

Islamic Extremism in the Balkans as a Geopolitical Instrument

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore the connection between religious extremism (especially Islamic extremism and Islamic terrorism) and traditional geopolitical theories of the last century. It is our assumption that religious extremism (especially Islamic terrorism) has shown clear geopolitical elements, since it has been used by countries of the region to promote their political and strategic objectives, as it has also been used by non-state actors to promote a geopolitical agenda that serves their goals. With our special focus on Islamic extremism, as one of the main threats for the security of the Balkan region, our goal is to study this phenomenon in the framework of security architecture and challenges for the Balkan geopolitical space after the Cold War. The methodology used will be comparative and empirical (a middle ground between qualitative and quantitative methodological approaches). It will compare different geopolitical approaches developed by countries of the region, while giving a special place also to empirical analyses of religious extremism. One of the results of our research is that the influence of political Islam in the Balkan region is not a product of the generalist idea of Islamic terrorism after September 11, 2001, but much more a historical product of long evolutionary social and cultural processes within especially the Western Balkan countries. Secondly, the increased sensibility and level of threats from international terrorism has impacted not only in the security strategies of Balkan countries, but also on their geopolitical adaptation vis-à-vis terrorist groups. The geopolitical impact of Islamic extremism in the Balkans cannot be seen isolated by other phenomena threatening its security and democratic stability, such as organized crime and corruption.

Keywords: Balkan Geopolitics, Political Islam, International Terrorism, Regional Security

1. Introduction

This paper will explore a variable of the geopolitical effects of Islamic radicalism, the religious extremism it is capable to produce as well as the use of terrorist violence for geopolitical objectives. It aims to analyze the geopolitical effects of terrorism and the use of violence by states –as unitary actors in international relations– and non-state groups or actors. In this context it constitutes an added value for it supports the assumption that, in an anarchical international system, states behave like biological organisms, unfolding a clear need to conceptual survival. The attestation of this need can be seen at the use states are making of other non-state (and extra-systemic) actors for geopolitical reasons, with the goal of perpetuating the need citizens nourish for the state as such. This kind of relationship between states and non-state actors is dialectical, since both need each-other in order to obtain legitimacy as important part of international relations. This is even more evident in the case of expansion of Islamic extremism in a large number of countries of the Balkan region, creating sound preconditions for the spread of terrorist violent acts not only in the Balkans but also in Europe.

2. The Demographical and Historical Roots of Islamic Extremism in the Balkans

Demographical changes occurred generally in Europe and specifically in the Balkans can be considered one important geopolitical dimension of the Peninsula landscape. Especially after the Cold War the new demographical balances linked directly with the problematic and challenges of security troubling the region. On the other hand, the demographic growth of the Muslim population in Europe and the Balkans, followed by almost two decades of wars and conflicts, has gradually transformed the region in a favorable ground for the rise of political Islam and the penetration of Islamic extremist exponents within the states and Muslim communities of the region. The expansion of Islamic extremism has intensified especially after 2010, while specific groups have shown clear evidence that they have served as terrorist shelters for other groups operating inside European Union countries, as well as a relatively “free area” of arms supply and other facilities needed to fulfill terrorist acts. On the other hand, during the last years there has been a sharp increase of the

number of extremist Islamists engaged in conflicts well beyond the region, especially in the Middle East. When this landscape is confronted with the actual level of economic, social and political development of the Western Balkan countries, it becomes clear to us that we are facing one of the most important security challenges not only for the region, but for the European security architecture as well.

