



Engagement Between Bosnian Muslims and Islamic Countries in the Middle East

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Abstract. In the late 20th century, the Bosnian Muslims took the civil war in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) as an opportunity to start engagement with the Islamic community in the Middle East. While providing humanitarian and military aids to BiH, countries like Saudi Arabia also exported various Islamic sectarian ideas, including Salafi jihadism or jihadist-Salafism, the most typical ideology of Islamic extremists, to the nation. During the civil war and post-war reconstruction, some marginalized Muslim youths, deeply influenced by those radical and belligerent ideologies, joined the Salafi sect. There have been many conflicts between the extremist sects and the highly-secularized Muslims in BiH due to their differences in religious practice and living habits. Thus, to avoid radicalization and alleviate sectarian conflicts, the nation needs to stay alert to the infiltration of extremist religious thoughts, embrace religious and cultural diversity, and establish a mechanism for equal communication.

Keywords: Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) · Islam · Salafism

1 Introduction

During the reign of the Ottoman Empire, some southern Slavs in the Balkans were converted to Islam for economic and political purposes. As nationalism swept across the European continent in the 19th and 20th centuries, the southern Slavs who turned to Islam gradually developed an identity distinct from the Serbs and Croats because of their religious beliefs, and the pogroms during the two world wars deepened the gap between Muslims and other ethnic groups in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). The Muslim national identity (Bosniak) was acquired in 1971 during the communist Yugoslavia period. For the time being, the Muslim community is concentrated in the central and western parts of BiH, with Sarajevo as its political, economic and cultural centre.

The Treaty of Berlin (formally the Treaty between Austria-Hungary, France, Germany, Great Britain and Ireland, Italy, Russia, and the Ottoman Empire for the Settlement of Affairs in the East) signed in 1878 led BiH to an almost complete break from the Islam Ummah¹ and an all-round, in-depth contact with the modern Europe, and its exposure

¹ Under the Treaty of Berlin of 1878, Bosnia and Herzegovina was placed under the trusteeship of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

to the European values resulted in a high degree of secularization across the nation. The 20th century saw successive establishment of modern nation-states in the Middle East. When the civil war broke out in BiH in the 1990s, the Muslims of BiH resumed contacts with the Islamic community in the Middle East.

2 Establishment of an Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH)

Before the Berlin Conference in 1878, the BiH region was under legal and political jurisdiction of the Ottoman Empire. The Muslims in BiH at that time revered the caliph, the spiritual leader of the Islamic world. Most of them believed that there was no authoritative leadership in the field of religious life, and some were even unwilling to break away from Islamic organizations in Istanbul. In 1881, the Muslim community in BiH approached the Austro-Hungarian authorities with a request to elect a “Reisu-l-ulema”² (a title used only by the Bosnian Muslims) or the Grand Mufti as the leader of the Islamic Community of BiH; in 1882, the authorities approved the establishment of the Ulema Council, with “Reisu-l-ulema” as the chairman of the body, thus giving Muslims in BiH a religious institution and a religious leader independent of Istanbul.

At the period of the former Yugoslavia, the domestic Muslims in the nation established a unified Islamic community centred in Sarajevo. This religious organization was responsible for all matters related to the lives of Islam followers, including issuing Islamic rules (fatwas), administering religious donations (waqfs), maintaining places of worship such as mosques, providing religious education, as well as collecting zakat and distributing it to low-income groups as needed.³ After the disintegration of the former Yugoslavia, the organization was also dismantled into separate and independent Islamic communities within each of the new states, which retained most of the administrative powers, with the Islamic Community in BiH being the largest and most complicated in organizational structure. The Faculty of Islamic Theology (later the Faculty of Islamic Studies of the University of Sarajevo), founded in 1977, is one of the most important institutions of the Islamic Community of BiH and the oldest Islamic institution of higher education in the Balkans. Other institutions include the Parliament of the Islamic Community, the Constitutional Court of the Islamic Community⁴, etc.

