

The Impact of the Arab Spring on the Security and Stability of the Balkans

The Arab Spring: Pandora's Box

The Arab Spring, though initially welcomed as the *third wave* of modernization and democratization of the Middle East and North Africa,¹ eventually spiralled downwards into a series of war and crises that still plague the region. Indicatively, the Syrian Civil War completely wrecked the birthplace of the Arab Nationalism² (at a cost of over 450,000 dead, 4,000 refugees and 7,500,000 internally displaced) and, far worse, destabilised the neighbouring countries (Lebanon and Iraq).³

Two major trends in the Arab World can be easily discerned in 2017: first of all, the “Balkanization”⁴ of the Middle East and North Africa and, secondly, the emergence of new threats for the security and stability to the Arab World and beyond (e.g. jihadist terrorism, transnational organized crime, tidal waves of refugees etc.).⁵ In fact, Syria, Iraq, Libya and Yemen can be characterized as “failed states” in the post-Arab Spring Middle East, whereas other states (e.g. Lebanon) deserve the title of “failing states.”⁶ How do these negative developments affect the Balkans?

According to Robert Kaplan, geography determines a state's prospects for peace and war in a critical way.⁷ The Balkans, a rather volatile region in modern times,⁸ witnessed first hand the aftershocks of the Arab Spring and Islamic Winter.⁹ The refugee crisis in 2015 testifies to the magnitude of the aftershocks of the

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¹ Spyridon Plakoudas, “Causes of the Arab Spring: A Critical Analysis” (Athens: KEDISA, 2017), 2.

² In fact, Syria was the cradle of Arab Nationalism in the 19th century.

³ Spyridon Plakoudas, “The Syrian Civil War and Peace in the Middle East: A Chimera?” *KEDISA (Geopolitical Risk Analysis)*, 29/12/2016.

⁴ The term “Balkanization” refers to the eruption of sectarian conflicts and the dissolution of sovereign states into warring statelets – just like the Balkans during the Yugoslav Wars (1991-2001). Michael Zimmerman, “A Middle East Islamicised or Balkanized?” *Jerusalem Post*, 30/12/2012.

⁵ Spyros Plakoudas, “The Syrian War: A Geopolitical Chernobyl,” accepted for publication in the forthcoming volume of the Middle East Review of International Affairs.

⁶ Aaron David Miller, “Middle East Meltdown,” *Foreign Policy*, 30/10/2014; Mehran Kamrava, “Weak States in the Middle East” in Mehran Kamrava (ed.): *Weak States in the Greater Middle East* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 1-4.

⁷ Robert Kaplan, *The Revenge of Geography: What the Map Tells Us about Coming Conflicts and the Battle against Fate* (New York: Random House, 2012).

⁸ In fact, the Balkans witness constant wars and crises ever since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in the 19th century. For an analysis of these trends, see: Mark Mazower, *The Balkans: A Short History* (London: Phoenix, 2002), 116-151.

⁹ John R. Bradley, *After the Arab Spring: How the Islamists Hijacked the Middle East Revolts* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); John Davis (ed.), *The Arab Spring and Arab Thaw: Unfinished Revolutions and the Quest for Democracy* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2013).

Arab Spring and the vulnerability of Greece and the Balkans to them. The Arab Spring opened, in a way, Pandora's Box and various ills (the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, the rise and spread of jihadist terrorism, the security of energy routes, and the tidal wave of illegal immigrants) threaten the security and stability of the Balkans.

ISIS and the "Green Corridor" in the Balkans

The Arab Spring inadvertently caused the rise and spread of jihadist groups in every country affected profoundly by the political revolution and the accompanying crises and conflicts – from Iraq and Syria to Yemen and Libya. ISIS (or Daesh) towers above all jihadist groups owing to its power and cruelty. ISIS established a "caliphate" in Syria and Iraq¹⁰ and expanded to Yemen, Libya, Afghanistan¹¹ and even the (western) Balkans. After all, the western Balkans and southern Russia remain the only two regions of the Old Continent with native Muslim populations.

After all, the Balkans were a fertile ground for the spread of jihadism. The Bosnian War (1992-1995) re-activated the old divide between Christians and Muslims during the concluding stages of the Eastern Question and thousands of mujahideen from all over the Islamic World arrived in Bosnia for jihad. And when the war ended in 1995, many of them inter-married with the locals and declined the invitation of the Bosnian state authorities to depart.¹² Unsurprisingly, these veterans developed a close cooperation with Al Qaeda and participated in various terrorist incidents.¹³ As early as 2001, the Central Security Operations Service (NOCS) in Italy, the police unit responsible for counter-terrorism, described the threat of a "green corridor" ("dorsale verde") in the western Balkans: "the project of Islamic colonization of the Balkans that aims at the gradual establishment of a green corridor to include all regions in which predominantly Muslim ethnic groups prevail."¹⁴

As the map clearly illustrates, this "green corridor" would encompass all the territories in the western Balkans with a majority of (Sunni) Muslims: Bosnia-Herzegovina, Albania, Kosovo, Tetovo (in north-western FYROM) and Sanjak (in south-western Serbia). Kosovo and Bosnia, two lands ravaged by inter-ethnic and inter-religious conflicts, witnessed in recent years the spread of religiosity and even extremism among the otherwise moderate Muslim populations owing to the missionary

¹⁰ The Islamic State draws support primarily from the nomadic tribes of Sunni Arabs in Iraq and Syria chafing at the oppressive rule of the Shia-dominated central governments in Bagdad and Damascus.

¹¹ Uran Botobekov, "Is Central Asia Ready to Face ISIS," *The Diplomat*, 8/7/2016; Eleanor Ross, "Why Extremist Groups Are Gaining Strength in Central Asia," *Newsweek*, 12/4/2017.

¹² The mujahideen established the following military formations: 7th Muslim Brigade, Black Swans, Green Berets, Green Legion, El Mujahid and Patriotic League.

