

Balkan states back US war in the Middle East

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Over the month of September, a number of Balkan states declared their support for the current US-led military campaign in the Middle East. Balkan states in both NATO and the EU, such as Croatia, Bulgaria and Romania, joined the US-led coalition. Those non-EU and non-NATO states backing the Western military campaign in Iraq and Syria include Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia.

For many of these states, their practical commitment to the military campaign will be minimal. Nevertheless their decision to back the military campaign is significant, not least because it gives credence to the US and its allies, which are conducting military operations in Iraq and Syria in complete defiance of international law.

One of the first Balkan states to join the US-led coalition was Croatia, which since the breakup of Yugoslavia following the NATO war of 1995 has maintained close links to Washington. It is symptomatic of the relationship between the US and Croatia that the local media first learnt that the country was joining the so-called Balkan “coalition against IS” from the US State Department, not from the Croatian government.

Croatia has played a particularly duplicitous role in recent developments in the Middle East. In an operation overseen by the CIA, Croatia supplied much of the weaponry that ended up in the hands of the Muslim jihadists fighting in the region. Croatia was deliberately used to smuggle arms in 2013 into Syria via Jordan in order to circumvent an EU ban on weapons to the region. As part of the US campaign to overthrow President Bashar al-Assad, the arms were delivered to Syrian Islamist militias, including ISIS and Ahrar al-Sham.

Exactly mirroring the about-turn in US policy, which is now using the struggle against ISIS as a means of

renewing its campaign against Assad, Croatia has now junked its former customers and pledged to join the “Balkan coalition against IS.” Just this August, the Pentagon acknowledged that both Croatia and Albania were sending weapons and other equipment to the Iraqi military and to Iraqi Kurdish fighters opposing ISIS.

Using similar language as US President Obama to demonise ISIS, the Croatian Defence Minister Ante Kotromanovic said of his government’s decision: “No one knows what our obligations will be yet... but this is an opportunity to unite the world against this deadly evil.”

Serbia has also declared its readiness to support US policy in the Middle East. In a letter addressed to US President Obama, Serbian Prime Minister Aleksandar Vucic wrote: “The Serbian government supports the fight against ISIS and is willing to help in this fight, in accordance with its limited resources.”

Serbia’s support for the anti-IS alliance is a significant concession to US imperialism, bearing in mind that the country suffered the worst of the NATO bombing campaign of 1999. In recent months, Serbia has come under heavy pressure from the US and EU for failing to implement economic sanctions against Russia. Serbia has longstanding ties with Russia and is a key link in the proposed South Stream pipeline, which would deliver Russian gas to Europe while bypassing Ukraine.

In the middle of this month, Russian President Vladimir Putin is due to visit Belgrade as part of Serbian celebrations marking the 70th anniversary of the liberation of Belgrade from Nazi German occupation. Vucic’s support for the US military campaign in the Middle East is part of the Belgrade government’s balancing act to retain relations with the West while maintaining its links to Moscow.

Under pressure from the US and the EU the Balkan states are increasingly being transformed into the front

line of aggression against Russia.

Another factor in the decision by Serbia and other Balkan countries to join the “coalition against IS” is that support for the latest edition of the Western “war on terror” permits these governments to whip up anti-Islamist sentiment and introduce repressive legislation. The US security forces have issued their own warning of the growth of Islamic extremism and the “threat of beheadings” in Europe, thereby justifying the repressive measures in Balkan countries.

Vucic’s declaration of support for the US-led coalition was promptly echoed by Serbian Foreign Minister Ivica Dacic, who stated that Serbia supported “the global alliance in the fight against terrorism.” Dacic told the Belgrade-based daily *Blic* that the alliance was important for the Balkan region, “because there are many jihadists from our region”.

Dacic based his remarks on figures released by the CIA and Western governments, which state that hundreds of those fighting for jihadist forces in Syria come from the Balkans where a number of countries, such as Bosnia, Kosovo and Albania, have significant Muslim communities. In Albania, for example, around 60 percent of the population are Sunni Muslims. In Bosnia 40 percent are Muslims.

In all of these countries, media reports relating to a few hundred Muslim citizens traveling to the Middle East are blown out of proportion and used by the respective governments to generate a climate of intimidation against the Muslim communities. This climate of fear allows governments in those countries with a Muslim minority to deflect attention from the growing social and economic crisis and build up their security apparatuses against the entire working class.

Serbia has announced plans to revise its penal code and make participation in a war or affiliation to armed groups in another country punishable by up to 10 years imprisonment. Similar laws have been adopted in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Macedonia and are in preparation in Albania, Kosovo and Montenegro.

Following reports from the Bosnian security service that up to 340 Bosnians had travelled abroad to join the IS or other radical groups, police arrested 16 people at the start of September who had allegedly returned from the Middle East.

On September 30, the parliamentary Security Committee in Montenegro ordered the domestic

intelligence service to permanently monitor up to 300 local Islamists. The Montenegro parliament has also submitted a draft law to penalise anyone joining an armed group abroad.

Repressive measures against the Muslim community have been especially pronounced in Kosovo. Already in August and September, police carried out widely publicised raids against alleged Islamists, arresting dozens of people. In a second wave of raids, the police arrested 15 suspected Islamists on suspicion of terrorism, threat to the constitutional order and incitement to religious hatred. Among the arrested were the leader of the Islamist party Lisba and 12 imams from mosques in Kosovo.

The US government explicitly welcomed the actions of the Kosovo security forces. In the event, the appeals court in Kosovo ordered the release of 11 of the 15 detainees this month, due to lack of evidence.

At the start of this week, the European Commission issued a report in which it made a series of criticisms of western Balkan states and made clear they had no prospect of membership of the EU in the short term. The criticisms raised by the commission included the reluctance of governments to undertake IMF and EU-dictated economic reforms, and measures against corruption. No mention was made of the repressive state measures introduced against Muslim communities.

This is because the EU is in the process of implementing similar measures on a continent-wide basis. The EU is currently discussing far-reaching proposals to amend the Schengen border controls to allow “systematic checks at external borders of persons enjoying the right to free movement to fully ensure they do not represent a threat to internal security”.

EU interior ministers are also discussing a broad range of security measures, including intensified Internet surveillance and a revival of proposals for a Europe-wide air passenger database.



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