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in Southeastern Europe

The Lead Story

Is Russia seizing Western Balkans from the EU?

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EDITORIAL

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"THE ISLAMIC STATE":
AN ATYPICAL GLOBAL THREAT
RESULTING FROM TYPICAL
INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Since publication of the last issue of Democracy and Security in Southeastern Europe, the world faces a new and unconventional security threat that suggests the character of modern global risks is shifting. But, while this new threat may in its essence be unique, the circumstances that opened space for it are certainly not. The so-called Islamic State, formerly The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), was organized as a coalition of several armed factions that emerged from consolidation of the opposition fighters which have been confronting the regime forces of Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad over the past few years. This consolidation was characterized by struggles for power among the factions (in which the majority of volunteer fighters from Bosnia and Herzegovina died) that often took precedence even over combat against Assad's troops.

The Islamic State inherited its ideological matrix from the Jama'at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad, a group led by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a Jordanian who joined the resistance against the American invasion of Iraq and pledged loyalty to Al Qaeda in 2004.[1] The group has been known ever since as Al Qaeda in Iraq. During 2004 and 2005, Zarqawi assumed responsibility for a series of bombings in Iraq; and before initiating this wave of violence against the Iraqi Shia and their most important monuments, he personally took part in the ritual beheading of several Western prisoners. Zarqawi clashed cruelly with all those who thought or believed differently than he, and was killed in the summer of 2006 when the US dropped two guided bombs weighing a quarter of a ton each on his shelter near the Iraqi town of Bakuba. His spiritual advisor and deputy, Abu Anas al-Shami – a Palestinian refugee born in Kuwait, who resided in Bosnia and Herzegovina during the 1992-1995 war – had been killed in a similar attack a couple years earlier.[2]

The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria built upon the ideological and operational heritage of Zarqawi during more than three and a half years of war in Syria. Over time, it became the strongest and largest opposition military formation there. Then, over this past summer, ISIS conquered parts of Iraqi and Syrian territory, occupied several garrisons and weapon storage sites of the Iraqi armed forces, robbed a number of banks, and established control over oil fields. With brutal violence, including the mass slaughter of perceived ideological opponents – often civilians – and members of minority ethnic or

religious communities as well as ritual beheadings of imprisoned Western journalists and humanitarian workers, ISIS is practicing what 19th century anarchists Carlo Pisacane and Mikhail Bakunin referred to as the communication potential of violence or "propaganda by the deed." In fact, having established a reputation for extreme violence, when word spread this summer that ISIS forces were nearby, entire settlements in Iraq were abandoned by citizens fleeing in panic, so that a substantial portion of territory was conquered with practically no resistance. Encouraged by military successes early in the summer, in late June, ISIS leadership declared a worldwide caliphate – an Islamic state led by a single political and religious leader (a caliph), believed to be a successor of the Prophet Muhammad and the ruler of all Muslims around the world. The ISIS leader at the time, Abu Bakr al-Bagdadi, was named Caliph Ibrahim and ISIS was renamed the Islamic State (IS).[3]

While the activities of Al Qaeda have been primarily directed against the "near enemy" (secular and dictatorial regimes in Muslim countries) and the "far enemy" (the US, because it has often supported those regimes) and have sought to foment unrest among and between these enemies, the main goal of the Islamic State is to conquer territory and establish a state structure. Dominance over territory is being achieved by the IS through brutality, causing fear, panic, and a frightening security vacuum that has allowed it to create a false sense of strict order and justice after invasions. And despite significant territorial gains, the territorial aspirations of the Islamic State are not necessarily for huge or even compact territories. According to an operational-strategic manual of the IS – the title of which translates as "Management of Savagery" – an incursion can begin in a few apartment buildings in a suburb, and the expansion of the Islamic State may take a few generations.[4]

A majority of the public in the Islamic world, as well as Muslim religious leaders, have condemned the establishment of the IS caliphate. The unilateral proclamation – a historic act undertaken without the requisite consensus of the entire religious community – along with the Islamic State's vicious tactics in pursuit of a utopia allegedly created in the name of all Muslims, have been perceived as an impertinent usurpation. There is fear among Muslims that this behaviour could make millions of people hostages of the IS by association.

Several regional and global factors have contributed to the formation of the IS. Various factions within the Syrian opposition have been supported from the outside through financial and military means for years, in the expectation that they would influence developments and ensure the protection of specific interests in the Syrian conflict. People, weapons, and money have been transported to local battlegrounds without any serious difficulty. Yet, this summer, when it managed to impose itself as the region's strongest military power, the Islamic State exploded in the faces of those who have indirectly and unintentionally contributed to its creation, like an uncontrolled laboratory experiment.

The international military response to the IS that has followed was only initiated after the world was exposed to images of the brutal beheadings of US and British civilians. This was the primary reason the US government reacted, though they have done so from a safe distance, using airstrikes. With the onset of the air campaign, another "coalition of the willing" has started to form out of countries that have committed to join the struggle against the IS. These countries will participate in the air campaign as well as the delivery of weapons and ammunition to rebels fighting the IS on the ground (mainly Kurds), and they will work together to arrest people suspected of assisting the recruitment and transfer of volunteers to Syria and Iraq.

