

Islamic radicalisation and the role of the Internet: the case of Bosnia-Herzegovina

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Introduction

The Bosnia and Herzegovina is beside Albania the only fully European state with so great Muslim population, which after the Bosnian war reached even the absolute majority of entire population. Bosnian Muslims are at the same time the only South Slavs with Islamic religion. They still have also very strong connections with Turkey, successor of the Ottoman Empire, which actually brought Islam religion in 15th century.

The purpose of our paper is to present, how the modern digital technology like Internet has changed the nature of the Islamic religion in Bosnia and Herzegovina. For better understanding of that, brief history of Islam in Bosnia and Herzegovina will be presented first. In that context we will describe how Islam came to Bosnia, how it has developed isolated from other Islamic world and last but not least, how the Yugoslav communism tried to make multicultural society without any religious or political radicalism in Bosnia. Furthermore we will focus on the period during and after the Bosnian war, when Bosnian Islamic community expressed religious feelings openly what some authors and even politicians¹ consider as the Islam radicalisation or even Islamic fundamentalism.

The freedom of speech, physical and virtual communication and political activities together with disappointment linked with slow and ineffective (Western) international salvation of war, pushed Bosnian Islamic population away from the Western civilisation and culture environment. The end of the totalitarian communism, the Bosnian civil war as well as the aggressions of neighbour states, arrival of radical Islamic fighters and last but not least culture, economic or political interests or interventions from Turkey, Saudis, Iran and other Islamic states have, without any doubts, radicalised sometimes secular Bosnians. This is truth especially for young Muslim population, who is seriously becoming more fundamental regarding the religion.

¹ Especially Serbian and Croatian authors and politicians, together with some Westerners who joint them specially after the September 11th 2001.

Irruption of the Arabic and Turkish terms and words in Bosniak South Slavs language, brought by Bosnian students, who return from these countries, or brought by Internet, the afresh use of traditional cloths, the solidarity with Muslim brothers in Chechnya, Iraq or Afghanistan or other parts of the world, where jihad has been implemented, fury against United States and their allies are just some of the indicators, that confirm thesis about Islam radicalization. Overflow of Islamic web pages and their contents, which we will analyze in the second part of the paper, also give a proof for such conclusions.

Nevertheless all these still doesn't mean that Bosnia become a greater terrorist threat for Western countries. Namely, if Bosnians didn't become terrorists in the nineties, when due the Bosnian war were practically judged to nation decay, why they should become the terrorists now, when the Muslim population in Bosnia is growing up to 55 % of the entire population.²

Islamization of Bosnia and Herzegovina

South Slavs were Christianized in 9th century. Until the Ottoman conquest of Bosnia, we have evidence of three Christian denominations in that area: Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic and indigenous church known as the Bosnian Church. Both Orthodox and Roman Catholic officials declared Bosnian church to be a heresy. Apart from testimonies of inquisitors and a few excerpts from allegedly apocryphal texts, we have very little knowledge of the Bosnian Church³. Its connection with Bogomils is spurious, however. Discussion about how numerous each of these denominations were is impossible with the amount of historical documents that are presently available to us (Malcolm, 1994).

The arrival of the Ottoman Empire, an Islamic state, in 15th century resulted in a thorough realignment of religious groups in Bosnia. The Bosnian Church entirely vanished, apparently because its leaders were either killed or converted. Some members of the Bosnian Church

² Reliable statistics on the precise membership of different religious groups remain unavailable since 1991 due to the recent war in Bosnia. According to the UN Development Programme's Human Development Report 2002, Muslims constitute 58 % of the population of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which is estimated at around 4.4 million. This estimate from 2001 was made by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, although a reliable census had not been conducted since 1991. Most estimates are much lower -the CIA World Factbook, for instance, estimates that the Muslim population account for 48 % of the country's people (<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/bk.html>)

³ Some scholars believe that the Bosnian Church was a dualist church related to the Bogomils of Bulgaria, while others dispute this claim, citing lack of historical evidence.

converted to either Catholicism or Orthodoxy. There is also evidence of a big part of the Catholic population converting to Orthodoxy. Many members of all three denominations converted to Islam. The presence of large Muslim population in contemporary Bosnia is a consequence of many factors, ranging from effective propaganda to religious persecution of Catholics in the 15th to 18th centuries⁴ and understandable motive to improve one's social standing in the theocratic Ottoman Empire (Riedlmayer, 1993).

Eventually, by the end of the 17th century more than 80 % of the population of Bosnia was Muslim. However, the next (18th) century brought drastic decline in the number of Muslims in Bosnia. Reasons for this include numerous defeats of Ottoman army⁵, plague and other natural disasters that mainly hit the urban population (mainly Muslims, whereas Christians were mostly peasants) and immigration of Christians from neighbouring territories (Malcolm, 1994).

During the 19th century an Ottoman population census by religion were conducted, but with vague, imprecise and varying figures: Greek Orthodox Christians 32.63 % - 46.6 %, Muslims 32.6 % - 51.9 % and Catholic Christians 14.97 % - 20.17 %. At that time the Muslim population comprised majority on 27 % of the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina; mainly in towns of eastern and central Bosnia (Sarajevo and Tuzla) as well as some parts and towns of Western Bosnia (Bihać, Banja Luka and Cazin). In general, Muslims were the dominant group in most developed urban centres of the country.

