

# **MILITANT ISLAMISM, DOMESTIC TERRORISM AND MACEDONIAN NATIONAL SECURITY**

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**Abstract:** The armed conflicts that began the process of disintegration of the Balkan peoples at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century have resulted in the existence of a distinct ethnic and religious divide that is maximally exploited by global militant Islamic organizations. The large number of militant Islamists from the Balkan countries struggling on the side of the paramilitary formations of the Islamic state in Syria and Iraq merely confirm the fact that the Balkan Peninsula is a region where active extremist structures are in line with the ideology of militant Islamism. As a result, militant Islamists have set up a solid base for extending this ideology between the Muslims and the rest of the population. With regard to Macedonia, although some analysts claim that militant Islamists are present in Macedonia, the overall assessment is that Macedonia is not the main goal of this movement. However, certain criminal activities with a terrorist signature, both from the expert and scientific public, have been rated as acts motivated by a militant Islamist ideology, and that this is a new kind of terrorist threat which has not been imported from outside, but made at home. In this paper, through a scientific approach, we will identify the threat to Macedonia's national security from a new generation of militants inspired by global jihad ideology.

**Keywords:** militant Islamism, terrorism, ideology, national security, threat

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Most security problems and threats in the modern world, one way or another, are associated with Islamic fundamentalism and its doctrine and policy. Not because Islam itself is prone to conflict, but because of fundamentalist movements that use terrorism as a means to achieve their goals everywhere around the world. In the last ten years Islamic fundamentalism has been the greatest threat to the security of Western democratic civilization.

Since the Balkan region has undoubtedly become part of Western civilization, by political and economic values as well as by civilization's values, and as the national interest for all the countries of this region is full integration into the transatlantic institutions, the threats of militant Islamism to the national security of the Balkan countries should be taken very seriously into account. This idea, presented for the first time in Huntington's "Clash of Civilizations", at that time seemed

exaggerated. Today, these threats have not only become more real, but in the era of mass electronic communication they have become frightening, and thus, the idea of victory of liberal democracy from Fukuyama's "End of History and the Last Man" sounds more like a utopia.

As a multi-religious and multi-ethnic region with unresolved bilateral disputes and open national issues, some Balkan states are today in an uncertain political and security situation. Such a situation has the potential to further spur the spread of a militant-Islamist ideology, promoted locally and supported by global militant Islamic organs, formed on the basis of the most prominent forms of Islam which promote religious and ethnic hatred, and non-compliance with modern democratic processes, human rights and freedom. The active participation of Macedonian citizens at the jihadist fronts in Syria and Iraq in the ranks of the Islamic State (IS) drew exceptional international attention, and promoted Macedonia as a country where radical structures associated with global jihadist movements consistent with militant Islamism ideology are active. The current policy of the Republic of Macedonia for the IS is guided by the country's Euro-Atlantic aspirations and supports the international coalition against this global threat. As a result of this, Macedonia is facing an increasingly likely risk threatening its national security, particularly if we consider the fact that on its territory there are active structures conducting, radicalizing and recruiting the Muslim community for the battlefields in Syria and Iraq.

## **2. CONCEPT OF MILITANT ISLAMISM**

For Muslims, preserving a strong feeling of faith and identity, independence and the definition of their ideology in today's times of modern globalization still continues to be a large and lasting commitment. The revival of Islam at the end of the 1960s was manifested in different forms and intensities in various Muslim religious organizations and Muslim governments around the world, such as Libya, Egypt, Lebanon and Pakistan. Apart from this, there are differences in perspective between those to whom Islam and religion are elements of the national cultural identity, and those to whom Islam is fundamental for the identity of their community and life. The aim to preserve the feeling of the Islamic identity, as a set of ideal values that were applied, is reflected in the religious holy laws of the prophet Muhammad. Muslims were connected through *ummah* – a community of believers that strived to create a just society through fulfilling the will of God.

The ummah angst is deeply rooted in the five pillars of Islam (or the five holy duties) which are compulsory for all Muslims:

1. Shahada – the affirmation of faith that there is no other God but Allah and that Muhammad is God's messenger;

2. Salat – prayer five times a day;
3. Zakat – the practice of giving alms by Muslims in line with the fortune they have achieved. This is obligatory for all those who are in position to do it. Zakat is believed to be a personal responsibility for all Muslims, with a view to decreasing the financial burden of the poor and eliminating inequality;
4. Sawm – Ramadan fasts, recognized by the Quran and practiced as compensation and remorse for sins committed;
5. Hajj – going to pilgrimage in Mecca if circumstances allow.

All this clearly indicates that the Islamic community aims to connect believers with one common feeling of identity and responsibility (Armstrong, 2001), and for some Muslims this could be achieved by the establishment of an Islamic state ruled by the code and law of sharia (Ritter, 2005). There is among them a widely spread belief that Islam is not only a religion, but also an unchanged social order that covers all spheres of life, including the state and the execution of laws. According to them, belief in Islam as an all-encompassing way of life means that there should be no division between religion and politics. In fact, here, in this belief, lies the basis of the term Islamism.

