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The Radical Milieu and Radical Influencers of Bosnian Foreign Fighters

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ABSTRACT

This research note looks at the radical influencers of Bosnian foreign fighters. This group is important, as the Balkan region has been seen as a spot of jihadist activism and recruitment for the IS and Al-Nusra Front. Previous research on foreign fighters emphasized that a small number of individuals (religious leaders, former combatants, and others) at the local level play a significant role in this recruitment. The influence of such figures results in hotspots of radical activism, which are called "power centers" here. This research note argues that such dynamics are likely to be even more evident in postwar societies due to state weaknesses, which create more power for social actors and inhibit counterterrorism. The paper also analyses the role of leader-led radical "institutions" that have appeared after the Bosnian War. By doing so, it stresses the significance of local radical influencers in the recruitment of Bosnian foreign fighters. The research note shows that radical influencers in postwar radical milieus manage to "institutionalize" their authority by filling the void left by domestic war(s) with life guidance and religious values. The paper provides insights into the social relations, authority and decision-making connected with foreign fighter departures to Syria and Iraq (2012-2016).

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A series of shootings occurred on 2 November 2020 in the center of Vienna, Austria.[1] A gunman opened fire with a rifle, killed 4 civilians and injured 23 more. The attacker was born and grew up in Austria, but his family is originally from the Balkans. To the Islamic State, foreign fighters from the Balkans are particularly important for three reasons: first, they are linked to large diaspora communities in Western Europe. Second, they come from societies with historical ties to Islam. Finally, the Balkan region is marked by recent wars, and thus also by frozen but unresolved political and ethnic disputes.

In support of this claim, a 2015 video by the IS's al-Hayat Media Center points to the importance of the Balkans in the IS strategy.[2] The video analyzes the role of Balkan Muslims in opposing "European crusaders" during the Ottoman Empire and also their struggle under Enver Hoxha and Josip Broz Tito's communist regimes. The video was the first piece of propaganda tailored to inspire more people from the region to join the "caliphate". It featured Balkan IS fighters in the battlefield who addressed their

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communities back home in two languages, Albanian and Bosnian-Croatian-Serbian (BCS), both of which are spoken in the region.[3]

Overall, up to 1070 individuals from the region reportedly traveled to Syria and Iraq by the end of 2017.[4] Approximately 300 have returned, more than 200 have been killed, while some 400 remained there as of the end of 2018. The data includes women, minors, and the elderly – most of whom were noncombatants and account for one-third of the entire Balkan foreign fighter contingent. Previous empirical studies have attempted to provide key profile characteristics of people from the region who joined the IS. The majority of the men had criminal backgrounds and a low socio-economic status, and were inspired and mobilized by local radical influencers, who have served as bridging figures between grassroots recruitment and jihadist groups in the battlefield.[5]

Empirically, Bosnian foreign fighters are not among those who failed to integrate in (the West) and consequently got radicalized and traveled to Syria. They do not come from Muslim immigrant communities but postwar indigenous ones. Given this, the expectation is that the radical structures and dynamics that appear in postwar societies may differ from those present in the West due to different historical contexts. Although the Balkan foreign fighters belong to the same generation and may have been subject to the same recruitment patterns, their local radical milieus have a unique history, which is a history of war. Thus, radical influencers can appreciate specific contextual factors and thus accommodate them into their mobilizing activities and narratives.

Methods

The paper looks at the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), as this is a typical case of a postwar radical milieu. BiH has experienced a violent conflict in the recent past and represents a case of a significant number of foreign fighters who traveled to Syria and Iraq between 2012 and 2016. The study is the outcome of a three-stage methodological process:

Interviews: I conducted interviews and research meetings in BiH in 2018 and 2019. A limited number of semi-structured interviews have been conducted with returnees, relatives and friends of fighters who either got killed or returned to their home countries, representatives of police forces and prosecuting attorneys, official religious authorities, mayors of affected municipalities, security experts and journalists.

Desk research: I collected data through extensive desk research of open sources. I researched more than 250 media reports, research reports by local NGOs (published between November 2012 and July 2019) and judicial documents provided by the Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Dataset: The key outcome of this empirical investigation is a dataset containing biographical data for 28 Salafi influencers. The individuals in the dataset are selected based on evidence of their activities undertaken to promote Salafism and consolidate the radical milieu (videos, sermons, organized events with followers) in the period between the Bosnian and the Syrian Wars. The individuals in the dataset represent two different categories of radical influencers: those who engage in violent rhetoric (jihadi Salafism) and those who do not promote violence and even oppose it in the framework of Salafism. The biographical information in the dataset is organized around eight categories,

namely the influencer's place of origin, role in the radical milieu, promotion/non-promotion of violence, online and offline activism, background in religious studies, participation in the Bosnian War, power center of influence and current status. This research note focuses on the cases of 11 radical influencers for whom there is data proving that they openly advocated violence in their social interaction with their followers. The paper does not look at the 17 other cases of peaceful Salafi preachers who are influential in the radical milieu but, according to the data, do not engage in violent rhetoric.

The Bosnian Radical Milieu: Context

This research note explains in what way leadership networks and authority affect how recruitment is done at the local level. The analysis is organized around two claims. The first one is that wartime actors and activities fueled the growth of the Salafist movement in BiH. The second claim is that the radical influencers who emerged from this process had an ideological and organizational impact on the foreign fighter recruitment.

