



# Declining Number of Foreign Fighters in the Balkans

Alexis Hollon

M.A. in Political Science  
with a Concentration in European Union Policy Studies  
James Madison University

## Abstract

Thousands of foreign fighters originating from the Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo have joined the ranks of ISIS, traveling to the Middle East and return with terrorist training. They are a danger to their country of origin as well as the larger European community because they are ideologically radicalized and often hide in plain sight until an attack has been executed. In 2014, the number of radicalized individuals traveling to the Middle East has decreased dramatically. Similarly, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo introduced counter-terrorism measures around the same time to combat radicalization and increase safety. Research concerning whether or not this decrease of foreign fighters from the Balkans stem from a decrease in the relative power of ISIS or new counterterrorism strategies has been lacking. The research done in this paper sought to understand why the decrease in foreign fighters occurred and whether or not the policies implemented in the Western Balkans played a significant role in the reduction. However, this paper is unable to determine what has caused the decrease in foreign fighters. ISIS's decline in power and drop in recruitment techniques occurred later than the 2013 decline in foreign fighters. The policies enacted by national governments in the Western Balkans are too drastically different from each other to have produced such succinct results across borders. Likewise, the policies were enacted just before the 2014 and have not all been effective combating foreign fighters making it unlikely that they are responsible for the decrease.

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## **Introduction**

Foreign fighters who return from Iraq and Syria to their country of origin in the Western Balkans are a major security threat. These individuals have become skilled in handling arms, executing terrorist plots, and have become ideologically radicalized. Individuals of this nature do not only pose a threat to the Western Balkans, but to member states of the European Union (EU). These fighters have the ability to cause mass chaos and cause thousands of injuries to societies throughout the EU because of their commitment to a global jihad. Therefore, it is necessary to monitor, analyze and understand all developments in the foreign fighter phenomenon in the Balkans.

Since 2012 there has been a steady decrease in radicalized individuals originating from the Western Balkans traveling to Syria and Iraq. However, there was a sharp decline in foreign fighters in 2014. This paper will analyze the explanations for the decrease in foreign fighters from the Western Balkans. Specifically, this paper will address whether a decrease in foreign fighters can be attributed to stricter and more cohesive policies at the national level, or if the declining power and influence of ISIS monetarily and territorially that have made the perspective of foreign fighting less appealing.

## **Literature Review**

### Foreign Fighters

The term foreign fighter is often misused to describe local rebels, terrorists, and insurgents. Therefore, it is necessary to establish a concrete definition that establishes the boundaries for what constitutes a foreign fighter and what does not. Some definitions say that a foreign fighter is simply a non-citizen of a conflict zone that engages in the conflict. However, this is not a sufficient definition because it lacks specificity. This paper will use Thomas Hegghammer's definition of a foreign fighter because it is both clear and exhaustive in defining the concept of a foreign fighter. Hegghammer states that a foreign fighter

(1) has joined, and operates within the confines of an insurgency, (2) lacks citizenship of the conflict state or kinship links to its warring factions, (3) lacks affiliation to an official military organization (Hegghammer 2010, 58).

This definition is important because it separates foreign fighters from soldiers, mercenaries, and any other violent actors who have crossed a border to fight on behalf of a particular group.

With this in mind, Hegghammer points out that the concept of foreign fighters is relatively new. He argues that the notion, and overall importance, of foreign fighters was lost among academics because of an emphasis on local rebels and international terrorists until the 1980s. Most academic literature, prior to the 1980s, focuses on foreign state support, exiled insurgents, or local rebels rather than the influence of independent global activists in the form of foreign fighters. Studies on foreign fighters, more recently, focus largely on their influence with Al-Qaeda. Most literature does not speak of them as a larger phenomenon, especially in the Western Balkans. Therefore, there is a gap within the academic literature that this paper will fill.

Hegghammer focuses his research on foreign fighters in conflicts within Muslim territories. Specifically, foreign fighters in Muslim territories represent “a violent offshoot of a qualitatively new sub-current of Islamism – populist pan-Islamism” (Hegghammer 2010, 56). Therefore, they are targeted through recruitment strategies that are framed as a way for Muslim nations to fight an “existential external threat” (Hegghammer 2010, 73). For example, conflicts where crimes are being committed against Muslims, such as women being raped, children and elderly killed, and mosques destroyed best motivates foreign fighters within the Muslim community. In this type of scenario, Muslims must fight back militarily because Islamic law commands it (Hegghammer 2010). The responsibility to defend Muslim territory is shared by all Muslims, and not limited to the residents of the contested and conflicted area. Specifically, there are two types of arguments that support the call for solitary in action among Muslims to unite against a common threat. The first emphasizes the unity of the Muslim nation. Victims are systematically referred to as “our brothers/sisters/mothers/children” as if they were blood relations of the prospective recruits. The second argument invokes Islamic law<sup>1</sup>, declaring that fighting is an individual religious duty (*fard ayn*) for all Muslims (Hegghammer 2010, 74). Through the discussion of the literature, we are better able to analyze how foreign fighters, particularly of Muslim descent, are recruited in conflicts throughout the world.