Muslim political activists (Islamists) believe in the complete holistic character of the renewed Islam, which includes *din* (religion), *dunya* (community) and *dawla* (state). This is the core of their political ideology. The Arab word *dawla* was used for the first time in the 8<sup>th</sup> century AD during the ruling of the Abbasid caliphate (Holt, Swynford, Ann, Lewis, Bernard, 1978), and was transformed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century into *Al-dawla al islamiyya* (Islamic state). For the Islamists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Islam represented an integral whole, offering solutions to all the problems in life, and the realization of Islamic society is based on the establishment of an Islamic state based on sharia (Ayubi, 1991).

There are claims that this idea for an Islamic state, suggested by the Islamists, is a process of “revealing the tradition”, in which Muslim intellectuals play the main role (Eickelman, Dale, 1996). According to them, the Quran states more explicitly the importance of ethics, values and morals than any other political doctrine. One of the verses in the Quran, where it is said, “*This day have I perfected your religion for you,*” (Verse 05:03) supports the argument that the prophet Muhammad inspired political and religious leaders to introduce a political-religious community based on faith as the main criterion for membership. The belief that the acceptance of the symbols of faith must be accompanied by active involvement in the collective efforts to fulfil the command

“to do good and prevent and forbid evil”, in order to fulfil the Islam moral objective for the legislative, political and economic issues in society, is considered to be essential for avoiding the state of *jahiliyyah* (a period when Islam and God were ignored, a concept completely contrary to the sharia) in which Muslims live today. After the discovery of the Quran, all other believers in other religions, except Jews and Christians, were considered to be unbelievers and polytheists who live in the state of *jahiliyyah* (Choueiri, 1997).

According to Islamists, contemporary Muslim societies have degenerated to a condition of *jahiliyyah*; a disbelief in God and an acceptance of the western concepts of nationalism, secularity, socialism, communism, democracy and capitalism which are in direct confrontation with the message of Islam. Aiming to overcome this state of *jahiliyyah*, Islamists believe that a declaration for total sovereignty and the rule of God is necessary. This could be achieved through the fight of *jihad*. *Jihad* – in translation it means fight – is an Islamic term for the religious duty of Muslims. One engaged in *jihad* is called *mujahid*, in plural *mujahideen*. The word *jihad* has much more power than any other expression or word among Muslims, especially among Islamists, for whom this word is the source of their militancy. In its traditionally accepted meaning, *jihad* means “to invest” efforts to introduce Islamic law (Noorani, 2002).

The notion of fundamentalism itself is generally linked to the militant religious belief that was born in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century within the big religious traditions, and which became influential in the 1990s. The term was used for the first time by American Protestants at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in an attempt to separate from the “liberal” followers of the Christian religion at the time. These fundamentalists wanted to return to the basics of the Christian tradition, which they identified with a literal interpretation of the Holy Bible and the acceptance of strict rules in following the faith. As a Christian notion, fundamentalism cannot be applied identically with regard to other different movements, such as the Jewish and Islamic traditional movements which have different priorities. Still, the term, even though not used properly, is used as a label for movements which bear many joint characteristics, and which, under the guidance of their charismatic leaders, create an ideology that has a plan to return religious meaning to social life, politics, art, culture, and the creation of resistance towards secularity.

The use of the word fundamentalism in Islam is wrong in most cases. Firstly, the word fundamentalism originated at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century from American Protestants. More precisely, the Protestant fundamentalists believed in the Bible as the true word of God and that it should be comprehended literally. For Muslims, the literal meaning of the Quran (the Quran is the main religious text for Muslims; written in verses, composed of 114 chapters, it is believed to

be composed by the word of God) is the “true word of God”, and in this sense all Muslims are fundamentalists (Al-Laithy, 2005). Still, most of them are “merely” fundamentalists, in terms of their belief that their conduct should not be guided only by religious books or that their interpretation should be one-sided (Denoeux, 2002). The various interpretations of the text of the Quran demonstrate not only the differences in perspective towards Islam among Muslims, but also the starting point among the so-called fundamentalists. If the Islamic fundamentalists insist on returning to the basics of the faith, it would be an offence to other Muslims, since it turns out that other Muslims do not act in line with the Quran.

In the new security environment, after 11 September, fundamentalism has been regularly linked with Islamic fundamentalism and extremism, and, in particular, with terrorism. When terrorist acts are linked to religion then the supporters of that religion (especially if in a minority) take a defensive stance, since their identity and loyalty towards the nation/state of their citizenship is being brought into question. This has been experienced by Muslim minorities in Western societies since 11 September.