Following the rise of the IS, BiH turned from a destination for foreign fighters, as was the case in the 1990s, to a place of their origin.[6] During the Bosnian War (1992-1995), several thousand foreign fighters, with many among them being Arab mujahideen, participated in the conflict on the side of the Bosnian Muslims. The outbreak of the Syrian War brought to the warzone a few hundred people of Bosnian descent who joined extremist groups such as the IS and the Al-Nusra Front. About 1/3 of them died, some returned or were captured on the battlefield, and others were charged with recruitment-related activities. The Bosnian foreign fighter contingent consists of fighters from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, Croatia, Kosovo, and Slovenia (see Table 1). In addition, there were people of Bosnian origin who, for a variety of reasons, did not hold Bosnian citizenship or a Bosnian passport before traveling to Syria. As claimed by local security institutions, the majority of those belonging to the Bosnian foreign fighter contingent were linked to the extreme parts of the Salafi milieu before their departure to the battlefields.[7]

Historically, what contributed greatly to the formation of the Bosnian radical milieu is the presence and legacy of the Arab mujahideen in the Bosnian War, many of whom were veterans from the Afghan War. Despite the lack of precise data about the numbers of Islamist militants in the Bosnian War, their integration in loose and independent fighting units allowed them to socialize with local Bosnian fighters and spread their ideology. The best organized unit of mujahideen in BiH, El Mudžahid, was a part of the 7th Brigade in the towns of Zenica, Tuzla, and Maglaj in central BiH. The unit, composed of foreign mujahideen and Bosnian combatants, regularly engaged militarily in the area between Zenica and Tuzla, where they set up training camps in remote, mountainous spots.[8] The arrival of foreign fighters in the summer of 1992 is significant to the creation of the radical milieu, as they were the actors who brought the concept of

Table 1. Number of men, women and children belonging to the Bosnian foreign fighter contingent.

	Men	Women	Children
BiH	172	61	57
Serbia	37	12	10
Montenegro	18	5	4

Salafism (the Saudi version of Salafism, Wahhabism) to the region for the first time.[9] In the framework of the Bosnian War, the mujahideen utilized the concept of jihad to justify violence as the only way to "defend" Islam. Thus, their appearance can be understood as formative in ideological terms for today's core of the radical milieu, where this view is shared by radical influencers and followers.

Another development leading to the establishment of the Bosnian radical milieu was the role of local influencers in building a network of local Salafi NGOs in the postwar years. The activities of these NGOs can be understood as a continuation of the humanitarian initiatives during and immediately after the Bosnian War. Nonetheless, they demonstrate that the process and evolution of ideological proliferation in the radical milieu was largely localized. Capitalizing on religious and socio-economic weaknesses of postwar BiH, such organizations could establish a solidarity network within the framework of Salafism. This approach allowed the influencers to increase their authority and expand their pool of followers. To illustrate this process empirically, I point to the most influential organization in the postwar period – Aktivna islamska omladina (AIO) [Active Islamic Youth]. Established in 1995 in Zenica, it was the best organized Islamic association in BiH. Some of the founders of the AIO were former members of the El-Mujahid unit, while others were locals who had previously studied in the Middle East and were ideologically inspired by their foreign mujahideen fellows.[10] The following quote illustrates how the legacy of the mujahideen in the war impacted local followers:

> [The] Arab Mujahideen made a huge, huge impact on me. I am proud of that … the first time I saw an Arab Mujahedin I had the impression, to put it simply, that the men didn't belong to this world … I instantly liked their way of communicating, their demeanor, their attitude towards the brothers.
>
> Izmet Fazlic, AIO administrator, as quoted in Innes 2006, 111.

The AIO was tasked to keep promoting the messages of Salafism inherited by the mujahideen. The organization was initially established with funds that remained from the El Mudžahid unit and later maintained through financial support from the Saudi High Committee and the Al-Haramain Foundation.[11] The AIO was particularly popular among youth, and within the first years of its existence, its membership expanded to several thousand members through branches in Sarajevo, Travnik, Zavidovici, Visoko, and Bugojno.[12] The AIO initially lacked a charismatic leadership until Adnan Pezo took it over in 1997. With a background as an aviation cadet, Pezo was a part of the El Mudžahid during the Bosnian War: "Several of us, Bosniaks, decided to establish the AIO towards the end of the war, because we realized that we should continue da'wa, the Islamic mission".[13]

The AIO had a significant impact on the evolution of the Bosnian radical milieu. Its magazine, *Saff*, in print since 1997, reached a regular circulation of 5000 copies at its peak around 2000.[14] In addition to the Salafi agenda that the organization had been pushing, the AIO employed an explicit anti-American rhetoric that led the U.S. Department of State to accuse its members of spreading anti-American propaganda.[15] Following 9/11, the AIO and its sister organization, al-Furqan, were targeted by local and international institutions due to a suspicion of them being linked to terrorism-related activities. Although both were closed by 2006, these organizations kept maintaining their influence through an emerging NGO network, where AIO members could be

further socialized.[16] This development led to the decentralization of ultra-conservative religious activism that contributed to the evolution of the Bosnian radical milieu's network.

The postwar period was the moment of growth of the Salafi movement in BiH, which was initially managed by the foreign mujahideen who remained in the country after the Bosnian War. Radical circles have been successful in maintaining their influence in places where former members of the El Mudžahid unit settled after the end of the conflict.[17] As the analysis in the next section will show, the locations of isolated Salafi settlements and illegal praying congregations (*parajamaats*) that appeared after the war overlap with those of the mujahideen's war participation. Previous empirical reports have argued that the Salafi settlements and parajamaats have been "institutions" essential to the radical socialization of foreign fighters who traveled to Syria.[18] However, not all of them are venues for recruitment; neither did all the members of the Salafi milieu become foreign fighters. Consequently, to understand the role of these "institutions" of the radical milieu in recruitment, it is necessary to look at their evolution in relation to the Bosnian War.

