

Bosnia & Herzegovina: Extremism and Terrorism

In January 2022, Bosnia and Herzegovina (Bosnia or BiH) initiated efforts to draft a new counter-terrorism strategy, more than a year following the expiration of the former strategy. The delay was due to disagreements over how to address the previously neglected threat of right-wing extremism. Among those right-wing extremist groups are the Serb ‘Chetnik’ associations, neo-Nazi groups in Prijedor, and Mostar, a Bosniak national-socialist organization. However, none of those groups have been recognized as a security threat by Bosnia’s security agencies. The country’s previous counter-terrorism strategy reportedly only covered the threat of radical Islamists, particularly the phenomenon of Muslims from the Balkans, including Bosnia, travelling to Syria and Iraq to join ISIS. However, the threat of right-wing groups has been neglected, with the State Security Minister Selmo Cikotic stating that the new counterterrorism strategy should define a broader spectrum of measures to deal with and potentially ban right-wing extremist groups. An incomplete working draft of the new strategy, reportedly proposes “preventing and countering all forms of radicalization and violent extremism leading to terrorism, as well as all forms of terrorist activity.” (Source: [Balkan Insight](#))

In November 2021, U.S. authorities sentenced Elvis Redzepagic of Long Island, New York, to 200 months in prison for attempting to travel to Syria through Turkey in 2015. Redzepagic admitted to communicating with an individual he believed to be both the commander of a battalion in Syria and a member of ISIS or al-Nusra Front and made attempts to join that individual’s battalion to engage in violent jihad. According to the U.S. Department of Justice, Redzepagic also repeatedly accessed the website “Put hilafeta,” or “Way to the Caliphate,” a Bosnian-language website for prospective foreign fighters from the Balkans who primarily sought to join ISIS and wage jihad in Syria. (Source: [U.S. Department of Justice](#))

On December 20, 2019, the Security Ministry of Bosnia and Herzegovina claimed that 25 former ISIS fighters, including women and children, returned to Bosnia. According to the prosecutor’s office, the “suspects are under investigation for the criminal offences of organizing a terrorist group, unlawful formation and joining of foreign paramilitary or paramilitary formations and terrorism.” The men were handed over to the state prosecutor, while the women and children were escorted to a reception center for further examination and medical assistance. According to Bosnian officials, about 260 Bosnian citizens remain in camps in Syria. The majority of those detained—160—are women and children. Bosnia introduced prison terms for citizens who fought abroad in 2014 and since then, more than 46 people were tried and convicted. Bosnian repatriation efforts were halted in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, leaving Bosnian citizens in limbo in Syrian camps. (Sources: [National](#))

Terrorist attacks are rare in Bosnia and Herzegovina, a country divided into three semi-autonomous states. Nonetheless, the country today faces several terrorism-related challenges, including dangers posed by its large foreign fighter contingent in Syria. The country is also reportedly host to a number of Islamist-dominated villages, where terrorist recruitment networks are believed to have settled in the mid-1990s, and today remain a threat. (Sources: [Spiegel Online](#), [Reuters](#))

Overview

Bosnia and Herzegovina (Bosnia or BiH) is a tripartite power-sharing state split between a Bosniak-Croat federation in the country’s center, a Bosnian Serb Republic in the north and east, and a small, neutral region in the northwest known as the Brčko District. The tripartite system in Bosnia—a result of the 1995 Dayton Peace Accords following the country’s three-year-long civil war—has resulted in major challenges for the country’s counterterrorism police force, which has been working in recent years to dismantle suspected Islamist recruiting networks in remote villages in the country’s north. (Sources: [Guardian](#), [Spiegel Online](#), [Mirror](#), [Reuters](#))

According to the Bosnian government, the greatest security threat in Bosnia today comes not from ethnic-religious extremism between Bosnian Muslims and Bosnian Serbs, but from international terror groups such as ISIS, al-Qaeda, and al-Nusra Front. According to the U.S. Department of State, “Extremist ideology and regional nationalist” groups remain potential sources of terrorism in BiH. Since 2012, an estimated 220-330 Bosnian foreign fighters have traveled to conflict zones in Iraq and Syria. Bosnians represented the largest contingency of foreign fighters from the Western Balkans, and the second-highest number of foreign fighters per capita out of any European country after Belgium. (Sources: [U.S. Department of State 2015](#), [U.S. Department of State](#), [Strategy of Bosnia and Herzegovina for Preventing Terrorism](#), [Fox News](#))

Despite these challenges, Bosnia has made strides in its efforts to stem the tide of foreign fighters to Syria. A June 2016 report by the Sarajevo-based Atlantic Initiative noted that travel between Bosnia and Syria had nearly come to a halt in early 2016 due in large part to efforts by Bosnian authorities, which had adapted its counterterrorism legislation to prosecute both returning foreign fighters from Syria, as well as aspiring ones. A 2020 European Commission report concluded there had been no reports of Bosnian citizens leaving for conflict zones since 2015. Bosnia and Herzegovina has since sought to address returning foreign fighters. In 2014, Bosnia became the first European country to sentence returning foreign fighters to prison. By late 2019, Bosnian officials estimated about 260 of its citizens—including 160 women and children—remained in Syrian

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camp. That September, Bosnia also began a reintegration program for former foreign fighters and their families. By December 2020, Bosnia had tried and convicted 28 people for involvement in the Syrian war. The repatriation process has stalled because of the COVID-19 pandemic. (Sources: [Reuters](#), [National](#), [Voice of America](#), [European Commission](#))