Secularism

In frame of secularism we have to discuss the communist relation towards Bosnian Islam in formal socialist Yugoslav state. Although Bosnia and Herzegovina after the 2nd World War became one of the six constitutive republics in Yugoslav federation, the Bosnian Muslims were not recognized as a separate nation until the 60's. Till then Bosnian Muslims were treated as Serbs or Croats of Islamic religion. The constitutional changes in 1971 gave them opportunity to express separate nationality – Muslims with capital M. Actually Muslim leaders at that time demanded to use historic name Bosniaks, but they were not supported by Serbs and Croatian politicians. They

⁴ Catholics were viewed as a sort of "fifth column" of the Ottoman arch-enemy, the Habsburg Empire. It is known that during the 16th and 17th century numerous Catholics left Bosnia. Much of the population of the coastal regions of Croatia and the Adriatic islands has origins in Bosnia.

⁵ In Ottoman Empire Muslims were obliged to serve in the army, while non-Muslims were not.

had to wait until 1993 when Bosniaks was officially introduced as a term for Bosnian Muslims. This was finally a base for splitting national and religious affiliations or feelings.

For Bosnian Muslims, religion often serves as a community identifier, and religious practice is confined to occasional visits to the mosque or significant rites of passage such as birth, marriage, and death. Today a great majority of Bosniaks are Sunni Muslims. Historically also Sufism played a significant role in the country. There is also a Bektashi and Shia community in Bosnia. While there are significant numbers of Bosniaks who practice their faith to varying degrees, for others, this identity tends to be secular and is based primarily on ancestral traditions and ethnic loyalty. Due to more modern influences and 45 years of communism, some Bosniaks have Atheist, Agnostic or Deist beliefs (pre war estimate of 10 % of total population).

Bosniaks also have a reputation for being "liberal" Muslims. Headscarves for women, popular in middle-eastern countries, are worn only by a minority of Bosniak Muslim women, and otherwise mostly for religious obligations.

Bosnian war and Islam radicalisation

The War in Bosnia and Herzegovina, commonly known as the Bosnian War, was an international armed conflict that took place between March 1992 and November 1995. The war involved several sides. According to numerous ICTY judgments the conflict involved the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (later Serbia and Montenegro) and Bosnia as well as Croatia and Bosnia⁶. These sides changed objectives and allegiances several times at various stages of the war.

The involvement of NATO, during the 1995 Operation Deliberate Force against the positions of the Army of Republika Srpska internationalized the conflict in its final stages. The war was brought to an end after the signing of the General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina in Paris on 14 December 1995. Peace negotiations were held in Dayton, Ohio, and were finalized on 21 December 1995.

While wartime figures were propagandized to reflect current political interests of involved parties, the most recent research places the number of victims at around 100,000–110,000 killed

⁶ According to ICJ judgment, Serbia gave military and financial support to Serb forces which consisted of the Yugoslav People's Army (later Army of Serbia and Montenegro), the Army of Republika Srpska, the Serbian Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of the Interior of Republika Srpska and Serb Territorial Defense Forces. Croatia gave military support to Croat forces of Herzeg-Bosnia. Bosnian government forces were led by the Army of Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

(civilians and military), and 1.8 million displaced. This research also showed that most of the killed people (soldiers and civilians) during Bosnian War were Bosniaks (65 %), with Serbs in second (25 %) and Croats (8 %) in third place. Of the 97,207 documented casualties⁷, 83 % of civilian victims were Bosniaks⁸, 10 percent were Serbs and more than 5 % were Croats, followed by a small number of others such as Albanians or Romani people.

Bosnian war undoubtedly has changed famous Bosnian secularism and religion/ethnic tolerance. Ethnic cleansing during the Bosnian war caused internal migration, which almost completely segregated the population into separate ethno-religious areas. Increased levels of returns in 2001-2002 slowed markedly in 2003-2004, leaving the majority of Serbian Orthodox living in the Republika Srpska and the majority of Muslims and Catholics still living in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Within the Federation, distinct Muslim and Catholic majority areas remain (Figure 1).

The increased religious identification within all three constitutive nations had become a fact which couldn't be avoided. Religious leaders from the three major faiths claim that younger persons increased identification with their ethnic heritage, in large part due to the national religious revival that occurred as a result of the Bosnian war. Thus many Muslim women have adopted Islamic dress styles that had not been common, especially in cities, before the war. An unknown number of young Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims) have gone to study in Saudi Arabia and other Muslim countries. Religious leaders also observed that they enjoy greater support from their believers in rural areas of Bosnia and Herzegovina rather than urban centers such as the capital Sarajevo or Banja Luka.

Another very important element of radicalizing of the Bosnian Muslim society should be pointed out – the role of foreign fighters in the Bosnian war. The War in Bosnia and Herzegovina between Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs attracted large numbers of foreign fighters and mercenaries from various countries. Volunteers came to fight for a variety of reasons including religious or ethnic loyalties and in some cases for money. As a general rule, Bosniaks received support from Islamic countries, Serbs from the Eastern Orthodox countries and Croats from the Western

⁷ The total figure of dead could rise by a maximum of another 10,000 for the entire country due to ongoing research.