Groups requiring foreign manpower must advertise, persuade and enlist foreigners to

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<sup>1</sup> Also known as Sharia, or Sharia law, it is the religious law that defines the Islamic religious tradition. The laws cover a wide range of topics and correspond with living life in accordance to God’s will.

fight for their cause. Similar to Hegghammer, David Malet argues that recruitment tactics are most successful when distant civil conflicts seem like a threat to the transnational community that the potential recruit is associated. Malet argues that specific characteristics, such as belonging to a specific religion or ethnicity, are related to transnational recruiting because it brings the recruiter closer to the prospective involvement in an armed conflict. Arguably, the root causes that justify fighting and killing are subjective. Consequently, recruiters must tailor their argument in a way for an individual to preserve their distant community, through defensive action, rather than individual gain. Recruitment strategies usually follow a similar pattern (Malet 2009).

As recruiters tailor their recruitment strategies to reflect the goal of saving a shared community, they must understand what groups they are trying to target. In order to make a connection with potential recruits, they must identify their cause in relation to the potential foreign fighters. At this time, individuals who are

highly active in the institutions of that community (that has been previously identified by the insurgent group) and identify with it closely, but who tend to be marginalized within their broader polities, often because they are part of some minority group often participate as a foreign fighter (Malet 2009, 14).

Again, recruiters must emphasize the potential threat to transnational communities in order to gain recruits. Recruiters do their best to persuade potential recruits that their participation (as foreign fighters) is “necessary for the survival of their people, and ultimately, their own” (Malet 2009, 15).

### ISIS Foreign Fighters

As of December 2015, nearly 30,000 foreign fighters joined the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), also known as, Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), or by the Arabic acronym, *Da'esh*. These fighters come from 85 different countries, the majority from the Middle East (Bakker 2013). However, foreign fighters also come from the Western world including the European Union and the United States. Fighters from the Western Balkans represent a threat to the international community for a variety of reasons. Most importantly, they present a major security threat to the Western world because foreign fighters possess government-issued passports. Therefore, they can easily return home from combat as a trained terrorist and go unnoticed by government authorities. Once they have returned home, foreign fighters have

connections and skills to create new terror networks in the West and successfully execute attacks. Without foreign fighters, ISIS and other terrorist groups would not have the human capital needed to commit attacks on foreign soil (Benmelech and Klor 2017). ISIS recruits from Western countries serve an extremely important purpose. These fighters help to create animosity between the Western population and Muslim immigrants who have settled there, thereby perpetuating the cultural conflict. ISIS focuses their recruitment strategies in Western countries on impressionable youth through social media propaganda (Benmelech and Klor 2017).

Benmelech and Klor's research has shown that poor economic conditions alone do not drive individuals of the Western world to participate in ISIS. In fact, in many cases, individuals who become ISIS foreign fighters originate from a country that has a positive GDP and Human Development Index (HDI). Countries with the highest foreign fighter recruits have high levels of economic development, low inequality, developed political institutions, and stability (Benmelech and Klor 2017). However, the size of a country's Muslim population, in relation to a country's homogeneity, does have a strong correlation to the number of foreign fighters. Muslim immigrants experience more trouble assimilating into countries that are more homogenous. In these homogenous countries, they experience higher levels of discrimination, which in turn, strengthens their religious identity and can lead to easier radicalization (Benmelech and Klor 2017). Muslims, either first or second generation, who fail to integrate or assimilate into their homogenous western country, often radicalize. During this radicalization process, individuals may move to Syria and Iraq for a short period of time. After, they move back to their country of origin as foreign fighters willing and able to commit and attack on their country of origin (Benmelech and Klor 2017, 4). Overall, marginalized individuals are recruited through nonviolent, intentional Islamic organizations that emphasize the threat to Islam and Muslim faith throughout the world.

## **Background Information**

### ISIS

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and its network of like-minded members have carried out hundreds of attacks, both on the large and small scale, and traumatized many societies throughout the world. ISIS marks a new era of terrorism and global security threats not

only to neighboring Arab countries, but also to the United States (U.S.) and the European Union. This objective makes them different from organizations like Al Qaeda, who focused their attention on the “near enemies” like Iraq and Syria (Knapp 2017). Instead, ISIS focuses on “the far enemy,” also known as, the Western world. ISIS stationed itself in Mosul, Iraq’s second largest city.