Bosnia's Muslim population—representing the largest single ethnic religious identity in the country—adheres overwhelmingly to a moderate interpretation of Islam. According to polls, the majority of Bosnian Muslims—nearly 60 percent—believe that Islam and Christianity have shared values, and nearly a fifth of Bosnian Muslims polled—18 percent—said that they engage in interfaith meetings. A Pew Poll released in 2013 found that a minority of Bosnian Muslims—15 percent—favored the establishment of sharia (Islamic law). (Sources: [Pew Poll 2015](#), [Reuters](#), [Pew Poll 2013](#))

Radicalization and Foreign Fighters

Radicalization and Recruitment

During the 1992-1995 Bosnian War, Bosnian Serb extremists recruited primarily in person. Leaders of the Bosnian Serbs—including convicted war criminals—were documented directing their militants to carry out ethnically-motivated violence, and inciting them to violence using anti-Muslim rhetoric. In March 1995, months before the Srebrenica massacre in July 1995, Bosnian Serb political leader Radovan Karadžić, directed his militants to “create an unbearable situation of total insecurity with no hope of further survival or life.” On the first day of the Srebrenica massacre in July 1995, Bosnian Serb commander Ratko Mladić was recorded saying, “We give this town to the Serb nation...The time has come to take revenge on the Muslims.” (Source: [Encyclopaedia Britannica](#))

The atrocities carried out against Bosnian Muslims during the war served to galvanize not only local Bosnian Muslims to action, but foreigners as well. Terrorist organizations like [al-Qaeda](#) used the ethnically-motivated violence in the 1990s as pretext to establish terrorist roots in the country, train its Afghan-based fighters, and lure new recruits. Though the vast majority of Bosnian Muslims were not radicalized by the influx of foreign fighters during the Bosnian War, some foreigners are believed to have successfully radicalized Bosnian Muslims to a violent and extremist interpretation of Islam both within the country, and among the Bosnian Muslim diaspora. (Sources: [Swedish National Defence College](#), [Reuters](#), [Reuters](#))

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Today, Islamist extremists in Bosnia recruit in isolated communities—often in the country's remote northern areas. There, residents are reportedly segregated from mainstream Bosnian society at an early age and indoctrinated in an exclusively Islamist curriculum. According to Igor Golijanin, the head of Bosnia's Ministry of Security Cabinet, the problem is extensive: “We're talking about villages where children no longer go to the public schools, opting instead for private schooling in accordance with a Jordanian curriculum... We're talking about concealment: What used to perhaps be recognizable as a training camp disappears today under the cover of a non-governmental organization.” (Source: [Spiegel Online](#))

One terrorist operative, 2011 gunman Mevlid Jasarevic, testified that he was radicalized in his home in the notorious Bosnian village of Gornja Maoča when Islamist mentors showed him propaganda videos showing persecuted Muslims in Iraq and Afghanistan. Before Jasarevic's non-lethal 2011 gun attack on the U.S. Embassy in Sarajevo, Jasarevic said that he intended to target the U.S. Embassy in retaliation against Americans because he believed that they “have launched a fight against Islam and Muslims across the world.” (Sources: [Reuters](#), [Spiegel Online](#))

With more than a dozen extremists and former foreign fighters incarcerated in Bosnian prisons, there has been a growing concern in recent years of prison recruitment and radicalization. Out of nearly 50 people who have returned from Iraq and Syria, 12 have been convicted of terrorism-related charges. Due to lack of financial resources, there is no particular program in place in Bosnian prisons designed to reduce the threat of prison radicalization. Experts warn that convicted extremists may radicalize others, and if released, may return to violent extremism at home or abroad. (Sources: [Balkan Insight](#), [Fox News](#))

In addition to recruiting in person, Bosnian extremists are believed to have recruited members “more successfully” in recent years online and using video games, according to Golijanin. When Bosnia released its first comprehensive, five-year regional plan to counter terrorism in 2015, the country focused on a need to tackle the threat posed by Internet-based recruitment to terrorism. (Sources: [Spiegel Online](#), [Strategy of Bosnia and Herzegovina for Preventing Terrorism](#))

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Foreign Fighters

Bosnia has a history of attracting foreign fighters, as well as exporting foreign fighters to conflicts abroad. During the 1992-1995 Bosnian War, the country attracted between 1,000 and 2,000 foreign fighters, hailing from most Arab countries as well as from Europe and the United States. (Source: [International Security: Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters](#))

Bosnia is believed to have produced between 220 and 330 foreign fighters to the Syrian conflict abroad as of early 2017, the largest contingent of foreign fighters from the Western Balkans and the second-highest number of foreign fighters per capita out of any European country after Belgium. From 2012 to the end of 2014, Bosnia was estimated to have produced nearly 200 foreign fighters to the conflict in Syria and Iraq. (Sources: [Soufan Group](#), [Reuters](#), [Spiegel Online](#), [Fox News](#))

Throughout 2016, however, no potential foreign fighters successfully left Bosnia for Syria, a trend that was in large part due to the efforts of Bosnian law enforcement, according to a report by the Sarajevo-based Atlantic Initiative and the U.S. Department of State. At the same time, the total number of Bosnian foreign fighters has also decreased. By June 2016, an estimated 50 Bosnians were believed to have been killed while in conflict zones in Iraq and Syria, while another 50 were believed to have returned to Bosnia, leaving an estimated 90 Bosnian males, 50 women, and 80 children still active in terrorist-held territory in Iraq and Syria. Of the remaining foreign fighters in Syria, the study claimed that the 80 Bosnian children posed the greatest threat to Bosnian national security, essentially serving as a “time bomb.” Bosnian Security Minister Dragan Mektic has revised earlier foreign fighter estimates, saying that as of late 2016, more than 220 Bosnians have left the country to join foreign fighter movements abroad, of whom 65 were killed and 46 returned. Of those that returned, nearly a dozen have been incarcerated or jailed on charges of fighting with ISIS. In its 2019 Country Report on Terrorism, the U.S. Department of State reported that while dozens of BiH citizens remain in Iraq, Syria, and Ukraine, there were no known registered BiH citizens who attempted to travel to foreign battlefields that year. (Sources: [U.S. Department of State](#), [Reuters](#), [Fox News](#), [U.S. Department of State](#))