Radical Settlements

The establishment of Salafi settlements is a postwar phenomenon in the Bosnian context, which initially became evident in several remote spots across the country (Gornja Maoča, Ošve, and Bočinja). Most people in these settlements lived in peace and seclusion, but a few cases of support for terrorism-related activities by Salafi adherents have shown that such structures could also function as a venue of radical socialization.[19] Therefore, it is not a coincidence that the highest numbers of foreign fighter departures to Syria and Iraq were linked to Salafi settlements.[20]

The postwar formative period of the radical milieu was crucial in terms of authority building and establishing social relations between influencers and followers within the community. Looking at the emergence and structure of radical settlements, they can be seen as bottom-up communes built around shared values. Nonetheless, this argument would be incomplete without considering the role of radical influencers, who were key "agents" in setting the rules and inviting and accepting new members. In fact, radical settlements were established around charismatic Salafi figures. Although Salafi settlements initially appeared in remote areas, their ideological influence reached larger towns and suburban areas owing to the leadership and peer networks.

The first more consolidated Salafi group emerged around the Bosnian-born Jusuf Barcić in the village of Bocinja (Maglaj, Central BiH). Most of the people in his circle were local and foreign former members of the El Mudžahid. A charismatic figure with a Saudi Arabian educational background, Barcić was committed to the ideological legacy of the mujahideen, opposing the legitimacy of secular state institutions. Upon his return to BiH in 1996, he became active in preaching Wahhabism, calling for a "back to the roots" Islam and aggressively challenging the Islamic community.

On several occasions, the group, with him leading, attempted to forcefully enter mosques in Kalesija and Sarajevo.[21] In his rhetoric that he used with followers, he would call local Muslims infidels, and insist that women should wear hijabs, and that listening to music and going out at night should not be allowed.[22] Barcić's community-building

efforts were formative to the growth of a local leadership style that combined ideology and violence in its rhetoric and actions. In many ways, this combination was inherited from the mujahideen in the Bosnian War. It was then utilized by local radical influencers to sustain their authority in the aftermath of the conflict.

The most well-established and influential Salafi settlement, located in the village of Gornja Maoča, appeared around 2000.[23] This location was among the remote spots chosen by Bosnian Salafists to establish their communes and live according to Sharia law. Before the Bosnian War, Gornja Maoča was inhabited by Serbs, and later Bosnian Muslims settled in the village. The village drew together radicals who believed living in isolation was the ultimate manifestation of their religious worldview.

A snapshot of the life in Gornja Maoča between 2012 and 2016 shows its inhabitants organized in a commune and following strict, religiously justified rules, such as that the members are not to vote, women are not allowed to communicate with men, or a married woman can only talk to her husband. Following the conceptual tenets of Salafism, the commune opposed the role of the secular state, democracy, free elections, and any institutions or laws that were not based on Sharia law. In a 2018 interview with a local media outlet, a former resident of Gornja Maoča recalls the life there:

> [Gornja Maoča] is a village like a village. You know, villages are small communities. It is located in the forest, one cannot pass by accidentally, but only get there on purpose. [When we lived there] it was a closed community, not open to strangers at all, totally isolated. If it happened that someone came from outside, people were always suspicious … My father first sent me to [study] at a maktab,[24] we began to pray at home and also met other people who prayed. At the same time, [my father] began to go to the mosque more frequently and would tell [the family] that we should turn to religion. It was some time in 2003 when he met with those Wahhabis. My father got involved in this kind of radical lifestyle, then Nusret Imamović[25] began to visit [us] and my father did like the lectures the guy was giving … There were Salafi coming from Maoča to Bihać.[26] After some time, my father decided to go to Maoča for the first time because of some religious gathering there".[27]

At the time of this research, in 2018, Gornja Maoča, having developed the reputation of being the stronghold of Bosnian Salafists,[28] was closed to researchers, journalists, and outsiders in general. The reported number of foreign fighter departures from Gornja Maoča alone is 52, including 38 males and 14 females.[29] Throughout the years, Gornja Maoča became known for directing the activities of Bosnian Salafists and linking them to diaspora communities across Europe and the U.S.[30] The community in Gornja Maoča was particularly connected to Bosnian radical leaders based in Vienna, Austria, while also playing a role in the distribution of financial resources among members of the Salafi movement in BiH.[31] According to the testimony of a witness who lived in Gornja Maoča at the time of active recruitment, there were "brothers from abroad" who used to visit the community on various occasions.[32] According to the investigation of a man of Bosnian origin who was suspected of planning a terror plot in Australia, he had spent some time in the village in September 2012.[33]

The Salafi settlement in Gornja Maoča had a distinctive, informal leadership style. Initially its leader was Jusuf Barcić, who was considered one of the founders of the Salafi movement in BiH, while later Nusret Imamović, another key Salafi influencer, took over the leadership role. Imamović has been well-recognized and respected within the extended radical milieu, even after he left for Syria to join the al-Nusra Front in

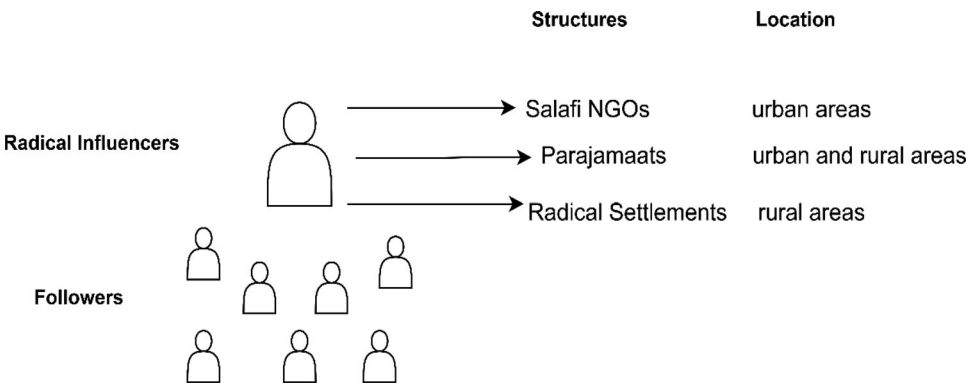

Figure 1. Structures built around radical influencers.