The term “Islamic fundamentalism” is used in various connotations. In daily discourse, in the media, and even in the literature of the non-Muslim world, the term is often used for those Muslims – individuals or groups – that are radical, militant and fanatic. On the other hand, Muslim theorists, when using this notion, refer to people that want Islam to be “re-born” (Marin-Guzman, 2003). The Arab terms related to religious re-birth make a clear distinction between the various fighters of Islamic fundamentalism. These terms, such as *islah* – reforms, *salafīyyah* – return to the ancestors, *tajdid* – renewal, and *nahda* – rebirth, are different from the term *islamiyyun* – Islamists who want to revive Islam and who use violent means. The concepts of *islah* and *tajdid* are the basic concepts of the Islamic perception of the world and are incorporated into the Quran and Sunna (the way of the prophet Muhammad, the road that every Muslim should take). If they cannot find answers to their questions in the Quran and the Sunna, they refer to the *hadith* – the tellings of the Prophet on issues from the fields of metaphysics, cosmology and theology.

These concepts represent a return to fundamental Islam. The concept of *tajdid* (renewal) is based on a tradition introduced by the Prophet, and refers to the *mujadid* – a leader of rebirth who is believed to have been sent by God to the Islamic community because of his efforts aimed at regenerating the faith.

This concept claims that at the beginning of every century a new *mujadid* appears, in order to revert the erosion in the faith created by “modern” times. Among the most important people in Muslim history are Ibn Tamīja, Ibn Abd al Wahab, Abduh Muhammad and Hasan al-Bana

(Dekmejian, 1995). The renewal and the belief in a just community is important for this concept, guided by the principles of the Prophet Muhammad and the elimination of the established institutions and the foreign and non-Islamic subjects that have infiltrated and corrupted the life of the community (Esposito, 2010).

The term *al-Salafiyya* – salafism – is closest to the Western concept of fundamentalism. The word salafism comes from the expression *al-salaf* and refers to the followers and companions of the prophet Muhammad. Salafism calls on Islamic believers to return to the original, clear, unchanged and flawless form of Islam practised by the prophet Muhammad and his companions, and rejects all practices, beliefs or behaviours that are not directly supported by the Quran or the Sunna of the Prophet. The followers of salafism believe in the right of every individual to interpret the religious texts for themselves by practising *ijtihad* – independent judgment. The puritan movements of Vehabia, Sanisia and Mahidia in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries were part of the salafist movement, and the main practice of Islam was based on the teaching of Rashid Rida nad Hasan al-Bana.

The events of 11 September represented a moment of concern in the evolution of Islamic extremism and its regional and transnational networks. This new trend of extremism among militant Muslims points to an inflexible and dogmatic ideology, the heart of which is represented by a distorted version of the concept of *jihād*. Rooted in the Afghan Jihad of the 1970s and the Russian-Afghan civil war, this brand of Islamic extremists made a breakthrough in Europe via the Bosnian conflict and the conflict in Chechnya. These conflicts resulted in the creation of a geographically dispersed network of extremists with joint experience who, with the support of local individuals, have managed to perpetrate numerous terrorist attacks.

The new waves of terrorist activities that are conducted globally, with no exception, have been linked to radical Islamist groups. Some studies even go to the extent of claiming that, since Islam by its nature is a militant religion, it is a question of how much Muslims are ready to fight against the radical and militant Islamists, despite the feeling of despair and humiliation they bear caused by globalization and the increase in the economic, cultural, technological and military influences of the western world.

### **3 RE-ISLAMIZATION AND THE DISCOVERY OF GLOBAL UMMAH**

The re-Islamization of the Muslim population in the Western Balkans is a very complicated process, which is directly related to the appearance and evolution of Islamism in the Arab and other countries of the Middle East. Re-Islamization is an intellectual trend that began in the Middle East in the 1950s as a counterbalance to de-Islamization, which Western democracies had imposed in the function of their own economic and geopolitical interests. According to Abdelwahab Meddeb, “re-Islamization is a term which expresses the insistency of Islamists of clearing society, through its social, educational, political and religious institutions, of ideas or people that don’t belong to Islamism” (Abdelwahab, 2003). Similarly to Meddeb, Olivier Roy defines re-Islamization “as a process of deculturalization – a crisis of the ancient cultures as a result of the influence of Western democracies – which highlights the over-emphasized role of Islam in the shaping of modern society” (Roy, 2004).

The process of re-Islamization of the Muslim population in the countries of the Western Balkans began in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Besides the fact that the organization “Young Muslims” was formed in 1939, as an official, but not intense, start to re-Islamization – as the process defined by Meddeb and Roy – it can be found in the period of the announcement of the Muslim declaration of Izetbegovic in 1970. However, the process of re-Islamization of the Western Balkans came to full fruit at the time of the Civil War in former Yugoslavia, when great numbers of Islamists and humanitarian and religious organizations from the Arab and Middle East countries established a widespread network for the promotion and expansion of Islam. The original reason for the arrival of *jihād* fighters from the Arab countries in the Balkans was to help their Muslim brothers in Bosnia. As more Muslims arrived in Bosnia, they decided to stay there, marry Bosnian women and get Bosnian citizenship. Later, Wahhabi groups in the region were enlarged, and they expanded in the region, in territories predominantly inhabited by the Muslim population, i.e. Sandzak, Kosovo, Montenegro, Macedonia and Albania, demonstrating that the Wahhabi movement was spreading across the Balkans (BIRN, 2007).