Bosnian foreign fighters to Syria are believed to come from all over the country, with a sizeable contingency coming from a few isolated communities in the country’s north, including Bosanska Bojna in the country’s remote northwest, near the border with Croatia; Ošve in the country’s north, next to Bosnia’s Serb Republic; and Gornja Maoča in the northwest, in Bosnia’s autonomous Brčko District. (Sources: [Mirror](#), [Spiegel Online](#))

These fighters have reportedly been lured to terrorist-held territory in Syria by a few recruiters from Bosnia, including internationally-sanctioned Nusra recruiter Nusret Imamovic and convicted ISIS recruiter Husein “Bilal” Bosnic. Another suspected ISIS recruiter, 45-year-old Ibrahim Delic, stands accused of delivering lectures encouraging people to join ISIS in Syria. In November 2021, U.S. authorities sentenced Elvis Redzepagic of Long Island, New York, to 200 months in prison for attempting to travel to Syria through Turkey in 2015. Redzepagic admitted to communicating with an individual he believed to be both the commander of a battalion in Syria and a member of ISIS or al-Nusra Front and made attempts to join that individual’s battalion to engage in violent jihad. According to the U.S. Department of Justice, Redzepagic also repeatedly accessed the website “Put hilafeta,” or “Way to the Caliphate,” a Bosnian-language website for prospective foreign fighters from the Balkans who primarily sought to join ISIS and wage jihad in Syria. (Sources: [Mirror](#), [Spiegel Online](#), [United Nations](#), [Al Jazeera](#), [U.S. Department of Justice](#))

Al-Qaeda

[Al-Qaeda](#) is first believed to have established roots in Bosnia during the 1992-1995 Bosnian War. According to the U.S. *9/11 Commission Report*, 9/11 attacks orchestrator Khalid Sheikh Mohammed joined Bosnian jihadist fighters in 1992 and supported the fighters with financial donations. Two of al-Qaeda’s 9/11 assailants—Khalid al-Midhar and Nawaf al-Hazmi—also fought in Bosnia in 1995. As described by London-based al-Qaeda recruiter Abu Hamza al-Masri, seasoned foreign terrorist fighters from Afghanistan moved to Bosnia because they “want[ed] to [struggle against] something that is indisputable, which is non-Muslims raping, killing, and maiming Muslims.” (Sources: [9/11 Commission Report](#), [Swedish National Defence College](#))

Osama bin Laden’s Benevolence International Foundation maintained an office in Sarajevo, as did a number of other al-Qaeda-linked charities.

Though Bosnia worked to disrupt terrorist networks in the country, many foreign terrorist fighters remained in the country for years after the Bosnian War, establishing roots and radicalizing some local Bosnians to extremism. Both during and after the Bosnian War, several al-Qaeda fronts operated in Bosnia under the guise of serving as humanitarian NGOs. Osama bin Laden’s Benevolence International Foundation maintained an office in Sarajevo, as did a number of other al-Qaeda-linked charities, including Al-Haramain Islamic Foundation, the Global Relief Fund, al-Furqan, Taibah International, and al-Masjed al-Aqsa Charity Foundation. (Sources: [U.S. State Department 2002](#), [U.S. State Department 2003](#), [U.S.](#)

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[State Department 2004](#))

In the years since then, al-Qaeda has continued to retain support among radicalized Bosnian Muslims. In 2005, al-Qaeda was linked to at least one failed terrorist plot in Bosnia, when it sought to create cells of so-called “white al-Qaeda” members who could infiltrate Europe to carry out attacks. The cells—disrupted by Bosnian police—were discovered to have maintained links in Denmark, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. (Sources: [Washington Post](#), [Swedish National Defence College](#))

ISIS

[ISIS](#) has successfully lured Bosnian Muslims to its territory, as well as fomented support for the terror group within isolated pockets of the country. Approximately 300 Bosnians have left their homes to join the conflict in Iraq and Syria, the majority of whom are believed to have joined ISIS. Within terrorist-held territory in Iraq and Syria, an estimated 80 Bosnian Muslim children are believed to have been radicalized, some of whom are documented to have joined ISIS combat units. (Source: [Reuters](#))

To lure Bosnian recruits to ISIS territory, the terror group often relies on in-person terrorist recruiting networks, though ISIS has also launched video campaigns specifically targeting Bosnian Muslims. In November 2015, Bosnia sentenced a major ISIS recruiter, Husein “Bilal” Bosnic, to seven years’ imprisonment after he was convicted of luring Bosnian groups to join ISIS abroad. At least six of Bosnic’s Bosnian recruits are believed to have died while in Syria. In November 2016, ISIS began translating online magazine *Rumiyah* into Bosnian. (Sources: [Mirror](#), [Spiegel Online](#), [24SATA](#), [Balkan Insight](#))