¹³ Osama bin Laden even visited Bosnia-Herzegovina twice. Evan Kohlmann, *Al-Qaida's Jihad in Europe: The Afghan-Bosnian Network* (Oxford: Berg, 2004); John R. Schindler, *Unholy Terror: Bosnia, Al-Qaida, and the Rise of Global Jihad* (New York City: Zenith Press, 2007).

¹⁴ Cf. Fiorenza Saranzini, "Soldi E Moschee, Osama Avanza Nei Balcani" ["Money And Mosques, Osama Advances In The Balkans"], *Corriere della Sera*, 8/11/2001; "Kosovo and the Jihadist Green Corridor in the Balkans," *Global Politics*, 24/5/2017.

work by Turkey, Iran and other monarchies from the Persian Gulf (e.g. Qatar). Thus, ISIS readily spread its influence deep into the Balkans and recruited an estimated 875 mujahideen for jihad in Iraq and Syria according to the Kosovar Center for Security Studies (KCSS): 217-330 from Bosnia, 90-210 from Albania, 232-300 from Kosovo, 100-146 from FYROM, 30 from Montenegro and 50-70 from Serbia. With a population of less than two million, the de facto independent Kosovo ranks the top country in volunteers for ISIS in comparison to its size (125 foreign fighters per capita for every 1 million citizens).¹⁵ Kaçanik, a town in south Kosovo, has been rendered a stout stronghold for ISIS in the Balkans.¹⁶ One of these volunteers, Lavdim Muhaxheri (Abu Abdullah al Kosova as nom de guerre), became the leader of the so-called “Balkan Brigade” of ISIS in Syria.¹⁷ Bosnia-Herzegovina is another such region. Nearly 28 villages in remote mountainous valleys of Herzegovina are inhabited by the former mujahideen and Sharia Law is practiced in defiance of the state authorities in Sarajevo; unsurprisingly, these villages offered recruits to Al Qaeda long before the rise of ISIS in 2014. Indicatively, a force of 600 police officers was required to storm Ovska and Gornja Maoča in 2010 in the context of an expansive counter-terrorism operation; a same operation was carried out in 2015.¹⁸

¹⁵ Francesca Astorri, “European Fears of the ISIS’ Black Flag Crossing from the Balkans,” *Al Arabiya*, 8/4/2017.

¹⁶ Julian Borger, “ISIS Targets Vulnerable Bosnia for Recruitment and Attack,” *Guardian*, 25/6/2015; Christos Tellides, “Kaçanik Scares the Balkans: A Village of Jihadists... Two Hours from the Border,” *Ethnos*, 30/8/2015.

¹⁷ Lavdim Muhaxheri was killed by a US armed drone in mid-2017. “Kosovo ISIS Leader Killed, Media Reports,” *Balkan Insight*, 8/6/2017.

¹⁸ Jenny Stanton, “A Far from Welcoming Village,” *Daily Mail*, 5/2/2015; “Islamic State: Bosnian Police Raid Gornja Maoča Village after IS Flags, Signs Displayed,” *ABC News*, 6/2/2017.



The Jihadist “Green Corridor” in the Balkans

ISIS does not utilize the western Balkans only for recruiting. ISIS additionally uses these territories as a transit route for funds, weapons and volunteers from Europe to the Middle East and vice versa. Between 2011 and 2015, 4,294 volunteers from Western Europe travelled through the Balkans to Turkey and, from there, to the battlefields in Syria and Iraq.¹⁹ Unsurprisingly, there is a strong connection between the cells of ISIS in the western Balkans and the repeated terrorist attacks in Western Europe. In fact, the terrorists involved in the attacks in Paris in January and November 2015 had spent a certain period of time in ISIS’s surfacing pockets in the Balkans.²⁰

ISIS forged close ties with the organised crime in the western Balkans to keep this “Balkan Route” open and running. Most notably, ISIS established an informal alliance with the mafia networks in Albania and Kosovo – two regions heavily infiltrated by the jihadist groups in recent years.²¹ The local mafias facilitate the movement of funds, weapons and volunteers by ISIS from Europe to the Middle East and, in return,

¹⁹ Approximately 30% of these mujahideen have already returned to Western Europe. Bibi van Ginkel et al., *The Foreign Fighters Phenomenon in the European Union: Profiles, Threats and Policies* (Hague: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 2016), 3-4.

²⁰ Europol, “Changes in Modus Operandi of Islamic State’s Terrorist Attacks” (Hague: Europol, 2016), 5-6.

²¹ Indicatively, Albanians constitute one of the ten most numerous factions within the jihadist groups in Syria and Iraq. Tim Judah, “Balkan Fighters Abroad: Holy Warriors,” *Economist*, 21/8/2014.

they benefit from the lucrative drug and human trafficking by ISIS.²² Contrary to the Syria and Iraq where ISIS violently substituted the syndicates of organized crime, the jihadists co-opted the mafias in the western Balkans.²³

Albania is the iconic example of the synergy between Mafia and ISIS. A police raid at Lazarat, the stronghold of the Albanian Mafia, in 2014 severely weakened latter and ISIS moved in aggressively to fill the vacuum. Co-opting the now Albanian Mafia, ISIS usurped a significant portion of the lucrative trade in (over 5 billion dollars worth). Nowadays, most of the cannabis crops (which after 2014 spread beyond Lazarat throughout the country) are controlled by an alliance the Albanian Mafia and ISIS.²⁴ In Kosovo, another region with an overwhelming Albanian majority, the ties between ISIS and the Kosovar Mafia are well-established. As early as 2001 Al Qaeda had infiltrated Kosovo and established an alliance with the Kosovar Mafia.²⁵ Al Qaeda's affiliate in Syria, Jabhat al-Nousra (renamed in 2017 to Tahrir al-Sham), and ISIS profited from an alliance with the Kosovar Mafia²⁶ which controlled a significant portion of the region's economy and retained a privileged relationship with the former UCK leaders and current officials in Kosovo.²⁷

Thanks to these networks of the local mafias in western Balkans with the state authorities of certain weak states and the (Albania and/or Bosnian) diasporas in Western Europe, jihadist groups in the Middle East not only increased the power in the Levant but also established themselves firmly in South-eastern and Western Europe. Drawing new vigour from these spread-out cells, the jihadist groups increased their overall attacks in Europe by almost four times since 2011 in terms of number²⁸ and many more times in terms in lethality.²⁹

²² EU, "Europe's Crime-Terror Nexus: Links between Terrorist and Organised Crime Groups in the European Union" (Brussels: European Parliament, 2012), 57-59; Lubov Grigorova Mincheva and Tedd Robert Gurr, *Crime-Terror Alliance and the State: Ethnosocialist and Islamic Challenges to Regional Security* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), 159-178.

