The threat to universal peace and security from terrorist organizations is increasing as more citizens from around the globe join those organizations. Acknowledging the serious threat posed by Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTF) the United Nations Security Council unanimously adopted on 24 September 2014, under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, its landmark Resolution 2178. The document is the most significant document related to terrorism since 2001.

Taking into consideration that RACVIAC – Center for Security Cooperation is organizing events that are of greatest interest to the SEE region, elaborating the most topical and relevant issues to our security environment, RACVIAC, together with the Ministry of Security of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the OSCE Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina, organized a regional conference under the title “Foreign Terrorist Fighters – Challenges for South East Europe“, which was held in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, on 7-8 October 2015.

The conference gathered participants from all RACVIAC member countries, Associate Members and other RACVIAC participants, OSCE Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Ministry of Security of Bosnia and Herzegovina and participants from other ministries, institutions and organizations from Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as from other international institutions and organizations.
The event aimed to provide a platform for a first regional exchange of views and experiences with regard to the threat of FTF in South-Eastern Europe and implementation of the UN Security Council resolution 2178 (2014), in compliance with all obligations under international law, including international human rights, refugee and humanitarian law. It was designed as an expert forum and was conducted in the form of conference panels-plenary sessions.

The main objectives of the conference were to obtain a general view of the international framework and initiatives and measures taken on both the international and domestic level, to exchange the best practices, lessons learned and to discuss effective cooperation in:

- Preventing the radicalization to terrorism and recruitment of foreign terrorist fighters
- Preventing foreign terrorist fighters from crossing the State borders
- Disrupting and preventing financial support to foreign terrorist fighters
- Developing and implementing prosecution, rehabilitation and reintegration strategies for returning foreign terrorist fighters

During the opening session the Deputy Minister of Security of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Mr Mijo Krešić, underlined that “Bosnia and Herzegovina is well aware of all risks related to violent extremism and radicalization”, stating that it is “active at both the national and the international levels in contributing to global counter-terrorist measures aimed at preventing, combating and protecting against all forms of terrorism and terrorism related activities”. He went on to say that “We do not accept nor can there be any justification for any form of terrorism”.

The head of the OSCE mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Mr Jonathan Moore, also welcomed the conference participants and said that “the OSCE Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina is committed to ensuring that local communities are involved in prevention of violent extremism and are empowered to promote positive narratives to counter those espoused by violent extremist groups. It is exactly at this local level that counter-radicalization measures prove the most effective.”

In his address the RACVIAC Director, Ambassador Branimir Mandić, pointed out key areas that should be addressed in preventing nationals from travelling abroad for the purpose of terrorism: stronger border controls, inter-agency cooperation and information exchange, prevention of financing for terrorist purposes, prevention of recruitment by countering the use of the internet and social media and preventing the spread of radicalism.

During the course of the event participants heard the panellists elaborate on initiatives for the criminalization of new criminal acts of terrorism in accordance with UNCHR 2178 and the Additional Protocol of the Council of Europe to the Convention of Prevention of Terrorism.

On the first day Mr Rajko Kozmelj, the Chair of the EU Western Balkans Counter-Terrorism Initiative, gave a keynote speech that was followed by a series of lectures delivered
by Ms Dolgor Solongo from the UN Office for Drugs and Crime (UNODC), who addressed the UN requirements related to FTF, challenges identified and responses supported by the UNODC. **Mr Kristian Bartholin of CODEXTER**, who spoke about the Additional Protocol of the Council of Europe to the Convention on Prevention of Terrorism, **Mr Guenter Sablatting, Advisor to UN Counter – Terrorism Coordinator**, who addressed the current EU challenges in combating terrorism and radicalization, and **Mr Enrico Boninsegna from the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights**, who spoke about Human Rights considerations in the Implementation of UNSCR 2178 (2014) and the CoE Additional Protocol.

During the afternoon of the first day and on the second day of the conference the **national delegations of RACVIAC member countries** presented their respective country perspectives on best practices and current challenges in national FTF strategies and policies, as well as successful preventive actions. Some presentations included information on FTF cases tried before the court of law.

Unprecedented numbers of citizens and residents of the countries around the world, including South East Europeans, have been recruited to fight on the battlefields in Syria and Iraq. Moreover, it is believed that many individuals, especially young people, are vulnerable to violent radicalization and recruitment as FTF. According to the United Nations Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team some 15000 FTF from 80 countries went to fight with various groups in Syria and Iraq, including ISIL, while the London-based think tank International Centre for the Study of Radicalization and Political Violence (ISRC) says that the number of FTF in Syria and Iraq exceeds 20000.

The Internet and social media networks are the principle tools for recruitment as it is difficult to regulate them and the process of prevention by authorities. There are several preparatory phases that should be passed in order to get to the battlefield. The threat posed by FTF comprises three phases: radicalization and recruitment, the departure to the battlefield and possible return to their countries of origin. The returnees pose a risk of future spread of extremism, involvement in attacks and other terrorism related crimes in their home countries as well.

There are no official consolidated statistics on the number of FTF from South–Eastern Europe, however, the ICSR estimates that about 600 South-Eastern nationals left to join the conflicts in Iraq and Syria. It seems urgent then that countries should undertake counter-terrorism measures which comply with all their obligations under international law, in particular international human rights law, international refugee law and international humanitarian law.
Many countries do not as yet possess appropriate legislation in line with the international standards to implement UNSCR 2178, to criminalize and prosecute the travel or intention to depart to other countries to receive or provide terrorist training, preparation or planning of terrorist acts and also the financing of FTF travel and other types of assistance for operation of FTF, especially recruitment.

The threat posed by FTF is impossible to handle individually and requires closer cooperation on the domestic, regional and international levels, as emphasized by the UNSCR 2178. Broader cooperation between states, the civil society, international and regional organizations should be strengthened and well-coordinated in order to respond adequately to possible challenges and risks.

In conclusion, BG Zdravko Jakop, Deputy Director of RACVIAC, elaborated on the future steps for Regional Cooperation in addressing the Foreign Terrorist Fighters phenomenon during the closing session. The conclusions of the conference were as follows:

1. The provisions of UNSCR 2178 must be fully implemented.
2. There has been a clear increase in the focus on preventing rather than just prosecuting violent radicalization in the approaches of SEE states - this should continue.
3. A comprehensive approach, with the involvement of the civil society and all major religious communities, is required when designing responses to FTF. This should include community-based awareness raising.
4. Online content and social media resources that incite violent extremism must be appropriately addressed - international cooperation and assistance in this would be appreciated by SEE states.
5. States, donor governments, international organizations and other agents supporting CT and CVE efforts should seek to improve coordination to avoid overlapping and increase activity efficiency.
6. Timely and actionable information sharing is crucial. States should make better use of existing mechanisms and examine the possibilities for establishing new modalities to improve information sharing.
7. Human rights considerations must be at the forefront of all CVE and CT efforts.
8. Education and training of members of the judiciary in international CT legal instruments and precedents should be facilitated.
9. Effective strategies for the rehabilitation and reintegration of those who engage in violent extremism and / or return from foreign battlefields must be a part of the states' responses.
10. The impact of the FTF phenomenon on women, boys, girls and the relatives of those who engage in FTF activity or violent extremism must also be taken into account.

Compiled by RACVIAC IRC Pillar