Previously, the U.S., the United Nations (UN) and the European Union (EU) was able to block further advancements of terrorist groups like Al Qaeda by blocking funds. However, ISIS was too economically independent. By the mid-2014 ISIS was the strongest it had ever been because of its economic capabilities. The jihadi group was able to smuggle oil out of countries like Iraq and Syria, and into Jordan, which gave them ample amounts of financial revenue (Knapp 2017). The total revenue from smuggled oil totaled somewhere between one and three million per day. The group also controlled a large taxed population of nearly eight million people where they are able to tax “everything from small family farms to large enterprises such as cell-phone service providers, water delivery companies, and electric utilities” (Cronin 2015, 35). Additionally, ISIS gained income from grain stores, and thousands of arms and ammunition (Cronin 2015, 35).

In order to sustain its power, ISIS needed further conquest, new recruits (to replace those lost) and arms. ISIS was unable to gain more territory because, as a Sunni Arab force, they were unable to conquer Shia terrain in central and southern Iraq (Burke 2017). After ISIS lost control of Mosul in July 2017, the leadership and administration of ISIS crumbled. The creation and distribution of propaganda that ISIS had relied so heavily on to attract new fighters had dropped by two-thirds, and by September 2017, it completely stopped. ISIS was unable to offer anything to recruits other than a place among the violence and destruction. U.S.-led airstrikes and Western forces have done well at abating ISIS, but has not eradicated them completely. Scholars and the media suggest that ISIS will return with insurgency campaigns as it has done in the past (Burke 2017).

## Albania

### *Background*

Between 1967 and 1990 Albanian communist dictator Enver Hoxha declared Albania an atheist country and banned all religions. However, after the fall of communism in the 1990’s

nearly 20 Arab Islamic foundations settled into the Western Balkans region. The vast majority of these groups established an extremely strong presence in Albania (Shtuni 2015). They were able to gain public support by sponsoring the construction of mosques and provide educational scholarships to Albanian Muslims who engaged in the promotion of Islam (Shtuni 2015). Many of these foundations were later found responsible for recruitment and radicalization activities. Before the Syrian conflict, very few ethnic Albanians traveled to Syria and Iraq to become foreign fighters. However, between 2012 and 2015 research suggests that nearly 500 ethnic Albanians from the Western Balkans have traveled to Syria and Iraq for the purpose of joining ISIS (Shtuni 2015).

The dataset compiled by Adrian Shtuni (2015) examines 211 ethnic Albanians who became foreign fighters in Iraq/Syria or have been arrested with recruitment charges between 2012 and 2015. The dataset does not include the women, children, and extended family members that traveled with those attempting to join a terrorist group. Ethnic Albanian foreign fighters range in age from 17-70, but the majority are approximately 30 years old. However, there is a large age gap depending on what country the ethnic Albanian individual lived in prior to becoming a foreign fighter. For example, in Albania, the average age of foreign fighters is 35.6, meanwhile the average ages of ethnic Albanians living in Macedonia or Kosovo is nearly ten years younger (Shtuni 2015).

During a briefing in February 2016 on U.S. Secretary Kerry's travel to Tirana, a senior State Department official reiterated that the Western Balkans is an environment that breeds foreign fighters. They argued that high levels of youth unemployment and Islam with strands of a politicized agenda are to blame for the rise in foreign fighters in the region (U.S. State Department 2016a). While the State Department acknowledges that there are high levels of violent extremism in the area, they also state that the Albanian government is working hard to stop foreign fighters on their own. The State Department official states that

they've [Albanians] been quite successful over the last year with that and they're trying to export some of the strategies that they have used to other countries in the Balkan region, including the work that they're doing in communities to make common cause between parents, educators, law enforcement, local Imams, et cetera, to make sure that they know what influences young people are receiving. So we work very closely with them on all of that (U.S. State Department 2016a).

*Legislation, Law Enforcement and Border Security*

On the national level, Albania has tried to curb the foreign fighter phenomenon by increasing indictments and laws against foreign fighters (Mejdini 2016a). This increase in arrests and tougher legislation has curbed numbers of foreign fighters significantly (Mejdini 2016b). Currently Albania criminalizes terrorist attacks, the collection, transfer and concealment of funds for terrorist organizations, any transaction done with an individual on the UN sanction lists, recruiting individuals to partake in terrorist activities and establishing or participating in a terrorist activity. In 2016, nine individuals were found guilty of one or more of these charges, and their sentences range from four-and-a-half to 18 years (Refworld 2016).