⁸ The percentage of Bosniak civilian victims would be higher had survivors of Srebrenica not reported 1,800 of their loved-ones as soldiers to access social services and other government benefits.

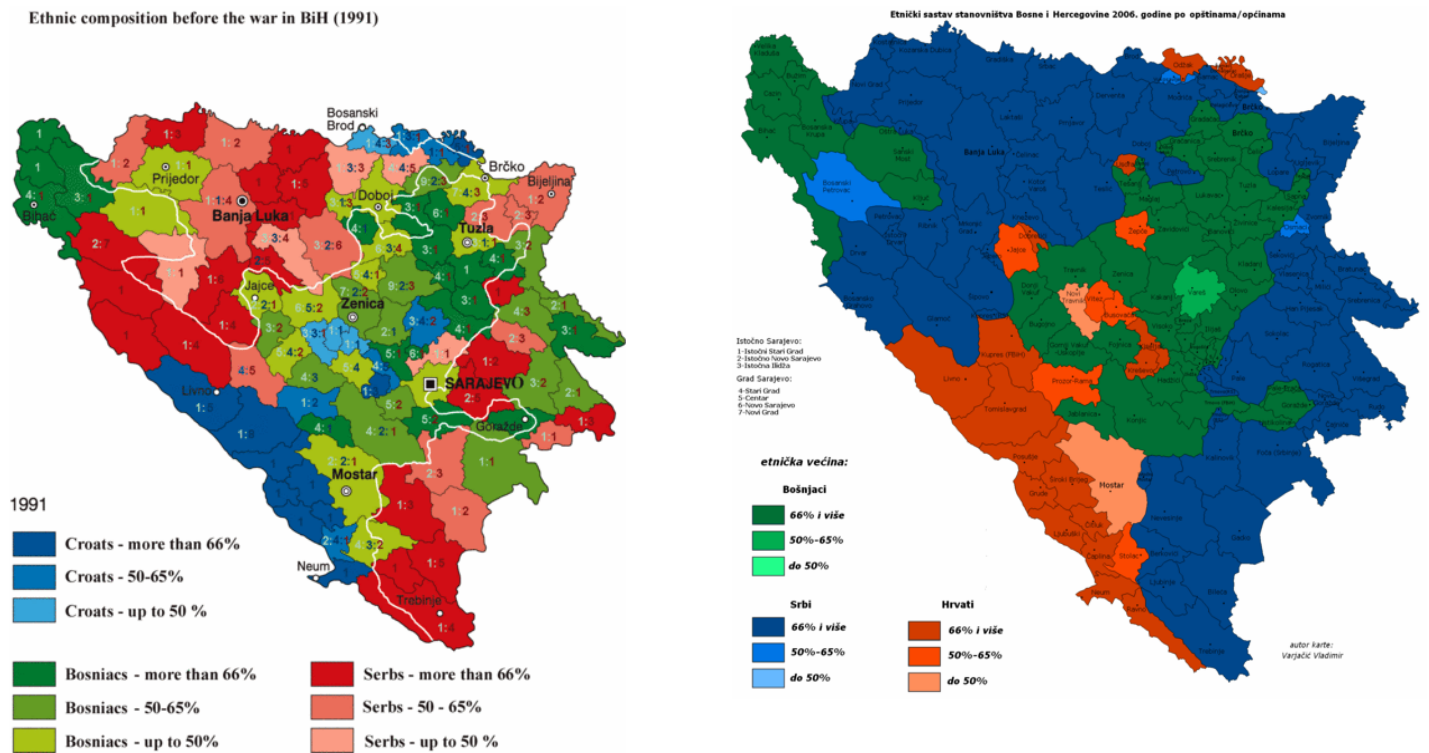
Christianity. The presence of foreign fighters is well documented; however none of these groups compromised more than 5 per cent of any of the respective armies' total manpower strength.

The Bosniaks received support from radical Islamic groups, notably Mujahedin fighters from Afghanistan (veterans from the Soviet war in Afghanistan) and other Muslim countries. Their strength is estimated at between 500 and 1000 fighters. Some reports claim the number could have been as high as 4000. During and after the war, Bosnia granted citizenship to at least 700 Mujahedin who fought in the war. Most left Bosnia after the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States, when strict checks by authorities closed down many of their charities. These included citizens from: Algeria, Egypt, Russia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia and Turkey (Hećimović, 2006; Kohlmann, 2004; Arab veterans of Afghanistan war lead new Islamic holy war, 1994). Some of them are believed to have links to Al-Qaeda (http://www.slobodnaevropa.org/al_kaida/index.html).

The arrival of the mujahedin, introduced two important factors into Bosnia's security and social landscape. One was short-term: the physical presence of people trained to commit terrorist acts. The other factor was long-term. Along with the mujahedin came a rather narrow, puritanical, and confrontational interpretation of Islam, commonly known as Wahhabism⁹. From the outset, Wahhabism caused tensions in traditional Bosnian-Muslim society, which has always been religiously moderate (Azinović, 2007). The self-proclaimed Bosnian-based Wahhabi community leader Abu Hamza, said in October 2006 that Islamic practice in Bosnia was "communist" and urged Muslims to return to "genuine Islam." That same month, a mosque in northern Bosnia closed for days due to a dispute between Wahhabis and local Muslims over the way prayer was conducted (Sito-Sucic, 29.12. 2006).

