“Foreign Terrorist Fighters – Challenges for SEE: Integrative and Complementary Approach to Counter-Terrorism and Violent Extremism”

23 - 24 November 2016
RACVIAC - Centre for Security Cooperation
Rakitje, Republic of Croatia

Background

Based on the conclusions of the Conference1, which was held in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina in October 2015, RACVIAC - Centre for Security Cooperation, in cooperation with the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) and the OSCE Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina, organized a follow-up event titled “Foreign Terrorist Fighters – Challenges for South-Eastern Europe: An Integrative and Complementary Approach to Counter Terrorism and Violent Extremism”.

The purpose of the event was to address the possible solutions and best practices in border management focused on identifying possible FTF on their way to and from the warzones. During the event rehabilitation and reintegration programs for those individuals who have been identified and prosecuted as FTF were discussed. In addition, a question was raised about providing assistance to the families of the Violent Extremist Offenders/Foreign Terrorist Fighters (the families who remain in the EU or SEE countries).

1 On 7-8 October 2015 RACVIAC - Centre for Security Cooperation, together with the Ministry of Security of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the OSCE Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina, organized a regional Conference titled “Foreign Terrorist Fighters - Challenges for South East Europe”, which was held in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina. The event provided an opportunity for a regional exchange of views and experiences with regard to the threat of FTF in South-Eastern Europe and the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 2178 (2014) in compliance with all obligations under international law, including international human rights, refugee and humanitarian law.
**Activity Venue and Participation**

The event took place on RACVIAC - Centre for Security Cooperation premises in Rakitje, Republic of Croatia, on 23-24 November 2016.

The conference gathered participants and lecturers from RACVIAC Members, Associate Members and other RACVIAC participants, OSCE Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), and the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR).

**Opening session**

In his Opening address, **RACVIAC Director Ambassador Haydar Berk** said that we first began to hear about the so-called "Foreign Fighters” in 2012, indicating those who have left their countries to fight in Syria or Iraq. The adoption of the Security Council Resolution 2178 (2014) at a high-level meeting of the Security Council in September 2014 brought the issue of Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTFs) to the forefront of the international agenda.

He went on to say that in fact what we are facing is not a new type of threat, but, rather, another face of terrorism and that the only way to cope with terrorism is closer cooperation between the states. In other words, the international community should act as a united front against all forms of terrorism. There could be no justification for terrorism, and the fight against terrorism cannot be selective, added Ambassador Berk. We need to work together against any form of terrorism and any terrorist organization, without exception. We should also avoid using religious attributions or adjectives, as terrorism has no religion, ethnicity or nationality. This is important so as not to play into the hands of terrorist organizations, he stated.

The European Union has developed a strategy against this threat and RACVIAC also has a role in the Counter Terrorism initiative of the European Union. Applying security and legal measures is not and will not be enough to cope with this challenge. Short and long-term rehabilitation and reintegration programs for those individuals who have been identified and prosecuted as FTF also requires close cooperation with their families. The development and adoption of such programs, based on positive experience, will be one of the main goals of our future activities in this area, said Ambassador Berk.

Addressing the participants, the **RCC Secretary General Mr Goran Svilanović** said: "Radicalization, violent extremism, terrorism and foreign terrorist fighters – all of these interconnected problems aren’t new. In the last couple of years, South East Europe and Europe as a whole are facing increased levels of such security threats."