The Albanian government has expanded their State Police Anti-Terrorism Unit (ATU), which continues to work closely with the U.S. Department of Justice's (DOJ) International Criminal Investigative Training Assistance Program (ICITAP) to improve their training, equipment and development. Specifically, they (ICITAP and DOJ) are focusing on the skills needed for interviewing terrorist suspects. Additionally, Albania continues to work closely with the EU and U.S. State Department to create a database that has the ability to collect fingerprints that can be crosschecked against all other national databases in real time. The development of this database could stop potential terror attacks in real time. However, Albania's judicial and police corruption and failing judicial system continue to delay law enforcement efforts and progress overall (U.S. State Department 2016c).

### *Countering Terrorist Financing*

Albania, as a member of the Council of Europe, is involved with the Committee of Experts of the Evaluation of Anti-Money Laundering Measures and the Financing of Terrorism (MONEYVAL) and the Financial Action Task Force (FATF). Through these committees, Albania is able to make the improvements needed to identify, trace, freeze and seize terrorist assets. Additionally, by working in the Council of Europe they are able to enhance international cooperation (U.S. State Department 2016c).

### *Countering Violent Extremism*

The Albanian government continues to work extensively to combat violent extremism. First, in 2015, Albania adopted its first national strategy against violent extremism. Then, in 2016, the Albanian government appointed a National Coordinator for Countering Violent

Extremism who works closely with the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). The government has acknowledged the role that education plays in fostering tolerance and inclusion. Therefore, the government of Albania has developed a program on religious tolerance that they would like to be implemented in schools (U.S. State Department 2016c).

### *International and Regional Cooperation*

Albania is involved in numerous organizations that can assist in the process of fighting terrorism through regional conferences and information exchanging techniques. Albania is a member of the UN, the OSCE, NATO, Regional Cooperation Council, Council of Europe and the Organization for Islamic cooperation. Membership in these associations are pivotal for a country like Albania as they make strides in improving their judicial system (U.S. State Department 2016c).

### Bosnia and Herzegovina

Foreign fighters thrive in a fragile or failed state (Innes 2005). Although few would put Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH) in that category, recently, its inaccessible terrain makes it an appropriate state for foreign fighters to hide. The European Commission stated that is

is easiest for terrorists to carry out these activities in states with rugged terrain, weak governments, and low population density. In such places, terrorists can hide themselves, as well as their supplies and infrastructure. Thus, these characteristics provide a recipe for a terrorist sanctuary or haven (Innes 2005, 297).

These conditions, in addition to its proximity to the Middle East, makes Bosnia and Herzegovina the perfect environment for the growth of terrorism. Sarajevo and other Bosnian cities have an overwhelming presence of Muslims from third countries making it easy to hide in plain sight (Innes 2005). Before 2005, the pervasive ethnic and political divisions within BiH, the role of crime and corruption, and the changes in its demographics and administrative makeup made it almost impossible to address terrorist threats domestically (Innes 2005). Recent literature on terrorism in Bosnia and Herzegovina is sparse. However, the pieces of academic literature that do exist are extremely revealing.

Bosnia and Herzegovina, post-9/11, was identified as a possible terrorist threat. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe argued that terrorism in Bosnia and

Herzegovina is not only prominent because of publicized international groups like ISIS, but because of the large role that domestic terrorism plays in the country. This knowledge has led to a “proactive, but uneven approach to domestic and foreign counterterrorism” (Innes 2005, 299). Terrorist cells that exist within Bosnia and Herzegovina, can easily disguise themselves in cultural centers, prisons, and on the Internet. Therefore, it is difficult to actively fight foreign and domestic terrorism in Bosnia. The ability for terrorist groups to hide in plain sight makes Bosnia-Herzegovina a sanctuary for Islamic terrorists and foreign fighters (U.S. State Department 2017a).

### *Legislation, Law Enforcement and Border Security*

In 2014, Bosnia adopted legislation that sought to deal with threats posed by foreign fighters. The government extended prison sentences for convicted foreign fighters to a maximum of ten years and increased the maximum sentence for terrorist-related crimes to 20 years. Additionally, the government introduced five-year minimum sentences to foreign fighter recruits (Counter Extremist Project 2017). Still, there are major problems among law enforcement agencies and the State Prosecutor’s Office, which makes coordination and cooperation difficult when investigating complex terrorism cases.

The Bosnian Border Police work closely with the ICITAP and Foreigners Affairs Services (FAS) to improve their techniques and foster development within the police department. The Border Police use computerized software that collects passenger information at border crossings and four major airports (Banja, Luka, Mostar, Sarajevo and Tuzla). They are able to share the data collected with the European Union (through INTERPOL), which will give real time information on each individuals in order to facilitate the detention of wanted individuals. However, there are locations where screening using this database was not used (U.S. State Department 2017a).