²³ Jamie Dettmer, "Syria's Jihadists Linked to Organized Crime," *The Daily Beast*, 12/9/2013; Ioannis Michaletos and Darco Trifunovic, "Nexus Between Terrorism and Organized Crime," *Radical Islam Monitor in Southeast Europe*, 24/12/2015.

²⁴ Alan Hall and Dan Warburton, "ISIS Seizes £4bn Drug Ring from the Mafia to Fund its Brutal Terror Campaign," *Daily Mirror*, 16/1/2016; David Clark, "EU Cannot Ignore Albania's Descent into Disorder," *Financial Times*, 12/5/2017.

²⁵ Nicole Contegiaco, "Rational Choice Theory and the Crime-Terror Nexus: How and Why Terrorist and Organized Criminal Groups are Working Together" (MA Thesis: University of North Carolina, 2007), 31-32.

²⁶ Ebi Spahiu, "Militant Islamists, Organized Crime and the Balkan Diaspora in Europe," *Terrorism Monitor*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (2015), 3-5.

²⁷ Unsurprisingly, Kosovo has been termed a "mafia state" and a "black hole of lawlessness" since this de facto independent state is the epicentre of human trafficking, drug and weapons trade and organs theft in Europe. Misha Glenn, "Criminal Gangs Running the Balkans," *BBC*, 28/4/2011; Chuck Sudetic, "The Bullies Who Run Kosovo," *Politico*, 23/7/2015.

²⁸ Thomas Hegghammer, "The Future of Jihadism in Europe: A Pessimistic View," *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 10, No. 6 (2016), 156-170.

Since the jihadists practice an “apocalyptic religious terrorism” in pursuit of an Armageddon,³⁰ the former can potentially use weapons of mass destruction. The decline of Libya and Syria (two states with stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction) into failed states simply presented the opportunity to ISIS and other jihadist groups (e.g. Jabhat al Nusra) to obtain such lethal weapons. In February 2015 the Libyan state authorities stated that unidentified assailants (most likely jihadists of ISIS) had seized control of the small stockpiles of mustard gas and sarin that remained in the possession of the post-Qaddafi regime.³¹ And a few months later, in September 2015 senior US officials confirmed that ISIS possessed chemical weapons after the capture of a regime military base in northern Syria and used them more than once against the peshmerga of Iraqi Kurdistan.³² Therefore, an attack with chemical weapons in the Balkans or in Western Europe by jihadists from the western Balkans cannot be discounted as a possibility.

The Danger of Civil Wars

The infiltration of the Balkans by jihadists radicalized the native Muslim populations even further and sowed the seeds of renewed civil wars in the “powder keg” of Europe. After all, three countries, Bosnia-Herzegovina, FYROM and Serbia-Kosovo, are demographically sensitive societies which have not yet recuperated from the traumas of sectarian conflict in the 1990s. All three countries “share” two trends: a recent ethnic/ religious war and a rising Muslim population which is increasingly radicalised.

Bosnia-Herzegovina is obviously the prime candidate for a renewed civil war. In a country literally devastated by sectarian passions, even the death toll of the Bosnian War³³ or the census³⁴ is a contentious issue. The Dayton Agreement in 1995 estab-

²⁹ For example, the truck attack in Nice cost the lives of 85 civilians in July 2016 whereas the coordinated attacks in Paris, the worst terrorist attack by jihadists in the Old Continent, cost the lives of 130 130 civilians in November 2015.

³⁰ Assaf Moghadam, *The Globalization of Martyrdom: Al Qaeda, Salafi Jihad and the Diffusion of Suicide Attacks* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2008); Frances L. Flannery, *Understanding Apocalyptic Terrorism: Countering the Radical Mindset* (London: Routledge, 2015).

³¹ Abdul Sattar Hatita, “Libya Militias Capture Chemical Weapons: Military Official,” *Asharq al-Awsat*, 21/2/2015.

³² Adam Entous, “Islamic State Suspected of Using Chemical Weapons, U.S. Says,” *Washington Post*, 13/8/2015; Lizzie Dearden, “ISIS Manufacturing and Using Chemical Weapons in Syria and Iraq, US Official Claims,” *Independent*, 11/9/2015.

³³ In 2007, the Sarajevo-based Research and Documentation Center published its report on casualties of the Bosnian War (“the Bosnian Book of the Dead”) and documented a minimum of 97,207 dead and missing. The Office of the Prosecutors at the Hague Tribunal calculated the minimum number of victims as 89,186, with a probable figure of around 104,732 souls. “Bosnian War Dead Figure Announced,” *BBC News*, 21/6/2007. “New War Demographics Feature on the ICTY Website,” *International Criminal Tribunal for former Yugoslavia*, 29/3/2011.