The case of the influence of extremist actors and terrorist groups in the Balkan sub-system of international relations is very important for our assumption for some reasons. First, as it will unfold in this paper, the Balkans (likewise other parts of Europe) has a long and complicated relation between religious communities. This relation has not always been peaceful. Second, if early history it intertwined with the second part of the twentieth century, we gain a complicated picture of inter-ethnic relations. These relations were forged under a period of communist atheistic ideology of totalitarian regimes, and through a very long and difficult post-Cold War transition towards democratic systems. When the first signs of liberal democracy were seen, the perspective of European Union integration was embraced, along with all its duties and privileges – especially in terms of human rights and religious harmony. In third place, the Balkan region has always been a “civilization fault line” (Huntington, 1997) between Christianity and Islam. Forth, in the post-Cold War Balkans, religion has been frequently used for geopolitical interests, as shown by the case of Bosnia (and even Kosovo). This can be documented by the re-orientation of strategic relations of nearly all Balkan countries (except Serbia, for other geopolitical reasons, mainly related to its position in the region and its privileged relation with Russia) –such as Albania, Rumania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Kosovo, etc.– with the United States; by the re-dimensioning of national security strategies of almost all those countries, putting terrorism at the center of their strategic and security priorities, in accordance with the American approach to this phenomenon; by the readiness and full support of these countries for the “War Against Terrorism”, waged by the former American president George W. Bush (Jr.) and materialized in the war campaigns against Talibans in Afghanistan (2002) and Saddam Hussein in Iraq (2003-2004); by the political and strategic readiness to adopt the European Union legislation on terrorism after 2001; as well as by offering all the necessary assistance under the NATO membership framework and obligations in the fight against terrorism and Islamic extremism (Tziampiris, 2009: 209-19).

In this sense, September 11 and Islamic extremism have impacted not only the strategies of Balkan countries, but also their geopolitical adaptation, in accordance with the security challenge from non-state transnational terrorist actors this sub-system of inter-state relations was facing. On the other hand, it is obvious that the impact of Islamic extremism in the Balkans cannot be seen and/or judged isolated from other phenomena threatening the regional security and democratic stability, such as organized crime, corruption and the states’ incapacity to build sound democratic institutions. For this reason, we will analyze below the other geopolitical challenges to Balkan security, in order to picture a more complete regional strategic context, with all factors and actors that operates within it.

As with other regions of the world, the ‘90s marked a series of changes in the international system, signaling a new era of international relations, beyond bipolar tensions of the Cold War. But in the Balkans this new era was characterized by nationalist clashes and conflicts, border changes and domestic and regional instability, emanating inevitably by the transitional processes towards democratic regimes of all countries of the region. Such a landscape brought to surface a considerable number of national, regional and international security issues, such as organized crime, human trafficking, ethnic clashes, political instability, corruption, and even failed states. Especially during the ‘90s and the following decade these turbulences produced regional instability, becoming obstacles for the political and economic development of the region. They brought also the Balkan issues into the foreign policy and security agenda of European Union and United States. The above-mentioned issues, compressed in what came to be called the “*Balkan Path*” are socio-political issues with a clear national and regional security dimension.

Adding the dimension of Islamic extremism to this already exploding blending, we have a complex geopolitical situation, with a high level of security threats. This situation increased the amplitude of attention that European and international institutions were willing to pay to the region, mainly through international organizations such as Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), NATO, Council of Europe, United Nations, and so on). Especially the Balkans have become a fertile ground for the penetration of Islamic extremism and for the exportation of terrorism to Europe, while remaining a preferred gate for the entrance of radical exponents from the Middle East (Tziampiris, 2009). On this regard, on 2008, European institutions noticed that “[...] the ‘Balkan Path’ uses the countries of Western Balkans as transit states in order to transport illegal commodities towards neighboring countries, such as Greece, Italy, Slovenia, Austria, Bulgaria, Rumania and Hungary, as key geographical entrance points into European Union” (Europol, 2009). Large deficits in the structure of governmental and institutional structures in these countries, combined with the new security challenges (of a much more human-centered and transnational nature, rather than state-centered and international nature) undermined the capacities of these states and diminished their ability to enter an immediate true development trajectory. The Balkan security challenges after the Cold War are not only common, but they have also a

cross-border dimension. The return at their homes of displaced refugees from the wars in Yugoslavia, economic development, war against organized crime and religious radicalism, are clear indicators of a region where cooperation remains the only way to obtain concrete results (EU Commission, 2004: p. 14).