⁹ All this has raised fears that, under foreign influences, a radical Wahhabism may take root in Bosnia. No one knows how many local converts there are. The issue is kept in the spotlight by frequent media reports of young women running away from home to join Wahhabi communities and by sensational coverage of religion-related crimes. In 2002, a 26-year-old man described by local media as a Wahhabi supporter killed three members of a Croat family on Christmas Eve, saying he was following instructions from God. In 2007, a young Wahhabi killed his mother because she refused to join him for morning prayers (Bosnia's Muslims, Balkan extremists, 12. 7. 2007).

Figure 1: Ethnic composition before and after the war in BiH



Internet activities of radical Muslims in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Information technology and the security environment changes

There is no doubt that information technology has allowed significant social changes practically all over the world, whereby security sector and perception management aren't exception at all. On one hand the information technology could be perceived as a new security threat in modern societies (because its influence toward the critical infrastructure sectors-banking, insurances, information industries, e-government and e-economy etc.), on the other hand modern media, leveraged and run by information technology, dramatically changed physical space perception and the perception of the conflicts and security issues as well.

Numerous information sources ensure the users to get different information about conflicts, whereby the censorship and data filtering is practically very difficult to reach. The fact is that some very disputable, moral and ethical controversial (from Western point of view) scenes

of extreme violence like beheading, hostages taking or direct combat action consequences have been shown in the last few years, from Iraq and Chechnya to other conflict zones. At the end the contemporary state difficulties for making and public presenting security policy should be mentioned because hermetic closed and by national state dominated information space is becoming definitely a matter of history. The citizens of these states could choose between different information sources (media proliferation), therefore the divided public opinion with stressed extreme points (radicalisation of the public) of view is a logical consequence.

Data, information, knowledge and understanding as three elements of cognitive scheme have always been determining social power as they have been significantly influencing political and military sphere as well. This wisdom was very explicitly present already in ancient world¹⁰. Despite that is the information-communication technology (ICT)-Internet importance in time of information society very clear and reasonable. When at the very beginning the Internet was primary military matter, further development, commercialization and expansion in practically all important social spheres gives us theoretical background also for analysing Internet activities of radical Muslims in Bosnia. Our research will show that Internet became, particularly for young generation, one of the most important media, by which ideology, religion or just political or personal statements ought to be spread. We have analysed numerous Bosnian web pages, but the overflow of radical contents, links towards jihad videotapes, audio files etc. confirm the basic thesis, that the use of the Internet helps radical opinion makers to spread ideas much more efficiently.

Islamist web pages in Bosnia could be practically divided into three basic groups: the first are **Islamic newspapers** with their online version like the Islamic information newspaper Preporod.com (rebirth) (<http://www.preporod.com>). In the second group represent **official web pages of radical organisations** like association Young Muslims (<http://www.mm.co.ba>), Bosniak Youth Network web page (<http://www.mladibosnjaci.ba>) and Islamic community in Bosnia and Herzegovina web page (<http://www.rijaset.ba>). The third **group presents the most radical Muslims**, which are more or less uncovered supporters of the Pan Islamic jihad movement. The Islambosna.ba web portal (<http://www.islambosna.ba>), Islamic information portal (<http://www.islam.co.ba>), Islamic Internet Portal Dzemat.org (<http://islam.dzemat.org>) and

¹⁰ Chinese military and strategic thinker Sun Tzu as well was one of the first who pointed out the significance of data, information and knowledge.

Abuhamza Brigade <http://www.abuhamzabrigade.tk> are just some of the proofs, how radical (a part of) ordinarily secular Bosnian Islam community could grow up.

For all three groups is significantly that their web pages contain religious material (translation of Koran and other religious essays, the software for translating and quick teaching Koran is even offered, on all types of the web pages individuals could express their own opinions and judgements with tools like web forums or chat rooms, and also on all web pages there are a lot of advices and suggestions, how to implement faith within the public life as well activities. In this sense one more web page has to be mentioned. **Women educational centre Nahla** (<http://www.nahla.ba>) gives instructions what a social role Muslim woman should be, how she has to educate her children, what kind of relations she may have with males, how to express love etc.

Figure 2: The Islamic information newspaper Preporod.com (rebirth)