2014. Prior to his departure, he was the decision-maker who was concerned with the commune's relationship with the external world, according to testimonies from people who used to live in Gornja Maoča.[34] In case of his absence, this position was delegated to some "brother by faith".[35] According to previous research, fighters from at least two of the major cantons in BiH, Sarajevo and Zenica-Doboj, established direct or indirect ties to the leadership of Gornja Maoča.[36]

According to data collected by the prosecution in BiH, among other objectives, radical settlements, like the one in Gornja Maoča, aimed at recruiting followers to be trained in religious and ideological beliefs shared by the extremist influencers in the radical milieu's core. According to the court and the prosecution's acquired information, the religious literature found in Imamović's house shows his interest in promoting concepts such as jihad, self-sacrifice, and religious extremism.[37] According to a local man's court testimony, his son went to Gornja Maoča to study Islam and Arabic before leaving for Syria to fight with both al-Nusra and the IS.[38]

The postwar Salafi settlements established in remote areas reflect the tendency of clandestine structures to seek isolation from the mainstream society. However, this way, the strategic objective of proliferating ideology could not be obtained. Thus, the Salafi influencers gradually extended their activities from traditional and isolated enclaves to larger towns and suburban areas in BiH.[39] This strategic change probably reflects the desire of the influencers not to isolate the milieu and not to limit its influence to only remote areas. The subsequent process of opening the milieu to more populated areas like suburban and even urban centers, such as Sarajevo, Zenica, Tuzla, and Bihać, demonstrates the intention of the local influencers to expand their pool of followers. To do so, the influencers relied on various forms of socialization with followers, including parajamaats.

Parajamaats

The term parajamaat can be understood as referring to another key institution of the radical milieu that speaks for the social engagement of local influencers with their followers. It is a key venue for recruitment into Salafi circles, and thus, it is essential to the functioning of the community. A parajamaat is often described in Western literature

as an illegal mosque, but in fact, it could be any private space chosen for the purpose of a religious gathering and/or as an alternative to the religious spaces of mainstream Islam. The term here means a congregation that carries out religious services and teachings outside the jurisdiction of the official religious institutions.

In the context of BiH, such "parallel structures" have appeared in both isolated and more populated areas, such as Sarajevo, Tuzla, or Zenica. Charitable activities of local Salafi NGOs such as trainings, language courses and social care are typically attached to a parajamaat's functions. Their organization is led by local Salafi influencers (*da'is*), whose religious lectures are often offered along with some of the listed activities to attract a broader pool of followers (See Figure 1). As recruitment into the radical milieu most frequently involves person-to-person communication, such activities played a vital role in expanding the influence of the movement. This socialization model has gradually allowed parajamaats to gain influence in areas where public provision gaps are left by institutions in a postwar context, including education and healthcare. While providing public services, the influencers have offered a strong ideological agenda in line with Salafism as well. By exploiting this model, they encouraged a horizontal structure of support and loyalty among followers as well as a sense of purpose, belonging, unity, and brotherhood, which were generally lacking in the postwar context of BiH.

Since 2016, the Islamic Community in BiH has been carrying out negotiations with the Islamic congregations known to have been operating outside its institutional umbrella. Out of the 72 parajamaats identified by 2013, in 2018, only 24 remained active outside the jurisdiction of the Islamic Community: "We live in a free society; we cannot force anyone to behave in a certain way. What we can do is to warn people against ideas that we see as contrary to our traditional understanding of Islam".[40] Although not all parajamaats were linked to violent extremism, many among the Bosnian fighters attended parajamaats, according to local security sources. With the outbreak of the Syrian War, it became evident that such parallel congregations played a role in the recruitment of Bosnian foreign fighters.[41] Data from several empirical studies conducted in the region testifies to the relationship between the presence of parajamaats, active targeting from Salafi influencers, and departures of foreign fighters between 2011 and 2015.[42] In BiH, the cantons with the highest numbers of Salafist parajamaats between 2011 and 2015 were Zenica-Doboj (13) and Sarajevo (12).[43] However, the following quote shows that parajamaats cannot be entirely seen as venues for foreign fighter recruitment:

> A guy who was part of our [para]jamaat went to Syria without asking anyone, without any initiative, and he went before the law[44] was in place. We spoke with him and told him that we did not want any troubles, so we kicked him out. The biggest problem of the Muslim world is exactly this IS … We are now part of the Islamic Community (IC) and we are proud of it.[45]

In building their authority through parajamaats, radical influencers could expand their influence beyond communities exposed to war and postwar Salafi activism and reach audiences in the region that did not suffer the Bosnian War themselves. As a result, larger Bosnian Muslim communities across the region had come across radical narratives by the time of the foreign fighter recruitment for Syria. In neighboring Montenegro, such congregations were established in at least four towns where local

Salafi influencers were active, even though they were not associated with extremism and recruitment-related activities, according to local security agencies.[46]

Furthermore, parajamaats were particularly present in bordering areas, as the collected data shows. One possible explanation for this may be that such regions are generally characterized by poorer socio-economic conditions, socially isolated, and religiously more conservative. To illustrate this trend empirically, I point to the case of Plav, a town in north-eastern Montenegro near the borders with Albania and Kosovo. This is the spot in Montenegro with the highest number of foreign fighter departures. Concerning socio-economic characteristics, Plav is among the most economically underdeveloped municipalities in the region, with an ethnically mixed population, over half of which identifies as Bosniak.[47] The radical milieu of Plav was institutionalized through the presence of two parajamaats and two small extremist groups identified by the local police as El-Bejan and the Takfir Group. According to the collected data, all individuals from this geographical location who joined the conflict in Syria were either directly or indirectly tied to El-Bejan, who used to manage their own parajamaat in the phase of active recruitment.[48]