### *Countering Terrorist Financing*

BiH is a member of MONEYVAL and FATF. However, in 2015, they were unable to make enough progress in money laundering, the financing of terror, and failure to implement UN obligation for targeted financial sanctions. Therefore, BiH made working with the FATF and MONEYVAL a top priority. In 2016, they had made improvements such as freezing terrorist

assets and working to harmonize their federal code with that of the EU (U.S. State Department 2017a).

### *Countering Violent Extremism*

Bosnia's religious communities (Catholic, Islamic, Jewish and Orthodox) work together through the Interreligious Council to stand against acts of prejudice or extremism. Through this Council, the Islamic community has made efforts to counter the misinterpretations of Islam that can lead to extremism and violence. Bosnia has created a counterterrorism strategy to better define their objectives in preventing future foreign fighters and the inevitable crimes they will commit. The objectives of the BiH counterterrorism strategy include,

1. To conduct continued activities with the aim of deterring any support to terrorism, terrorist activities or radical movements through public awareness activities directed at positive communication.
2. To implement the Strategy in such a way as to prevent violations of fundamental human rights and freedoms guaranteed by international conventions and regulations.
3. To improve interagency coordination and cooperation and develop capabilities in those institutions or agencies that lack them.
4. To ensure monitoring and supervision of the Strategy's implementing documents (Bosnia and Herzegovina Ministry of Security 2013, 1).

Bosnia has reaffirmed its interest in the International Antiterrorist Coalition and has pledged its allegiance to the EU for a continued harmonization of legislation in relation to terrorism and foreign fighters (Bosnia and Herzegovina Ministry of Security 2013).

### *International and Regional Cooperation*

Bosnia is a member of the UN, INTERPOL, OSCE, Council of Europe, and Regional Cooperation Council and aspires to be part of NATO. INTERPOL allows BiH to work closely with the EU and have direct access to criminal databases. Furthermore, the Regional Cooperation Council has its headquarters in Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia. Overall, BiH has harmonized its terrorism criminal code with the UN and EU standards, which has fostered greater cooperation with U.S. and European counterterrorism agencies (U.S. State Department 2017a).

### Kosovo

In 1998-1999, after the Kosovo War, major developments were made to the country's sociopolitical structure to improve the overall living conditions and reduce the risk of radicalization in the region. Despite no prior history of religious militancy, the substantial economic improvements made in Kosovo to stop radicalization were not enough. Kosovo still became one of the main hubs of foreign fighters in the Iraq and Syrian conflict (Shtuni 2016).

Political Islam continues to grow, as does radicalization, recruitment and mobilization in Kosovo. 3 out of every 4 Kosovan adults traveled to Syria or Iraq since 2012, with nearly 37 percent returning (Shtuni 2016). The average age of these individuals is between 17 and 30 years old. However, the majority of foreign fighters are between 21 and 25 years old. Nearly 87 percent of Kosovar foreign fighters have completed formal education at the secondary level or higher (Shtuni 2016). More than half of all Kosovar foreign fighters arrested lived in above average economic conditions, while only 36 percent lived in poor conditions (Shtuni 2016). Overall, Shtuni has confirmed that there has been little to no observable correlation between income and education to vulnerability to Islamic radicalization and mobilization.

Radicalization, recruitment and mobilization are concentrated near Kosovo's border with Macedonia in two tiny municipalities of *Hani i Elezit* and *Kaçanik* (Shtuni 2016). More than one-third of all male Kosovar violent extremists originate from this area, despite only accounting for 14 percent of the total Kosovo population (Shtuni 2016). Foreign-funded extremist networks, usually originating from Macedonia, continue to be active in these regions of Kosovo. Their message focuses on spreading an extremely conservative and political form of Islam that is conducive to radicalization. Local and radicalized Imams<sup>2</sup> focused on a global trend of the oppression of Muslims and the war in Kosovo. For example,

In a video statement from 2010 posted online, a Kosovo Liberation Army veteran and the first Kosovan to be reported killed in Syria in November 2012 provided his view on the reasons behind the Kosovo War. 'Those who fought us were crusaders. Those who think that the Kosovo War was a nationalist war are wrong! [The Serbs] came here to fight against Islam' (Shtuni 2016, 8).

Statements like these reinvigorated Kosovar grievances against Serbia. Many young Kosovars resonated with the difficulties that the Sunnis face in Syria because of the recent memories of rape, humiliation and massive expulsion of Kosovar's from their homes during the Kosovo War. This has made the job of radicalized Imams much easier. Many Muslims in Kosovo already felt

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<sup>2</sup> A person who leads prayer in a mosque.

they had a duty to act in solidarity with other Muslims under attack through defensive jihad (Shtuni 2016).