Still, despite the commitment of these coalition countries, dramatic battles for the Syrian city of Kobane – which was on the verge of falling into the hands of IS fighters at the beginning of autumn and has now been under siege for months – have demonstrated how the different and opposing interests of these countries can actually inhibit timely response.[5] An inadequate reaction to the territorial occupation and atrocities committed by the Islamic State are reminiscent of the early stages of the war in Syria, where no intervention was undertaken due to the divergent interests of key regional and global powers. As a consequence, circumstances were created that have led in part to the founding of the Islamic State.

Developments in Syria to date, particularly the emergence of the IS, have confirmed some realities of interdependent global dynamics; above all, that the lack of decisive international intervention in an internal conflict opens the possibility of

its escalation as a rule and invites the potential that it grow into a regional conflict. Key international stakeholders choose to intervene in such conflicts only when they recognize a threat to their own national interests. But, even when an intervention is initiated, delays in action mean that interventions usually take place amid much more complex circumstances, when the outcome is less certain. The Syrian conflict has also proved that levels of violence substantially increase in civil wars in which one of the warring factions takes on an international dimension by attracting foreign fighters. Considering earlier examples of the impact of foreign fighters in internal conflicts, it is clear that their presence will be an obstacle for peace in Syria, even once an agreement to end the conflict becomes possible.

The war in Syria has shown, too, that a non-state formation (regardless of its pretentious name), can in certain circumstances become a global security threat, or can at least be perceived as one. Rather than a reflection of its genuine power, though, this perception is based more on the ideological potential of the Islamic State to radicalize marginalized, alienated, oppressed, and hopeless people in many parts of the world. Nonetheless, the attention given the IS by media and international powers classifies the organization as a credible threat.

It is interesting to note that another powerful non-state organization declared war on the Islamic State in the summer of 2014, in response to the brutal atrocities committed by IS fighters. Anonymous, the global "hacktivist" online movement, claims to be using all means at its disposal to inhibit the influence of the IS on social networks, in what has been dubbed "OperationNo2ISIS."[6] This marks the beginning of a new kind of global war in which member states of the so-called international order are neither leaders nor direct participants. The war zone is no longer on the ground; the new battlefield is virtual space.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the existence of the Islamic State may have a number of security implications, primarily due to ideological links and the presence of BiH citizens in the organization. The continuing tolerance in BiH for an ideology that justifies and advocates violence against "others" or those who are different has ended up being completely counterproductive and nearsighted. Such ideology inspires socially, economically, and geographically marginalized people who often happen to be emotionally unstable. Some political elites have occasionally mobilized such groups or individuals domestically to commit some form of violence or oppression against local minorities, and they have been kept in reserve in case of a renewed serious internal conflict. But their reduced perception of the world and of their own place and mission in it has neither improved BiH society nor its values. To the contrary, the actions and messages of radicalized people have directly contributed to the a priori perception of Bosnia and Herzegovina as a state which serves as a "recruitment centre for the white Al-Qaeda" or a "sanctuary and springboard" for terrorist groups wishing to spread their activities in Europe.[7]

It turns out that maintenance of this community in BiH was not the only motive for long-term and plentiful outside investment in the preservation of this ideology and the recruitment of new followers. This was a pre-meditated investment, collected with interest in the form of human lives and cashed out in Syria. Several dozen BiH citizens, of a total 160 who are known to have been in Syria and Iraq since the beginning of the war, are still in the region, most likely as part of IS formations. Over twenty have been killed there as of the autumn of 2014. Those who remain have no intention of returning to a country they consider an enemy and infidel, and their passports were probably ritually torn and burned upon admission to the IS anyway. Still, their activities on the battlefield and in social networks are powerful propaganda tools used to spread an ideology that promotes the use of force against anyone with different values or opinions.

This is a potentially dangerous development for Bosnia and Herzegovina – a country in which various political radicalisms have mutually nurtured each other for more than two decades. National and international security agencies believe that fighters who did return from the battlefields of Syria and Iraq are likely to be additionally radicalized, skillful in handling weapons and explosives, linked with international militant groups and, therefore, capable of establishing cells for the recruitment and indoctrination of new Islamic State fighters. And even if people with such knowledge and experience are not involved in sophisticated operations, they can be used by organized crime groups as well. Apart from that, returnees from Syria and Iraq are seen by many as authentic champions of the values they identify with, and could become a sort

of social role model within their local communities. They may be particularly looked up to by alienated and disenchanted young people from the margins of society. Indeed, war veterans from Syria and Iraq present a potential challenge to the authority of leaders of such communities, who could deepen the isolation of returnees and increase the possibility of mutual antagonism if they push back.