The 1992 referendum on independence in BiH met immense objection from the Serbs in the territory, who then established the Republika Srpska and built an army. With the support from Serbia and Montenegro, they declared war against the Muslims and Croats in BiH. According to statistics, 927 mosques, 259 prayer halls, 87 Islamic schools and over 500 Islamic donation management institutions were destroyed during

² Omer Nakičević, *Istorijski razvoj institucije Rijaset, Rijaset Islamske zajednice*, Sarajevo, 1996, pp. 45–56.

³ Fikret Karcic, “Administration of Islamic Affairs in Bosnia and Herzegovina”, *Islamic Studies*, 1999, 38(4): 535.

⁴ Constitution of the Islamic Community of BiH, Website of the Islamic Community of BiH, 26 November 1997, http://www.islamskazajednica.ba/images/stories/Ustavi/Ustavna_odluka_iz_1993.g.pdf.

the Bosnian civil war.⁵ The atrocity of the war, embodied in the Srebrenica massacre⁶, sparked widespread concern in the Islamic world. The Bosnian Muslims at that time were looking for peace and stability in their daily lives and spiritual pursuits, so the Islamic Community of BiH became more concerned with individual survival while providing spiritual guidance to its followers. At the same time, the Community began to lobby the Islamic countries in the Middle East for international assistance, highlighting the extremely precarious conditions and hardships that the Bosnian Muslims were suffering then.

3 Wartime Aid from the Middle East and the Spread of Sectarian Ideas

Although Islamic countries in the Middle East were unable to provide effective diplomatic assistance, countries such as Saudi Arabia made considerable donations of food, medicine and money, as well as some weapons and equipment to BiH. They also sent a number of humanitarian relief workers. However, jihadists, i.e., jihadist Salafists, and followers of other Islamic sects who supported Islamic extremism, also arrived.⁷ Considering the daily life and values of the Islamic community in BiH too secular, Muslims from the Middle East also donated much Islamic literature⁸ along with other aids to help the Islamic community in BiH to restart the process of Islamization after the war.

Saudi Arabia was one of the first Islamic countries to provide assistance to Bosnian Muslims. In June 1992, the Saudi government established the High Commission for Relief of Bosnia and Herzegovina to provide assistance to refugees, students and other social groups during and after the war, rebuilt hospitals, amenities, and religious venues, purchased medical equipment and medicines, and organized cultural and educational activities in BiH. As of 2001, the Commission had initiated 61 assistance projects to BiH, with a total worth of 560 million US dollars.⁹ The Commission distributed free publications in Arabic and Bosnian authored mostly by Salafists to Muslims in BiH. The Society of the Revival of Islamic Heritage, founded by Kuwaiti Salafists, was also actively involved in the distribution of Salafi religious literature. Other books with different sectarian perspectives were also disseminated in BiH.¹⁰

⁵ Maya Shatzmiller, *Islam and Bosnia: Conflict Resolution and Foreign Policy in Multi-Ethnic States*. Queens University School of Policy, 2002, p. 100.

⁶ The brutal killing of more than 8,000 Muslims in Bosnia and Herzegovina by the Republika Srpska army on 11–13 July 1995 was ruled an act of genocide by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia and the International Court of Justice.

⁷ Harun Karčić, “Globalisation and Islam in Bosnia: Foreign influences and their effects”, *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, 2010, 11(2): 155.

⁸ Harun Karčić, “Islamic Revival in Post-Socialist Bosnia and Herzegovina: International Actors and Activities”, *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 2010, 30(4): 519–534.

⁹ Saudi Aid Platform, <https://data.ksrelief.org/Projects/FS>, 2020–05-26, cited in Chen Mo, “Characteristics, Drivers and Effects of Saudi Arabia’s Foreign Aid”, in *West Asia Africa*, 2021, no. 3, p. 117.

¹⁰ Ahmet Alibašić, “Bosnia and Herzegovina”, u: Jocelyne Cesari (ur.), *The Oxford Handbook of European Islam*, 2015, p. 464.

