

Terrorism Monitor

In-depth analysis of the War on Terror

VOLUME XVI, ISSUE 10

p.1

Alexander Sehmer

BRIEFS

p.3

Sunguta West

Al-Shabaab Faces Leadership Battle as Speculation Over Emir's Health Mounts

p.5

Tobias Burgers and Scott N Romaniuk
Islamic State After Syria: A Dangerous New Stronghold in the Sinai

p.7

Ebi Spahiu

Returning IS Fighters in the Balkans: Beyond the Immediate Security Threat

LIBYA: FOREIGN FIGHTERS AND TROUBLE IN THE SOUTH

Alexander Sehmer

Clashes between rival tribes in Libya's southern Fezzan region re-escalated on May 11. However, the situation reflects more than just tribal rivalries, and the involvement of foreign fighters has troubling implications for regional security.

Recent clashes between Tebu fighters and those from the Awlad Suleiman tribe have led to multiple casualties, including at least 18 civilians, according to humanitarian agencies ([CAJ News](#), May 15; [Koaci](#), May 14). The Awlad Suleiman fighters are with the Sixth Infantry Brigade, which for the time being falls under the auspices of Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA) ([Libya Herald](#), May 14). The recent clashes have focused on the historic Qala citadel in Sebha, where the Sixth Infantry Brigade had set up a base and which has been used, the Tebu say, by Awlad Suleiman snipers ([Libya Observer](#), May 13; [Alnabaa](#), April 14).

The situation is confused by shifting loyalties and foreign fighters. The Sixth Infantry Brigade was set up in

2013 with government backing. Largely constituted from members of the Awlad Suleiman, it has helped put the tribe in a dominant position, and it is the Awlad Suleiman's capture of local security institutions and smuggling networks that has brought it into conflict with the Tebu.

While the Brigade appears to answer to Haftar, such loyalty is not to be guaranteed—earlier in the year, the UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA) claimed it fell under the authority of the defense ministry ([Libya Herald](#), February 22). Haftar had to stamp his authority on it, replacing its GNA-aligned commander Ahmad al-Utaybi ([Al-Sharq al-Aswat](#), February 27).

Meanwhile, the influx of foreign fighters in the south adds another dimension to the problem. Local officials have likened the situation to an "occupation" ([Libya Observer](#), February 25). The Tebu have aligned with foreign fighters from Sudan and Chad ([Libya Herald](#), June 11, 2017). Haftar too has been accused of using foreign fighters, mainly Darfuri mercenaries with the Sudan Liberation Army (SLA), to bolster his forces, something the LNA denies. It is telling, however, that LNA airstrikes on foreign elements in the south have had a greater focus

on fighters from Chad than those from Sudan ([Libya Herald](#), March 26).

The number of Chadian fighters in Libya is unclear, but they appear to be with the Front for Change and Concord in Chad (FACT), and a splinter group, the Military Command Council for the Salvation of the Republic (CCMSR), both of which are arrayed against Chad's President Idriss Deby.

As well as the carnage in Libya, the use of foreign mercenaries has significant security implications for the region more broadly as fighters move backwards and forwards across the border. However unintended, with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Egypt backing Haftar, Sudan, for example, could find its rebels are suddenly much better resourced.

MOROCCO: BREAKING DIPLOMATIC TIES WITH IRAN

Alexander Sehmer

Morocco has found itself in a diplomatic spat with Iran, having accused Tehran and Lebanon's Hezbollah, an Iranian ally, of training and arming independence fighters in Western Sahara. Rabat says regional politics had nothing to do with its decision, but such a move cannot avoid drawing in the Gulf States.

On May 1, Morocco announced it would cut diplomatic ties with Iran over what it alleged was Tehran's support for the Polisario Front ([Medias 24](#), May 1; [Kifache](#), May 2). Nasser Bourita, Morocco's foreign minister, claimed Rabat had evidence Hezbollah was providing surface-to-air missiles to Polisario fighters via Iran's embassy in Algeria ([al-Jazeera](#), May 1; [North Africa Post](#), May 2).