Of course, there are a significant number of volunteers who have returned from Syrian battlefields disappointed and disgusted with what they have witnessed. Instead of the magnificent struggle they expected – meant to establish a better and more just world governed in accordance with God's laws – they witnessed treason, cowardice, looting, and atrocities perpetrated against innocent civilians. In statements, they report having been appalled with the lack of military organization, chain of command, and care for the wounded. They suffered from food and water poisoning and were forced to buy or steal weapons. And many of them did not even participate in the struggle against the regime of Bashar al-Assad; instead taking part in internal conflicts among factions of ideologically similar groups, each convinced of the veracity of their own view of the war in Syria.[8]

The experiences of these returned fighters are important to consider in the development of an effective strategy aimed at preventing the further radicalization and recruitment of new volunteers. Criminalization and repression alone are insufficient and counterproductive.[9] Obviously, the phenomenon of voluntary participation by BiH citizens in other country's wars is in itself a serious warning to any reasonable and responsible government that a well-designed and balanced response is required. Otherwise, the security of BiH citizens will continue to depend to an unacceptably high degree on mere luck.

NOTES:

[1] For more details about Zarqawi, see: "Profile: Abu Musab al-Zarqawi," *BBC News*, November 10, 2005, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/3483089.stm (accessed October 26, 2014); Laura Smith, "Timeline: Abu Musab al-Zarqawi," *The Guardian*, June 8, 2006, http://www.theguardian.com/world/2006/jun/08/iraq.alqaida1 (accessed October 26, 2014); "Profile of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi," Homeland Security Profiles, Global Security, http://www.globalsecurity.org/security/profiles/abu_musab_al-zarqawi.htm (accessed October 26, 2014).

[2] For a useful review of the phases of the creation of the Islamic State, see: "What is Islamic State," *BBC News,* September 26, 2014, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29052144 (accessed October 27, 2014).

[3] For more on the declaration of the caliphate, see (in Bosnian): "Islamska država proglasila Hilafet," Vijesti ummeta, June 29, 2014, http://vijesti-ummeta.com/islamska-drzava-proglasila-hilafet (accessed October 26, 2014); "Proglašen Hilafet od Aleppa u Siriji do istočne iračke provincije Diyala na granici s Iranom," Vijesti ummeta, June 30, 2014, http://vijestiummeta.com/proglasen-hilafet-od-aleppa-u-siriji-do-istocne-iracke-pro-vincije-diyala-na-granici-s-iranom (accessed October 27, 2014).

[4] The Manual, titled *Dārat at-Tawahhush: Akhtar marhalah satamourrou biha l ummah* in Arabic (*Management of Savagery: The Most Critical Stage Through Which the Ummah Will Pass*), appeared on the internet in 2004, when Abu Musaba al-Zarqawi ramped up operations in Iraq. Its alleged author is Abu Bakr al-Naji, but common opinion is that this is a pseudonym used by Mohammad al-Hakim, also known as Abu Jihad al-Masri, an Egyptian who was a key figure in Al Qaeda until he was killed in a 2008 US air strike in Pakistan.

[5] For a more detailed analysis of the relations among these "allies," see (in Bosnian): Muhamed Jusić, "Šta nakon tzv. Islamske države," *Al Jazeera Balkans*, October 21, 2014, http://balkans.aljazeera.net/vijesti/sta-nakon-tzv-islamske-drzave (accessed October 23, 2014).

[6] Ben Makuch, "Anonymous-Affiliated Hackers Have Declared War on the Islamic State," *Motherboard*, June 30, 2014, http://motherboard.vice.com/read/anonymous-declared-war-on-the-islamic-state (accessed October 27, 2014).

[7] See: William Kole, "Terrorists recruiting 'white Muslims,'" *Associated Press*, October 17, 2006; Rade Maroevic and Daniel Williams, "Terrorist Cells Find Foothold in Balkans," *Washington Post*, December 1, 2005; "Al-Qaida ima logore na Balkanu," *Blic*, November 30, 2004; Judy Dempsey, "Al-Qaeda cells survive in Bosnia despite NATO raids," *Financial Times*, May 7, 2002; Marcia Christoff Kurop, "Al'Qaeda's Balkan Links," *Wall Street Journal Europe*, November 1, 2001; Craig Pyes, Josh Meyer and William C. Rempel, "Bosnia Seen as Hospitable Base and Sanctuary for Terrorists," *Los Angeles Times*, October 7, 2001.

[8] See: Suzana Mijatović, "Bošnjački bratoubilački džihad," *Slobodna Bosna*, March 20, 2014, 16-19.

[9] The criminalization of participation in other countries' wars has already led to terrorist attacks in states that have introduced bans, as revenge for their adoption. The most recent case occurred in Canada on October 22, 2014. For more, see: Vassy Kapelos and Laura Stone, "Canada's domestic terror threat quietly elevated days before attack," *Global News,* October 21, 2014, http://globalnews.ca/news/1626941/canadas-dome-stic-terrorism-threat-quietly-elevated-for-first-time-in-4-years (accessed October 27, 2014).

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