³⁴ According to the census in 1991, the population of Bosnia and Herzegovina numbered 4,377,000 souls of whom 43.5% Bosniaks (Muslims), 32% Serbs and 18.4% Croats. The first post-war census was initially scheduled for 2011 but was successively postponed until October 2013 due to disagreements over the census methodology among the various parties. According to the new census, the total popula-

lished in effect a “Frankenstein State”: one country (Bosnia–Herzegovina), two statelets (Republica Srpska and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina) and three authorities (Serb, Croat and Bosniak). The recent census in 2013 revealed that the population of Bosniaks is constantly rising at the expense of the Serbs and Croats (from just 39.5% in 1981 to 50.11% in 2013) despite the fact that the Bosniaks suffered the vast majority of the war casualties.³⁵ The steady rise of the Bosniaks creates a “siege mentality” to the Serbs of the country who see their ratio of the population in constant decline since 1971: from 37.2% to just 30.8%.³⁶ This change in the delicate demographic balance could call into question the very foundations of the Dayton Agreement.

The recent terrorist incidents in Bosnia-Herzegovina only deepened the gap between the Republica Srpska and the (Croat-Bosniak) Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. In April 2015, an ISIS lone wolf murdered a police officer in Republica Srpska; a few months later, in November, a jihadist murdered two Bosniak soldiers Rajlovac (a suburb of Sarajevo). The actions of the local authorities in the two revealed the widening gap between them. The authorities in the (Croat-Bosniak) Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina raided two villages—strongholds of ISIS and detained a few dozen suspects; in contrast, the authorities in Republica Srpska conducted “Operation Ruben” – a sweeping counter-terrorist operation which targeted the small Bosniak population of the republic en masse. And in 2016, Serbia and Republica Srpska conducted a joint counter-terrorism drill which testified to the growing military ties between Banja Luka and Belgrade.³⁷

The situation is further complicated by the actions of outside powers. Ideally the EU should be able to contain a crisis at its own backyard. However, the EU can offer only “carrots” (i.e. accession to the EU) and no “sticks” (i.e. military or diplomatic sanctions) to the parties involved. In other words, this inability of the EU corroborates the axiom that this union is an “economic giant, a political dwarf and

tion of the country had decreased to 3,791,622 people (a 20% decrease) of whom 50.11% Bosniaks (Muslims), 30.8% Serbs and 1.4% Croats. The census results were eventually published in 2016 owing to political wrangles. “Bosnia-Herzegovina Has Lost a Fifth of its Pre-War Population, Census Shows,” *Guardian*, 1/7/2016.

³⁵ Indeed, the Bosniaks suffered 61% of the casualties in the Bosnian War although they constituted 43.7% of the country’s population according to the data of the Research and Documentation Center in Sarajevo. Marie–Janine Carlic, “Ethnic Cleansing and War Crimes, 1991–1995” in Charles W. Ingrao and Thomas A. Emmert (eds.), *Confronting the Yugoslav Controversies: A Scholars’ Initiative* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2012), 139–140. For the demographic evolution of the country, see: Ondřej Žiła, “Ethno-Demographic Development in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1971-1991 and its Propensity for Ethnic Conflict,” *Acta Universitatis Palackianae Olomucensis – Geographica*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (2013), 5-25.

³⁶ Unsurprisingly, the leaders of the Bosnian Serbs openly questioned the validity of the census results, citing certain problems with the methodology. Charles Recknagel, “Bosnia Erupts in Feuding Over New Census Data,” *Radio Free Europe – Radio Liberty*, 30/6/2016; “Census Reveals Bosnia’s Changed Demography,” *Balkan Insight*, 30/6/2016.

³⁷ Tej Parikh, “How Islamic State is Putting the Balkans on Edge,” *The National Interest*, 30/10/2016; Dejan Anastasijevic, “Stirring Up the Spectre of New Balkan Wars,” *Balkan Insight*, 30/1/2017.

a military worm.”³⁸ The USA, the superpower that ended the Bosnian War, is not particularly interested for the time being at the western Balkans.³⁹ Moscow, on the other hand, is increasingly asserting its influence in this volatile region – primarily through the Serbs. The close ties between the Bosnian Serbs and Russia are evident – from posters of Putin in eastern Sarajevo to investments from oligarchs-friends of Putin.⁴⁰ After all, the room for maneuver is quite restricted for Russia in the Balkans. Almost every state in the Balkans is either member of NATO and/ or EU or has applied for membership in the EU and NATO. The support from Russia imbued the leadership of Banja Luka with a rising self-confidence and, unsurprisingly, the calls for secession within Republica Srpska are augmenting.⁴¹

The infiltration of Serbia by ISIS threatens to reignite old passions. Two regions in the south, Kosovo and Sandžak, are predominantly inhabited by Muslims (Albanians and Bosniaks respectively) who have been radicalised significantly in recent years. Kosovo already seceded from Serbia although the latter has not formally recognised the new status quo.⁴² Muslims (Bosniaks) constitute 48.4% of the population in Sandžak and, since 2010, they have been demanding in earnest a status of autonomy – just like their co-religionists in Bosnia-Herzegovina.⁴³ The Bosniaks discovered an external ally for their demands – a neo-Ottoman Turkey. In recent years Turkey infiltrated the region through cultural and religious undertakings in an effort to establish an “Ottoman Corridor” from Turkey all the way to Bosnia by using the various Muslim/Turkish minorities in the Balkans as “human links.”⁴⁴ ISIS, in addition, established a foothold on Sandžak and a new headache for Belgrade was added: the radicalization of a population that already demands its autonomy from Serbia.⁴⁵

³⁸ This statement is attributed to the then-Belgian Minister of Foreign Affairs Eyskens. For a detailed analysis of the failure of the EU in the western Balkans, see: “The EU-Balkans Relationship Is A Two-Way Failure,” *DW*, 27/8/2015.

³⁹ Valerie Hopkins, “Donald Trump’s Big League Balkans Problem,” *Foreign Policy*, 31/1/2017; Jeffrey Mankoff, “How to Fix the Western Balkans,” *Foreign Affairs*, 7/7/2017.