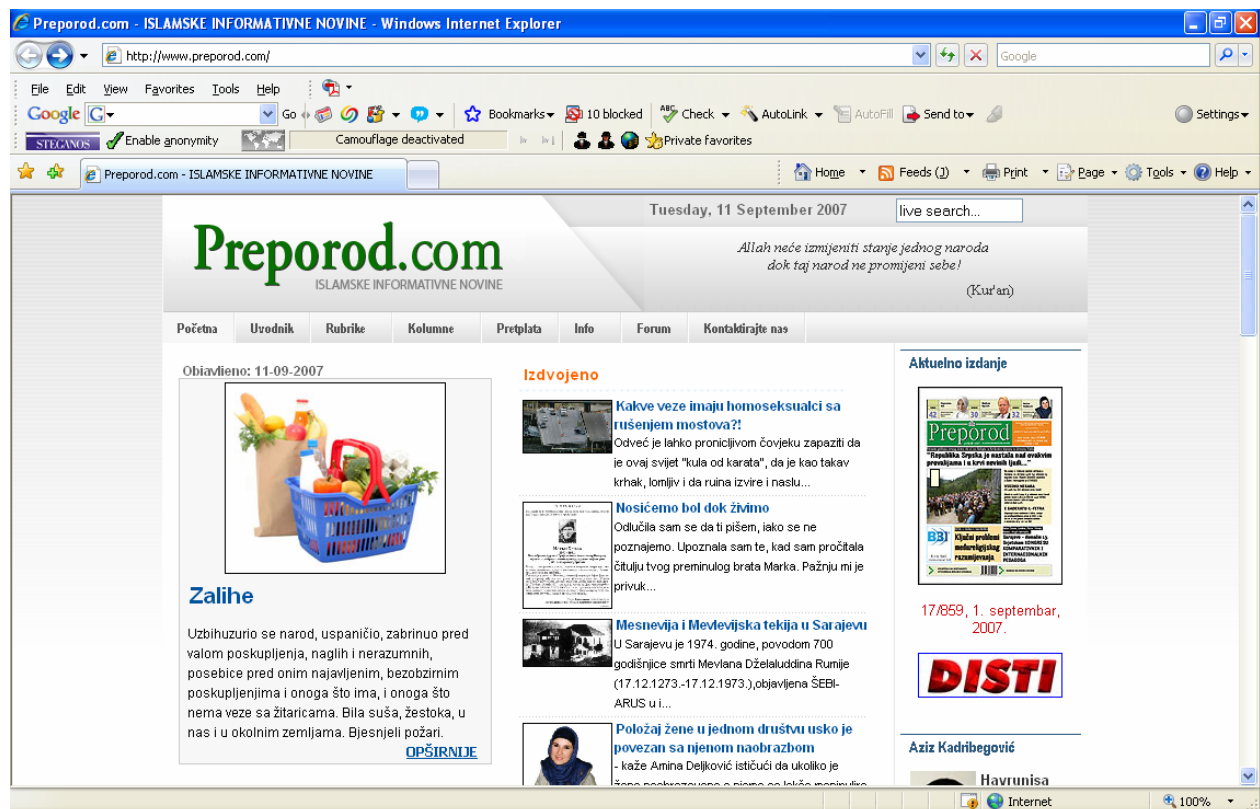
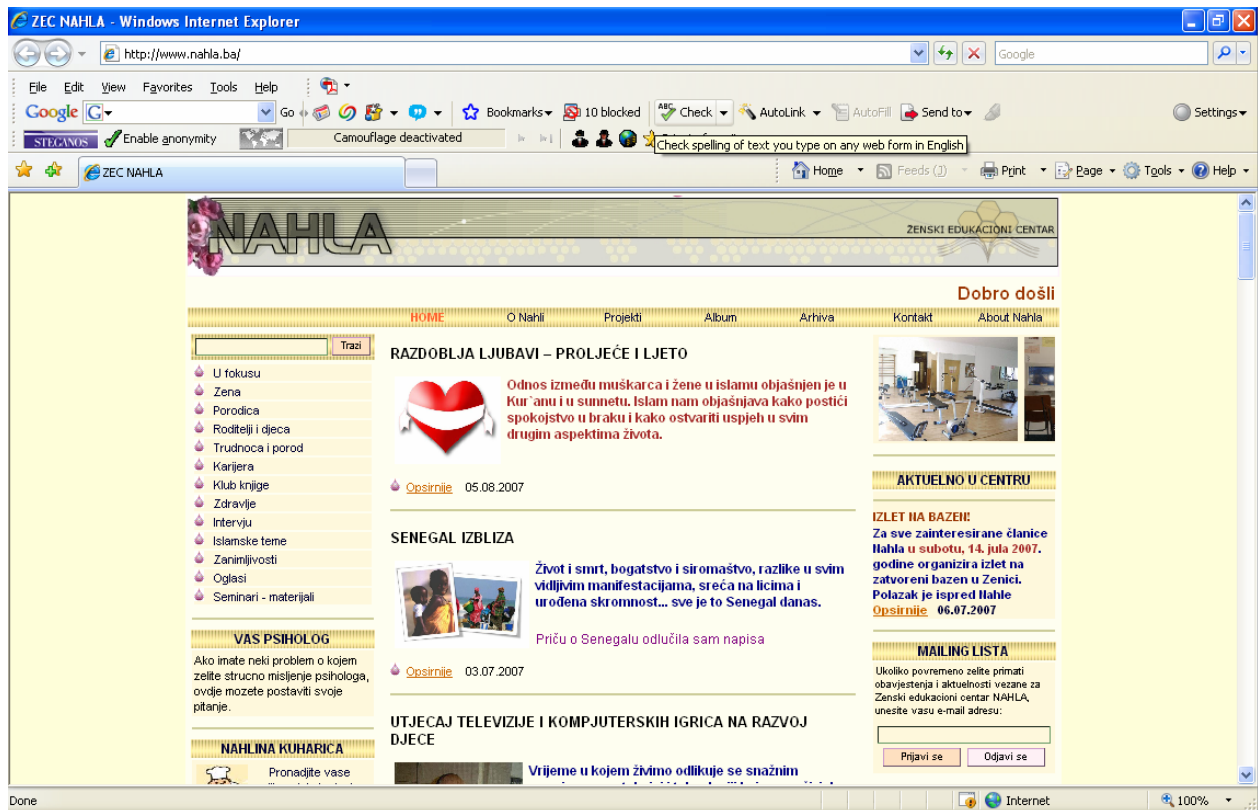


