

# **Y**outh Radicalization by extremists in the Balkans and Western Europe

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## **Abstract**

Terrorism has always been the satellite of human civilization. It took different shapes, it modified its ways of acting throughout the history, it had various names but the essence of it never changed. Terrorism is a particular type of crime, which has undergone modifications throughout the development of societies. In ancient times its manifestations were mostly individualist, whereas today governments and societies have to deal with organised, trained and well-funded terrorist organisations. Nowadays the most notorious terrorist organisation is the ISIS, which is recruiting Muslim members from all over the world particularly from Western Europe and the Balkans. Starting from 2014 we have witnessed the Islamic State's unprecedented success in recruiting foreign fighters from all over the world, particularly, youth from Western societies. Many of the terrorist attacks committed on the European soil can be prevented if the governments take up relevant measures in good time to stop the youth from getting radicalised. This paper will focus on the problem of the socially excluded youth in the Balkans and Western societies and the measures that would prevent the young teens from getting radicalised by extremist organisations.

**Key Words:** terrorism, social exclusion, youth, the Balkans, the West.

Terrorism has always been the satellite of human civilization. It took different shapes, it modified its ways of acting throughout the

history, it had various names but the essence of it never changed. Terrorism is a type of crime, which is characterized by unlawful use of force and violence against persons or property to intimidate or coerce a government, the civilian population, or any segment thereof, in furtherance of political or social objectives (28 C.F.R. Section 0.85, 2005). In ancient times its manifestations were mostly individualistic, whereas today governments and societies have to deal with organised, trained and well-funded terrorist organisations. Nowadays the most notorious terrorist organisation is the ISIS, which is recruiting Muslim members from all over the world particularly from Western Europe and the Balkans. Most people get recruited by the terrorists at a very young age, usually even before they become adults. Moreover, unlike any other radical group that the youth adheres to, the commitment to terrorist organisations starts at a young age and doesn't stop when young people reach maturity. According to some researches ("Home grown terrorism: Causes and dimensions", 2014: 26) 51.5% of the individuals under consideration began their process of radicalization between 16 and 25 years old. The proportion rises up to 84.8% if the age bracket is extended from 16 to 30.

Using children and teens in wars, clashes and terrorist attacks isn't new. Throughout centuries as well as in the 20th century teens have been used as human shields, messengers, spies, suicide bombers etc. Starting from 2014 we have witnessed the Islamic State's unprecedented success in recruiting foreign fighters from all over the world. Islamists have chosen brainwashing as one of the main tools of indoctrination, however there are also a number of socioeconomic and cultural reasons which will be examined further in this article.

The article is focusing on increasing youth extremism in the Balkans and Western Europe and the main reasons for it. Next the article argues for the young female's role in the ISIS and will attempt to portray the typical teenager or young adult who can be an easy target for indoctrination and recruitment.

While doing the primary research on this topic we have examined a vast number of books, scientific and official reports, articles on terrorism, youth radicalisation, crime prevention, immigration and cultural issues, as well as methodologies in criminological research and several case studies.

The rise of extremist groups in the chaos of the Syrian civil war doesn't remain a local or regional phenomenon, even though the vast majority of the ISIS recruits are from Arab States, the number of Western European, Balkan and post-communist recruits grows

rapidly. Balkan countries are among Europe's top exporters of volunteers fighting for radical Islamic organisations such as ISIS. Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) estimates that over 300 fighters from Kosovo have travelled to war zones in Iraq and Syria, while 330 fighters have come from Bosnia and Herzegovina, 110 from Albania, 100 from Macedonia, 50 from Serbia and 13 from Montenegro. This places Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina as the top two European countries by percentage of population who have joined terrorist organisations, while Albania is ranked in fourth place just behind Belgium (Petrovic, 2016: 1).

Due to the cultural differences and the mere fact that these countries (Italy, Spain) have historically had a small Muslim community who were mostly immigrants or their descendants the situation in the South Western part of Europe is slightly different. Nevertheless, according to the Spanish police there are more than 50 thousand newly converts who can become susceptible to radicalization because they are facing increasing pressure from Islamists who are calling on them to carry out attacks to demonstrate their commitment to their new faith.