Morocco, which claims Hezbollah has for several years trained Polisario fighters in guerrilla tactics, connected the plot to the arrest last year of the suspected Hezbollah financier Kacem Taj Eddine ([Medias 24](#), May 15, 2017). Eddine was the subject of an international arrest warrant, but his capture by Moroccan authorities at Casablanca airport supposedly prompted Hezbollah to redouble its efforts in support of the Polisario ([L'Observateur](#), May 1).

Iran has denied Rabat's "false" accusations ([Fars](#), May 2). Algeria, feeling itself to have had been implicated, called the claims "completely baseless" ([MEMO](#), May 7). Hezbollah, for its part, insists Morocco has given way to pressure from the United States, Israel and Saudi Arabia ([MEMO](#), May 3).

Since Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) accuse Iran and Hezbollah of training and equipping Houthi rebels in Yemen, it comes as no surprise that the Gulf States quickly backed the move ([Medias 24](#), May 2). Qatar too was among the Gulf voices, reflecting Morocco's neutrality in the ongoing dispute between Doha and its regional neighbors. Rabat has so far resisted Saudi pressure to join the boycott of Qatar, possibly because of Qatari sympathies over Morocco's claim to the Western Sahara ([Morocco World News](#), June 21, 2017).

That has not stopped the Moroccan media from speculating about a "hidden" relationship between Qatar and

the Polisario Front, pointing to tracts of land allotted to Qatar in the east and south of the country, one of which is supposedly just a “stone’s throw” from the Polisario’s Tindouf camps ([Hespress](#), May 6).

Morocco’s relationship with Iran has been fractious in the past—over its hosting of the Shah following Iran’s 1979 revolution, and again in 2009 over allegations Iran was using its embassy in Rabat to undermine the Moroccan state and attempt to convert Moroccan Sufis to Shia Islam.

Morocco has taken a more assertive stance over the Western Sahara in recent months. Despite its claim the split with Tehran is unrelated to regional politics, it is unlikely the Gulf States view it wholly in that light.

Al-Shabaab Faces Leadership Battle as Speculation Over Emir’s Health Mounts

Sunguta West

The secretive head of al-Shabaab is reportedly critically ill, giving rise to speculation that the Somali Islamist group is re-organizing itself ahead of his possible demise. Ahmed Umar has been emir of the al-Qaeda affiliate in East Africa for nearly four years, but now reportedly bedridden for more than six months, the installation of a new leader could be imminent ([Daily Nation](#), April 20; [Tuko](#), April 23).

Splits Within the Shura

Details of Umar’s ailment are scarce. While it is possible he was badly injured in an attack, a Mogadishu-based source familiar with the militant group’s activities told the *Terrorism Monitor* that Umar is suffering from a serious kidney problem that affected first one and now both kidneys, and has left him fighting for his life.

Umar’s current location is unclear, but some reports say he is in the town of Jilib, in southern Somalia, where al-Shabaab maintains a stronghold. Others indicate the ailing leader may have fled to an undisclosed hideout in Gedo region, near the Kenyan border, following intensified bombardment by international forces ([Daily Nation](#), December 14, 2017; [Mareeg](#), December 7, 2017).

Since the advent of Umar’s illness, the group has acted to save its leader’s life, paying doctors and providing costly treatments that are depleting the group’s financial resources. A consequence of this has been a failure to release funds to pay its fighters at battlefronts in parts of southern Somalia ([Tuko](#), April 23).

Umar’s condition is allegedly causing concern among the group’s top leadership, at a time when al-Shabaab is pinned down by troops with the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM). Sources say the situation is so critical that Umar’s deputies in the Shura, al-Shabaab’s executive council, have been meeting to discuss his possible succession. That has led to heated ex-

changes, splitting the council into different factions ([Tuko](#), April 23).