Figure 3: The web portal <http://www.nahla.ba>



Last but not least we have to devote our attention to most radical web sites. They are actually a part of the global Pan Islamic movement and in their statements are more or less hostile to Western values, states and policy. Frequently they are calling for boycotting Israeli or some Western products and they are paying full attention to conflicts between Islamists and their opponents all over the world too. But their activities don't stay at this point. They demand the sacrificing for the faith directly and the greatest thing a Muslim could do is giving a life for the faith or become shaheed.

Very interesting, from propaganda point of view, are the also these contexts of web pages, which include the material for children. Children songs, fairy-tales about the important Islamic religious icons, computer games and other attractive stuff should show to the little ones, how Muslims have to express their faith in everyday life. This applicable part indicates that the Islam is actually very hard to be a real secular religion. Koran and other religious documents are written

very practically and in fact, they don't give a real choice how the Muslim should behave. In difference with Christians, where a religion may be, or the fact is, also a private matter, the Muslims don't have a real choice.

But these radical web pages and portals have one more particularity. They links towards other radical Islamic groups appear very often. Particularly fighting in Chechnya, Iraq, Afghanistan and also Somalia is presented on almost all radical web pages. Multimedia material of successful combat actions should inspire Muslims for supporting the jihad, financially but also morally or just ideologically. Our further analysis has to prove that this communication flow is not just one-way direction (from local sites to great jihad combat places), but also in the opposite. The jihadists from Iraq or some other parts of the world also seek supporters particularly in Islamic states and between Muslim population in Western countries.