The need for a stable and secure Balkan region was even more urgent and necessary when European Union member-states became "recipients" of a series of security issues flowing out from the Western Balkans. European Union reaction began to toughen when these security issues started to take threatening dimensions for the member-states. In this sense, organized crime and its secondary dimensions, emanating mainly from countries such as Albania, Bulgaria, Moldavia, Rumania, Russia, etc., have constituted the main threat for European Union states. The underlying causes of this phenomenon are various, such as poverty, unemployment, gender and ethnic discriminations, misrule and the lack of the rule of law. During the last two decade, the networks of organized crime have succeeded to penetrate in a series of political and social processes, frequently transformed in political units with deep impact not only into domestic political life, but also in the regional balance-of-power relations. A considerable part of corruption emanate exactly from these networks, penetrating deep into states' infrastructure, transforming itself into systemic corruption.

After organized crime and corruption, the next threat for the security of Balkan states comes from Islamic extremism, a phenomenon imported mainly from Middle-Eastern countries, finding fertile group to penetrate in the region because of religious composition (with large Muslim majorities) of the most countries. Also, Islamic extremism has made it through the Balkans making a geopolitical use of the regional conflicts (as shown by the cases of Bosnia and Kosovo wars against Serbia, a country with Christian-Orthodox majority). This gave Islamic extremism a clear geopolitical dimension, especially in the more general context of global war against terror and of tensioned relations between civilizations (Huntington, 1997).

On the other hand, the Post-Cold War period has created a blurred situation globally in relation to asymmetrical threats and the Islamic terrorist cells, even more so in western countries. But the Balkans constitutes a geographical space where scholars of international security, as well as experts and scholars of terrorism and radical Islamism have paid reduced attention (Arbatova, 2004: 361-2). This geopolitical interpretation finds practical application on another very important security issue for the countries of the regions that has alerted the security institutions and structures of European Union, as shows the dislocation, installation and presence of terrorist exponents and extremist organizations coming mainly from Afghanistan. On 2009, European Council concluded that: "terrorism should be considered an important threat for the security of Europe, to our democratic values as well as for the human rights and freedom of European citizens. Terrorist acts constitute unjustifiable acts under any point of view" (EU Council Secretariat Factsheet). Based on this political approach of the European Union, the investigation and dismantling of terrorist support networks inside European territory or the prevention of their displacement, as well as the interruption of financial support for terrorist activities inside European Union, have already become priorities for the organization and its member-states.

This evidences a prioritization of the foreign policy agenda of European Union in relation to Balkan countries, boosting terrorism and religious extremism on a very high level. Such an imposture of the foreign policy agenda reveals that Islamic extremism has obtained the status of a geopolitical challenge, a special viewpoint to deal with the Balkans, but also the Caucasus. In any case we are conscious that European Union's relations with these two regions have been built on completely different premises. We should also mention the fact that further democratization of the region is necessary to avoid the strengthening of religious extremism. Thus democratization has become a geopolitical and geostrategic priority of the Union, accepting indirectly the impact of an external non-state geopolitical actor, such as Islamic extremism (Arbatova, 2004: 371-8). These activities were observed in a number of Western Balkan countries, which have been put under continuous pressure to change their practices and approach for the prevention of terrorist attacks in the future. European Union in cooperation with United Nations requires by all countries to ratify and implement all 16 Protocols of UN against terrorism.

There are also other regional or global organizations, except from European Union, that have paid special attention to the issue of expansion of Islamic extremism in the Balkans. The Council of Europe and other organizations, such as OSCE, have considered terrorism after 2001 as an extremely important issue, with important geopolitical implications regarding the use of these states by extremist non-state actors. The case of Bosnia-Herzegovina, a country frequently described as an area of terrorist allocation and movement, was seen by the Council of Europe as an issue of absolute priority (CODEXTER 2006). The arrestments carried out under the accusation of collaboration with terrorist organizations and Islamic extremism, have not paid off, while the country remains institutionally and politically unable to react. Bosnia cooperation with the European Union institutions is assessed as positive, in the sense that there were made some solid steps ahead regarding investigations and justice distribution (European Commission Progress Report on Bosnia, 2006). This increased mobility of the Council was not casual, but followed a series of reports by a lot of sources mentioning the entrance of certain individuals in Bosnia and their promptitude to offer all kinds of "services". The contradiction around