⁴⁰ For example, various towns in Serbia and Republica Srpska awarded Putin the title of honorary citizen. Maja Zivanovix, “Serbian Towns Queue to Make Putin Honorary Citizen,” *Balkan Insight*, 23/2/2017; Richard Palmer, “Will Putin Reignite the Balkans?” *The Trumpet*, 1/1/2016.

⁴¹ Republica Srpska announced in 2016 its intention to organize a controversial referendum about independence. However, the High Representative for Bosnia-Herzegovina warned that separatism by the Bosnian Serbs would most likely force “an international intervention.” “A Referendum by Serbs Threatens Yet More Trouble for Bosnia,” *Economist*, 27/9/2016; Daria Sito-Sucic and Gordana Katana, “Planned Serb Referendum Vote Reawakens Fears of Strife in Bosnia,” *Reuters*, 22/9/2016.

⁴² In 2013, Serbia and Kosovo signed the Brussels Agreement under the auspices of the EU and promised to fully normalise their relations; the agreement, however, has not been implemented yet completely.

⁴³ For an analysis of the emergence of the “Sandzak Issue,” see: International Crisis Group, “Sandzak: Calm for Now” (Sarajevo: International Crisis Group, 1998); Marija Todorovic, “The Emergence of the Bosniak Identity Politics in Sandzak in the 1990s” (MA Thesis: Central European University, 2012).

⁴⁴ “Sandzak, The Balkans Region Where Turkey Is the Big Brother,” *DW*, 21/10/2016; Serkan Demirtaş: “Turkey Dives into Balkan Diplomacy Amid Violence,” *Hürriyet Daily News*, 10/11/2011.

⁴⁵ Milos Teodorovic and Maria Arnautovic, “Serbia’s Sandzak Becomes Balkans’ Latest Hot Spot,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 28/9/2010; “The Troubles of Sandzak,” *Economist*, 27/8/2011.

Already separated by Serbia, Kosovo is a region which ISIS infiltrated heavily. Although Albanians historically identified themselves as “Shqiptars” first and Muslims or Christians second, in recent years a growing number of Albanians in underscore their religious identity.⁴⁶ This new trend is owed primarily to Qatar and Turkey which heavily invested in the construction of mosques and madrassas in Kosovo. Unsurprisingly, ISIS established a firm foothold in the break-away area. A terrorist incident by jihadists against the remaining Serbian pockets in northern Kosovo or in the neighbouring Sandžak and Preševo would most likely ignite the old passions between the Albanians and Serbs. After all, the strategy of ISIS aims to accomplish just that: incite a civil war between Muslims (whether native populations or immigrants) and the “Others” and, thus, deepen its influence over the Muslims in Europe.⁴⁷ Preševo, in particular, is a “sleeping volcano.” Just after the end of the Kosovo War in 1999, an insurgency⁴⁸ erupted among the majority Albanian population of Preševo which was suppressed after almost two years at the expense of the separatist insurgents.⁴⁹

FYROM is yet another country of the Balkans that was added to the new list of “failing states.”⁵⁰ In fact, the old rivalry between Albanians and Slav-Macedonians was recently rekindled due to a drawn-out political crisis that was caused primarily by Nikola Gruevski.⁵¹ Since 2016 the opposition has accused the ultra-nationalist and authoritarian Slav-Macedonian potentate of corruption and espionage and (violent and non-violent) protests against him.⁵²

⁴⁶ According to a recent report by the Kosovar Institute for Policy Research and Development (KIPRED), roughly 32% of the Albanians now declare themselves Muslim first and foremost. “Is Kosovo a breeding ground for Islamists?” *DW*, 25/12/2016.

⁴⁷ Steven Erlanger, “A Quandary for Europe: Fighting a War on ISIS within its Borders,” *New York Times*, 23/3/2016; Nassif Hitti, “ISIS Strategy of Provoking Civil War in Europe,” *The Arab Weekly*, 22/1/2017.

⁴⁸ The insurgency was launched by the Liberation Army of Preševo, Medveda and Bujanovac (UÇPMB) – with the tacit support of the Kosovo Liberation Army (UÇK).

⁴⁹ The armed uprising was quelled with difficulty due to the restrictions imposed on the Yugoslav Army in the aftermath of the Kosovo War. Zorana Brozović, *Territorial and Border Demarcation Disputes in the Western Balkans Case study: Territorial and boundary disputes between Serbia and Kosovo*, (Belgrade Centre for Security Policy, Belgrade, 2011), 7.

⁵⁰ A state is considered “failing” when it cannot provide governance, welfare and security to its citizens to a critical degree. Judy Batt and Dov Lynch, *What is a “failing” state and when is it a security threat?* (Brussels: European Union Institute for Security Studies, 2004).

⁵¹ The political crisis in FYROM started in April 2016 when the opposition orchestrated non-violent protests against former prime minister (and de facto leader of the country until May 2017) Nikola Gruevski on the grounds of the widespread corruption and increasing authoritarianism of the ultra-nationalist politician. The protests lasted for a few months (April–June 2016) and were labelled a “colourful revolution.” Pete Baumgartner, “Explainer: Roots of Macedonia’s Political Crisis Run Deep,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 15/4/2016.

⁵² In the early elections in December 2016, neither the ruling party nor the opposition won an absolute majority to form a one-party government; the negotiations for the establishment of a coalition government dragged on for months at the connivance of the country’s president (and an ally of the prime minister) and Gruevski acted as the de facto leader of FYROM. Stavros Tzimas, «Η Κρίση στα Σκόπια και η Ελλάδα» [“The Crisis in Skopje and Greece”], *Kathimerini*, 10/3/2017.