### *Legislation, Law Enforcement, and Border Security*

Kosovo's legal framework, the Criminal Code of Kosovo, comes from the UN model on counterterrorism. This charter criminalizes all form of terrorism, including assistance, facilitation, recruitment and the failure to report terrorist activities. The code allows Kosovo authorities to investigate and prosecute cases through means such as wiretapping and the use of undercover agents. This gives Kosovo court system to use any tools necessary in the fight against terrorism and shows their overall commitment to fighting terrorism related cases (U.S. State Department 2016b). Furthermore, the U.S. State Department and Department of Justice have acted as a mentor to Kosovo law enforcement and prosecutors on security related issues. Representatives from Kosovo have attended countless training activities and conferences on counterterrorism sponsored by the EU and the United States (U.S. State Department 2016b).

In March of 2015, Kosovo began new legislative procedures where individuals who join or participate in foreign armies, police, paramilitary or para-police groups are subject to three to 15 years in jail. Additionally, the Kosovo government has enacted legislation where those found guilty of organizing, recruiting, training, funding (directly or indirectly), or offering material assistance to individuals with the aim of joining a foreign police or military will face between five and 15 years in prison. Individuals who have committed, assisted, facilitated terrorist acts including but not limited to participation in terrorist activities/groups or committing acts of terror will face five years to life in prison. However, many individuals guilty of these crimes could not be tried under the new laws if they returned to Kosovo before the new laws were passed, and overall, prosecutors lack experience in trying such cases with the new legislation. Therefore, they were tried under the much more lenient legislation in place since December of 2012 (Balkan Investigate Reporting Network 2016). While Kosovo is extremely committed to fighting all threats related to terrorism, they often lack the legal framework to do so effectively. National investigators and prosecutors often have limited resources and experience in handling terrorism related cases effectively (U.S. State Department 2016b).

The Kosovo Border Patrol (KBP) uses a system similar to the EU's EUROPOL. The computerized system is able to detect fraudulent identifications and is updated with individuals

on who needed to be stopped or watched due to their possible connections with terrorist related offenses. However, this system does not always function properly. Since Kosovo is not a member of EUROPOL, Kosovo is unable to share information as easily and does not have access to EU watch lists. In 2015, during the peak of foreign fighters traveling to Iraq and Syria to join ISIS, KBP was able to block 10 people from leaving Kosovo and arrested them for their participation with terror related activities (U.S. State Department 2016b).

### *Countering Terrorist Financing*

Kosovo is a member of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) and has a national law focused on the prevention of financing terrorist organization through money laundering. National laws not only define terrorism finance, but also establish the way it should be reported to the police in a way that complies with international anti-money laundering and counterterrorism finance standards. However, Kosovo lacks the ability to monitor non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that may receive money from suspicious sources, rendering the national law virtually useless. As of 2016, Kosovo has yet to successfully prosecute an organization or an individual for financing a terrorist group (U.S. State Department 2016b).

### *Countering Violent Extremism*

The Kosovo government focuses most of their energy pre-radicalization efforts on raising awareness of radicalization through community initiatives and counter-narratives. Additionally, Kosovo emphasizes on the de-radicalization and reintegration of once radicalized individuals (U.S. State Department 2016b). The government began this initiative in November 2016 in hopes of rehabilitating radicalized individuals by helping them to abandon their violent extremist ideology. The process is done through the Kosovo government by assessment of the risks posed by these individuals returning from foreign conflicts and provides them with support they need (including but not limited to detention or psychological support) (U.S. State Department 2016b).

### *International and Regional Cooperation*

Kosovo continues to struggle with membership to many international organizations, like the UN, because countries that do not recognize Kosovo's independence block its entry into these organizations. For example, BiH and Serbia does not recognize Kosovo as an independent

country thereby making regional cooperation extremely difficult. Kosovo is not involved in any regional initiatives like the Regional Cooperation Council for this reason. However, Kosovo does have membership in the OSCE, and continues to work closely with the United States by attending their conferences on violent extremism. Kosovo was selected as a Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund (GCERF) recipient, which will fund initiatives at the community level to reduce the risk of radicalization of youth.

## **Methods**

The number of foreign fighters originating and returning to Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo is decreasing. In order to understand why, this paper will compare and analyze the tactics and timeline each of these countries have taken to prevent foreign fighters. Furthermore, the paper will consider the presence of any foreign power, like the United States, North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), or the EU, as well as steps national and local governments have been taking to curb foreign fighting and radicalization. Specifically, this paper will compare the strategies of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo to see the similarities or differences in policy. To do this, information collected from research centers and organizations that focus on terrorism and foreign fighters will be used. Additionally, news articles published about the steps each country is taking, the role of foreign aid, and the declining foreign fighter population will be utilized (U.S. State Department 2016b).