As with Saudi Arabia, Iran was among the first countries who provided humanitarian and financial assistance to the Muslim community in BiH, smuggling weapons and ammunition to them through Croatia and dispatching military personnel and intelligence officers despite the UN arms embargo.¹¹ After the signing of the Dayton Agreement in 1995, the US pressured the government of BiH to sever connections with Iran, but the two sides maintained close ties through academic and cultural institutions. In November that year, Iran opened a new embassy in Sarajevo and the embassy's Cultural Centre often organized seminars and exchanges between experts, scholars, students and other professionals from both sides, and regularly published the journal "Beharistan" on Iranian and Islamic studies.¹² The Cultural Centre also offered free Persian language courses, as well as free loan books and films on Shia Islam. In addition, Iran invested in the construction of some academic institutions to expand its influence among the Muslim intellectual elite in BiH. For example, the Mullah Sadra Foundation is committed to promoting Islamic education and Iranian philosophy research, while the Ibn Sina Institute advances academic and cultural cooperation between Iran and the Muslim community in BiH, both of which are major Iranian academic institutions with a Shia bias in their outreach.¹³

Saudi Arabia and Iran left some religious and political influence on the Bosnian Muslims through international aid and proactive export of Islamist ideas, but it is clear that the Iranian Shi'ite influence on Muslims in BiH was much less significant and won support from a very select group of senior intellectuals. Salafism, mainly from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates and Jordan, on the other hand, became the most prevalent foreign Islamic sectarian thought among Bosnian Muslims during and after the civil war. As Wahhabism is the state religion of Saudi Arabia, Salafism is also commonly referred to as Wahhabism in BiH. The two are often not clearly distinguished and there is a conflation.

In addition, the radical jihadist Salafists, who are fully committed to helping the Bosnian Muslims fight against the Serbs by force, have had some ideological influence on the Muslims and attracted a section of young followers. Nonetheless, problems ensued as the Salafists follow the Hanbali school of Sunni Islam, a school that encourages strict and devout support of the Qur'an and the Hadith. The majority of the Bosnian Muslims belong to the Sunni school, but favour the moderate and liberal Hanafi school. The overly secularized lifestyle of the Muslims in BiH soon triggered resentment among conservative Salafists. Even during the civil war, there were frequent frictions between conservative and moderate Muslims.

Under the communist ideology of the previous Yugoslav period, the vast majority of the Muslims in BiH were almost secularized and it was not uncommon to see them smoke, drink alcohol and eat pork. However, the extreme Salafists, in desperate hope

¹¹ "Another Iranian Arms Case Takes Washington by Storm", *Guangming Daily*, 22 April 1996. https://epaper.gmw.cn/gmrb/html/1996-04/22/nw.D110000gmrB_19960422_11-03.htm?div=-1.

¹² "Iran's Cultural Presence in Bosnia and Herzegovina", Center for Iranian Studies, https://iramcenter.org/en/irans-cultural-presence-in-bosnia-and-herzegovina/?send_cookie_permissions=OK.

¹³ Harun Karčić, "Globalisation and Islam in Bosnia: Foreign influences and their effects", 161.

of the Muslims' secularization and transition to Islamic extremist values, directed some young Bosnians to military training and provided them with uniforms and weapons. As a result, many young Muslims in BiH soon joined the outsiders in their jihad. In addition, the groups that spread the Salafi ideology in BiH, due to their extreme understanding and irrational adherence to Islamic teachings and hadith, often reject religious pluralism. They have also tried to forge a stereotypical Muslim identity to the outside world. This disconnection from the identity and traditions of the local Muslim community, driven by various factors, exacerbated their "jihadist" tendencies.

4 The Bosnian Muslims' Response to the Spread of Salafism

From the late 20th century to the early 21st century, rapid spread of the extreme Salafist ideology introduced instability to the fragile social and political structure in the post-war Western Balkans, as reflected in the following aspects:

First of all, the danger of the spread of Salafism is not definitely clear to the Muslims in BiH. This can be partly attributed to the fact that Muslims in BiH follow the Hanafi school of law and continue the Ottoman tradition of being more tolerant to other religions. Another reason is the general negative attitude of the Muslim community towards the West after the genocide in the Bosnian civil war and also the long-standing rejection of the Islamic community by the Western society. Such religious sentiment was further exacerbated by the American and British invasion to the Islamic world during the war in Iraq. In addition, the plenty of help that jihadist Salafists and the Islamic countries in the Middle East have provided to the Muslim community in BiH during the civil war made the Muslims and intellectuals in BiH unwilling to criticize them.

