Mujahidin in Bosnia From Ally to Challenger

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Rather than forming an actual terrorist threat, Muslim warriors in Bosnia have become prominent challengers to Bosnian Islamic leadership. By propagating Salafi teachings which target the forms of Islam practised by the Bosnian Muslims, this former ally came to be seen as a threat—not only because their presence fuelled stigmatization of Bosnia as a potential terrorist hotbed, but also because their Salafi ideas go against the very essence of Bosnian Muslim identity.

The existence of the remaining mujahidin, foreign Muslim warriors, in Bosnia following the Dayton agreement in 1995 has occasionally been portrayed by Croat and Serb religious and political leaders alike as a threat towards their existence and coexistence in Bosnia. This article disputes this view and argues instead that mujahidin have become a challenger to the Islamic leadership, namely the Islamska Zajednica (Islamic Community), and the Hanafi interpretation of Islam practiced by Bosnian Muslims. The Islamic Community of Bosnia and Herzegovina, founded in 1878, is the sole religious authority of Muslims in Bosnia and Herzegovina and authorized to appoint imams to approximately 1,700 mosques and to provide religious education from secondary to post-graduate level.

Mujahidin entered Bosnia in 1992 through Croatia, mainly as humanitarian aid workers. Although initially welcomed during an arms embargo in the fight against Serbian aggressors, they have gradually become a problem. Beside several confrontations with UN Peacekeeping forces, their operations against Croat armed forces and civilians aggravated relations between Bosnian Muslims and Croats. Their emphasis on the religious character of the war did not only create conflict between the two allies (Bosnian Muslims and Croats), but also created tensions within local Muslim populations.

In the early 1990s, the Bosnian Muslims were at a serious disadvantage vis-à-vis the Serb army which seized the ammunition of the Yugoslav army. In this context, the appearance of the mujahidin received much support, not least from Izetbegović, who was president at the time. However, the political anxieties triggered by 9/11 brought an end to this welcome. In 2002, six Bosnian citizens of Algerian origin were deported to Guantanamo and the accounts of ten humanitarian organizations were frozen. Since March 2007, the government has stripped 661 individuals of their Bosnian citizenship, arguing that it had been granted illegally. Such incidents show that after a decade of cooperation the mujahidin have now become a nuisance to Bosnian Muslims, not just because they negatively influence the image of Bosnian Muslims in the eyes of non-Muslim Bosnians and the international community, but also because they challenge the very core of Bosnian religious identity and its everyday representations.

Between "brothers" and "neighbours"

Following the end of the 1992–1995 war, resulting in around 200,000 dead, two million refugees and over 3,000 destroyed or damaged monuments, the Islamska Zajednica faced the difficult task of facilitating understanding and confidence among the previously warring parties. In this context, the representatives of Croat and Serb religious and political leaders in Bosnia occasionally referred to the "increasing Islamization" which they saw as a threat to their existence and to the possibility of coexistence. Although these statements have reflected a vague and ambiguous framework on subjects ranging from the increasing number of mosques to constitutional arrangements for a centralized state or the political statements made by Reis ul-Ulama Dr. Mustafa ef. Cerić, they have centred on the presence of mujahidin.

In the post 9/11 era Bosnia has been under scrutiny as a potential hotbed of Al-Qaida terrorism. It has been this alleged potentiality that has fed into anxieties and suspicions. The aforementioned statements started to be pronounced publicly in Bosnia in 2000. Until now three attacks have been committed by Salafi-oriented groups[1] towards non-Muslim Bosnians. These were the murder of three members of Andelic family on 24 December 2002, a fight in Maoca on 13 March 2003, and an attack on Mihajlo Kisic from Brcko on 15 July 2006. Furthermore, "verbal provocations" were reported by Serb returnees in the Jablanica and Gornja Maoca near Brćko where the settled mujahidin reside since they moved from Bocinja in central Bosnia in late 2000 and early 2001.