At the moment, the Shura, which has a mandate to make important decisions regarding targets, finances and the group's ideological direction, is composed of eight members, among them Umar's deputies Mahan Karate, who heads the Amniyat, al-Shabaab's intelligence wing, Maalim Osman, the infantry commander, and Ali Dheere, the group's spokesman. It is believed the three do not see eye to eye on the matter of succession.

The deputies are concerned that a leadership vacuum would result in reduced operational capacity and the further loss of territory. Under Umar, the group has lost key areas and strategic towns in southern Somalia, which are crucial to revenue collection, recruitment and arms replenishment. It has also faced a split, with key leaders defecting to the government ([The Star](#), July 1, 2017).

Controversial Rise to Power

A ruthless hardliner, Umar—who is also known as Abu Ubaidah or Ahmed Diriye—took over as al-Shabaab's leader on September 6, 2014, replacing the former supreme leader Ahmed Abdi Godane, who was killed in a U.S. airstrike on September 1, 2014 ([Daily Nation](#), September 5, 2014).

Prior to this, Umar was a little-known cleric, an alleged member of the Amniyat, the secret intelligence group Godane formed to expose and eliminate dissident within the group. He was allegedly a close confidant of the late leader, who attempted to shape al-Shabaab into a regional jihadist group, and is believed to have participated in the bloody purge of dissenters ordered by Godane.

Umar is believed to be in his mid-40s and was known to be a hardliner within the movement ([WardheerNews](#), September 10, 2014). He was born in the Kalafe area of the Ogaden region before moving to southern Somalia, where he helped establish Islamic schools. He also served as al-Shabaab's governor for the Bay and Bakool regions ([Somali Current](#), September 6).

His ascendancy to al-Shabaab leadership was controversial. The Shura's decision to appoint him following Go-

dane's death had not been unanimous, and it was clear that some Shura members disliked him and considered him uneducated ([Intelligence Brief](#), June 20, 2016).

While analysts expected Umar to instigate a fresh wave of violence, an uncomfortable silence followed the weeks and months after his appointment. This sparked speculation that the poorly educated cleric lacked the leadership skills to re-energize al-Shabaab ([Sabahi](#), October 31, 2014).

However, after nearly four years at the helm, his death would leave the militant group in a precarious situation with no obvious successor. Possible candidates include Mahad Karate, who the Shura by-passed when they picked Umar in 2014, Ali Mohammad Rage, alias Ali Dheere, and Hussein Ali Fiidow.

Possible Successors

Karate (a.k.a. Abdirahman Warsame) is al-Shabaab's deputy leader and continues to play a key role within the Amniyat. Like Umar, he is believed to be in his 40s. He hails from the Eyr sub-clan of the Habar Girir, an influential clan that was the backbone of the Islamic Courts Union (ICU), from which al-Shabaab splintered.

The U.S. government designated Karate a terrorist in 2015 and put a \$5 million bounty on his head. He allegedly played a key role in the 2015 Garissa University attack, in which 148 students were killed ([The Standard](#), November 11, 2015). In 2016, Karate, whose name is spelled variously as Mahad Mohammed Karatey or Mahat Karetey, was erroneously reported to have been killed in a strike by the Kenyan military ([New Vision](#), February 18, 2016).

Sources describe Karate as battle-hardened and a religious hardliner, factors that boost his chances. He also worked as a deputy to Godane and now Umar, and both leaders came to trust him.

The other significant militant in the race is Rage, who is from the Hawiye Mursande clan and, like Karate, is a deputy emir for al-Shabaab. There was speculation that he too had been killed in a Kenyan-Somali commando operation in 2014 ([Terror free Somalia](#), March 6, 2014). Months later, the rumors were disproved.