Second, it was not until several years after the civil war ended that Salafists' expansion sparked an outcry among the local Muslims. The jihad led by Salafists was popular during the Bosnian war and the Salafists' expansion reached its peak in 1999–2000, during which they had extensive engagement and cooperation with the young Muslims in BiH by organizing summer schools, courses on Islamic law and various publishing activities. All these attracted a large number of young people to participate. Soon afterwards, however, as the funding for the organization's missionary activities was drastically cut and it was no longer possible to initiate events that would appeal to young people, more and more Bosnian Muslims noticed and disapproved of the overly strict and extreme doctrines that the Salafists were preaching. The Islamic Community's attitude towards Salafism, however, was separated from that of the ordinary Muslims: they sometimes opposed Salafism, but more often tolerated its activities,¹⁴ drawing widespread criticism from local media, pundits, and ordinary Islamic believers.

The spread of Salafism in BiH is a problem left over from the Bosnian war, but it can also be considered a successful attempt by the Islamic community in BiH to accept and embrace dissident sects. The survival and growth of Salafism in BiH does not mean that the local Muslims are being radicalized and extremized; instead, it marks the start of the Bosnian Muslims' growth into a diversified Islamic religious group. Studies have shown that many of the poor, unemployed youth, drug addicts and people

¹⁴ Mirsad Mahmutović, "Šije i mi", Preporod, 11:708, 2001, p. 2.

with criminal records in BiH are followers of the Islamic Salafi sect.¹⁵ These religious groups are well organized among themselves and have shown some aggression towards moderate Muslims. The Islamic Community of BiH should enhance relations and active communication with local Salafists and enrich the religious life of marginalized social groups to effectively prevent them from adopting extreme anti-social behaviour, establish a platform for dialogue and corporation between Salafists and moderate Muslims. The officers should also consider how to encourage Salafists and followers of other Islamic sects to join in the construction of the Islamic Community by, for instance, serving in higher education institutions, parliaments, or courts, and guide them to be open and tolerant towards foreign sects.

5 Conclusion

Since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, Muslim groups in Bosnia and Herzegovina had long been in contact with Islamic countries in the Middle East, including Turkey, especially after the outbreak of the Bosnian civil war in 1992. The Islamic Community of BiH has actively lobbied countries in the Middle East and has received economic and military assistance from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iran and other countries. The introduction of jihadist Salafists to BiH, together with the free distribution of books and publications of various Islamic sects among the local Bosnian Muslims, significantly contributed to the spread of the Islamic ideologies from the Middle East, represented by Salafism, to BiH.

Although the jihadist Salafists helped the Bosnian Muslims to fight against the Serbs by force, their overly conservative doctrines and living habits put them at odds with the highly secularized Muslims in BiH. After the civil war, the Salafists who continued their preaching in BiH became a major hidden threat to the stability of the BiH society. For a time, they expanded in BiH before being terminated due to lack of funds. The Salafist group has become a destabilizing factor due to its small number of believers and its deviation from the religious practice of traditional Bosnian Muslims. While the ordinary Muslims in BiH have had varied attitudes to the Salafists over time, with the often-marginalized younger generation being more vulnerable to Salafi extremism, it is also important to create an inclusive and open environment and to establish mutual trust among different religious communities to prevent extremism.

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¹⁵ Edina Bećirević, “Crisis management and counter-terrorism in the western balkans: Bosnian Approach in the Fight Against Terrorism”, Faculty of Criminal Justice Science, University of Sarajevo, 2007. <https://www.helsinki.org.rs/doc/Slovenija%20Edina.doc>.

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