Figure 4: The web portal www.islambosna.ba

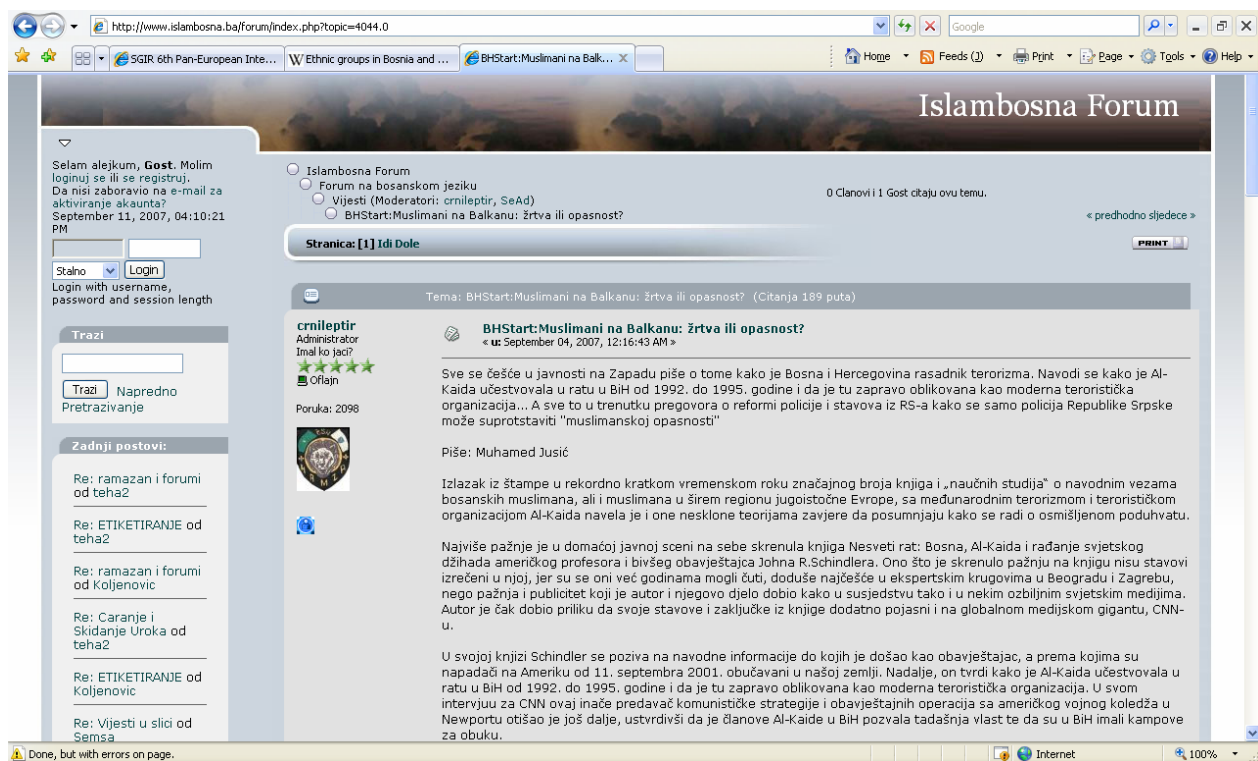
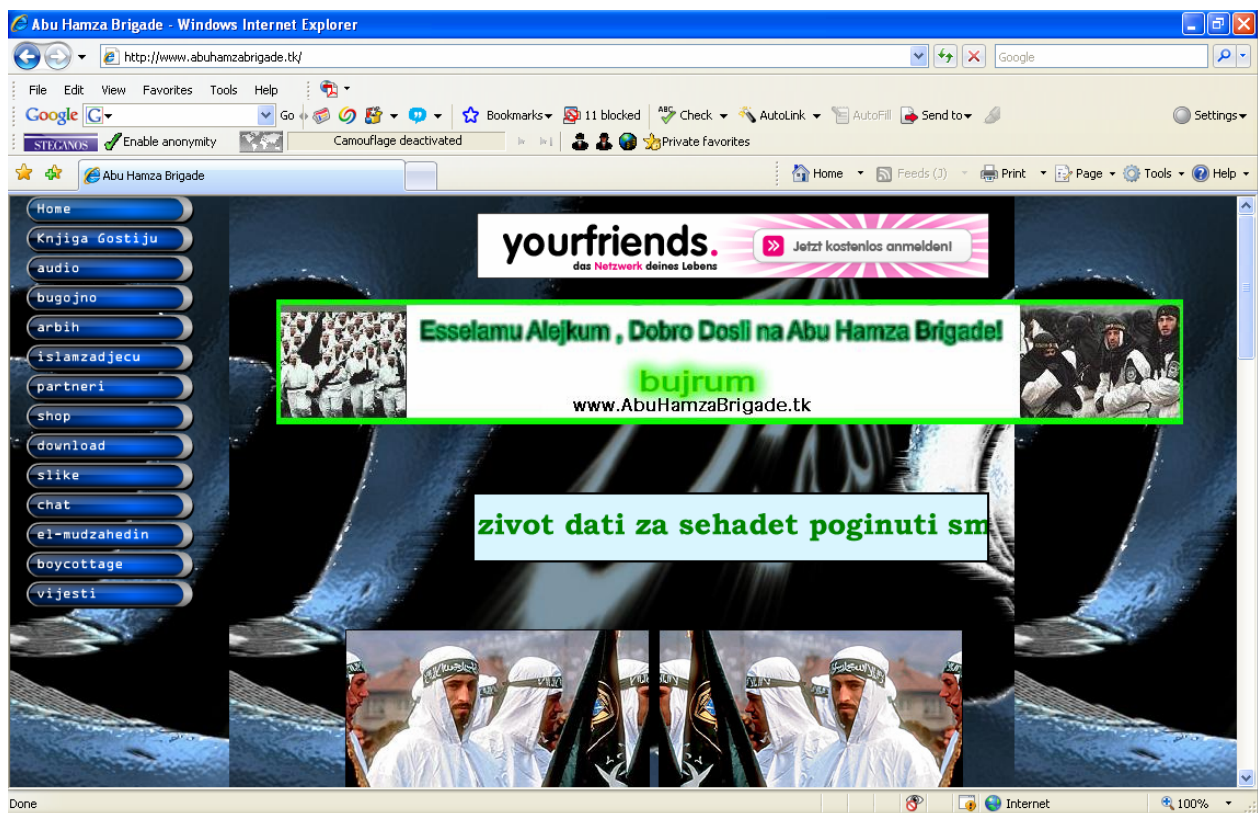


Figure 5: <http://www.abuhamzabrigade.tk>



How the other world conflicts have radicalised the Bosnian Muslims? Information analysis of Iraqi conflict

Perhaps the information and media most exposed and intensive conflict is the war in Iraq, where scenes of extreme violence are transmitting over the Internet almost every day and which are recorded by mobile phones and digital cameras (for example, the exploding of improvised explosive devices, beheadings, on the other hand also the execution of the former Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein and the pictures from the Abu Graib prison should not be forgotten). The media has been used very efficiently, particularly in the sense of information warfare and psychological operations (sometimes better known as propaganda, if we use the old term. Psychological Operations (PSYOP, PSYOPS) are namely techniques used by military and police forces to influence a target audience's emotions, motives, objective reasoning, and behaviour. Target audiences can include governments, organizations, groups, and individuals, and these techniques