It is clear that, in the Balkans, the main emissaries of the foreign "fundamentalist" type of Islam are the Arab emigrants and the local Muslims who fall under their influence. Their penetration into the Balkans is through Islamic humanitarian organizations and foundations or through local Muslims who are educated in the Middle East and then transfer their knowledge home. According to Deliso, Wahhabis get help from extreme Islamist imams, who make the selection of young people. During interviews with young Albanians, Deliso discovered one of the recruitment methods:

*“When my cousin graduated from the University of Saudi Arabia, the Wahhabists offered him 200 euros a month and an apartment if he returned and spread the Wahhabi movement in Macedonia,” (Deliso, 2006).*

Financing the construction of new and the reconstruction of the old mosques in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BIH), Montenegro, Albania, Kosovo and Macedonia, the Islamists from the Middle East and Arab countries intensively helped their brothers from the Western Balkans to rediscover their long-forgotten roots. Thanks to powerful financial funding, humanitarian and religious organizations succeeded in educating large numbers of young imams in the most famous religious institutions in the Middle East. The knowledge gained there and the fanatic devotion to Islam of the newly educated young religious leaders were widely accepted by the Muslim population of the Western Balkans. Helped by the widespread networks of non-governmental organizations and religious organizations of the World Assembly of Muslim youth, the new religious leaders were provided with the necessary literature and other material and financial means required to promote traditional Islam and encourage Muslim believers to devote significant attention to religion. Their basic goal was to operate actively and with internal cooperation in the process of Islamic awakening, and in this way to indoctrinate as many young people as possible to devote their contribution to the Islamic faith (Margetić, 2006).

As a result of its geostrategic position and geopolitical conflict, and before all cultural interests of the East and the West, the region of the Western Balkans has in its history made it through many turbulent periods, which often culminated in conflicts of regional proportions. The present process of re-Islamization can be thought of in the same way, as it actually represents the product of two different, but contemporary, processes, which additionally increase the risk of the explosion of the hidden conflict between Christians and Muslims. The promotion of Islam as the source of a new identity of the Muslim population represents the first contemporary process which could turn re-Islamization into a cause of new turbulence in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. If religion provided the basis of the identity of the Muslims, then the Balkans would again become an arena for conflicts between the different cultures that live in the territory; cultures that have increasing support from the West as well as the East. In this context, the young Muslim population would identify themselves more with Islam and they would call themselves Islamists, instead of the roots and culture which their ancestors developed in the countries of the Western Balkans. The second process is different from the first, and is closely related to globalization. It is known under the term “the de-territorization of Islam”. Its basis consists of the idea that the transnational character of the new Islamic identity separates religion from nationality. In this case, Islam, not ethnicity,



represents the unifying force for strengthening the feeling of belonging and political mobilization (Taneski, 2013).

As a consequence of internal interaction between these two processes, the pragmatic leaders of Muslim communities are facing the challenge of how to preserve the secular form of Islam – typical of the Western Balkans – in the new contemporary conditions imposed by its transnational relationships. The appearance of a large number of radical and fundamental structures in the lines of the Muslim communities in the countries of the Western Balkans is a sign of their failure. Besides the fact that they are structures which are marginalized in the social aspect, their presence, ideology, influence and devotion to the re-Islamization of the Muslims in the Western Balkans must not be underestimated.

#### **4 THE NEW SECURITY CHALLENGE FOR MACEDONIAN NATIONAL SECURITY**

With regard to the Balkans and Macedonia, the media often reports the presence of the Wahhabis, who label themselves as Islamic fundamentalists, unlike the “more liberal” Muslims who have been present in this region for centuries. In the territory of the former Yugoslavia, Wahhabism appeared in several phases. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Hussein Efendi Gjozo and Ahmet Smajlović translated the works of Muhammad Abdel Wahab, the “Book of Monotheism” and “Three Basic Principles and Their Evidence” (Potežica, 2007). Islamism, imported from countries in the Middle East to Bosnia during the 1990s armed conflict, and exploiting the poor socio-economic situation of the Muslim population, quickly spread to Croatia, Serbia, Montenegro, Kosovo, Albania, Macedonia and Bulgaria. The establishment of the *mujahideen* units of Kosovo Liberation Army - KLA in Kosovo and National Liberation Army - NLA in Macedonia can be considered the first observable results of the ideological goals of militant Islamists in Macedonia and its immediate surroundings.