PHOTO BY HRVOJE POLAN / © AFP 2004

Cars damaged during post-war communal tensions in Bocinja, Bosnia

Certainly, the accusations are not just rhetoric: mujahidin have indeed used Bosnia as a battle front to fight "infidels" and as a training field for future campaigns. However, a comparison of the extent of the incidents and the discourses on this "threat" reveals that although the relatively limited direct threats to Croats and Serbs can inevitably give rise to anxiety, the statements of a so-called Wahhabi threat in Bosnia towards coexistence is primarily incited by the memories of the war and the aforementioned "potentiality," which is also politically manipulated. For example, the Serb terrorism expert Darko Trifunović urged preservation of

the institutions of the Serbian Republic despite the current dysfunctional state structure of Bosnia "to keep a track on Muslim spies," the number of which was exaggerated to 400,000 by Mihajlo Mitrović, another Serb terrorism expert.[2] Furthermore, Serb politicians such as Milorad Dodik employ discourses similar to those used prior to the 1992-95 war, such as "to prevent the creation of a Muslim state in the heart of Europe."[3] However, facts on the ground reveal that it has been particularly the Bosnian Muslims who have been challenged by their former allies.

Importing "true Islam"

Following a war into which Bosnian Muslims drifted partially due to their religious identity, the remaining mujahidin have attempted to transform the dominant socio-cultural framing by further solidifying and channelling the increased interest in religion in particular ways. The remaining humanitarian relief organizations have not only reconstructed destroyed mosques, but also started educational and publishing projects. Translated Salafi-oriented literature (such as the "Family Library" financed by High Saudi Committee), new magazines (such as SAFF published by the pro-Salafi youth organization Active Islamic Youth), and websites (such as www.islambosna.ba and www.bih.org) have been the main instruments for the transmission of Salafi thought among Bosnian Muslims. They especially brought new cultural framings and related discussions into the agenda of Bosnian Muslims. Besides denouncing the local practices as *bid'a* (religious innovations), such as mawlid celebrations, *tawhid*s (commemoration rites), or relatively fast performance of prayers, they also introduced visual symbols in public life such as *niqab* and long beards. Since 1992, these interpretations have often caused tensions between Bosnian Muslims performing the customary, Hanafi way of rituals and those adopting a Salafi interpretation.

These conflicts moved to the next stage when differences in appearance and performance of rituals started to disrupt the established order in Bosnian mosques and evolved into physical conflicts between the two groups. In February 2007, the doors of the Careva Mosque were locked, probably for the first time in its history, to avoid clashes between the congregation and the followers of Jusuf Barčić (the deceased Salafi imam from Barčići) who intended to give religious lectures. Several cases have reported "Wahhabi young men" being beaten up by Bosnian mosque-goers. For example, during the past Ramadan, such young men were beaten and thrown out of the mosque when they intended to do *i'tikaf* (spend time in devotion to God) in a mosque. Similar cases occurred in Barčići in March and in Sarajevo in April 2007.[4] Not only did these intra-Muslim conflicts create impatience with the Salafi-oriented groups, but due to such instances, the Islamska Zajednica and Reis-ul Ulema Cerić have now been harshly criticized for not looking after the Bosnian Muslims' centuries-old trust.

The authority of the Islamska Zajednica

While these events targeted the Bosnian interpretation of Islam and the authority of the Islamska Zajednica as the sole legal and traditional representative of the Bosnian interpretation of Islam since 1878, the alleged passivity of the Islamska Zajednica has also been severely criticized. The critics were mainly learned Bosnian Muslims such as several professors at the Faculty of Islamic Studies and Gazi Husrev Beg Madrasa of the Islamska Zajednica in Sarajevo as well as "former Wahhabis" such as Jasmin Merdan.

The Islamska Zajednica, which has been criticized for not having taken timely measures, had indeed attempted to take the initiative in the midst of the war with an almost now forgotten fatwa dated 13 November 1993, concerning "the obligation of honouring the principles of the Hanafi madhab."[5] Despite current requests to adopt a coercive approach by implementing legal measures, the Islamska Zajednica typically tries to sustain its hegemony by legitimizing its discourse and reconfiguring alliances horizontally and vertically to gain the consent of the members of the traditional congregation, as well as followers of the Salafi-oriented movements. The only exception was its later request from legal authorities (resulting in a law enacted in 2006) not to register any organization or institution with the attribute "Islamic" in its name, which can be regarded as an implicit coercive instrument. However, the developments on the ground, revealing that this fatwa in 1993 had been ignored by some segments of the society, opened the way to new initiatives.