Hussein Ali Fiidow, a deputy who oversees al-Shabaab's governorates, is another possible successor. Fiidow is thought to be in charge of the group's finance and administration. He is influential and a rival to Umar. With the high number of recent defections to the government, some al-Shabaab members suspect that Fiidow is plotting a coup against Umar ([Daily Nation](#) December 14, 2017). He is thought to have recently attempted to eliminate the leader, forcing Umar to flee with his supporters ([Mareeg](#), December 7, 2017).

An Opportunity to Strike

With Umar potentially incapacitated, it appears a leadership change within al-Shabaab is likely. While the group faces significant challenges that constrain its operations, the loss of strategic territory, the death of its commanders through airstrikes, defections and reduced revenue sources, a change of leadership could revitalize what remains one of Africa's deadliest militant groups.

That may mean increased attacks in Somalia as any new leader seeks to prove himself, with attacks potentially spreading to other East African nations—a growing al-Shabaab presence already exists in Kenya's Boni forest.

However, a change in leadership will also open a window of opportunity for international forces, which may be able to capitalize on the period of confusion and division that a leadership change will inevitably bring.

Sunguta West is an independent journalist based in Nairobi, Kenya.

Islamic State After Syria: A Dangerous New Stronghold in the Sinai

Tobias Burgers and Scott N Romaniuk

Having once held domain over some eight million people and controlled territory reaching nearly to Baghdad, Islamic State (IS) has undergone a monumental decline. Where the group was once in control of massive swathes of northeastern Syria and western Iraq, its so-called caliphate has since been dismantled. Militants appear to have deserted the group by the hundreds, and its territorial and battlefield losses have been mirrored online.

After the fall of its treasured Iraqi possession, Mosul, the group's de facto capital, Raqqa became the international coalition's next target. IS was predicted to take its last stand at Raqqa, fighting until its ultimate demise. However, rather than fighting to the last man, many IS fighters fled under an agreement to minimize civilian casualties, leaving only a minor force of about 300 to 400 fighters behind ([Haaretz](#), October 15, 2017). Thousands of foreign and local fighters were allowed to leave Raqqa before the collapse of the city's defenses.

Some experts argued that these fighters would make their final stand along the Syrian-Iraqi border. Closed in by an offensive on the Iraqi side of the border, in Anbar province, IS fighters had no place to go. It was widely considered that the final battle would be for a stretch of land along the Euphrates, but the expected showdown never materialized. Demoralized local IS fighters chose to run, rather than face certain death. The group's foreign fighters, unable to blend into the local population, could now seek to repeat an earlier strategy—faced with battles that left it nearly defeated in 2009, IS opted for a survival strategy based on insurgency-style warfare that would ensure the group survived in one form or another. [1]

As the ring around IS has slowly but steadily closed, the group has adapted, establishing a new safe haven in the Sinai Peninsula, capable of serving as its stronghold in the Middle East. Meanwhile, hundreds of its fighters have crossed into Turkey. An extensive number of IS jihadists are now potentially strategically situated for future attacks against civilian and military targets in Turkey

and across the wider region, including parts Europe. Turkey also serves as a valuable transit point for fighters seeking to reach other IS-controlled territories.

Emerging Threat in the Sinai

The basis for an IS insurgency in the Sinai already existed in the form of Ansar Bait al-Maqdis (ABM or “Supporters of Jerusalem”), which pledged allegiance to IS in 2013 ([al-Jazeera](#), November 10, 2014). The group benefited from the governance chaos that followed the ousting of Egypt’s former leader Hosni Mubarak. During that time, experienced jihadists were released from prison and the group sought to take advantage of the chaotic situation, extending its influence and operations in Egypt’s Sinai Peninsula ([Mada](#), February 16, 2014).