Bosnian state entity during its first steps as an independent state, doesn't consist only in its three ethnic groups and in the non-existence of its institutions and state structures, but also in the dimension of consolidation the Islamic component in Bosnia on a wider regional area. This Islamic component was partly hostile towards other ethnic groups and enjoyed essentially wide support from the Arab world (Kholman, 2004). This constitutes an important geopolitical dimension in the Bosnia-Herzegovina's case.

The changes observed after the '90s increased not only the American geopolitical attention towards Bosnia, but also European institutional and economic support for the country. The European economic support for the establishment of an institutional framework came under the condition of fighting extremism within the country and devoting a special dimension to its categorization as a criminal act (CODEXTER 2006). At the same time, all declarations and strategies to confront organized crime in Bosnia-Herzegovina and in Western Balkans in general, point out the increasing connection between religious terrorism, organized crime and international arms and drugs trafficking. Bosnia has signed and ratified a number of international agreements on the war against terrorism and the fight against organized crime. But the security threats emanating from these issues remain worrisome, taking a regional geopolitical dimension.

As a result, the favorable geopolitical and geostrategic position of Balkan Peninsula, due to its vicinity to Western and Central Europe as well as to Middle East and Caucasus, has always inspired the interest of great powers in their fight for regional or global domination. In this sense, the involvement of new actors of international relations (without any remarkable historical tradition regarding geopolitical influence in the Balkans) such as Iran, in the Balkan security architecture, should not pose any surprise, because one ought to bear in mind the fragile geopolitical balances of the region, its ethnic conflicts along with fault lines between religious communities. Iran has been a supplementary player in the geostrategic chessboard of the Mediterranean during the last two decades, while its role has intensified especially at the end of the '90s and during 2000-2010 (Arbatova, 2004: 363-6; Huntington, 1997: 269). Bosnia represents the center of Iranian influence in the greater Balkan region, with a big investment in human and financial resources, because Iran considers it a very important strategic junction from where to project its power throughout the Balkans.

One of the most important developments inside such a big and divers community, with a clear regional geopolitical dimension since the end of communist era, is the radical re-definition of their religious identity and the re-shape of relations between Muslim communities and nation-states throughout the region. The history of the last two decades in the Balkans has been full of active jihadist and terrorist movements with direct connections with the Middle East (Deliso, 2013: 28-50). This changing and dynamic relation between Muslim communities and their respective states has produced a new geopolitical reality in the Balkans that policymakers and scholars have been trying to analyze, notably under the new global events following September 11, 2001. Seen from the viewpoint of civilizational geopolitical clashes, as Huntington (1997: Ch. 4) would argue, there exist deep distinctions, motivated by deep historical traditions, between Muslim communities in the Western Europe and the Balkans. In this aspect we should notice the obvious differences between specific groups within each state, not only regarding their historical traditions or ethnic and socio-linguistic peculiarities, but also concerning the multiplicity of their cultural and ideological features.

