸

⁹⁸ Ignjatijevic, Marija, and Jelena Beslin. Op.cit.

The influence of recruiters should not be taken lightly, since they utilize their charismatic nature and their hardline persuasion skills to indoctrinate and lure the vulnerable ones, and in some cases regular individuals. According to Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter Joby Warrick, the recruiters have “the ability to make converts out of hardened criminals and even prison employees. At [Jordan’s] Swaqa Prison, so many guards had fallen under their spell that the prison officials were forced to limit shifts to ninety minutes in any sector where the inmates might be encountered.”⁹⁹ The spell of ISIS recruiters cursed Ibro Cufurovic, a Bosniak fighter born in 1995 who left to fight in the Syrian civil war. Before leaving for Syria, Cufurovic told his 58-year-old father “When you're dead, I won't pray for you because you are an infidel.”¹⁰⁰

Cufurovic’s words to his father serve as proof of the fighters’ abandonment of family ties for the sake of joining a like-minded group sharing the same disdain for society and desire for power. Having any kind of attachment to family or friends stirs unwanted emotions in the hearts of those who choose to follow the path of upheaval and extremism. Indoctrinated youths reject their parents' authority as much as their Islam, as the convert David Vallet wrote, the radical preachers rhetoric could be summarized as: “Your father’s Islam is what the colonizers left behind, the Islam of those who bow down and obey. Our Islam is the Islam of combatants, of blood, of resistance.”¹⁰¹ The brainwash process adopted by recruiters and preachers pave way for the rebirth of Islamist mujahidin willing to commit any action for the sake of the extremist ideology. On this note, writer Olivier Roy says that the aim is not so much victory in the field as the making of a new sort of Muslim, one who is completely detached from ethnic, national, tribal, and family bonds: a global Muslim. In February 2006, a young Muslim fanatic in Sarajevo

⁹⁹ Warrick, Joby. *Op.cit*, pp. 31.

¹⁰⁰ Mayr, Walter. “Sharia Villages: Bosnia's Islamic State Problem - *SPIEGEL ONLINE* - International.” *SPIEGEL ONLINE*, 5 Apr. 2016,

¹⁰¹ Roy, Olivier, et al. *Op.cit* pp. 25.

murdered his own mother because she would not convert to Salafi-Wahhabism from the traditional, after killing her, the 23-year-old man went to a Wahhabi mosque with blood on his hands and clothes, telling his fellow believers that he had just made a ‘sacrifice to God.’¹⁰²

To date, BiH lacks a database of individuals believed to be in Syria and Iraq. "In some cases, it is impossible to determine whether someone has really left the country, is still in a foreign combat zone, or has returned home; and information about peoples’ intent to leave does not always come from reliable sources."¹⁰³ Meanwhile, since the beginning of the Syrian war, Balkan states, particularly Croatia, Serbia, and Montenegro have been selling millions of dollars’ worth of arms and munitions from the former Yugoslavia.¹⁰⁴ The weapons ended up in the battlefields of Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Libya, with Saudi Arabia as the main buyer.¹⁰⁵ The aforementioned shortcomings are caused by the lack of seriousness and transparency on behalf of the Balkan governments.

Indeed, security campaigns were launched targeting returning ISIS-affiliated elements in both BiH and Kosovo. Bosnian and Kosovar authorities have arrested a number of returning and local jihadis in high-profile strings in recent years and foiled a handful of domestic terror plots in the same period, namely the attempted New Year’s Eve bombing in Sarajevo in December 2015 and the plan to bomb an Albania-Israel football match in Tirana.¹⁰⁶ Yet such measures are only providing temporary solution to a deep-rooted issue. The local intelligentsia in BiH should start

¹⁰² Rusmir Smajilhodzic, “Moderate Bosnian Muslims Fear Extremist Takeover, *National Post*, June 17, 2006

¹⁰³ Azinović, Vlado, and Muhamed Jusić. Op.cit

¹⁰⁴ Mujanović, Jasmin. Op.cit. pp. 121.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Toe, Rodolfo, “Bosnia Ends Abu Hamza’s Seven-Year Ordeal”, *Balkan Insight*, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/bosnian-authorities-have-responded-to-terrorism-threats-says-expert-02-03-2017>, last accessed 20 July 2018.

thinking about addressing political, social, and economic issues that surfaced due to the war, in addition to the the growing influence of religion and outside foreign powers.

Conclusion

The fantasy of the ethnically pure nation-state "served the interests of Balkan elites who wished to keep the region from undergoing precisely the profound social transformations that came to envelop western Europe at the end of the eighteenth century and continued throughout the course of the 19th and 20th centuries."¹⁰⁷ Meanwhile, if it was not for the failings of the world powers in managing the war in BiH, the Bosnian exposure to extremist thought would have been averted or at least diminished. Saudi Arabia, Iran, the United States, and some European countries indirectly facilitated the rise of extremism in the country. The funding of Al-Qaida-affiliated mujahidin during the Bosnian war was taking place with the knowledge of the international community, yet they chose to turn a blind eye and remain ignorant about the complexity of the situation.