Connecting countries with Bosnian-speaking communities across the Balkans, parajamaats secure space for strengthening regional ties among Bosnian radical influencers. Being a recognized communal structure, a parajamaat could link Bosnian communities from across the region, including Sandžak, Serbia, where a large Bosnian population lives. The popularity of Salafi influencers in this area can be explained by the presence of two competing official Islamic bodies, one headquartered in BiH and one in Serbia, operating in Sandžak. The confusion as to which institution has the final authority over religious matters allowed Salafism to gain a particularly strong influence over the targeted segments of the population.[49] Almost all departures of foreign fighters here were associated with prior socialization and participation in activities of the Islamic youth organization Furkan, based in Novi Pazar.[50] According to media investigations, the organization was part of a jihadi Salafi network targeting marginalized youth.[51]

The Bosnian Radical Influencers

The lack of a formal administrative body within the framework of Salafism has particularly contributed to the emergence of the grassroots leadership network. As the Salafi movement in BiH has never been homogeneous or highly centralized, dividing lines among its Salafi influencers have appeared in terms of their ideological and political attitudes. Although they are all associated with strategic attempts to change local Islamic traditions throughout the years, radical influencers have varied in their approaches to the radical milieu, as most Bosnian Salafi leaders did not promote violence. Some Salafists are political, others are apolitical, and some accept the role of secular state institutions, while others reject it. Even though there are Salafists formally loyal to the official Islamic Community, there are also extreme parts of the movement which have been operating outside its control. Various external ideological and financial sources, such as those coming from Saudi Arabia and Egypt, have created further divisions among Salafi influencers in the Balkans.

Table 2. A profile of radical influencers.

They are graduates of Islamic universities in Gulf countries
They rely on Salafi teachings: they advocate for an allegedly "purer" version of Islam compared to traditional Bosnian religious tradition
They rely on sponsorship from abroad (Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States)
They engage in discussions with Salafi adherents both offline and online
They perform the role of Sharia judges at a community level
They do not possess the prerequisites to predicate and work under the auspices of the Islamic Community

This research has identified 28 radical influencers with similar profiles. Their activities throughout the years secured the survival and consolidation of the radical milieu, as they reached Bosnian speaking audiences in BiH, Serbia, Kosovo, and Montenegro (Table 2).

An educational background from Middle Eastern religious institutions can be seen as a source of credibility that radical influencers could use in building their authority. As most of their followers lacked religious education, this background "gap" contributed to the way the followers "institutionalized" Salafi influencers and trusted many of the things they said. The above listed characteristics are shared by most of the Salafi influencers who appear in the dataset, but they are not sufficient for claiming who among them had an impact on the recruitment of foreign fighters, as not all of them employed violent rhetoric. The radical influence is indicated by the clusters of foreign fighter departures that appeared in the parts of the radical milieu where at least one radical influencer claimed authority.

The individuals in the dataset are selected based on the activities they undertook to promote Salafism and consolidate the radical milieu, such as videos, sermons, and organized events with followers, in the period between the Bosnian and the Syrian Wars. The individuals in the dataset represent two different categories of radical influencers: the core, those who engage in violent rhetoric (jihadi Salafism), and the periphery, those who do not promote violence, and even oppose it, in the framework of Salafism.

I collected specific data about the individuals who promoted violence, including information about their prison sentences, recruitment-related activities, and traveling to Syria after actively promoting jihadi Salafism. In the sample, 11 individuals are categorized as belonging to the core of the radical milieu. The research puts an emphasis on these cases, as they are thought to have had an impact on the recruitment of foreign fighters. The research does not look in detail at the radical influencers on the periphery of the radical milieu. Out of the 19 radical influencers in the dataset, five were active in Sandžak, Serbia, while six others were based in Vienna, Austria (see Table 3).

Based on the locations of the radical influencers' activities, the research has identified at least four *power centers* that arguably had an impact on the recruitment of Bosnian foreign fighters: three of them set in the Balkans (BiH and Serbia [Novi Pazar, Sandžak]) and one in the European diaspora, which appeared around some extremist influencers of Bosnian origin based in Vienna, Austria (see Figure 2).

Each power center refers to radical influencers who, according to data from local security authorities, capitalized on their support base and encouraged their followers to become foreign fighters. In Figure 2, the arrows reflect the collected evidence about the exchange of visits and shared ideological activities between the radical influencers. The

Table 3. Background and activities of radical influencers of Bosnian foreign fighters.

Total N of radical influencers	Place of activities	Educational Background	Traveled to Syria	Background activities	Activities related to recruitment
11	Serbia: 3	Saudi Arabia: 8	Yes: 3	Members of El Mudžahid: 3	Sentenced for recruitment: 6
	Bosnia: 4	Syria: 1		Members of AIO: 6	Still part of IS in the Middle East: 1
	Austria: 4	Local Islamic institutes: 2	No: 8	Islamic humanitarian activities during the Bosnian War: 5	No data: 4