In addition to the long-term threat posed by returning ISIS foreign fighters, the terror group has also posed an immediate threat to the homeland. Since 2013, ISIS-linked fighters and extremist preachers have been buying up land in Bosnia—including in the northern town of Ošve and the northeastern village of Gornja Mao?a, in the country’s self-governing Br?ko District—in what security services worry may be undercover ISIS training camps. In these two towns, crudely fashioned Islamic State flags have occasionally been found waving in the streets. (Sources: [Mirror](#), [Spiegel Online](#), [International Business Times](#), [Reuters](#))

By early 2016, Bosnia had largely stemmed the tide of foreign fighters both to and from terrorist-held territory in Syria. Nonetheless, the dangers posed by ISIS members operating in Bosnia remains. As noted by Igor Golijanin, the head of Bosnia’s Ministry of Security Cabinet, Islamist extremists successfully operate through a mode of “concealment” in Bosnia’s remote villages. Now, “[w]hat used to perhaps be recognizable as a training camp disappears today under the cover of a non-governmental organization,” according to Golijanin. The group’s reported presence in Bosnia also poses a threat to Western Europe, where weaponry from Bosnia has been smuggled. (Sources: [Reuters](#), [Spiegel Online](#))

Al-Nusra Front

[Al-Nusra Front](#)—an internationally sanctioned terrorist group in Syria—is believed to have attracted a large contingency of Bosnians to its cause. The success of the terror group amongst Bosnians is largely credited to Nusret Imamovic, a Bosnian recruiter and senior member within al-Nusra Front. One such Nusra recruit—23-year-old Bosnian foreign fighter Emrah Fojnica—was a suicide bomber in Iraq. In response to the loss of his son, father Hamdo Fojnica said, “It is a terrible thing to lose a child, but if Allah decides that even his two brothers must leave for Syria, I could not oppose.” (Sources: [Spiegel Online](#), [United Nations](#), [Il Giornale](#))

Though terrorist recruiters like Nusret Imamovic are believed to have played a major role in the recruitment of Bosnian foreign fighters to Syria, another driver was reportedly logistics. According to a report by the Sarajevo-based Atlantic Initiative, upon Bosnians’ arrival in Turkey in 2014, foreign fighters mostly followed whatever group met them on the Syrian side of the border, leading Bosnian fighters to join both the Nusra Front and ISIS. (Sources: [Atlantic Initiative 2015](#), [Atlantic Initiative 2016](#))

Major Extremist and Terrorist Incidents

Bosnia has experienced several small-scale terrorist attacks since the early 2000s, including the 2010 bomb attack near a police station in Bugojno, the 2011 gun attack on the U.S. Embassy in Sarajevo, the April 2015 gun attack at a police station in Zvornik, and the November 2015 gun attack at a betting shop in Rajlovac. Collectively, these terror attacks have resulted in the deaths of four police officers, and fewer than a dozen people wounded. (Sources: [U.S. Department of State 2015](#), [Reuters](#), [Reuters](#), [Reuters](#))

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In terms of scale and lethality, no modern terror attack in Bosnia compares to the atrocities carried out during the Bosnian War, which left an estimated 100,000 Bosnians dead, 80 percent of whom are believed to be Bosnian Muslims. From 1992 to 1995, Bosnian Serbs detained, killed, and let perish thousands of Bosnian Muslims, as well as Bosnian Croats, in camps in the western Bosnian village of Prijedor. Since the war, the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) has sentenced more than a dozen Bosnian Serbs to a total of more than 200 years in prison in connection to war crimes carried out throughout the country. Of these attacks, the single worst one was the Srebrenica massacre in July 1995, later determined to be an act of genocide. (Sources: [Reuters](#), [ICTY](#))

Srebrenica Massacre

In July 1995, Bosnian Serb forces murdered an estimated 7,000-8,000 Muslim boys and men in what was later known as the Srebrenica massacre, the worst episode of mass murder and genocide in Europe since World War II. The atrocities began on July 11, 1995, when Bosnian Serb forces advanced into the U.N.-protected “safe area” in Srebrenica, eastern Bosnia, where thousands of Bosnian Muslim refugees had gathered over the years. In the days that followed, Bosnian Serb forces segregated Muslim boys and men from the rest of the population and systematically executed them, dumping their bodies into mass, unmarked graves. The massacre prompted the fleeing and expulsion of more than 20,000 Bosnian Muslim civilians, and was later classified as a genocide. (Sources: [Guardian](#), [Encyclopaedia Britannica](#), [Atlantic](#), [Reuters](#))