The Egyptian army, stretched thin as a result of its new role as an internal security actor, failed to quell the insurgency with its hard-handed approach ([Ahram](#), July 18, 2013; [MEE](#), March 13). Rather than pursuing a counter-insurgency approach, Egypt has opted to conduct traditional military-style engagements. However, this approach has not had positive results ([al-Jazeera](#), March 7). Indeed, the Egyptian army has been responsible for a large number of incidents in which civilians have been killed, alienating large portions of the local population and serving as propaganda and incentives for IS recruitment ([MEE](#), April 27). Already discontented with the lack of adequate governance, a framework for increasing IS support among the local population is already in place. Missteps on the part of the Egyptian government and its military, moreover, have served as a new means of luring foreign fighters to the Sinai.

In 2013, AMB became the Islamic State–Sinai Province (IS-SP), pledging allegiance to IS in a bid to secure more funding, weaponry and training. Ever since, it has evolved into one of the most successful IS franchises. IS-SP now controls some 900 square kilometers of territory in the restive Sinai. It assassinated the country’s top prosecutor, besieged an entire town—only withdrawing once the Egyptian forces deployed heavy air assets—conducted the largest attack in Egypt’s history when it killed 305 worshippers at a Sufi mosque and blew-up a Russian passenger jet operated by Kogalymavia, killing all 224 passengers and crew members on board.

Changing Dynamics

IS has morphed from a classical terrorist movement into a thriving insurgency-guerilla organization, retaining pieces of its old caliphate and securing entirely new territory ([Mada](#), July 9, 2013; [Aswat Masriya](#), July 2, 2015). As of mid-2017, a significant part of its forces constituted foreign fighters ([Jerusalem Post](#), March 11, 2018). The group is estimated to currently have somewhere between 200 and 2,000 fighters, albeit 1000-1,500 is a more realistic figure ([Cipher Brief](#), November 28, 2017). The group possesses heavy weaponry, including anti-tank missiles, anti-aircraft capabilities, tanks and artillery. Most importantly, and rather unusually, IS continues to engage in state-building operations and governance, resulting in the continuation in some form of its so-called caliphate. As part of its enduring success story, IS has created numerous institutions, even operating a religious police force ([Jerusalem Post](#), May 2, 2017).

With its Syrian affiliate losing terrain and under pressure, the Sinai is becoming the latest frontline in the global war against jihadist extremism and a new hub for foreign fighters. As its only semi-secure territory, IS leadership may prefer to seek refuge in Egypt’s Sinai region than resort to going underground or fighting along the Syria-Iraq border.

The Sinai offers IS a position of strategic significance, with more territorial opportunities. The group is also relatively sheltered, contending at present only with the Egyptian state, rather than external intervention or coalition airstrikes.

IS’ violent operations conducted from the Sinai illustrate the strength of the group and the relative ineffectiveness of the Egyptian regime’s counter-terrorism efforts. In the Sinai, the group’s military opponents are weaker, it controls a greater amount of territory and it faces little in the way of jihadist competition. Rather than remaining in Syria, where IS faces formidable adversaries and retains little-to-no territory, the Sinai presents a dangerous new chapter for the group.

Tobias Burgers is a Doctoral Researcher at the Otto Suhr Institute, Free University Berlin, from which he received a Master’s in Political Science. His research interests include the impact of cyber and robotic technology on security dynamics, East-Asian security relations, maritime security, and the future of conflict. Email: burgers@zedat.fu-berlin.de

Scott N Romaniuk is a Doctoral Researcher in the School of International Studies, University of Trento. He is the Editor of *Insurgency and Counterinsurgency in Modern War* (2015) and *The Palgrave Handbook of Global Counterterrorism Policy* (2017). His research interests include international relations, security studies, terrorism, and political violence.

NOTES

[1] Barrett, R 'Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees', The Soufan Centre (October 2018). Available [here](#).

Returning IS Fighters in the Balkans: Beyond the Immediate Security Threat

Ebi Spahiu

Over the years, the nations of the Western Balkans have seen about 1,000 of their citizens join al-Qaeda's Syria wing, Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (formerly known as Jabhat al-Nusra), and move on to join so-called Islamic State (IS). [1] They have hailed from Muslim majority communities in Bosnia, Albania and Kosovo, as well as minority Muslim populations in Serbia, Montenegro and Macedonia.