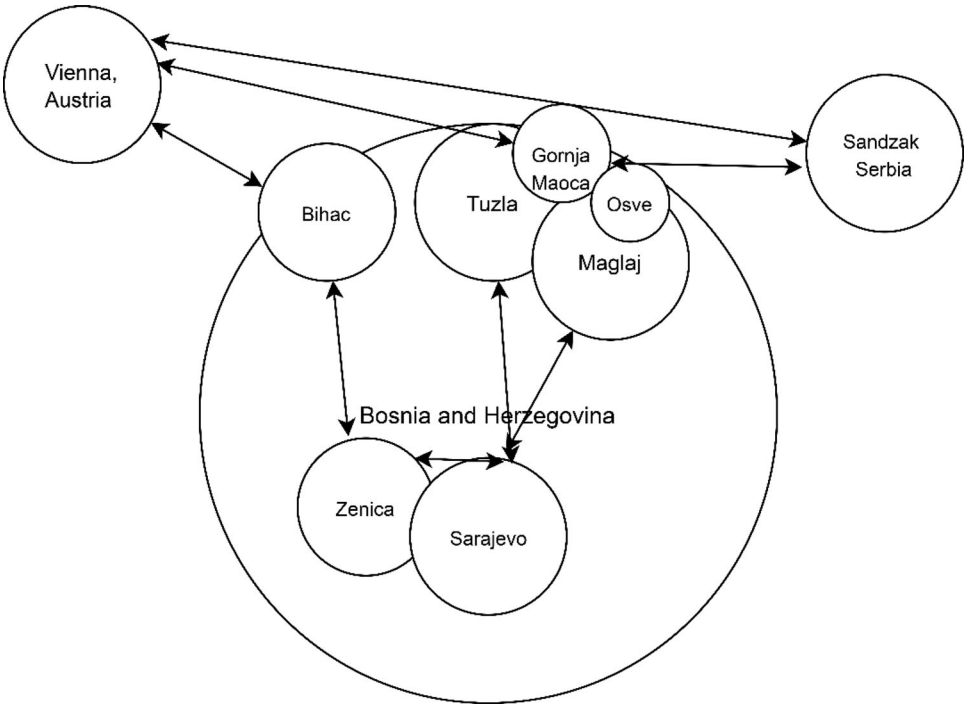

Figure 2. Power centers of foreign fighter recruitment.

cooperation between the power centers testifies to a preexisting social network of radical influencers. Their significance to the radical milieu can be explained by their shared biographical characteristics and similar ties to Salafism, which were developed during the Bosnian War and the postwar years.

The distinction between the two domestic power centers in BiH corresponds to two Salafi influencers, Nusret Imamović and Bilal (Husein) Bosnić, who, among others identified in this research, took an openly pro-violent stance in relation to the Syrian War. While Imamović was supportive of al-Nusra and joined its ranks in 2013, Bosnić was advocating in favor of the IS.[52] Their active engagement in extreme messages and actions indicates that they belonged to the radical milieu. In one of his speeches, Bosnić asserts that "deeds are valued upon their completion. If you die as a Muslim, everything will be calculated in your favour. If you die as an infidel, everything will be

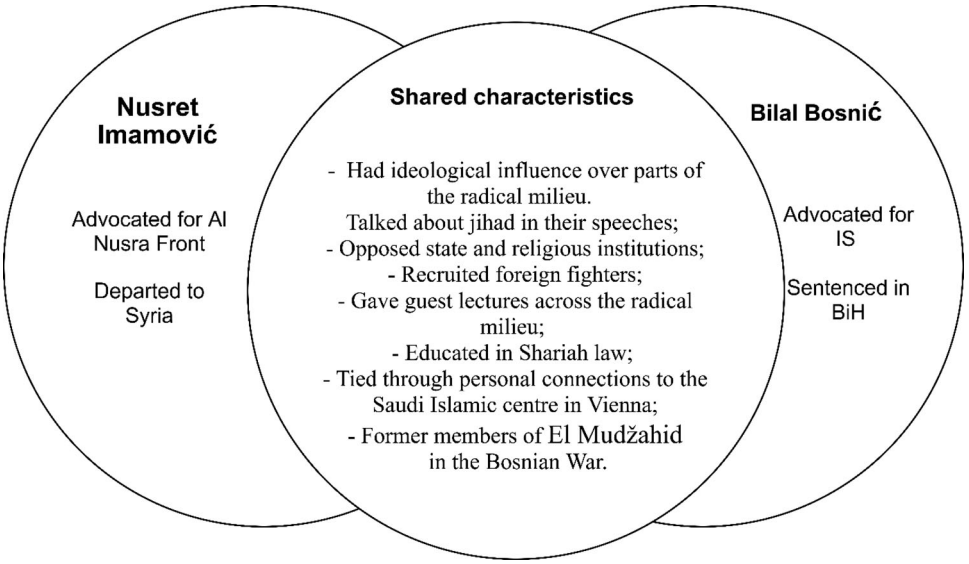

Figure 3. A comparison of the profiles of the key Bosnian radical influencers.

annulled … We pray to Allah to be martyred. This is the best way of dying".[53] A closer examination of Bosnić's biography shows that his first introduction to Salafism happened in the 1990s in Germany, where he lived with his parents. In 1992, he returned to BiH, joined the 7th Muslim Brigade, and, after the war, became a member of the AIO. Unlike most local Salafi influencers, Bosnić did not have an educational background in the Middle East. However, he was an active member of the postwar radical milieu since its early establishment.

Despite their manifested ideological differences, both Imamović and Bosnić have certain leadership features in common and generally have similar approaches to their followers (see Figure 3). Both influencers played the role of an informal authority figure and showed leadership skills in recruiting followers as they managed to build their influence over jihadi Salafi communities across BiH and the region. Bosnić was established in Bihać, and while he did travel to other locations to give lectures, he was rarely invited to speak before large audiences, as he was perceived as a marginalized voice in the Salafi community.[54] Imamović was the leader of the Salafi commune in the village of Gornja Maoča, where the largest cluster of departures of foreign fighters was reported.

It would be an over-simplification to argue that in any given situation potential followers are approached by radical influencers with the intention to create individuals prone to violence and convince them to become foreign fighters. On the contrary, radical influencers perform a variety of functions, and appeals to violence are only one function among the possible ones. The role of influencers is to seek, spot, and exploit vulnerabilities and, thus, identify their followers and approach them. They do not necessarily show them any intention of sending them to a war. In fact, this pattern only emerged following the outbreak of the war in Syria.