"These challenges have prompted the need that greater attention be paid to security and rule of law at the national and regional levels, calling for an enhanced cooperation. As an all-inclusive, regionally-owned and driven cooperation framework, the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) continues to pursue its mandated mission. As a part of it, we have recently put new emphasis on the area of Stability and the Rule of Law, and refocused our activities in Security cooperation. At the same time, we continue to coordinate and support the SEE initiatives and task forces for a better response to the region’s needs. This event, which is a result of cooperation between RACVIAC, the RCC, and the OSCE Mission in Bosnia-Herzegovina, is proof of a practical answer to a pressing need for deeper and more pragmatic, results-oriented, cooperation and coordination in counter-terrorism, prevention and countering of violent extremism”, said Mr Svilanović.
Mr Paul Martin, the Acting Head of the Security Cooperation Unit at the OSCE Mission to Bosnia Herzegovina, noted in his Opening address that a great deal has changed in the few short years since the challenge of Foreign Terrorist Fighters to the security of the region appeared, not to mention the past twelve months since the last conference in Sarajevo. He noted that many states were unprepared for the scale and momentum of this problem. Bosnia and Herzegovina was among the first in the region to respond with tough legislation introduced in 2014 making the joining of the overseas paramilitary and para-police formations or supporting foreign terrorist fighters illegal. More effective intelligence acquisition, investigations and prosecutions have helped to bring those who support terrorism to justice, and to perhaps deter those who would consider doing so. But until deterrent sentences and segregated prisons are the norm, legislation and enforcement alone will not be enough, he added.

Mr Martin went on to say that the OSCE Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina has supported these actions, but also recognized that they were only a part of the solution. To see a long-term decrease in the number of people volunteering as FTF, the prevention of radicalization and extremism has to begin much earlier than when individuals try to board a plane or a bus, he stated. He added that their approach emphasizes the power of family and community-based support networks for those at risk of becoming radicalized. “Parents, friends, teachers, colleagues, religious leaders – all have an essential role to play. Being a security actor in today’s world doesn’t have to mean wearing a uniform or working in a state agency”, he stated.

After the Opening session, the Conference participants were addressed by the guest speaker, Deputy Minister of Security of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Mr Mijo Krešić, who is also the Chairman of the Inter-Ministerial Working Group (IMWG) of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The members of IMWG, with the support of the OSCE Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina, visited RACVIAC – Centre for Security Cooperation in conjunction with the conference on Foreign Terrorist Fighters.

Mr Krešić informed the participants about the challenges in the process of the implementation of the Strategy of Bosnia and Herzegovina for Preventing and Combating Terrorism. In his speech, Mr Krešić emphasized that all relevant institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina will continue to combat all forms of extremist and terrorist activities while respecting the values of democracy, the rule of law and human rights and freedoms.

The Strategy of Bosnia and Herzegovina for Preventing and Combating Terrorism (2015-2020) emphasizes preventive measures that need to be achieved through cooperation with citizens and civil society organizations, community policing, development of special security programs for vulnerable communities and also special emphasis is placed on increased participation of local religious leaders and young persons. The role of the public and private sectors in all of these processes should be concrete and visible at the local level. In addition to that, special preventive measures are envisaged to combat the abuse of the Internet for terrorist purposes, as well as widespread hate speech and incitement to hate crimes and discrimination.

In conclusion Mr Krešić highlighted: „I believe that we are aware that this process will be successful only if all segments of the society are dedicated to it and perform it responsibility - from the government at all levels, the academic community, school, family, religious communities, NGOs, to the media.”
Dr Valery Perry, a Conference keynote speaker, in her presentation emphasized that over the past several years the topic of violent extremism has increasingly become a part of policy discussions among domestic officials, international actors, academic researchers and civic activists in South East Europe (SEE).

The prominence of this issue has been driven to a large extent by the concerns of ISIL/Daesh-inspired terror, the threat of foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) gaining battlefield experience in Syria and Iraq and then returning to their home countries, and the substantial media attention which surrounds acts of high-profile terrorist activities, said Dr Perry. The role of social media and global outreach in overcoming borders has illustrated the negative side of increased global communication, mobility and connectivity, and demonstrated new security threats. There is a growing recognition that traditional counter-terrorism (CT) measures may not be enough to successfully suppress violent manifestations of extremism and terror. Measures to prevent violent extremism (PVE) and counter violent extremism (CVE) are required to truly reduce the risk factors, she added.