Regional governments have responded by criminalizing participation in foreign conflicts and taking measures against recruiters, radical preachers and jihadist propaganda networks. [2] The threat of attack is real but limited, while years since the alarm bells first went off, it remains unclear what effect returning foreign fighters will have in the longer term.

While the Western Balkans is not immune to terrorist attacks, as sporadic attempted attacks and some lone actor shootings have demonstrated, there is little consensus on the true threat returning foreign fighters pose for the region. Indeed, the general perception is that the region holds little propaganda value as a target for jihadists, raising the question of whether they intend to move further into Europe and in what way the phenomenon will manifest itself in the region's security landscape.

The Returnees

Between 250–300 Balkan fighters who quit IS and returned home between 2014-2015 seem to have done so having become disillusioned by the war and disheartened by the infighting between jihadist groups ([Gazeta Tema](#), October 8, 2017). The authorities appear to believe that few of these returnees pose an immediate security risk. In Albania, for instance, media reports have claimed that only 15 of some of the 40 returnees may pose a threat ([Reporter.al](#), March 23, 2016).

Others seem unable or unwilling to return, instead remaining in Syria and Iraq with their families and children.

[4] Security agencies in Kosovo claim that there are still 91 children (37 of whom were born in Syria and Iraq) and 41 women in areas under IS control. Only seven women and three children have so far returned home ([Balkan-Web](#), April 5).

Vlado Azinovic, professor of political science at the University of Sarajevo, commented that there were only “a few groups of women and children desperate to return” to the Balkans. “I don't think that the men will attempt to come back, short of being faced with the choice of imminent death in Syria and Iraq, or criminal prosecution back home,” he said. [5]

Despite the security implications of leaving a generation of potential jihadist fighters to grow up under the influence of remaining IS leaders, governments across Europe, including those of the Western Balkans, seem hesitant to repatriate those left in Syria and Iraq.

Meanwhile, in Bosnia, there are an undetermined number of children born in territories formerly held by IS as a result of “marriages” between Bosnian men and women of other nationalities, Azinovic claims. There are also orphans, adopted by Bosnians, whose nationalities are unknown.

Countering the Threat

The possibility of a large-scale act of terrorism in the Balkans became apparent in November 2016, when security forces in Albania and Kosovo thwarted an attempted attack targeting the Israeli national soccer team during a World Cup qualifying match in Shkodër, northern Albania's second largest city ([Gazeta Express](#), November 9, 2016).

Warning of the planned attack came from Israeli intelligence, which had reportedly intercepted online conversations between Lavdrim Muhaxheri, a Kosovar Albanian militant reportedly killed by coalition airstrikes against IS in Syria in the summer of 2017, and a number of his followers, including recent returnees from Syria ([Insajderi](#), June 8, 2017; [Opinion.al](#), November 14, 2016).

A total of 19 people, including the planned attack's supposed mastermind, were arrested across Albania, Kosovo and Macedonia. In Albania alone, more than 170 people were detained and questioned in connection with the plot, including 30 recent returnees from

Syria ([Panorama](#), November 10, 2016). The operation was an example of strong collaboration between regional intelligence agencies and international partners, but it also highlighted significant security vulnerabilities.

Since then, the IS influence on populations across the Balkans has been much reduced. Key propaganda and operational mouthpieces—such as Muhaxheri from Kosovo, Almir Daci from Albania, and Ines Midzic from Bosnia and Herzegovina—have reportedly been killed. That has left a significant leadership vacuum for IS supporters in the region, which in turn has left the group's objectives for its Balkan followers unclear ([Insajderi](#), June 8, 2017; [Dnevni List](#), March 13).