With this information, this paper will analyze if the actions taken by the Western Balkan governments could have caused a similar phenomenon, drastically decreasing foreign fighters, in all states. Theoretically, if countries are using different tactics to curb foreign fighters, it is unlikely that they will all be successful, at the same time, in the same way. In this case, it is more likely that the declining influence of ISIS has caused such a phenomenon. Therefore, this paper will also examine the decreasing power and influence of ISIS territorially, economically and their recruitment methods. In order to do this, academic literature as well as recent news articles will be utilized.

## **Discussion**

Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo have made enormous steps forward in counterterrorism. Each country has made progresses in areas of legislation, law enforcement and border security, countering the financial support of terrorists, countering violent extremism in their own country, as well as participation in international and regional organizations. However, all of these countries still need to make improvements because of their own disadvantages and downfalls before starting to amend their counterterrorism departments. For example, Albania has been dealing with corruption and a faulty judicial system for many years. Therefore, their country still has many difficulties in processing individuals involved in terrorist activities. BiH has difficulty because religious ties within the country are profound, making cooperation between different religions difficult. Similarly, there are extensive problems between different law enforcement agencies and State Prosecutors Office. This lack of coordination and collaboration between parties investigating the same terrorist case leads to an overall inefficiency of the system. Kosovo's biggest challenge is their inability to be seen as an independent state actor by all countries, and therefore, is unable to enter regional or international organizations. This undermines their ability to share information with others, as well as gain vital information from other countries in the region.

The policies in all the countries studied were established after the number of foreign fighters leaving each state peaked in 2013. Many of these policies were unable to be implemented until 2015, after the number of foreign fighters decreased dramatically. Therefore, it is unlikely that the imminent application or promise of implementation of these different counterterrorism strategies greatly impacted the number foreign fighters across all studied countries. Still, these policies are a positive foundation for Albania, BiH and Kosovo to ensure that if the number of foreign fighters begins to rise again, they will be ready legally, financially and socially to counteract this phenomenon.

Not only were these policies enacted after the peak of foreign fighters, but the overall trend of foreign fighters decreased and maintained similar trends across all three countries (see Table 1). The policies and their execution vary dramatically across each state. Therefore, it seems unlikely that these strategies could have produced a similar effect in the number of foreign fighters regardless of the major differences in legislation. For example, all states have expanded the definition of terrorism making it easier for someone to be prosecuted for a terrorist related offense, and increased the number of years for which someone can be imprisoned. However,

Albania still lacks the capability to prosecute successfully. Arguably, Kosovo has made the progress in terms of countering financial support of terrorist or terrorist organizations, but they are unable to monitor their own policies effectively, rendering the new legislation almost useless.

The most interesting trend between different national legislation is seen in the ways each country counters violent extremism. The goal of creating policies in this realm is to reduce the risk of radicalization before it is too late. Arguably, the results of the results of this policy space will not be seen for years to come. However, Albania and Bosnia focus their attention on fighting prejudice through education to stop radicalization in the Islamic community. Kosovo, on the other hand, spends most of their attention on those who have already been radicalized and how they may be de-radicalized to reenter society. These are very different approaches to fighting extremism, and even in the short term, we would expect to see dramatically different results across these three countries in terms of radicalization and travel to the Middle East.

The inconsistencies and shortcomings in the policies that have been enacted to curb foreign fighters in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo cannot cause such similar and consistent results in all three countries. The strategies taken vary from each country in terms of basic objectives, time enacted, intensity and execution. Therefore, it is unlikely that these policies are the reason for the decrease in the foreign fighter phenomenon in the Western Balkans.

The argument that the fading power of ISIS as the driving force for the declining foreign fighters in the Western Balkans is weak chronologically and economically. By 2014, ISIS had control of Mosul and Raqqa, an oil rich town in Syria. At this time, they were attracting foreign recruits, not only to fight on their behalf but also to establish a strong Caliphate. They needed to recruit doctors, engineers and regular civilians to move and pay taxes to support this new Islamic State that seemed to be thriving (AlJazeera 2017). Even so, we see a decrease in the number of foreign fighters coming from the Western Balkans despite ISIS's strong territorial hold and recruitment techniques. Economically, the timing of ISIS's amassed decline in wealth occurred years later than the drop in foreign fighters coming from the Western Balkans (See Table 2). For example, after 2014, the total revenue of the Islamic State declined from \$1.9 billion to 870 million in 2016 (Heißner, Neumann, Holland-McCowan and Basra 2017). While this economic downturn makes joining ISIS less appealing, it does not sufficiently explain the steep decline of