In 2002 the Ministry of the Interior of Macedonia prepared a report on the situation with regard to the presence of Al-Qaeda. This report contained detailed information on the links between militant Islamists and Al-Qaeda; according to the report there were two militant-Islamist units active in north-west Macedonia. These units were composed of former soldiers, *mujahideen*'s from Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, Bosnia, Chechnya and Kosovo (Dettmer, 2002). Stefan Schwarz, in his book “The Balkan Front”, wrote about the presence of “radical Islam” in Macedonia from 2001 onwards. According to him, the most prevalent and current radical Islamic movement in the Balkans and Macedonia was Wahhabism. In his book and in other articles and books (e.g. Balkan

Caliphate), the beginnings of Wahhabism in Macedonia were connected to the conflict in 2001, when a significant number of *mujahideen* and Islamic extremists fought for the NLA, which was associated with Osama bin Laden. In fact the “*Imri Elezi*” unit, which was called the Mujahideen unit, was composed of *mujahideen*’s that came from abroad, as well as local Islamists. After the conflict, some of the Wahhabis stayed in Macedonia and actively spread the ideology of militant Islamism.

At the beginning they had no support from the local population and had constant confrontations with the Bektashi Sufis (Schwartz, 2007). However, in 2004, the growing courage of Wahhabi activities in Macedonia was given an international character. French terrorism expert Claude Monet warned that some of the leaders of the Islamic Religious Community (IRC) were receiving a huge amount of money, most likely from Al-Qaeda, and with this money the Wahhabists were trying to take over the IRC. He also warned that about 100 extremists connected with terrorist organizations were operating in Macedonia.

Problems between the IRC and Wahhabis in Macedonia first started in 2002 in the city of Tetovo, with the violent seizure of Arabati Baba Teke (a place for spiritual retreat) by Wahhabis. Issues about the selection of a new IRC leader followed, as well as the beating of five imams from Skopje in Kondovo, and the taking over of four mosques in Skopje (Yaya Pasha, Tutunsuz, Hatundzuk and Isa Beg) from the IRC. The events escalated to a physical clash between the two factions in Isa Beg mosque. Motivated by their rise, the Wahhabis expelled the imam Bajram Rexhepi by force from Friday prayers, and set the exiled imam Ramadan Ramadani, who had been accused of spreading Wahhabism in several mosques in Skopje, in his place. Even more worrying was the fact that government officials and members of the security forces participated in the physical violence.

In 2006, the Wahhabists organized a protest in Skopje and Tetovo, as an expression of condemnation against a cartoon of the Prophet Muhammad. The demonstrations established several new things: 1) this happened for the first time in Macedonia; 2) the Wahhabis publicly showed their presence; and 3) they managed to hold protests in Skopje, showing that they could appear in the capital city (BBC, 2006). From then on, without prejudice, they were openly in public. This event was provocative enough to attract the attention of many world newspapers. In an article published in the prestigious British newspaper, the Sunday Times, it was implied that Islamic fundamentalism was a threat that could destabilize the Balkans and Macedonia. Referencing the President of the IRC, Sulejman Rexhepi, an anonymous source from the Macedonian Government, and statements from local Muslims, the Sunday Times wrote that radical Islamic Wahhabi forces were present in the country and that they were disrupting

Macedonia and controlling four mosques in Skopje. Despite the fact that an IRC denial followed, in the end the IRC admitted that Islamist ideology was a reality in the Republic of Macedonia, that it had infiltrated into the IRC, and that the IRC could not deal with it alone. Finally, as a result, on September 20, 2010, the head of the IRC, using the goals of the country's Euro-integration as alleged reasons, asked the Macedonian authorities, the political parties of the Albanians, the US Embassy and the EU to help solve the problems with Wahhabism (Radio Free Europe, 2010). Another incident which was related to the activities of militant Islamists was the Brodec case, in Tetovo in 2007, when one of the members of the disbanded extremist group was identified as Ramadan Shiti. He was associated with Wahhabism as an adherent and promoter, not only in the territory of Macedonia, but also in Albania and Kosovo.

The level of the Wahhabis success in recruiting young Muslims can be confirmed by the terrorist attack of 2007, when the US base in Fort Dix, New Jersey, was attacked. The group consisted of six Muslims: one Palestinian from Jordan, one Turk, and four ethnic Albanians – one from Kosovo and three from Macedonia. They were all in their 20s. This example is a picture of Islamist groups financed in the Balkans. Macedonian Albanian politicians were aware that the Wahhabis were a “clear and present danger” for both Macedonian and Albanian Muslims. They were under constant pressure to become “more Islamic”. There were reports during the 2001 crash of attempts by Iranian groups to supply arms and military equipment to Albanians. In an interview with Stefan Schwarcom, Arben Jaferi, the leader of the Albanian political party in Macedonia, expressed concern about the Wahhabis threat to Macedonia. He said: *“Albanian Islam faces the threat of fundamentalism. It is absurd; the Wahhabi come here and seek that in the name of Islam people live and dress like them. I am suspicious because of the economic weakness of the Albanians – I think that this will make them vulnerable,”* (Scwartz, 2004). The impact of militant Islamism in the Republic of Macedonia culminated in 2010 with the appearance of a song, sung in Albanian, in which Al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden was mentioned (Cvetanovski, 2010).