Unfortunately, other external actors were involved in this crisis. Albania, which under Prime Minister Edi Rama distanced itself from the EU in pursuit of a grandiose vision of “Greater Albania,”⁵³ intervened openly in the ongoing political crisis in the FYROM. In December 2016, Rama invited the leaders of the minor Albanian parties in Tirana and, after a few days deliberations, announced the “Tirana Platform” which encapsulated the demands of the Albanians in FYROM. The Albanians, who as recently as 2001 agreed to abandon their separatist objectives under the Ohrid Agreement, in essence demanded from the established Slav-Macedonian élite to upgrade them into partners of the new “nation.”⁵⁴ The EU could not intervene decisively to diffuse the crisis. The Pržino Agreement in 2015,⁵⁵ its crown achievement, was in fact violated by Gruevski and the EU possessed neither the capacity nor the willingness to compel him to comply.⁵⁶ Russia, on the other hand, offered open support to the nationalist Slav-Macedonian hard-liners in a desperate effort to acquire influence once again in a region outside the Kremlin’s orbit. Putin pledged openly support for two Slavic and Orthodox countries (FYROM + Serbia) against Albanian Irredentism and “colour revolutions” – two threats allegedly originating from the USA.⁵⁷ The USA did not initially intervene in FYROM to contain the crisis and only in May 2017 did Washington use its special weight to oust Gruevski. A new government between the Socialists and the Albanians was established under the auspices of the newly-appointed US ambassador.⁵⁸

The crisis still persists, however, as the violent provocation against the Socialists and Albanian MPs by ultra-nationalists in June proved eloquently.⁵⁹ A counter-terrorist operation against jihadist cells among Albanians in FYROM could provoke yet another crisis between Slav-Macedonians and Albanians as in 2015.⁶⁰ Wash-

⁵³ According to ultra-nationalists, Greater Albania would encompass Tetovo in north-western, FYROM, Preševo in south-eastern Serbia, Chamëria in north-western Greece and Malesija in southern Montenegro and Kosovo.

⁵⁴ Fatjona Mejdini, “Macedonian Albanian Leaders Plot Joint Strategy in Tirana,” *Balkan Insight*, 30/12/2016; Andrej Isakovic, “Albanian Prime Minister: EU Faces “Nightmare” If Balkan Hopes Fade,” *Politico*, 21/4/2017.

⁵⁵ This agreement stipulated that early elections would be organized in April 2016.

⁵⁶ Andrew Rettman, “EU and Russia Step Into Macedonian Crisis,” *EU Observer*, 3/3/2017; Erwan Fouéré, “The Macedonian Crisis: A Failure of EU Conflict Management?” *Centre for European Policy Studies*, 5/5/2017.

⁵⁷ Miki Traikovski, “Russia and Macedonia: The Ghosts of Pan-Slavism,” *Balkanist*, 29/5/2015; Vladislav B. Sotirović, “Russia’s Balkan Politics: From the Politics of Pan-Slavic Reciprocity of the Tsarist Russia to the “Realpolitic” of the Republic of Gazprom Russia,” *Global Politics*, 18/10/2016.

⁵⁸ Sinisa Jakov Marusic, “Macedonia Parliament Approves New Gov’t After Prolonged Stalemate,” *Balkan Insight*, 31/5/2017; Aleksandar Dimishkovski, “Macedonia Has New Government, But Rocky Road Ahead,” *New York Times*, 1/6/2017.

⁵⁹ In late April 2017, ultra-nationalist protestors stormed the parliament in Skopje and injured several Socialist and Albanian deputies. “Macedonia: Protestors Storm Parliament and Attack MPs,” *Guardian*, 27/4/2017.

⁶⁰ Matt Robinson and Fatos Bytyci, “Gun Battle in Ethnic Albanian Region Deepens Macedonian Crisis,” *Reuters*, 10/5/2015; Chris Deliso, “Asymmetric Threats Challenge Macedonia before Easter and Elections,” *Balkananalysis*, 25/4/2016. A similar counter-terrorist operation in 2012 incited a crisis. Tej Parikh, “How Islamic State Is Putting the Balkans on Edge,” *National Interest*, 30/10/2016.

ington consistently pushed for the inclusion of the FYROM in NATO and the EU as a safety valve vis-à-vis the various security threats (i.e. separatism from Albanians and terrorism from jihadists); however, the chronic dispute with Greece over the name stands as a critical barrier.⁶¹ Although Greece blocks the entry of FYROM to NATO, Athens and Belgrade monitor with unease the spread of jihadism and the rhetoric about Greater Albania.⁶² After all, a crisis in FYROM could easily engulf in flames the rest of the Balkans. Since the 19th century, two issues caused repeated crisis and wars in the Balkans: the Macedonian and the Bosnian Questions.⁶³ The returning jihadists in FYROM (as well as Kosovo and the other regions of the Balkans) could easily conduct terrorist strikes and, in that way, inflame the passions of war between old rivals.⁶⁴

In summary, the Balkans do feature prominently in the overall strategy of ISIS the latter views the region as a transit zone and a stronghold. However, ISIS is not that popular among the local Muslim minorities/ majorities. Indeed, many moreunteers for ISIS originated from Western and Northern Europe (with Belgium first) than the western Balkans. In line with Resolution 2178 of the UN Security Council in September 2014, several countries of the western Balkans (FYROM, Montenegro, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Albania and the de facto independent Kosovo) laws that criminalized the participation in foreign armed groups – an indirect reference to jihadist groups in Syria and Iraq. These countries, however, must do much more to combat extremism in their native soil.⁶⁵

The Threat of Demographic Change

The Arab Spring opened Pandora's Box and caused, among other ills, the movement of wholesale populations from one country to another and from one continent to another. In 2015, Europe witnessed a refugee crisis of a scale unprecedented since the end of the Cold War. Hundreds of thousands of refugees and immigrants from the Middle East (as well as Central Asia and Africa) migrated en masse to Italy and, above all, Greece, by means of a perilous sea voyage.⁶⁶ Greece

⁶¹ Recently, Skopje assumed some initiatives to unlock this deadlock and end this chronic dispute. Helena Smith, "Macedonia and Greece Appear Close to Settling 27-Year Dispute Over Name," *Guardian*, 13/6/2017.