Rijaset, the leadership of the Islamska Zajednica, issued two subsequent resolutions in March and November 2006.[6] By these resolutions, the Islamska Zajednica underlined its determinacy "to protect the uniqueness of the centuries-long tradition of Bosnian Muslims" and support "an institutional interpretation of Islam in this region, based on Quran and Sunna and the traditions of the Bosnian Muslims," while calling "those who want to make interpretations outside the institutional set-up, perhaps some humanitarian organizations or others [to] harmonize their programmes with the Council of Elders of the Islamic Community." Here, it was also stated that mosques are open to everyone, while approval of the imam is required to do "anything in an organized fashion."

Although the Islamska Zajednica aimed to strengthen its leadership, it has abstained to exclude the dissident individuals and groups and conduct a kind of witch-hunt. The Islamska Zajednica has even refused to name and stigmatize these dissidents, not to "repeat the mistake made in 1949" when the religious leadership declared some ulema and members of the Young Muslim association as "traitors and terrorist." Cerić preferred to blame "those who have not understood the 'Islamic tradition of the Bosniaks'."[7]

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Beside these attempts to form a horizontal alliance at the domestic level, the Islamska Zajednica has also initiated a vertical alliance in synonymy with the debate on so-called Euro-Islam with the initiatives of the Reis-ul Ulema Dr. Mustafa ef. Cerić. Following his "Declaration of European Muslims" in August 2005, Cerić has portrayed the Bosnian experience as a genuine form of the European experience of Islam. This has also reminded Bosnian Muslims that preservation of their moderate stand could promote their image. Now, the mujahidin have not only been figures who "sowed discord" within mosques and on the streets, but are also an obstacle in attempts of Bosnians to regain their positive image and to be part of the house of Europe. The dissidents had already damaged these goals by prompting connotations of terrorism.

However, the resolution of November 2006 was found "inadequate and euphemistic" by several Bosnian Muslims, such as Prof. Esad Duraković, professor at the Institute for Eastern Studies in Sarajevo, who stated that "it has not even named the threat that is looming over Bosnia-Hercegovina," while "it is necessary to act more adequately and with more urgency."[8] Such a call for action has already been pronounced by Prof. Adnan Silajdžić, who even proposed that Wahhabi activities in Bosnia-Hercegovina must be penalized.[9] Furthermore, the strongest accusations came from another professor from the Faculty of Islamic Sciences, Rešid Hafizović, who accused the Islamska Zajednica of being indulgent, by delineating the situation as follows: "Bosnian Muslims have been infected by a new lethal virus, as a recurrence of the recent aggression [1992–1995 war]" which "manifests itself in the form of an arrogant, rigid, aggressive, and anachronistic phenomenon called Wahhabism."

From 1992 to 2007, mujahidin have changed from an ally to a threat in the eyes of many Bosnian Muslims. For over a decade the traditional interpretation of Islam by the Bosnian Muslims and their religious leadership have been the main targets of the Salafi ideologies of the remaining mujahidin in Bosnia. They have not only fuelled the discourses to depict Bosnia as a hotbed for international terrorism, but also challenged the very core of Bosnian religious identity and its main representative, the Islamska Zajednica. It is now the representatives of the traditional Bosnian interpretation of Islam who undertake the struggle to regain self-confidence and trust before their fellow Bosnians and Europeans.

Notes

1. "Salafism" is a more comprehensive and neutral notion used in Bosnia, while the term "Wahhabism" is mostly used by critics against these groups, which themselves reject the term.
2. SRNA news agency (Bijeljina), 17 October 2003.
3. *Dnevni List* (Mostar), 24 November 2007.
4. See http://archive.newsmax.com/archives/articles/2007/5/24/134645.shtml?s=sr.
5. *Glasnik* 1–2 (1994): 198.
6. See www.rijaset.ba.
7. *Nezavisne Novine* (Banja Luka), 17 February 2007.
8. *Oslobođenje* (Sarajevo), 18 November 2006.
9. *Oslobođenje* (Sarajevo), 11 November 2006.

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