On 12 April 2012, on the eve of the biggest Christian festival, Easter, at Lake Smilkovci, near Skopje, the capital of Macedonia, there was a fierce “liquidation” of five people of Macedonian nationality. According to the official statement of the Minister of Internal Affairs, the main motive of the perpetrators of the murder “...is the idea, conviction, belief and following of radical Islam...”, and some of them “...were present on the battlefields in Afghanistan and Pakistan and fought against NATO forces” (Government of the Republic of Macedonia, 2012). On 6 August 2015, in the operation “Cell” conducted by the Macedonian security services, a cell for the recruitment of IS soldiers in Syria and Iraq was cracked. During the searches in Skopje, Gostivar, Tetovo, Kumanovo and Struga, a total of nine people were detained, including the Imam Rexhep

Memishi, and 27 are still being traced. According to the official report of the Ministry of Interior, about two dozen of them are still on the battlefields in Syria (Ministry of Interior, 2015).

The NGOs “Spark of Mercy” and “Islamic Youth-Saraj”, as well as associated facilities of Tutunsuz mosque in Skopje, were some of the facilities which were searched, and which were used for the indoctrination, radicalization and recruitment of future IS militant Islamists. In a similar action made by German security services on 22 September 2015 in Berlin, a Macedonian citizen was arrested who was part of a militant-Islamist cell in Germany which recruited IS fighters.

Meanwhile, the number of Macedonian citizens who contribute to or are killed in fights led by the main promoter of the ideology of militant Islamism – IS – in Syria and Iraq is continually growing. The return of veterans to the country and their impact on the radicalization of individuals and groups in the Muslim population is an additional enigma. According to CIA assessments, there are about 700 militant Islamists from Balkan Peninsula countries such as Bosnia, Montenegro, Kosovo, Serbia, Albania and Macedonia on the battlefields in Syria and Iraq (Bardos, 2014). Operation Cell in August 2015, conducted by Macedonian security forces for the termination of the IS recruiting jihadist cells, clearly demonstrates the importance of the problem and the future implications for the national security of the Republic of Macedonia.

Although there are no specific data on the exact number of soldiers from the Republic of Macedonia who have joined militant Islamist organizations in Syria and Iraq, given the examples above we can conclude that their number is progressively growing. Based on estimates from the International Centre for Radicalism and Political Violence Research (ICSR), twelve Macedonians were recruited by Sunni militant-Islamist organizations in Syria and Iraq (Newman, 2015). According to the Interior Minister of Macedonia, Mitko Chavkov, around 130 Macedonians who were recruited and trained in Macedonia were or are on the battlefields in Iraq and Syria as part of Islamist terrorist groups (Stankovich, 2015). This figure is not big in quantitative terms, but at the same time it should not be underestimated. Considering the fact that they have fought for the ideological goals of militant Islamism, we can conclude that the veterans from Syria and Iraq will definitely stay loyal to their leaders and will be ready to act on their orders, not only within the Caliphate but outside of it. Based on the current root analysis, breakthrough and examples of the actions of militant Islamists, it can be concluded that Macedonia is slowly but surely becoming a strategic point on which the ultimate goal of militant Islamist ideology that IS implements depends.

The presence of militant Islamism in Macedonia is itself a sufficient security challenge for the security services, but it is more important whether Macedonia is a target of Islamists and followers

of Osama Bin Laden and similar ideologies, or whether it is a new kind of threat typical of the Balkan region, provoked by ethnic divisions and separatist motivation. The killing of five people in 2012 by the police was rated a work of militant Islamists, and the motive was to cause fear and uncertainty among the local population. However, in addition to this attack, police reports have recorded a number of other terrorist acts in Macedonia. On 16 May 2004, a police patrol was attacked in the community of Suto Orizari in Skopje. An armed group from a vehicle opened fire on the police patrol, and then escaped. Later, the vehicle was found, and a large quantity of automatic weapons were in it. On 12 July 2005, three missiles exploded at the police station in Vratnica. In this terrorist attack, rocket launchers and automatic weapons were used. On 15 July 2005, a terrorist attack with five kilograms of explosives was carried out on the Bit Pazar police station in Skopje.

In September 2005 some media published that several individuals reminiscent of Wahhabis were making drills with firearms on Kitka Mountain. On 7 November 2007 another event took place linked to radical Islam. The Macedonian security forces, undertaking an operation called “Mountain Storm”, detected a terrorist group in a mountain village in Shara-Brodec. The open guns firing lasted for 10 hours and the outcome was seven neutralized terrorists. Twelve suspects were arrested. On 3 January 2008 there was an act of revenge when a policeman from a special unit was killed and two policemen were wounded.

On 21 April 2015, an armed group of approximately 40 people seized weapons, ammunition, and radio communication supplies from a border police station in Goshince, near the border with Kosovo. On 9-10 May, the Macedonian police authorities carried out a police action in Kumanovo, ostensibly to recover the stolen equipment. This action resulted in the deaths of eight Macedonian police officers and 10 members of the armed group. Although the motives of the armed group remain unclear, the Public Prosecutor’s Office classified the incident as an act of terrorism, and charged three suspects with leading a terrorist organization and 26 with participating in a terrorist organization (US Embassy, 2015).