- **September 8, 2021:** Prosecutors in BiH file an indictment against Sena Hamzabegovic, charging her with financing terrorist operations. According to the prosecution, Hamzabegovic collected and provided financial support—around 230,000 Bosnian marks—for Bosnians fighting in Iraq and Syria from 2013 to 2018. Hamzabegovic allegedly delivered the money herself to Muradif Hamzabegovic, a Bosnian ISIS fighter who used the funds to pay jihadist salaries and to buy arms. Hamzabegovic, who has dual Bosnian and Swedish citizenship, was arrested by Bosnia’s State Investigation and Protection Agency (SIPA) at Tuzla airport in May 2021. Source: [Balkan Insight](#)
- **June 27, 2019:** German authorities arrest a Bosnian national they claim was complicit in the Paris 2015 terror attack that killed 130 people. The suspect, Adis Abaz, was previously sentenced by a Bosnian court in 2011 to two-and-a-half years imprisonment for smuggling drugs and military equipment. German and Belgian authorities issued a European arrest warrant for Abaz for incitement linked to terrorist attacks. Source: [Balkan Insight](#)
- **November 23, 2019:** Bosnian police arrest Munib Ahmetpahic at Sarajevo Airport. Ahmetpahic allegedly spent some time in Maoca—a community known for fostering hardline Wahhabi beliefs—as well as Syria and Iraq where he fought for ISIS. Additionally, Ahmetpahic is suspected of being connected to the attack on the U.S. Embassy in Sarajevo in 2011. Source: [Balkan Insight](#)
- **July 1, 2019:** Bosnian authorities arrest Maksim Bozic and Edin Hastor on suspicion of trying to obtain weapons and explosives to carry out an attack on government buildings. On July 3, 2018, the Sarajevo prosecutor’s office charges the two men of plotting a terrorist attack on police. The men are allegedly hardline Islamists. On July 4, 2019, the Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina find the suspects guilty of acquiring guns and explosive devices in preparation for terrorist attacks. According to the verdict, the men were planning and preparing an attack between June 2017 and April 10, 2018 on the State Investigation and Protection Agency and the Tuzla Cantonal Ministry of Internal Affairs. Bozic is sentenced to four years imprisonment, whereas Hastor is sentenced to two and a half years in prison. In November 2019, the Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina increased Bozic’s sentence to six years and Hastor’s sentence to three years. Sources: [Radio Free Europe](#), [Balkan Insight](#), [U.S. Department of State](#)
- **November 2, 2017:** The United States charges a U.S. resident from Kosovo with terrorism charges. The suspect, Mirsad Kandic, was extradited from Bosnia and Herzegovina in October 2017, four years after he joined ISIS in Syria where he helped to disseminate propaganda and recruit suicide bombers. According to sources, Kandic recruited more than 20,000 “brothers” to join ISIS. Source: [Radio Free Europe](#)
- **November 18, 2015:** An Islamist gunman kills two Bosnian soldiers at a betting shop in Rajlovac, a suburb of Sarajevo. After fleeing and injuring several bystanders, the 34-year-old assailant—identified as French-born Enes Omeragic—killed himself after being cornered by police. Police discovered pro-ISIS propaganda material, including an amateur ISIS flag in his home. Omeragic is later discovered to have a prior history of drug abuse and petty crime, having spent time in prison in Zenica, central Bosnia. Sources: [Reuters](#), [Bosnia Today](#), [U.S. Department of State](#), [Newsweek](#)
- **November 13, 2015:** Eight ISIS assailants carry out a series of coordinated gun and bomb attacks in Paris and its environs, killing 130 people and wounding 350 more. One of the weapons used in the attacks in Paris—a Zastava rifle—is later traced back to Sarajevo. Sources: [BBC News](#), [Spiegel Online](#)
- **April 27, 2015:** An Islamist assailant kills one police officer and injures two others at a police station in Zvornik, eastern Bosnia, in the country’s autonomous Serb Republic region. The assailant—24-year-old Nerdin Ibric—is killed in an ensuing gunfight with police. The following day, police arrest two Bosnians in connection to the attack, one of whom is believed to have fought previously in Syria. Sources: [U.S. Department of State](#), [Reuters](#)
- **January 7, 2015:** In Paris, two gunmen—brothers Chérif Kouachi and Said Kouachi—storm the offices of French satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo, and murder 12 people on behalf of al-Qaeda’s Gulf branch, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). The assailants had reportedly used weapons sourced from Bosnia. Sources: [CNN](#), [Spiegel Online](#)
- **August 8, 2013:** Three Bosnian Serb extremists assault Muslims in Zvornik, eastern Bosnia, during the Islamic holiday of Eid.

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Before they launch the assault, the assailants reportedly asked their victims to use a Christian Orthodox greeting instead of saying “salaam.” All four Muslims, including a 73-year-old man, are wounded in the attack. Source: [BalkanInsight](#)

- **October 28, 2011:** Islamist gunman Mevlid Jasarevic uses an automatic rifle to fire at the U.S. Embassy in Sarajevo, seriously injuring one police officer.
Jasarevic, a former resident of the reportedly hotbed Bosnian neighborhood of Gornja Mao?a, had reportedly been radicalized to violent extremism by Islamist mentors in the town. In a video filmed prior to the attack, Jasarevic claims that he seeks to target Americans because they “have launched a fight against Islam and Muslims across the world.” Sources: [Reuters](#), [Guardian](#)
- **June 27, 2010:** A bomb left by Islamist extremist Haris Causevic detonates near a police station in Bugojno, central Bosnia, leaving one police officer dead and five injured.
Bosnian Security Minister Sadik Ahmetovic labels the attack an act of terrorism. Sources: [Reuters](#), [BBC News](#), [OCCRP](#)
- **October 19, 2005:** Croatian police arrest several Bosnians from Gornja Mao?a, thwarting a plot to bomb the papal funeral of John Paul II. The Bosnian extremists reportedly sought to smuggle a variety of weapons into Italy, including rocket launchers, explosives and detonators. Source: [Washington Post](#)
- Bosnian Serb forces murder an estimated 8,000 Muslim boys and men in what is later known as the Srebrenica massacre.
On July 11, the Bosnian Serb forces sweep into the U.N.-protected “safe area” in Srebrenica. In the days that follow, the Serbs segregate Muslim boys and men from the rest of the population and systematically execute them, dumping their bodies into mass, unmarked graves. The systematic rape, murder, and expulsion of Bosnian Muslims from Srebrenica is later classified as a genocide. Source: [Atlantic](#)
- - : Following the collapse of Yugoslavia and Bosnia’s declaration of independence, Bosnian Serbs and Croats reject the authority of the democratically elected Bosnian government and launch a violent insurgency.
From 1992 to 1995, some 100,000 people die in the clashes, 80 percent of whom are believed to be Bosnian Muslims. Source: [History](#)