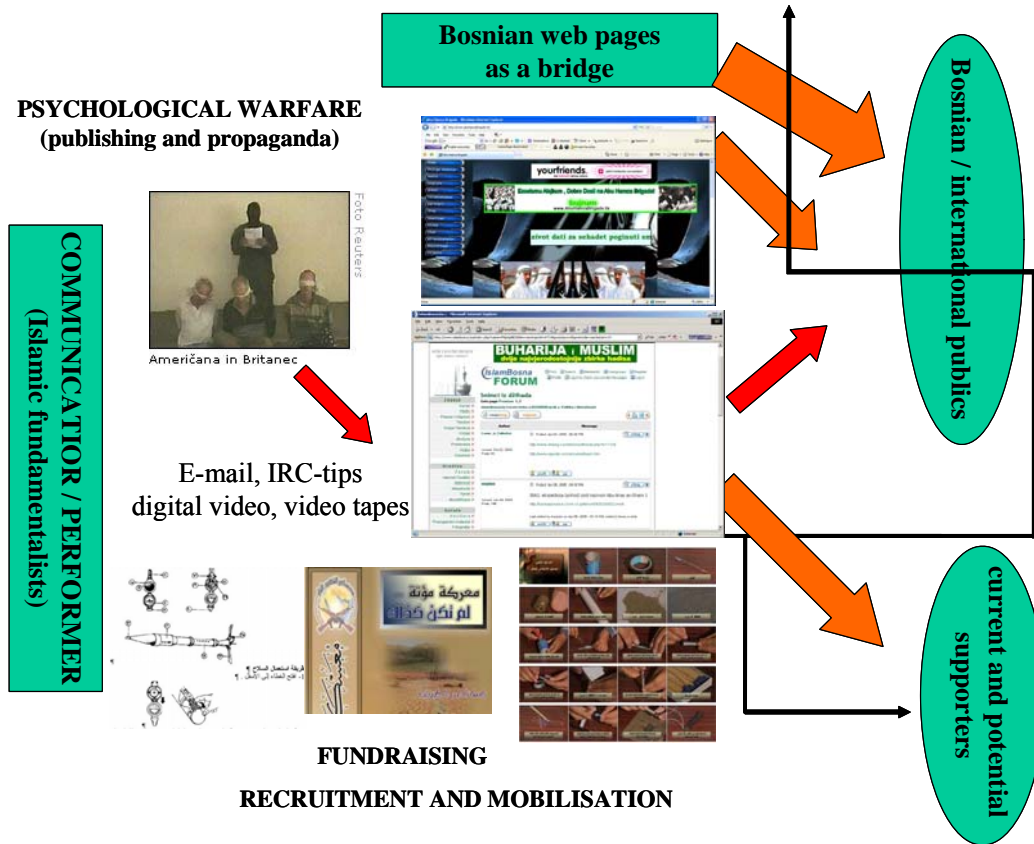
are used in order to induce confessions, or reinforce attitudes and behaviours favourable to the originator's objectives. Psychological warfare/operations are always perceived as an additional war technique, while fundamentalists claim, in regard to the information warfare, that in the near future the war is going to be waged just within the information space). Iraqi Islamic fundamentalist groups as well as terrorist organisations have used information technology and digital media to influence the domestic public (in order to gain its support) as well as the international (Western) or global public. Islamic groups and certain media (including the Arab information services Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya) are very skilled in using the advantages of information-communication and satellite technologies in attempting to present violence against kidnapped civilians and soldiers in order to influence, above all, the Western public. Their sympathisers upload videotaped wills of suicide bombers, post claims of responsibility for attacks and write monthly online magazine articles on urban warfare, on how to choose a target or how to raise your child to be a "martyr".

Consequently the Internet use plays a significant role in the logistic, operational and communication network of terrorist organizations. Terrorists use the Internet not only as a mean of communication and to spread propaganda, but also to radicalize, recruit and train members and supporters all over the world, to spread instructions on how to carry out concrete offences and to transfer information, as well as for terrorist financing purposes. So-called terror manuals provide instructions on how to produce weapons, how to carry out attacks, how to take hostages and how to build bombs, among other things. In the face of the global availability of the Internet, this is particularly worrying. As an example of such activities one very important Bosnian web portal could be putted out (Islambosna.ba - <http://www.islambosna.ba>), which indicates terrorist awareness for using local languages, dispersal web pages and different Internet services. Without them the global effects as well as the goals of (Pan)Islamic movement could never be achieved. But it's also remarkable, how Islamists have gotten savvier in their use of the Internet. When in early 2004, Iraqi insurgent Abu Mussab al-Zarqawi and his group posted the video of the execution of Nicholas Berg, an American contractor working in Iraq, to one Web site, which was quickly overwhelmed with traffic, today jihads post evidence of their operations on dozens of sites¹¹ (some of them already mentioned) and coordinate their operations on secret e-mail lists,

¹¹ Good example is the web page of Islamic Army in Iraq <http://www.iaisite.net/>, which has a lot of mirror sites: www.iaisite.org, www.iaisite.net, www.iaisite.info, www.iaisite.biz.

password-protected Web sites and audio chat services like PalTalk, which don't leave behind printed record. The level of sophistication of these groups has become just unbelievable.

Figure 6: Information activities of Islamic fundamentalists and impact on the Bosnian publics



Conclusion

The radicalisation of the Bosnian Islam is a fact, which shouldn't be neither avoided nor exaggerated by politicians, state authorities or academics. Moreover the Internet usage didn't cause Islamic radicalisation. However it helps Islamic fundamentalists to spread their values and ideas more rapidly and more efficiently through:

- possibility of targeting particular social and demographic groups;
- Interactivity of the Internet media gives a possibility of the feedback in communication
- Its global presence enables decentralised activities of Islamic fundamentalists towards achieving their common goals.

Therefore it is not surprising, that cyberspace is becoming one of the most important areas, opposing radical Islamism. But not just that. Cyberspace is becoming appropriate media for all types of Radicals because it is very hard to control. Although many state authorities recently have started to supervise Internet activities we shall see, how efficient these measures will be. Paradoxically Internet was designed in the past to survive a nuclear attack today the crucial question is if it is going to survive Fundamentalists misuse and state communication limitations.

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