The last event being linked to militant-Islamist terrorism was the one that took place at Lake Smilkovci. Unlike the previous cases, where the target was the police, in this case the victims were selected randomly, and the timing chosen with purpose – just before the great Christian Easter festival. All the defendants were found guilty of terrorism, but what was the motive, and could there be any parallel with terrorist attacks guided, organized or motivated by the Al-Qaeda ideology and radical Islamists, or it is about home-grown terrorism, the motives of which are most likely to be found in inter-ethnic intolerance and Albanian separatism, rather than in the militant Islamic ideology? Motives can also be found in the party interests of the parties from the Albanian

political bloc. According to assessments made by experts from the region, the intention of the killers at Lake Smilkovci was to provoke mass clashes between the Albanians and Macedonians, which would be the trigger for new inter-ethnic clashes not only in Macedonia, but also in the wider Balkan region.

What can be stated with certainty is that Macedonia is not an isolated case in the world, and that in this state as well as others, terrorism gradually gets to be used as a tactic for achieving certain goals. Were the terrorist attacks in Macedonia committed by radical Islamists? In this case, the answer is not so simple. The fact is that behind all the terrorist attacks in Macedonia there are Albanians who belong to the Muslim religious community. But to most Muslims they are only criminals, and not believers. On the other hand, in the actions undertaken by the police during the arrest of the suspected individuals or groups, with no exception, literature was detected that incites radical Islam and later also links of the defendants to IS and Al-Qaeda.

If the events are seen from this perspective, it can be said that the terrorist acts were perpetrated by militant Islamists. However, if we go back to the definition and meaning of the term militant Islamism, we will see that in the cases closed up to now, militant Islamism is not the subject matter, but home-grown terrorism is, with its perpetrators advocating the ideas of militant Islamism and using their tactics and skills, but for their own purposes.

## **5 CONCLUSION**

The expansion of militant Islamism in the countries of the Western Balkans is directly related to two events which had great influence in the appearance and breakout of this security threat to the Balkan Peninsula. The first event is the formation of the organization of Young Muslims and the promotion of the idea of the formation of a large Muslim state in the territory of the Balkan Peninsula, the Middle East and North Africa. The Civil War in Bosnia and the armed conflicts in Kosovo and Macedonia, which resulted in the formation of appropriate *mujahedeen* units is the second event which influenced the appearance and the breakthrough of militant Islamism in the Western Balkans. As a result of these two events, the enforced process of re-Islamization, radicalization and recruitment of the young Muslim population started, which day by day becomes more and more convincing that Islam represents a fundamental union force and the only way towards nation-building and the shaping of a society in which Muslims would dominate. These three processes, helped by the militant-Islamist ideology and its followers, could be determined as the three key factors which have had the greatest influence on the present expansion of militant Islamism in the countries of the Western Balkans.

Since 2003, Macedonia has been part of the global coalition for the fight against terrorism, and actively participates in peacekeeping missions with the support of NATO and the UN in Iraq, Afghanistan, Lebanon and BiH. It is an undeniable fact that at the same time there are both positive benefits and negative consequences. It is positive that there have been a large number of rotations carried out so far in these missions, in which in fact almost every individual of the combat units of the Army of Republic of Macedonia has experienced direct involvement in the anti-terrorist activities. More importantly, we are successfully carrying all the time, and with the exception of technology and equipment, we are not far behind those who are members of NATO. However, our participation in the global fight against terrorism can also cause negative consequences for our national security. Knowing the goals of militant Islamism, and taking into account who the leader of the global coalition to fight terrorism in which we participate is, we must not exclude the possibility of being perceived as a possible goal to militant Islamism and being a target of revenge acts.

In the Balkans, the Wahhabists are well-organized, well-funded and constantly recruited, which results in more and more followers. At the moment they are positioning themselves in our Balkan societies and forming a safe transit zone for Islamic extremists and terrorists on their way to Europe. Probably the next stage would be to take control of Muslim believers in the Balkans, and later to direct their activities to the rest of the non-Muslim citizens and act against the institutions of the system. Strategically, the significance of the Balkans for militant Islamism is for it to be used as a logistics base and a “security paradise” for secure entrance into Europe. The real threat is based on the perception of militant Islamism among young Muslims. The idea is to put pressure on the non-Muslim population to leave the territory in order to create purely ethnic territories, which is the main goal of the militant Islamists. This has been a proven formula in the case of Kosovo.