Domestic Counter-Extremism

Religious Organizations

The Catholic, Islamic, Jewish, and Orthodox communities in Bosnia continue to cooperate and strengthen inter-faith dialogue through the Interreligious Council, working to counter violent and extremist narratives. Husein Kavazovic, the Grand Mufti of the “Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina,” called on non-affiliated Salafi communities to join his group in February 2016 or face legal consequences. Since then, 90 percent of these independent Salafi groups have recognized the authority of the Grand Mufti and the Islamic Community, allowing Kavazovic to supervise their sermons and appoint Imams. In 2019, the religious communities came together under the Interreligious Council to identify extremist influences and began working on activities to counter terrorist radicalization and recruitment. Additionally, religious community members worked to expand their understanding of extremism to include extreme ethno-nationalism and drivers of “extreme ideologies.” (Sources: [U.S. Department of State](#), [U.S. Department of State](#))

Legislation

In 2003, Bosnia criminalized terrorist financing and participation in acts of terrorism. Since then, Bosnia has repeatedly adapted its legislation to meet the emerging threats posed by terrorism. In 2005, the country established amendments to its constitution that allowed the government to strip citizenship from naturalized Bosnians who had fraudulently obtained Bosnian citizenship. This measure—as well as the 2006 establishment of its Citizenship Review Commission (CRC)—was largely credited with helping the country extradite a large percentage of the foreign terrorist fighters that remained in the country after the 1992-1995 Bosnian War. (Sources: [Council of Europe](#), [U.S. Department of State 2005](#), [U.S. State Department 2006](#))

In 2014, Bosnia again adapted its legislative practices to meet the challenges posed by emerging terrorist threats, namely, the challenge posed by radicalized Bosnian foreign fighters lured to Syria. In April 2014, the government extended prison sentences for convicted terrorists to a maximum of 10 years, with terrorist recruiters receiving a minimum prison sentence of five years and foreign fighters receiving a minimum sentence of three years. The country later increased the maximum sentence for terrorist-related crimes to 20 years in prison. (Sources: [Council of Europe](#), [Library of Congress](#), [Weekly Standard](#))

Bosnia’s efforts to bolster its counterterrorism legislation have been met with some success. A June 2016 report by the Sarajevo-based Atlantic Initiative noted that travel between Bosnia and Syria had nearly come entirely to a halt in early 2016 due in large part to efforts by Bosnian authorities, who were devoting more resources to prosecuting both returning foreign fighters from Syria, as well as aspiring ones. From 2012 to 2015, there were an estimated 188 Bosnian adult males in Syria, a figure which is believed to have dropped to 91 after 47 Bosnians returned to the

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country, many of whom were prosecuted, while 50 were killed in the conflict zones. (Source: [Reuters](#))

Despite these counterterrorism successes, the U.S. Department of State has determined that Bosnian law enforcement capabilities are lacking due to “personal, political, and institutional rivalries that exist among law enforcement agencies and the State Prosecutor’s Office.” This has led to faltering coordination between counterterrorism agencies, insufficient sentencing for terrorism suspects, and poor investigations into recruitment and terror financing. (Source: [U.S. Department of State](#))

Additionally, the European Commission said in November 2016 BiH has been “seriously affected” by the global phenomenon of extremist radicalization. Although the commission noted that Bosnia has taken “important measures” to deal with this problem, the commission noted that additional steps are needed to “identify, prevent and disrupt the flow of foreign terrorist fighters travelling to conflict areas such as Iraq and Syria.” (Sources: [European Commission](#), [U.S. Department of State](#))

In January 2022, BiH initiated efforts to draft a new counterterrorism strategy, more than a year following the expiration of the former strategy. The delay was due to disagreements over how to address the previously neglected threat of right-wing extremism. Among those right-wing extremist groups are the Serb ‘Chetnik’ associations, neo-Nazi groups in Prijedor and Mostar, a Bosnian national-socialist organization. However, none of those groups have been recognized as a security threat by Bosnia’s security agencies. The country’s previous counterterrorism strategy reportedly just covered the threat of radical Islamists, particularly the phenomenon of Muslims from the Balkans, including Bosnia, traveling to Syria and Iraq to join ISIS. However, the threat of right-wing groups has been neglected, with the State Security Minister Selmo Cikotic stating that the new counterterrorism strategy should define a broader spectrum of measures to deal with and potentially ban right-wing extremist groups. An incomplete working draft of the new strategy, reportedly proposes “preventing and countering all forms of radicalization and violent extremism leading to terrorism, as well as all forms of terrorist activity.” (Source: [Balkan Insight](#))

Law Enforcement

A number of Bosnian agencies are involved in the investigation, arrest, and prosecution of Bosnian-based terror suspects. These include the country’s Intelligence and Security Agency, its Ministry of Security, and the Prosecutor’s Office. Within Bosnia’s Ministry of Security, Bosnia’s national police, the State Investigation and Protection Agency (SIPA), is responsible for thwarting criminal and terrorist activity within the country. SIPA’s Financial Intelligence Unit (FIU) is used to combat terrorist financing. (Sources: [Council of Europe](#), [Tužilaštvo Bosne i Hercegovine](#), [Ministry of Security](#), [OSA-OB](#))

