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Bosnian imam attacked 7 times over call to stay out of Syria

The Washington Post (05.01.2015) - The long-bearded man burst into the mosque's yard and pinned Selvedin Beganovic to the ground. Shouting "Now I will slaughter you!" he plunged a knife three times into the imam's chest and fled.

It was no random attack: Beganovic has suffered seven assaults blamed on Muslim extremists in the past year — with three just last month.

The apparent reason for the jihadi wrath? Beganovic uses his pulpit to tell the faithful in predominantly Muslim Bosnia they have no business fighting in Syria or Iraq. And he vows to keep preaching the message no matter how many times extremists try to silence him.

"That is not our war," the imam told The Associated Press in his small northwestern town. "Our jihad in Bosnia is the fight against unemployment. The care for our parents who have small pensions. The care for the socially jeopardized."

Some 150 Bosnians have joined Islamic militants in Syria or Iraq, officials estimate, with many fighting for the Islamic State group. All are apparently members of a small community that follows an ultra-conservative interpretation of Islam. Last month, a court in Bosnia charged a man believed to be the spiritual leader of the group with recruiting Bosnians to fight with Islamic militants in Syria and organizing a terrorist group.

Beganovic, who preaches every week to a full mosque, tells his followers that groups like IS are spreading a "perverted version of Islam."

"When did (the Prophet) Muhammad ever behead anyone?" he said. "When did he take a knife and slaughter an innocent journalist?"

Of Islam's 99 names for God — including The Mighty and The Avenger — the ones Beganovic likes most are The Exceedingly Merciful and The Exceedingly Gracious.

"That is what we teach our children here," he said.

Dragan Lukac, the director of federal police, blamed fighters returning from Syria's front lines for the attacks against Beganovic, which include severe beatings and knife slashes to the face, shoulders and hands. Investigators are still hunting for the attacker in last week's knife assault.

"Every person who comes back from that front line is a danger," said Lukac. "These people are able to perform attacks on citizens, on property, on state institutions."

Militant Islam was all but unknown to Bosnia's mostly secular Muslim population until the 1990s Balkans wars when Arab mercenaries turned up to help the outgunned Bosnian Muslims fend off Serb attacks. These fighters, many of whom settled in Bosnia, embraced a radical version of Islam that Bosnia's official Islamic community opposes.

The community's leader, Husein Kavazovic, has repeatedly warned Bosnians not to fall for extremist rhetoric aimed at pulling them into the fight in Syria.

"Our job is to keep repeating, to keep warning that this is evil and cannot be justified," he said.

That's exactly what Beganovic has been doing — at the risk of his life.

"These are dangerous people," he said. "Their place is in a mental institution."