In 2016, on behalf of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), Dr. Perry spoke to over 110 individuals from the governmental and non-governmental sectors about the issue. The goal of the research was to better understand the situation regarding violent extremism and related planned and on-going governmental and non-governmental activities in preventing and countering radicalization and violent extremism leading to terrorism in the region, in the Republic of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo**, Montenegro, Republic of Serbia, Republic of Turkey, and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia*. The aim of the research was to identify gaps and unnecessary overlap, and the final report contains conclusions and recommendations.

In her presentation Dr Perry discussed the findings from this research, both in terms of the country case studies but also the broader regional trends. She noted a number of questions that are common among the stakeholders in the region, the questions that have to date not been sufficiently discussed, or answered. She also placed the issue in a broader political context, which facilitated a discussion on the unique characteristics of the region that create a situation different than that faced by countries such as France, Belgium and the United Kingdom, while also being quite different from the situation in the Middle East itself.

** This designation is without prejudice to position on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on Kosovo Declaration on Independence. (In accordance with Arrangements regarding regional representation and cooperation.)
* Turkey recognizes the Republic of Macedonia with its constitutional name.
Over the course of the Conference participants participated in panel discussions aimed at addressing possible solutions and best practices in border management with a focus on identifying possible FTF on their way to and from warzones as well as identifying possible ways and means to establish adequate short and long-term rehabilitation and reintegration programs or those individuals who have returned from warzones and have been identified as FTF.

The first panel (session), entitled “Contemporary Challenges for Border Security Management: Traveling Abroad for the Purpose of Terrorism” was moderated by Dr Sandro Knezović from the Institute for Development and International Relations, Zagreb. The panellist was Ambassador Viktor Dimovski, PhD, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, MK. The presentation was followed by a discussion.

These are some of the main points that were raised:

- There are three aspects of coordination in border security and P/CVE efforts: intra-service; inter-agency, and international. Only if a high level is achieved on all three levels is a guarantee of success. Currently, there are still challenges on all three levels, even the first one.
- Being a „frontline“ for FTFs (both sourcing and transit country), Republic of Turkey has done a lot to stop the flow of would-be or former FTFs, either from the Republic of Turkey itself, the Western Balkans, or Western Europe. The regional and international cooperation in this respect has much improved recently.

Dr Vlado Azinović, Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Sarajevo, spoke about the “Current Status Regarding FTF from Europe/Returnees from the War Zone/Home Grown Terrorists”. His presentation was an update of his previous study on FTF, co-authored with Mr Muhamed Jusić. The main conclusion was that the outflow of FTF from the Western Balkans to Syria and elsewhere has been stopped in an efficient manner. In the ensuing period, emphasis should be put on prevention on the one side, and on the rehabilitation and reintegration of former FTF, terrorists, and violent extremists, on the other side, he said.

The second panel, titled “Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Violent Extremist Offenders: Best practices”, was moderated by Mr Marinko Raos, Senior Advisor on Security Policy Issues at RCC. The panellists were Mr Dubravko Čampara, Prosecutor in the Office of the State Prosecutor of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Mr Besfort Lamallari, researcher at the Open Society Foundation of the Republic of Albania. In a tour de table national delegations presented their perspectives on best practices and the current challenges related to the topic of this session.

Mr Čampara, being a practitioner, gave specific data on the recent anti-terrorists and anti-violent extremists cases in BA. As a prosecutor, he expressed his dissatisfaction with the lenient verdicts issued by BA courts to terrorists and violent extremists. That fact, he stated, especially underlines the urgent need for the development of practical, well-planned and funded programmes for rehabilitation and reintegration of incarcerated former FTFs, terrorists, and violent extremists in BA.

Mr Lamallari presented the results of the recently published study on FTF and VE in the Republic of Albania (of which he is one of the authors), which complements a previous study on a similar topic, done by another institution (IDM – Institute for Democracy and Mediation in the Republic of Albania).