As regional media investigations have shown, there remains a wealth of propaganda material translated by IS into local languages available on social media ([Balkan Insight](#), February 2, 2017). New and updated material, however, is more difficult to find. Most IS-supporting channels have moved onto the “dark web” or material is shared on encrypted applications that are hard for the authorities to trace. The remaining videos and propaganda pages found online date back to the height of IS' media presence, when it first declared the creation of its so-called caliphate. [3]

Despite this good news for regional actors and counter-extremism strategies adopted across the region, radicalization continues in the Western Balkans, albeit that the ideology is evolving, taking different and possibly non-violent forms. Radical preachers no longer issue calls to action over war-torn territories, but instead hate speech and the incitement of polarization seems to be increasing and intensifying.

Crossing Borders

It is common for weapons originating in the Balkans to appear in war-torn areas across the Middle East, and to have been used in recent terror attacks in the West (see [Terrorism Monitor](#), December 2, 2015). Indeed, this is not unexpected considering the thriving black market and availability of weapons ([Balkan Insight](#), July 27, 2016). Less understood are reports of key Balkan members of IS repeatedly returning to their countries of origin undetected by the security services. Italian media once claimed that Muhaxheri had returned to Kosovo with his closest aides via the Macedonian border, although Kosovo's authorities quickly denied the reports

through an official statement ([L'esspresso](#), December 26, 2016).

Bosnian media has similarly raised alarm bells regarding Midzic returning home several times before his reported death in Syria ([Dnevni List](#), March 13). Both cases, although unconfirmed, raised questions over border controls and the Balkan migrant route toward Western Europe.

Additionally, organized criminal networks can affect transfers and there have been instances where criminal activities have been carried out by adherents of IS ideology. There is still only limited research into the nexus between IS terrorism and organized cross-border criminal networks, and the links between IS terrorists and organized crime have been widely debated. However, high levels of corruption and the already established organized criminal networks in the Balkans could enable this aspect to flourish and facilitate cross-border movement.

Nevertheless, fears of the movement of jihadists from the Balkans into Western Europe should not be overblown, and the situation is at any rate not a one-way trade. There are indications Balkan diaspora communities in the West have already been affected by Islamist ideologies, such as Albanian communities in Italy, and Bosnian communities in Austria ([Balkan Insight](#), January 9). Although these links are yet to be fully explored by the research community, past investigations and terrorism-related trials have helped to shed light on the radicalization processes of some Balkan nationals, dating back to time they spent in the West and links to radical Islamists living in Europe ([Balkan Insight](#), January 9).

Ideological Adaptation

While Balkan authorities downplay the possibility of an immediate security threat, the injection of political Islam into local religious and political rhetoric more broadly is affecting the region's ethnically and religiously diverse populations.

During the past few months, for instance, Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has repeatedly called on Balkan Muslims to support his political agenda and military operations against Kurdish forces in northern Syria. As Turkey transforms itself from a key regional economic player into a major geopolitical force—often accused in

the region of following a Neo-Ottoman agenda—Erdogan has also pressured Balkan governments to take action against investments, businesses, schools and individuals financed by the movement of Fetullah Gulen, Erdogan's political opponent exiled in the United States ([Gazeta Tema](#), January 21; [Klan Kosova](#), April 3).

Indeed, Erdogan is scheduled to hold an election rally in Sarajevo, the Bosnian capital, later this month. The planned rally is a strategic move to strengthen Turkey's footprint in the region, but it also, since several European countries have refused Turkey's requests for election rallies to be held in their territories, represents a "slap in the face" for European governments ([Balkan Insight](#), April 4).

Such geopolitical concerns increasingly inform Balkan Islamist ideologies and deepen political polarization. In addition to Turkey's political message, Russia is actively encouraging Slavic populations and adherents to the Orthodox Church to reinforce their political message and agitate around contentious issues, such as the recognition of Kosovo's independence ([BalkanWeb](#), April 5). The result has been increased friction between Kosovo and Serbia.