In addition to police efforts to clamp down on foreign fighters and terrorist recruiting networks, Bosnia has also worked to combat terrorist financing and stifle transfers of illegal weaponry to terrorist operatives in Western Europe, primarily through border arrests. In November 2015, Bosnia’s security minister Dragan Mektic announced that the country was working to create a team of experts tasked specifically with identifying and destroying weapons smuggling channels out of the Balkans. According to the Bosnian Ministry of Security, Bosnian-produced weaponry are believed to have been used in major terrorist attacks in Paris, including the January 2015 *Charlie Hebdo* attacks and the November 2015 gun and bomb attacks in Paris. As of 2017, there are an estimated 750,000 illegally held weapons in the country, many left over from the Bosnian War. (Sources: [Reuters](#), [Reuters](#), [Reuters](#), [Reuters](#), [Spiegel Online](#), [Vecernji](#), [Time](#), [Economist](#), [OCCRP](#), [OSAC](#), [vijesti.ba](#), [Balkan Insight](#))

The U.S. State Department 2019 Country Report on Terrorism noted “law enforcement cooperation at a more strategic level continued to suffer from some interpersonal and institutional infighting, as well as BiH’s complex governmental structure.” Nonetheless, the State Department praised BiH law enforcement agencies for their response to returning foreign fighters and their family members from Syria. (Source: [U.S. Department of State](#))

Repatriating Foreign Fighters

In 2014, Bosnia became the first European country to begin sentencing returning foreign fighters to prison. By December 2019, Bosnia had tried and convicted at least 46 people returning from Iraq or Syria, though the government has received international criticism for lenient sentencing and poor follow-up. The Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) concluded Bosnia sentenced foreign fighters to less than two years in prison on average. The European Commission’s Bosnia and Herzegovina 2020 Report found the government provided few deradicalization resources in prison or upon prisoners’ releases, raising concerns of recidivism. The commission pointed to lenient sentences and “the absence of a probation service and systematic disengagement assistance” as presenting a continuing security risk. The U.S. Department of State has also criticized BiH for lenient sentencing, but the department has also noted “recent judgments indicate some judges recognize a need to apply more rigid sanctions.” (Sources: [National](#), [Voice of America](#), [Balkan Insight](#), [Balkan Insight](#), [European Commission](#), [U.S. Department of State](#))

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On December 20, 2019, the Security Ministry of Bosnia and Herzegovina claimed that 25 former ISIS fighters, including women and children, returned to Bosnia. According to the prosecutor's office, the "suspects are under investigation for the criminal offences of organizing a terrorist group, unlawful formation and joining of foreign paramilitary or paramilitary formations and terrorism." The men were handed over to the state prosecutor, while the women and children were escorted to a reception center for further examination and medical assistance. According to Bosnia officials, about 260 Bosnian citizens remain in camps in Syria as of 2019. The majority of those detained—160—are women and children. In its 2019 Country Report on Terrorism, the U.S. State Department criticized the BiH Ministry of Security for failing to create a comprehensive plan to reintegrate and rehabilitate family members. The repatriation process has since stalled because of the COVID-19 pandemic. By April 2020, Bosnia had indefinitely postponed the repatriation of women and children from Syrian camps. As of May 2021, no new numbers on the number of Bosnian citizens in Syrian camps had been released. (Sources: [U.S. Department of State](#), [National](#), [Balkan Insight](#), [Voice of America](#))

Anti-Money Laundering/Countering Financial Terrorism/ (AML/CFT)

As of March 2021, BiH had yet to prosecute a single suspect for financing terrorism. In 2014, the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) identified multiple deficiencies in BiH's legal framework to address AML/CFT. The Committee of Experts on the Evaluation of Anti-Money Laundering Measures and the Financing of Terrorism (MONEYVAL) of the Council of Europe called on BiH to immediately address deficiencies in its AML/CFT processes. In 2015, BiH committed to working with FATF and MONEYVAL to improve its processes. Additionally, the European Commission said in November 2016 that the Bosnian government "still needs to meet international standards on anti-money laundering and countering the financing of terrorism." (Sources: [Balkan Insight](#), [FATF](#), [FATE](#), [FATE](#), [European Commission](#))

In 2018, the FATF noted BiH had made "significant progress" in implementing the legal and regulatory framework to address the deficiencies FATF identified. BiH successfully criminalized terrorist financing, created a legal framework for freezing terrorist assets, and developed an AML/CFT supervisory framework. BiH also developed monitoring measures for the non-profit sector and cross-border currency controls. As a result, FATF removed BiH from its monitoring process and its grey list. The European Union removed BiH from its list of high-risk countries in May 2020. According to a Bosnian risk assessment, the banking, money transfer services, and real estate sectors are the country's most vulnerable for potential criminal abuse. The assessment also identified a "medium high" risk of NGO fundraising being used for terrorism financing. BiH intended to institute new laws to address money laundering and terrorism financing, as well as the creation of a registry of the real owners of all legal entities in the country. The new laws have received pushback from authorities in Bosnia's Serb-led Republika Srpska out of opposition to any new state-level legislation. (Sources: [Balkan Insight](#), [FATF](#), [FATE](#), [FATE](#), [FATE](#), [Lexology](#), [Sarajevo Times](#))

International Counter-Extremism

Bosnian law enforcement works with the Sarajevo-based branch of Interpol, as well as with U.S. and European agencies, to cooperate on international counterterrorism investigations. According to the U.S. State Department, regional cooperation between Bosnia, Croatia, and Serbia improved in 2015. Bosnia is also a member of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), which works to promote reconciliation and peacebuilding in the country. (Sources: [U.S. Department of State 2015](#), [OSCE](#))