They utilized foreign forces and players to fight the war rather than intervening from the beginning, as they had sought to break the Serbian aspiration for expansion and implement goals that they failed to accomplish throughout the course of history. NATO continually threatened to use military force against Bosnian Serb forces committing aggression against the Bosnian government and civilian populations. Until the last year of the war, though, these threats were mostly empty, with the exception of the downing of four Bosnian Serb aircraft in February of 1994.¹⁰⁸ The Dayton Peace Accords, signed on 15 December 1995, created a weak central state presiding over two sub-state entities, including the Republika Srpska, representing areas

¹⁰⁷ Mujanović, Jasmin. Op.cit. pp. 21.

¹⁰⁸ Bideleux, Robert, and Ian Jeffries. *A History of Eastern Europe: Crisis and Change*. Routledge, 2010. p. 348.

populated mostly by Serbs. It ended the conflict while reinforcing Bosnia's ethnic cleavages via the ethnic partition of Bosnian territory.¹⁰⁹

The main feature of the Balkan region, at large, and BiH, in particular, is the knitting of the social fabric based on ethnic ties. In the absence of "a meaningful concept of a social contract that extends beyond or supplants banal invocations of blood or social,"¹¹⁰ ethnicity becomes the backbone of identity, further separating the peoples. With the arrival of the mujahidin, interreligious differences stiffened with the mainstreaming of Wahhabi Salafi ideology imported from beyond the borders of Europe. Salafi Islam found a fertile ground in the dire economic circumstances caused by the war, and paved way for a tragic epilogue to a struggle for independence that dates back to the age of the empires. Twenty-one years on, BiH continues to pay the price of the war. The radicalization of a segment of society has an everlasting impression set in the psych of individuals that extends across a generational level.

Two sets of motives prompted Bosniaks to fight alongside the ranks of ISIS, the first is the *El Mudžahid* unit which led to the Bosniaks' exposure to radicalism by means of the mujahidin who fought the Afghan-Soviet war, and the global appeal of ISIS among the youth seeking power, respect, and influence. The appeal attracts also people suffering from psychological troubles, wherein they find in the "jihadi imaginary a way to situate their madness within a realm of meaning shared by others; in other words, to cease being considered mad when their insanity reaches its murderous height, because they will be given the prestigious label of terrorist instead of being called a psychopath."¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ Zic, Borjan. "NATIONALISM DURING ARMED CONFLICT: A STUDY OF IDEOLOGY AND IDENTITY IN THE BOSNIAN WAR, 1992-1995." *University of Maryland*, 2017.

¹¹⁰ Mujanović Jasmin. Op.cit. pp. 10.

¹¹¹ Roy, Olivier, et al. Op.cit pp. 36.

As the international community prides itself as the torch bearer of modernity, democracy, and diplomacy, it is therefore expected to shoulder its responsibility to the fullest. Taken as a whole, the Western reaction to Yugoslavia's implosion might be summed up as willful, cynical ignorance. Because American and European policymakers did not want to deal with the crisis, they simply chose to avoid it ¹¹². The role of authoritarian powers, mainly Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey is gaining rise in second and third world countries due to the West's mishandlings. Presently, the Balkan region is witnessing the shrinking of U.S. and EU influence and its replacement by authoritarian and autocratic regimes. ¹¹³

Despair and disappointment following the war coupled with the powerlessness of the state, which suffers from absence of adequate capabilities, founded a potent ground for extremism, crime, and corruption to name a few. This comes in addition to the range of psychological, social, and environmental factors that make some susceptible to militant Islam than others. As events in the Middle East and the former Yugoslavia have shown, ethnic and confessional identities can be radicalized when confronted with the right circumstances. "The social fabric is almost always divided into a modernizing surface and a traditional substance."¹¹⁴ In the case of BiH the potential of the modernizing surface was shattered by traditional approaches, adopted during the war, and employed by outside forces, which predisposed the nation-state and its subjects toward backwardness.

The key to de-radicalization and modernization ultimately is to prevent the emergence of such circumstances. ¹¹⁵ Criminalizing foreign fighters is considered a momentary measure. The

¹¹² Mujanović Jasmin. Op.cit. pp.75.

¹¹³ Mujanović, Jasmin. Op.cit. pp. 125.

¹¹⁴ Mazower, Mark. Op.cit.

¹¹⁵ Mujanović, Jasmin. Op.cit. pp. 125.

rise in the number of Bosniak and Kosovar foreign fighters -- wherein around 413 Kosovo citizens, including women and children, have joined Islamist extremist factions since the war in Syria – signals a social and political rupture in those new states. This underlines the importance of putting in place prevention and de-radicalization strategies by local stakeholders, educational institutions, civil society and religious organizations in order to effectively counter and uproot radicalization and violent extremism.¹¹⁶ This comes in addition to vesting control over rural areas and establishing developmental projects so as to create opportunities for citizens, and diminish the anti-government sentiment adopted by a segment of society.

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¹¹⁶ Ignjatijevic, Marija, and Jelena Beslin. Op.cit.

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