Recent events and diplomatic disputes have halted further dialogue between the two countries, even though a series of negotiations brokered by the EU over the past few years have led to important advances, often dismissed as merely symbolic ([Telegrafi](#), November 11, 2016). The situation came to a head in recent months with the arrest of Marko Dzuric, the head of Serbia's Kosovo office, during a meeting with Kosovar-Serb nationalists held in Northern Mitrovica, which strained diplomatic ties ([RTK Live](#), March 26).

'Prevent, Pursue, Respond'

Initially, regional governments simply responded to the challenges posed by the foreign fighter phenomenon by amending their respective national penal codes to criminalize the departure of nationals to fight in foreign conflicts. [4] Subsequently, governments have adopted national strategies to counter violent extremism, along with detailed action plans for their implementation (see [Terrorism Monitor](#), January 27, 2017).

Balkan strategies align with the "prevent, pursue, respond" model established in 2010 by the EU, which fo-

cuses on policing, community outreach and education aimed at countering extremist propaganda, as well as the monitoring of social media and internet traffic for terrorist-related activity. These strategies have been adopted across the Western Balkans; Albania, for example, established its Center for Countering Violent Extremism as a hub for regional coordination and capacity development of local stakeholders.

Territorial losses for IS in Syria and Iraq do not necessarily mark defeat for the group, rather it may result in a transition. A new iteration of IS may rely on insurgency-based tactics and local support groups already established in local communities. These could conduct small-scale terrorist attacks, which are difficult to predict and prevent using hard security measures.

For IS, this could boost their followers' morale and potentially aid recruitment. It marks a challenge for the authorities in European countries too, where IS has proved able to recruit. As a result, authorities across the region should anticipate significant ideological pushback from nationalist and right-wing ideologies.

In the Balkans particularly, that risks damaging the existing frail relations between different ethnic groups. Social cohesion, in addition to the strengthening of independent institutions able to respond to immediate crises, is one of the key tools necessary to counter threats from radical ideologies that seek division between communities.

In this regard, and in light of geopolitical players utilizing nationalist narratives to widen their support among local populations in the Balkans, the EU should emphasize the Balkans historical ties to Europe, ensure a path for Balkan nations toward European integration and guarantee their future within the EU.

Ebi Spahiu is an analyst of Western Balkans and Central Asian affairs and a countering violent extremism practitioner. She is currently based in Tirana, Albania.

NOTES

[1] Qehaja, Florian, *Jihadists Hotbeds: Understanding Local Radicalization Processes*, The Italian Institute for International Political Studies, 2016, Milano, Italy. Available at: http://www.ispionline.it/it/EBook/Rapporto_Hotbeds_2016/JIHADIST.HOTBEDS_EBOOK.pdf

[2] *Between Salvation and Terror: Radicalization and the Foreign Fighter Phenomenon in the Western Balkans*, Atlantic Initiative, 2017, Available at: http://www.atlantskainicijativa.org/bos/images/BETWEEN_SALVATION_AND_TERROR/BetweenSalvationAndTerror.pdf

[3] Author's own monitoring of social media platforms and webpages administered by IS supporters.

[4] Azinovic, Vlado, *A Waiting Game: Assessing and Responding to the Threat from Returning Foreign Fighters in the Western Balkans*, Regional Cooperation Council, 2017, Sarajevo, BiH, Available at: <https://www.rcc.int/pubs/54/a-waiting-game-assessing-and-responding-to-the-threat-from-returning-foreign-fighters-in-the-western-balkans>

[5] Azinovic, Vlado, Email Interview, April 9, 2018.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Council of Minister Decision on the Creation of the Countering Violent Extremism Center in Albania, December 12, 2017. Available at: <http://www.qbz.gov.al/Botime/Akteindividuale/Janar%202017/Fletore%20225/VKM%20nr.%20737,%20date%2013.12.2017.pdf>

[8] Resonant Voices Initiative as part of one of the programs already developed in the Western Balkans in collaboration with civil society. Available at: <http://resonantvoices.info/hr/>