The ensuing interventions from participating jurisdictions have shown that, although there is an awareness of the need for it, practical work on rehabilitation and resocialization of incarcerated former FTFs, terrorists, and violent extremists has in earnest only begun. While in some places (such as the Republic of Croatia or Montenegro) the need may not be large given the small number of such prisoners, in other places it is urgent. Thus far, Kosovo** has done the most in this respect. There, the rehabilitation programmes for former FTFs

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and terrorists are already being implemented. In the Republic of Albania, a national programme for this area has been adopted, but its implementation is scheduled to start in 2017 only.

The third panel focused on “Human Rights and Terrorism” with LtC Josip Mlakić from RACVIAC as the moderator and Mr Enrico Boninsegna, Human Rights Officer ODIHR (OSCE), Warsaw (through a video-conference), and Mr Ergys Muzhaqi, Independent Security Expert from Elbasan, Republic of Albania, as the panellists.

Mr Boninsegna focused on the legal aspects of the need to respect human rights in the context of counter-terrorism, prevention and countering violent extremism, explaining the fundamentals of international and European legal frameworks pertaining to it. Mr Muzhaqi, on the other hand, focused on examples and the lessons learned, mainly from the Republic of Albania. During the lively discussion that ensued, more questions were asked than answered, mainly concerning the „right measure“ of operative police measures towards persons that might be connected with terrorism or violent extremism. It was argued, by some participants, that unnecessary police measures towards people who are neither terrorists nor violent extremists, can in fact be counter-productive, i.e., can play into the hands of VE propagandists. Other participants argued, however, that law-abiding citizens understand the need for such measures, necessary to save human lives.

Finally, a consensus was reached that, in the CT context, the primary responsibility lies on the relevant national authorities. They should first and foremost protect human lives and health. While doing it, they should also strive to always respect human rights as stipulated by the international and national legal frameworks.

Conclusions

In order to enhance the SEE countries’ capacity in border control it was concluded that concrete, timely and actionable information sharing on known or suspected FTFs at the regional and global level is of crucial importance. To achieve this, it is important to secure a better use of the existing multilateral information mechanisms or/and establish new modalities to improve information sharing.

The recent migration crises have shown that most of SEE countries are not ready to cope with the challenges of border security in terms of identification of the potential foreign terrorist fighters.

Once the individuals were identified as potential FTFs at entry or exit border checks, they were in some cases returned to their countries of origin, where some of them were prosecuted and imprisoned. Not every returnee from the warzone is dangerous and ready to conduct a terrorist attack or will motivate others to do so, and, thus, the response to returnees needs to be differentiated in order to minimize the potential threat posed by them.

In addition to the returnees from the warzones, there are also those individuals (so-called “homegrown” extremists) who actively work on recruiting fighters and spreading violent propaganda within the country. Some of them are on trial but, probably, as is the case with those who have returned from the warzones, will not be sentenced to life imprisonment.

It was concluded that participating countries don’t have the so-called Rehabilitation and Reintegration Programmes for returning FTF that could be measurable in terms of its success. The absence of a national strategy and Programme of Rehabilitation and Reintegration of returnees from foreign battlefields is a challenge for each of the countries in terms of security.

To be effective in dealing with this phenomenon requires engagement with a wide range of actors such as families, community members, teachers, police and intelligence services, religious scholars, and local authorities, but to ensure good coordination it must be clear who the lead party is.
It is necessary to define a common policy toward returnees, and to identify the roles and responsibilities of different governmental institutions during the implementation of the Rehabilitation and Reintegration Programme.

The issue of FTF is an upsetting phenomena that needs an adequate response. Yet, not every FTF should necessarily be treated as a lifelong extremist, but rather as a potentially valuable member of his or her society, following a proper process of rehabilitation and reintegration.

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