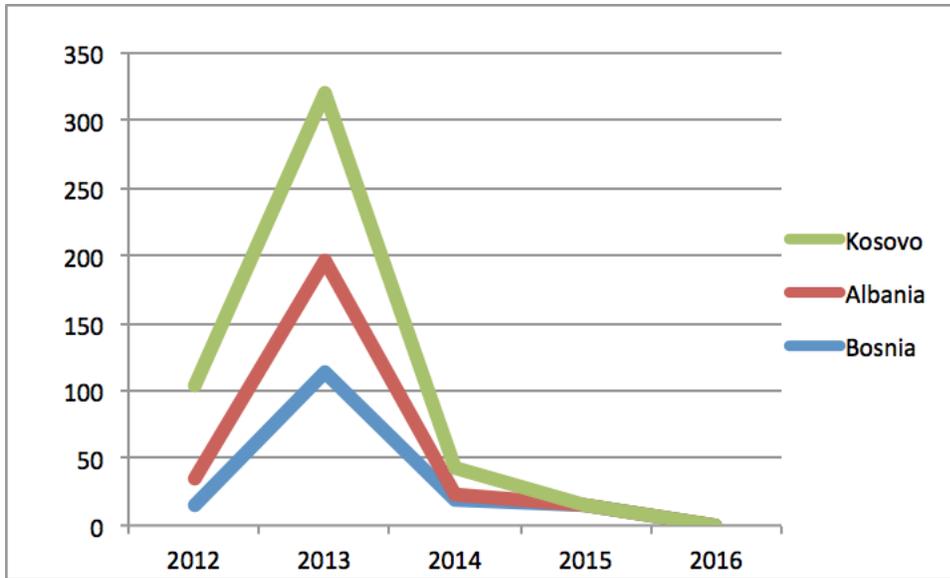
foreign fighters in 2013-2014 from all three countries. Therefore, it is unlikely that the decline of ISIS's economic and territorial power is behind the decrease in foreign fighters.

## **Conclusion**

Foreign fighters originating from the Western Balkans pose a major security threat to the European Union, as well as the countries from which they originate. They possess the ability to execute large and small scale attacks and remain unseen by their national governments until it is too late. Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo saw a dramatic increase in the number of foreign fighters from 2012 to 2013. Therefore, each national government has considered or enacted legislation in legislation, law enforcement and border security, countering terrorist financing, and countering violent extremism or radicalization. Since then, these countries have seen a significant reduction in the number of foreign fighters in the region (2013-2014). It is necessary to monitor, analyze and understand why there has been a decrease of foreign fighters since 2015. Unfortunately, this paper is unable to determine what caused the decrease in foreign fighters in 2012-2013. While it is clear that ISIS has lost a considerable amount of pull in the Western Balkans, their power was still steady during the decline of foreign fighters. Similarly, the policies to fight foreign fighters enacted by the Albanian, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo government differ dramatically from each other making it unlikely that they have caused the decrease in foreign fighters. Similarly, the policies were enacted just before the 2014 and have not all been effective combating foreign fighters making it unlikely that they are responsible for the decrease.

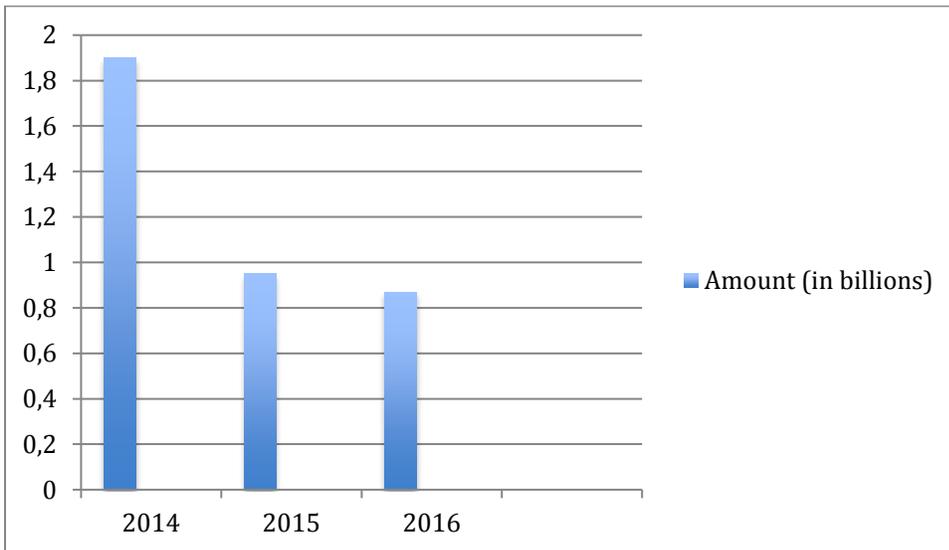
## **Appendix**

**Table 1:** *Number of Foreign Fighters leaving Kosovo, Albania and Bosnia between 2012-2016*



Source: Balkan Investigate Reporting Network. 2016.

**Table 2:** *ISIS's Monetary Worth from 2014-2016*



Source: Heißner, et al. 2017.

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