The reasons of increasing radicalization of youth and young adults in the Balkans and South Western Europe have various roots, from socioeconomic and cultural to political ones. The Balkan countries are an ideal example of how over the past decade the militant Islamist movement introduced by the so called "Wahhabi charities", generously funded by Middle Eastern countries, has succeeded in creating an infrastructure of mosques, situated in remote villages and controlled by radical clergy, who often obtained their education in Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Egypt. These sharia-run enclaves often serve not only as indoctrination camps, but also as recruitment bases. Another spring off for indoctrination is online propaganda which is becoming more popular among young people. As for socioeconomic reasons, over 30% of youth unemployment rate, lack of opportunities both for men and women are recognised as contributing factors to the region's radicalisation problem.

The situation is overwhelmingly different in the South Western Europe, where the unemployment issue is not so pressing and countries' economic performance is better. In States like Italy or Spain the main target becomes the second-generation of migrants who face being bicultural by holding both heritage and mainstream cultural identities. This can create an inner conflict in a susceptible group of adolescents who might lose their sense of belongingness to the society

and search for it elsewhere, usually outside of their communities, inclining towards extremist ideas, thus becoming an easy target for recruiters. A similar dilemma sometimes encounter newly converts, especially young, marginalised and narcissistic individuals who are desperate to distinguish themselves. Thus we can conclude that in the South Western European countries the problem of youth radicalisation is more linked to the immigration, social integration and mostly psychological issues. Case studies of some Italian citizens, of both Italian and Arab origins have demonstrated that the roots of radicalization are more in personal traits, in unwillingness rather than inability to fit into the society ("Home grown terrorism: Causes and Dimensions", 2014: 16).

As a special part of this paper I would like to put an emphasis on young females' role in the ISIS. Female recruits are often stereotyped as submissive doers of their male counterparts, while the reality is somewhat different. Estimates show that around 15% of total Islamic State recruits are women (Saltman E.M., Smith M., 2015, p.6). Although under the Islamic State's rule, they are supposed to keep to the domestic sphere and raise the next generation of fighters, women's role in disseminating propaganda and recruiting other women mustn't be underestimated. There are two main types of women joining the ISIS, those who travel to Syria with their husbands(fighters) and those young girls (as young as 15) who travel to ISIS territory to marry a jihadist. Apart from the issues already mentioned (youth unemployment, social exclusion and psychological issues), there are also some other "push and pull" factors influencing young girls. While in countries like Italy or Spain the feeling of isolation and growing Islamophobia in the society, as well as unsatisfying life (based on restrictions imposed by families) can create hostile and frustrating environment for young girls, Balkans girls are often attracted by the romanticism of marrying a jihadist, jihadi *cool* and *pure* culture, compared to their countries' cultural diversities and promise of women's empowerment in the Islamic State. It is worth mentioning that educational and social backgrounds of young females joining the ISIS are quite diverse and there is no single profile of a female recruit. Each case is individual and extremely complicated, which makes it difficult for the authorities to trace female agents and recruiters.

To conclude this article, I will make an attempt to depict the typical teenager who can become an easy target of recruiters, basing on the information I referred to above. Combining all the facts a fuller image of a young person with social and psychological problems is

beginning to emerge. It is likely that this person has lost the feeling of belongingness to the society and is suffering from a dissatisfaction of life. S/He does however feel the need to be accepted. S/He feels alone in the world and that no one will save him/her. S/He hope that by joining a terrorist organisation, s/he can escape from the society s/he fears or disagrees with (Smith J.N., 2012: 26).

Terrorists' psychological motivations for their behaviour may arise from their frustration with their life and the 'need' for revenge for the alleged cause of their circumstances and becoming a part of something big and powerful gives them the feeling of being distinguishable among his peers while providing with the longed for feeling of brother/sisterhood and the idea of working for a righteous cause. The governments', social organisations, NGO's and educational institutions' prime duty in the circumstances must be undertaking relevant steps towards the promotion of peaceful co-existence ideology, social and cultural inclusion of the second and third generation immigrants, as well as marginalised youth in the Balkans. Extreme ideologies often strike a chord in the hearts of the deprived and marginalised. Many problems in the Balkans can be solved provided that the youth unemployment decreases and the educational level rises. Adding the socioeconomic problems of the youth to the government's agenda will most likely spare the countries from Islamic terror in the future.

## **Conclusion**

Thus, after the First World War the situation in Europe can be very schematically represented as follows: state and political structures are open about peacemaking and cooperation, but covertly continue the pre-war practice of a military solution to the issues of domestic and foreign policy; the society, intellectually striving for a peaceful life in practice are expressed aggressive plans to review the results of the war. Therefore, before politicians and diplomats had a difficult task of appeasement not only in the traditional foreign policy, but also appeasing the public.

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