Radical influencers have a variety of functions in the radical milieu that could be understood beyond their ideological activism. For instance, Bosnić and Imamović were

responsible for issuing *tezkije* [recommendation letters] to those who intended to travel to Syria. Such confirmations were initially given by Imamović until his departure to the battlefield and then later by Bosnić. According to police and prosecution sources, after Bosnić was arrested in 2014, the task of issuing tezkije was transferred to an authority figure outside BiH.[55]

Another function of radical influencers that finds empirical evidence in the case of Bosnić and Imamović refers to the application of *ruqya* [spiritual healing] to people who later become foreign fighters.[56] The practice of ruqya was a way to encourage followers who sought help, often with problems of drug or alcohol abuse, to follow the path to jihad on the day when Bosnić was arrested.[57] Some of his "patients" were from BiH, and others were from Slovenia, Italy, and Austria.[58]

The power centers around these charismatic influencers did not appear in a vacuum but seem to have been the product of leadership dynamics, wherein influencers would either support or reject each other's activities. When Imamović traveled to Syria in 2014 to join al-Nusra, followed by his wife and children, Bosnić called Imamović's move a "mistake" in a message published on a local news portal popular among the Salafi community.[59] In fact, the differing ideological preferences of the two influencers, as one preferred the IS and the other al Nusra, had implications for recruitment, as it caused re-groupings and divisions among the followers of the two leaders. The Imamović-Bosnić "split" further testifies to the leadership competition, power dynamics, and various centers of influence in the radical milieu. In line with the claim about ideological cleavages, an influential figure in the Salafi milieu interviewed for this research points to the role of Bosnić in the recruitment of foreign fighters:

> When Bilal Bosnić began to advocate for the caliphate, I got in my car and went to Krajina [where Bosnić was preaching], and confronted him saying, 'Listen, I've heard that you are advocating, recruiting and sending young people to the caliphate. The two of us are men of knowledge. Give me a single argument/piece of evidence that the caliphate in Syria is the real one. If you convince me that Baghdadi is the real caliph, I trust you and in the name of Allah I will immediately go to Syria.' He looked at me, and he told me that his evidence is that he had a dream that Baghdadi was the real caliph. And I told him, 'Both of us are men of knowledge. You've studied in Syria. How come?'… I believe they paid him.[60]

Considering their different leadership pathways, the collected data indicates that the Bosnian influencers were strategic about the rhetoric they used and the activities they undertook. Despite their individual leadership histories embedded in the Salafi milieu, they were not always explicit about inciting their followers to violence. This shows their ability to adapt to the external political and security environment. A Bosnian imam interviewed for this research shared his insights from his friendship with Bilal Bosnić during the postwar years. In the interview, he argued that previously Bosnić did not openly engage in violence, despite his ideological stance:

> I met him in Visoko[61] during the war and, even after that, we spent time talking about Islam, about life. In one moment, around 1999-2000, we were even planning to go to Jordan to study together. At that time, he was a normal guy, and when I say normal, I mean, yes, he was a Wahhabi, but he did not have extremist ideas. Then the Arab Spring came… When I heard that my friend Bilal [Bosnić] had been preaching and encouraging youngsters to go to Syria, I wrote a post on Facebook. I said, 'If someone should go to

> Syria, it's us, because we fought in a war. The younger generation does not have any clue what a war means, and they don't know how to fight.'[62]

This quote points to the evolution of the informal authority built throughout the years between the Bosnian War and the rise of the IS. On the one hand, the gradual buildup of power shows the persistence of the Salafi influencers. On the other hand, the decisions of individual influencers as to how and whether to utilize it for the sake of recruitment seem to have been taken individually, yet in line with the framework of the radical milieu.

The evolution of the local radical influencers can be traced to the leadership dynamics in the radical milieu long before the outbreak of the Syrian War. In fact, the legacy of some postwar ideological leaders has remained dominant throughout the years, inspiring cooperation as well as ideological cleavages among Salafi influencers in the radical milieu. For instance, Barcić, who was previously mentioned as one of the founders of the Salafi movement in BiH, had particularly formative effects on the establishment of the radical milieu in the postwar period. His legacy was preserved by Salafi influencers like Imamović and Bilal Bosnić. This continuity in the Bosnian Salafi leadership points to long-term targeting efforts that provided the local influencers with the opportunity to build their authority. Thus, they could utilize this authority within the context of the Syrian War to encourage followers to become foreign fighters and even to "compete" ideologically in their recruitment messages.

In addition to the ideological continuity, radical influence is characterized by decentralization, meaning that the recruitment process has been influenced by several different power centers, both internal and external to the region. One possible explanation for this points to the online presence of radical influencers. Video recordings of lectures and religious gatherings have been a popular form of their social engagement with followers. This factor impacts recruitment as social media removes national and regional boundaries and allows the recordings to reach larger audiences across Bosnian-speaking populations. However, the problem with this argument is that not all the influencers were active in utilizing online spaces. Instead, the empirical evidence suggests that preexisting ties among the leaders facilitated the buildup of a network in which cross-boundary recruitment took place.

Nonetheless, not all parts of the radical milieu could rely on the presence of charismatic influencers. While distinct power centers appeared in the recruitment process, there were influencers with more limited authority who acted as amplifiers of the radical rhetoric. Influencers of this kind were less impactful but very proactive in their efforts to target followers. The case of a rogue imam from Rožaje, Montenegro empirically illustrates this type of leadership. Despite his contribution to the buildup of the Salafi milieu in Montenegro, he was not as active online as other Salafi influencers from neighboring BiH. As local followers in Montenegro lacked a charismatic figure there, they looked to Bosnian Salafi leaders for ideological inspiration. Data from local researchers show that Salafi influencers from BiH have been particularly popular among the younger generation in Montenegro.

An external power center identified in this research is connected to a few radical clerics of Bosnian origin who, during the Bosnian War, oversaw humanitarian aid channels from Vienna to Sarajevo through several Islamic organizations. Back in the 1990s, a few

Islamic organizations with offices in Vienna were active in sending aid to BiH. Various security sources point to the "infrastructure" of Islamic charities that was used during the conflict to transfer money from Vienna to Sarajevo and its significance for the distribution of material and non-material resources following the rise of the IS and their recruitment campaign.[63] For instance, Barcić was the representative of the Vienna-based International Islamic Relief Organization for the city of Zenica, BiH in the 1990s.[64] This illustrates the link between the financial influx of humanitarian aid during the Bosnian War and the emergence of Salafi influencers in the postwar period.