⁶² Aggelos Syrigos, «Η Κρίση στα Σκόπια και τα Διλήμματα της Αθήνας» ["The Crisis in Skopje and the Dilemmas of Athens"], *Stavroslygeros.gr*, 25/4/2017.

⁶³ For an exceptional analysis of the two questions, see: Misha Glenny, *The Balkans, 1804-2012: Nationalism, War and the Great Powers* (New York: Granta Books, 2012).

⁶⁴ Already over 150 foreign fighters, originally from Kosovo, either returned to Kosovo or reside in other countries of Europe according to the Executive Director of the Kosovar Center for Security Studies Florian Qehaja. Francesca Astorri, "European Fears of the ISIS Blag Flags Crossing from the Balkans," *Al Arabiya*, 8/4/2017.

⁶⁵ Chris Deliso, "Five Ways ISIS Can Destabilize the Balkans," *Balkan Analysis*, 2/7/2015; Hristo Voynov, "ISIS and the Balkans," *Vostokian*, 12/1/2016.

⁶⁶ Over 3,000 refugees and immigrants perished in the warm waters of the Mediterranean Sea in 2015. Tara Brian and Frank Laczko, *Fatal Journeys: Tracking Lives Lost during Migration* (Geneva: International Organization for Migration, 2014), 92-97.

did not welcome for the first time refugees from war-torn countries; in the 1990s, hundreds of thousands of Albanians and other Balkan people had migrated to Greece.⁶⁷ However, 2015 was quite different from the 1990s. Within just 12 months, Greece and, by extension, the EU admitted over one million individuals from the Middle East – the vast majority of whom Muslims.⁶⁸ Although this figure may not appear high for a continent inhabited by 740 million people (508 million people within the EU), this number of immigrants can upset a sensitive demographic balances in the Balkans.

Bulgaria and Greece stand at the forefront of this refugee crisis since they share a land (and naval) frontier with Turkey – the terminus-a-quo of the tidal waves of immigrants and refugees. Already nearly 65,000 refugees from the Middle East are trapped in Greece and sheltered in refugee camps notorious for their meagre facilities.⁶⁹ Germany accommodated the majority (nearly 800,000 souls) of the refugees but other states in the EU are still unwilling to admit refugees from Greece and Italy – and that despite the repeated warnings by Brussels.⁷⁰ The refugee plight in 2015 demonstrated clearly the various threats to a country's national security. Especially since ISIS most likely infiltrated the waves of refugees and immigrants and, thus, accessed the Balkans and Western Europe unnoticed.⁷¹

Since Greece could not deal alone with the tidal waves of refugees, other agencies and in particular NGOs intervened to assist the beleaguered Greek authorities. However, certain NGOs did not operate on altruism but served other agendas. The Greek police authorities discovered that some of them either co-operated with the slave traders on the western Turkish coast or embezzled the various EU funds for the refugees' relief. Other NGOs even operated as Trojan Horses for Turkey and incited riots among these refugees (who already complained about their "entrapment" in Greece).⁷²

⁶⁷ For an analysis of the tidal waves of refugees in the 1990s in the Balkans, see: Ioannis Kyriakou, *Στατιστικά Δεδομένα για τους Μετανάστες στην Ελλάδα* [Statistical Data for Immigrants in Greece] (Mediterranean Migration Observatory: Panteion University, 2004).

⁶⁸ In fact, 1,255,640 individuals from the Middle East, Africa and Central Asia applied for political asylum in the EU in 2015 – a 2,5 times increase from 2014 (562,680 individuals). "Asylum in the EU Member States," *Eurostat*, 4/3/2016.

⁶⁹ International Amnesty, «Παγιδευμένοι στην Ελλάδα: Μια Προσφυγική Κρίση που θα Μπορούσε να Έχει Αποφευχθεί» ["Trapped in Greece: A Refugee Crisis that Could Have Been Averted"] (Athens: International Amnesty, 2016); «Μουζάλας: Στους 65.000 Οι Πρόσφυγες και Μετανάστες στην Ελλάδα – Το 30% Είναι Σύριοι» ["Mouzalas: 65.000 the Refugees and Immigrants in Greece – 30% of them Syrians"], *Banking News.Gr*, 10/2/2017

⁷⁰ For an exceptional analysis of the failed crisis management by Brussels, see: Silvia Merler, *EU Migration Crisis: Facts, Figures and Disappointments* (Brussels: Bruegel, 2016).

⁷¹ Tej Parikh, "Is Political Correctness Over 'Refugees' Putting Lives in Danger?" *Reuters*, 27/11/2015; Joshua Posaner, "German Intelligence Warns of ISIS 'Hit Squads' Among Refugees," *Politico*, 8/11/2016.

⁷² Indicatively, see: Chiotis Vasilis, «Χρυσές Μπίζνες με τους Μετανάστες» ["Golden Businesses with the Refugees"], *Vima*, 23/8/2015; Nefeli Lygerous, «Ο Άγνωστος Πόλεμος των ΜΚΟ – Έφερναν και Πρόσφυγες στα Νησιά» ["The Unknown War of the NGOs – They Even Shipped Refugees to the Islands"], *Proto Thema*, 22/3/2016; «Έρευνα για την ΜΚΟ που Φέρεται να Εκμεταλλεύεται Μετανάστες και Πρόσφυγες» ["Investigation for the NGO that Appeared to Exploit Immigrants and Refugees"], *News.Gr*, 29/5/2017.