In 2015, Bosnia produced the Balkan region's first comprehensive plan to counter terrorism. The five-year plan—known as the "Strategy for Preventing and Combatting Terrorism"—named ISIS, al-Qaeda, and the Nusra Front as the leading terrorist dangers in the country, and emphasized the need for regional cooperation in the Balkans in order to confront new challenges related to terrorism, including the dangers posed by radicalized lone wolves and foreign fighters, and misuse of the Internet for terrorist-related purposes. The five-year strategy expired in 2020, however, and the BiH government had not begun processes to replace it as of January 2021. According to a 2019 BiH Security Ministry assessment, the five-year strategy did not receive state funding and relied on donations. (Sources: [U.S. Department of State 2015](#), [Strategy of Bosnia and Herzegovina for Preventing Terrorism](#), [Balkan Insight](#))

On October 13, 2017, Bosnia's local army and police carried out its first joint drill with the EU peacekeeping force in Bosnia, which has been deployed in the Balkan state since 2004. The drill, "Quick Response 2017," provided an opportunity for the different agencies to quickly and efficiently respond to security threats. The five-day drill also included 400 British and NATO troops. Bosnia continually struggles with ethnic politicking and external influences as Bosnian Serb and Croat nationalists espouse separatist sentiments. Additionally, the drill addressed countering the threat of radicalization among Bosnian Muslims. (Source: [Reuters](#))

Foreign Military Engagements

Bosnia & Herzegovina: Extremism and Terrorism

Bosnia is part of the international coalition to fight ISIS. Though the country has not participated in military sorties, Bosnia has donated more than 570 tons of ammunition to Iraq as of September 2016. The donation came from a cache of more than 16,000 tons of surplus weaponry used during the Bosnian War that the government seeks to either donate or destroy by 2020. (Sources: [Ministry of Defense](#), [Reuters](#), [Global Coalition](#))

Bosnia has contributed to international coalitions in the past. From 2005 to 2008, Bosnia contributed more than 330 soldiers to the U.S.-led Operation Enduring Freedom mission in Iraq. Bosnia has also contributed dozens of troops, staff officers, and military police to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission in Afghanistan (2010 to 2014), and the ongoing Operation Resolute Support mission there. (Source: [Providing for Peacekeeping](#))

United Nations Peacekeeping Missions

Bosnia has contributed to a number of U.N. peacekeeping missions around the world, including in Afghanistan, Cyprus, Liberia, Mali, South Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. (Source: [Providing for Peacekeeping](#))

Bosnia was also host to foreign peacekeepers. From December 1995 to December 2002, the United Nations maintained a peacekeeping force in Bosnia of around 2,050 civilian police personnel. Following the end of the mission in 2002, the United Nations transferred peacekeeping responsibilities to the European Union, whose multi-national European Union Police Mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina (EUPM) remained in the country until June 2012. (Sources: [UNMIBH](#), [EUPM](#))

EU Cooperation

On November 19, 2019, the European Union and BiH signed a bilateral agreement on counterterrorism to implement the Joint Action Plan on Counter-terrorism for the Western Balkans agreed by the EU-Western Balkans Ministerial Forum on Justice and Home Affairs on October 5, 2018. The agreement highlighted five objectives in EU-BiH cooperation: alignment of legislation and institutional infrastructure; countering and prevention of violent extremism, sharing of information and cooperation with EUROPOL; AML/CFT; and protection of citizens and critical infrastructure. On October 1, 2021, Bosnia and Herzegovina held its second Counter-terrorism Dialogue with the European Union to discuss counterterrorism and countering violent extremism. (Sources: [Ministry of Security of Bosnia and Herzegovina](#), [Council of the European Union](#), [Delegation of the European Union to Bosnia and Herzegovina & European Union Special Representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina](#))

Public Opinion

Bosnia's population is divided geographically and politically along ethnic and religious lines, a result of the 1995 Dayton Peace Accords that established the country as a tripartite state. Of the 3.5 million people in Bosnia, 50 percent identify as Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims), 30 percent as Bosnian Serbs (predominantly Orthodox), and 15 percent as Bosnian Croats (predominantly Catholic). Bosnian Muslims—representing the largest single ethnic religious identity in the country—are believed to by and large adhere to a moderate interpretation of Islam. Nonetheless, a small contingency of Bosnian Muslims is believed to have inherited a violent interpretation of Islamic extremism from foreign terrorist fighters during the 1992-1995 Bosnian War. (Sources: [Agency for Statistics of Bosnia and Herzegovina: Final Results 2016](#), [Reuters](#))

A Pew Research Center poll conducted between June 2015 and July 2016 found that Bosnian citizens were generally extremely tolerant of other faiths, with 95 percent of Orthodox, Catholic, and Muslims surveyed stating that they would accept members of another religion as citizens of their country. However, positive responses dropped when asked if they would accept members of another religion as a part of their family, with only 42 percent of respondents accepting of Muslims and only 40 and 43 percent accepting of Orthodox Christians and Catholics, respectively. A Pew poll conducted between 2015 and 2017 and released in October 2018 found 48 percent of respondents ages 18 to 34 were willing to accept a Muslim in the family while only 39 percent were willing to accept a Jew in the family. Asked whether religion was a key component of national identity, 59 percent of respondents responded religion was somewhat or very important. Asked to evaluate the sentiment that while not perfect, their culture is superior to others, 68 percent of Bosnians polled completely or mostly agreed. (Sources: [Pew Research Center](#), [Pew Research Center](#))

According to a Pew poll from July 2015, the majority of Bosnian Muslims—nearly 60 percent—believe that Islam and Christianity have shared values. Nearly one-fifth of Bosnian Muslims polled—18 percent—said that they engage in interfaith meetings. A Pew poll released 2013 found that a minority of Bosnian Muslims—15 percent—favored the establishment of sharia (Islamic law). (Sources: [Pew Research Center](#), [Reuters](#), [Pew Research Center](#))