The role of diaspora-based influencers became particularly important in the recruitment of foreign fighters, as they could utilize their images as authority figures that they had cultivated among their followers for more than two decades. The Salafi milieu in the 1990s was initially influenced by two Bosnian clerics based in Vienna, Nedžad Balkan from Sandžak and Muhamed Porča from Sarajevo (see Table 4). However, the reference to an external power center does not point to a centralized or strictly hierarchical leadership structure, as the influencers emerged under the conditions of ideological cleavages and power dynamics among leaders of competing groups. Table 4 shows some examples of typical cases of radical influencers.

The collected data speaks for the authority of influencers situated outside of the Bosnian radical milieu in the Balkans. The importance of maintaining influence among Bosnian Salafists abroad is evidenced by the fact that at least 15 percent of the foreign fighters belonging to the Bosnian contingent departed from other countries.[65] Thus, it can be argued that the strong ties to jihadi Salafi influencers in the Bosnian diaspora have significantly impacted the recruitment network. According to local security authorities, the radical leaders based in Austria could secure the involvement of Salafi adherents and recruit them into local radical milieus, which grew noticeably between the Bosnian War and the outbreak of the Syrian War.[66] This way, they have acted as a bridge between the European diaspora and Salafi groups in the Balkans.

The ties between local and abroad-based radical influencers were maintained and reinforced through shared activities, guest lectures, engagement in online discussions, and the spread of ideological propaganda. According to the collected data, Balkans-based Salafi leaders paid regular visits to Bosnian Salafi communities in Vienna. They were frequent guests in diaspora communities in Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Sweden, and Italy, which was facilitated financially and logistically through Salafi NGOs based in European countries.[67] This shows that even recruitment is seen as a grassroots process; it is not a country-based or region-based process, but it is a transmittable function of leadership ties in the framework of the same milieu. The exchange of visits between influencers adds to their individual and group legitimacy as authority figures in their constituencies.

Conclusion

The examination of the biographies of jihadi influencers emphasizes the existence of power centers concerned with recruitment. The ideological legacies and resources inherited from the Bosnian War have facilitated the growth of internal and external power centers of radical influence. At the micro-level, the cooperation of these power centers

Table 4. Radical influencers of Bosnian origin belonging to the external power center of recruitment.

Influencer	Place of activities	Background activities	Activities	Current status
Muhamed Fadil Porča	Vienna (from Sarajevo, BiH)	Studied in Saudi Arabia; was a leader of the Salafi missionary activities and the Bosnian Salafi movement in Austria, and a "middle-man" between some Middle Eastern NGO's and Salafists in the Balkans.	Served as an imam at the al-Tawhid Mosque in Vienna closed down following the November 2020 terror attack. Porča has been particularly influential among radical circles in BiH providing ideological and allegedly material support to the radical milieu.	Arrested in January 2017.
Nedžad Balkan (known as Ebu Muhammed)	Vienna (from Sandžak, Serbia)	Studied in Saudi Arabia, influential in administrating the mujahedeen's arrival in Bosnia in the 1990s.	Had ties to radical circles in BiH and Sandžak, Serbia; provided ideological and logistical support to Bosnian Salafists in Austria and the Balkans; an imam in the Sahaba mosque in Vienna's Seventh district; led the Vienna-based Kelimetul Haqq organization of Bosnian and Serbian Muslims, which was part of the Al-Takfir w'al-Hijra movement.	Arrested in 2017 and in 2019.
Mirsad Omerović (known as Ebu Tejma)	Vienna/Graz (from Tutin, Serbia)	Studied in Saudi Arabia	Reportedly led a Vienna-based Bosnian network through which he had recruited Europeans to join jihadist groups abroad.	Arrested in November 2014. Sentenced in 2016 to 20 years for recruitment of 160 foreign fighters; also convicted for murdering two girls.
Fikret Begić	Graz (from Konjic, BiH)	No data	A close associate of Mirsad Omerović; Begić presumably planned to travel to Syria himself to join the IS in 2015.	Arrested in 2014 and sentenced in 2016 to eight years for recruitment.

has strengthened the Bosnian radical milieu and, most importantly, its radical core encouraging Bosnian foreign fighter recruitment. This conclusion concerns the "locality" of recruitment. When thinking of recruitment as a grassroots phenomenon, the focus should be on the trajectory of influencers, not the geographical location featured by one or another set of structural factors that may influence individual radicalization. Consequently, recruitment is explained through the authoritative, ideological, and logistical support provided by grassroots influencers.

Radical influencers may have different pathways and histories across cases of foreign fighter recruitment. They may vary in the resources they rely on. In the postwar context of BiH, radical influencers shape the recruitment of foreign fighters by managing preexisting "institutions" of the radical milieu. Influencers may fill a variety of power gaps and thus be able to access and target their followers. The reference to influencers instead of "recruiters" or "radical imams", points to the finding that radical authority figures may have both ideological and (sometimes) operational functions in recruitment. Although they may lack strategic links to the centralized leadership of a terror organization, they have the power to influence the "bottom," where prospective foreign fighters are situated.

The analysis has shown that local influencers of the Bosnian radical milieu benefited from the institutional vacuum left by the war and postwar structural conditions and capitalized on their image of authority figures. The influencers managed to "institutionalize" their authority due to the postwar state weakness and thus create a radical milieu. While Bosnian foreign fighters are only a visible part of the invisible processes of radicalization, the presence and persistence of local radical influencers between the Bosnian and the Syrian War speak for the strength of the local radical milieu. Consequently, the recruitment of foreign fighters was largely influenced by their strategic choices, radical rhetoric, and activities in the given context.

Data availability statement: The data that support the findings of this study are available on request. The data are not publicly available due to their containing information that could compromise the privacy of the research participants.

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