Since the refugee waves decreased and did not cease the immigrant Muslim communities in Greece and Bulgaria will only increase in the foreseeable future. Both countries already accommodate sizable Muslim native populations in sensitive regions (adjacent to the frontier with Turkey): 98,000 in Greece (0.9% of the total population but 26% of the population of western Thrace) and 577,139 in Bulgaria (or 7.8% of the total population). Both countries suffer from a dire demographic crisis (especially Bulgaria whose population decreased by 2,000,000 inhabitants since 1991) but, surprisingly, the population of their Muslim (and partially Turkish) minorities remains rather stable.⁷³ Worse, Turkey (as a revisionist power since 1974) attempts to extend its influence over the lands of the Ottoman Empire and uses the various Muslim/ Turkic minorities in the Balkans as a vehicle for its grandiose neo-Ottoman visions.⁷⁴ This influx of immigrants threatens to radically transform the religious/ethnic composition of Greece or Bulgaria⁷⁵ and, therefore, result in the creation of a populous Muslim community whose leadership Turkey aspires to assume as the “protector” of Balkan Muslims.⁷⁶

After all, Turkey consistently facilitated in various ways the migratory flows the Middle East and Central Asia towards Greece in an indirect effort to weaken its old rival.⁷⁷ In recent years, Ankara has consistently acted as the self-designated “protector” of Muslims in Greece and adds issues with regards to Muslims (e.g. the construction of a mosque and cemetery in Athens) in the agenda of the Greco-Turkish disputes.⁷⁸ The degree to which Ankara is complicit to these migratory flows is evident in two facts: a) the senior security officers who are deeply involved in human trafficking⁷⁹ and b) the virtual stop of the refugee waves in Europe after the EU-Turkey deal in 2015.⁸⁰

⁷³ Marcin Stonawski, Michaela Potančoková, Vegard Skirbekk, *Fertility Patterns of Native and Migrant Muslims in Europe*, (Princeton: Princeton University, 2012), 6-10.

⁷⁴ Selma Mujanovic, “Turkey’s Harmless Tango Between East and West,” *Epiphany – Journal of Transdisciplinary Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (2013), 205-217 .

⁷⁵ Indicatively of the new fears for a demographic imbalance owing to immigration, see: Veselin Zhelev, “Migration Threatens Demographic Balance, Says Bulgarian PM,” *EU Observer*, 24/4/2015.

⁷⁶ Indicatively of the influence of Turkey on Greece’s Muslims, the leader of the Muslim Association of Greece, Naim Elgantour, greeted Bilal Erdogan, the son of Erdogan, as “son of the great hero of Islam, Erdogan,” during the former’s visit in Thrace in 2015. Aggelos Athanasopoulos, «Η Άγκυρα Ρίχνει τα Δίκτυα της σε Όλους τους Μουσουλμάνους της Ελλάδας» [“Ankara Spring its Nets to all Muslims of Greece”], *Vima*, 24/5/2015.

⁷⁷ Özal, the former prime minister of Turkey, remarked in the 1980s that Turkey could simply overwhelm Greece with tidal waves of Muslim immigrants. Theodoros Katsanevas, «Η Επικείμενη Καταστροφή και Μουσουλμανοποίηση της Χώρας» [“The Upcoming Destruction and Islamization of the Country”], *Capital.Gr*, 23/1/2012.

⁷⁸ Christina Flaskou, «Τζαμί στην Αθήνα: Τι Κρύβει η Τουρκική Προθυμία για Χρηματοδότηση; Άρθρο-Ανάλυση» [“Mosque in Athens: What Does the Turkish Willingness for Funding Conceal? Article-Analysis”], *OnAlert*, 8/2/2013; Aggelos Syrigos, «Από το Τζαμί του Πορθητή στο Τέμενος του Βοτανικού» [“From the Mosque of the Conqueror to the Mosque of Votanikos”], *Stavroslygeros.gr*, 26/5/2017.

⁷⁹ Sotiris Balaskas, «Αποκάλυψη: Ο Μηχανισμός Τουρκίας και Δουλεμπόρων Που Πλημμυρίζουν την Ελλάδα με Πρόσφυγες» [“Revelation: The Mechanism of Turkey and Slave-Traders Who

The Absence of “Regional Policemen”

In summary, the Arab Spring acted as a catalyst that accelerated the ongoing instability in the Balkans ever since the collapse of Yugoslavia in 1990. The rise of jihadists (in particular ISIS), the strengthening of the local mafias (in association with with ISIS/ Al Qaeda) and the migratory flows are direct and indirect consequences of of the Arab Spring which only exacerbated the old rivalries (e.g. Slav-Macedonians Macedonians versus Albanians in FYROM) and problems (e.g. the Muslim/ Turkic minorities in Bulgaria and Greece and the revisionist policy of Turkey). For that reason, the prospect of increased instability or even new war in the western Balkans must not be discounted as unrealistic.⁸¹

That begs the question: what will the outside powers do to avert a new war? For the time being, the world hegemon, the USA, is unwilling to intervene decisively in the Balkans and avert a new war or even intercept the aggressive resurgence of the Kremlin in South-East Europe. On the other hand, Russia (and even China on a purely economic aspect) cement their influence in the region by capitalizing on the (until now) indifference of Washington. The EU is yet another actor who could exert a heavy influence in this troubled region but avoids doing so. The 2015 refugee crisis demonstrated quite clearly the inability of the EU member-states to act in unison vis-à-vis a pan-European problem. Since the EU cannot cope with the refugee crisis, how will it deal with a new war in the western Balkans? Last but not least, the Arab Spring vastly increased the “geopolitical weight” of Turkey in the Balkans and the Middle East; however, as the recent developments demonstrated, Turkey is part of the problem –not the solution– in the Balkans and Middle East.

Flood Greece with Refugees”], *Athens Agency*, 1/10/2015; Uzay Bulut, “Turkey: The Business of Refugee Smuggling, Sex Trafficking,” *Gatestone Institute*, 3/4/2016.

⁸⁰ Elizabeth Collett, “The Paradox of the EU-Turkey Refugee Deal,” *Migration Policy Institute*, 1/3/2016; Bodo Weber, *The EU-Turkey Refugee Deal and the Quite Not Closed Balkan Route* (Berlin: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2017).

⁸¹ Mathew Day, “War Is Brewing in the Balkans Again – the West Can’t Afford to Turn A Blind Eye Any Longer,” *Telegraph*, 25/5/2017.