Even though the geopolitical connection between Islamic extremism and religious terrorism has been very clear, especially on a global context, when it comes to the Balkans, there are obviously some empirical interesting concerns. First, the region has had a minor number of terrorist attacks, especially when compared to other regions of the world (reference libri sigurisè). The main reason why no significant attacks have been carried out until now by Islamic terrorist organizations in major metropolitan cities of the Balkans should be found at the regions geostrategic importance as a "safe heaven" with support role for the international jihadist network. In this sense, terrorists don't want to draw international attention to the region. RAND Institution, in a study about transnational criminal networks, notices the formation of the so-called "hybrid criminal groups", a new phenomenon of transnational security, giving special attention to the Balkans, where these groups combines with increased effectiveness the unlawful traffic of narcotics with nationalist ideology and religious fanaticism or extremism (Williams, 2007: 50-4). The issue obtained more attention at the beginning of 2010, when Israel's foreign ministry made some clear statements about the issue, while another very interesting aspect have unfolded through various sources and channels of information, revealing the existence of direct Hezbollah links with the Balkans (Weinthal, 2013). Also in January 2012, at a meeting with the Macedonian Prime-Minister, Israel's foreign ministry Avigdor Lieberman declared that Balkan states have already transformed in a new target for the global jihad – not in the aspect of planning and carrying out terrorist attacks, but in the much more serious sense of preparing the necessary ground for the extremist movements to flourish. According to Lieberman (Balkan Insight, 2012), "the last reports show clearly that the Balkan region has transformed into a new target for global jihad, aiming to create the infrastructure for the recruitment of Islamic activists. This can be evidenced by the efforts of some Islamists, especially Saudi organizations, to transfer financial funds from Africa and South America, in order to navigate them towards the Bosnian and Albanian areas". On the other hand, a special report of the French newspaper "Le Figaro" (2010) reveals to

the details the itinerary of Islamic terrorists from Lebanon into Europe. The journalistic report clearly indicates the security and geopolitical dangers facing European states in the South border of the Union, whose borders coincide with those of Muslim or Arab countries – such as Greece, Italy, France, or Bulgaria in the Balkans. The killing of five Macedonian citizens, the attack on American embassy of Sarajevo at the end of 2011, the attack on Israeli tourists in Burgas (Bulgaria), as well as the numerous reports regarding the spread and intensification of terrorist activity in Southeast Europe, show with a degree of certainness the increase of threat level for the national security status of the countries around the region. This situation has an immediate impact in the regional level of terrorist threat and in any geopolitical interpretation regarding the wider Balkans, because it bears the potential to change geopolitical balances and to give them a much more religious dimension. The war in Syria seems to have re-activated the paths of the '90s decade among salafists in the Middle East and their offsets in various areas of the Balkans. This brings us to a final point to make regarding the role of intelligence services and security agencies in this complex geopolitical situation of increased terrorist threats in the Balkans and their implications for Europe.

3. Conclusions

Analyzing the impact of the danger emanating from Islamic extremism and the wider use of religious by a number of countries for geopolitical purposes and objectives bring us to some very interesting and useful conclusions. It is obvious that these conclusions need further scientific elaboration due to their immediate impact in the instability of Western Balkans. Actually, the influence of political Islam in the Balkan region is not so much a product of the post-September 11 era. It is more a consequence of historical processes with cultural and social dimensions. The increase of the sensitivity and the level of international terrorist threats from Islamic extremist activities has impacted not only the transformation of security strategies of the Balkan countries, but also changed their geopolitical behavior. Their new behavior was now adapted to the new terrorist non-state transnational actors threatening the Balkan sub-system of international relations. On any case, the geopolitical impact of Islamic extremism in the Balkans –especially in the Western Balkans– cannot be considered isolated from other phenomena that threatens its security and democratic stability. Problems like organized crime and corruption, that has by now dictated the regional agendas of foreign and security policies, has taken worrisome dimensions and has transformed in authentic challenges for regional stability and the national security of the region's states. The European perspective of these countries seems not enough as a possible "carrot" in absence of an efficient "stick", regardless of the role played by regional security organizations (such as OSCE and NATO) or the increasing geopolitical and diplomatic involvement of United States as regional stability guarantee. As mentioned above, one of the main reasons why the Balkan region has no records of any major terrorist attack should be attributed to the geostrategic importance it has for terrorist organizations as well, as a "safe heaven" and support area for the European Islamic extremist networks. But such an assumption cannot be made for the future, especially bearing in mind the state of democracy and development of the Balkan countries and their long-lived problems, such as the rule of law, the consolidation of democratic institutions, deep economic problems and crises, or organized crime and corruption. All these issues increase the possibility for Islamic extremism to be used more intensively in the future as a geopolitical instrument by the countries of the region, as well as by other non-state actors operating in it.

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