One of the worst scenarios would be if the Wahhabis, with the support of the Islamists, decided to support the idea of a Greater Albania. In other words, given the pan-Albanian project of the creation of Greater Albania, it is clear that separatism in the part of the Albanians of the population is growing extremely fast, and has been encouraged since the time of the former Yugoslavia. The difference in religions between the Christian and Muslim population additionally aggravates the seriousness of terrorism, and it is more than clear that it is a serious security problem which could very easily destabilize the Balkans and thus the Republic of Macedonia. The most deadly terrorist organizations are religious Islamic organizations, while one of the most motivated are the separatists. In the case of the Balkan region, there is a symbiosis of religious and separatist reasons for recruiting future terrorists and creating a terrorist cell. The common and basic goal of militant

Islamic organizations is to create an Islamic society in the Balkans, in which it would rule according to sharia law. This basic goal would be realized through the following methods:

1. Spreading the militant Islamist ideology and their view of Islam;
2. Building new mosques and creating new *madrasa* (educational institutions);
3. Expanding Islamic influence among young people, which would play a significant role in the future;
4. Terrorist training for “selected ones”.

However, some theorists and intelligence analysts believe that the presence of militant Islamism and terrorists in the Balkans poses a greater threat to the security of Western European countries than the security of Macedonia. As long as the Islamic state and Al Qaeda cells function without problems in the territory of the Balkan states, there is no serious threat from terrorist attacks on civilians or the causing of material damage. In any case, in the context of the militant Islamic structures that are in any way connected with the Republic of Macedonia, it is clear that the country cannot isolate itself or be underestimated in relation to possible actions of individuals from the aspect of terrorist acts. If we add our geostrategic position in Europe, and in the Balkans, where many interests of different natures intertwine, in any case we must not exclude the risk that our territory could be used as a “safe territory” or as a logistics base for the growth of militant Islamism and terrorism against Europe countries.

For now, it may seem exaggerated, but as is the case all over the world, the aim of militant Islamists in the Balkans is to establish a caliphate as part of a world state of Muslims – Ummah. The influential Wahhabi Ahmed ibn Nafi, from Mecca, called, in 1992, even before the war in Bosnia, upon the Islamic countries to get involved in the *jihad*. He said: “We entrust you to see to the imminent establishment of the Caliphate in the Balkans, because the Balkans are the path to the conquest of Europe... Know, therefore, brothers, that time is working for us... The Caliphate is at hand.”

According to their plans, this aim could be achieved if the separatist feelings among the Albanians from Southern Serbia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro and Greece were used, i.e. through religious, Islamic radicalization (Wahhabization) or re-Islamization of the Albanian Muslim population, a critical foundation could be created that under the veil of human rights could ask for autonomy, and terrorism could be used only as a cover – tactics used to frighten the non-Muslim population in order to achieve these goals more easily.



For this reason, in Macedonia there is no classic global terrorism used by IS and Al Qaeda, which most often ends with messages to the “occupants” of the Arab territories, but rather a terrorism aimed against the institutions of the system with a view to disobeying the constitutional order and the state authorities. Actually, it can be concluded that there is a symbiosis of militant Islam and Albanian separatism. In other words, Wahhabism is no longer an ideology imported to Macedonia by Afro-Asian *mujahideen*, preachers or “humanitarian organizations” that served as cover for the financing of these criminal-terrorist structures in the region.

The rich Arab countries invested a lot of money to spread Wahhabism in these territories. Their success can be seen in the silence of the IRC or the symbols used at the protests following the killing of the five people at Lake Smilkovci. If up to the last few years the IRC leader stated that the biggest threat they faced were the Wahhabis and radical Islamists, after the Smilkovci case and the statements made by the Minister it joined the revolt, stating the term radical Islam was offended them. At the protests that took place in front of the Government of the Republic of Macedonia following the arrests for the killing of the five people, a larger group of young people waved the state flags of Albania and Saudi Arabia. The slogan on the green Saudi flag read the Shahada, stating “There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is His Messenger”, with a sword beyond it which according to Saudi law represents justice – the justice to be achieved through blood.

In conclusion, it is important to accept that in Macedonia there is a real threat of home-grown terrorism which is incited by militant Islamism. Individuals or groups who are ready to undertake terrorist activities against the institutions of the system are slowly but surely penetrating into the pores of society making it more difficult for the security services to identify and fight them. The earlier the threat is taken seriously, the more easily it could be prevented. Avoiding facing the truth and not taking certain steps in the name of good inter-ethnic relations will neither improve the relations between the ethnic groups, nor will it solve the problem. For the beginning, the greatest need is to find a suitable terminology that would make a clear distinction between these militant Islamist structures and other Muslims. Then, to identify the threat, clearly and in an unbiased way, and have the intelligence services make a new security evaluation of the magnitude of the threat. The new security evaluation/assessment of the situation in Macedonia will need to identify and locate these threats, their content, their inter-connectivity and platform of action, the equipment used, the forms and methods of action, the links with foreign factors, their paramilitary organization, and the groupings and identification of the infiltrated followers deeply rooted in the security, political and religious structures of the system of the state. According to this new security evaluation, an effective strategy needs to be worked out to counter terrorism, which will define

home-grown terrorism with all its specifics, and will recognize it as a new threat which will be one of the priority intelligence quests, and at the same time a challenge for the overall national security sector in Macedonia.

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