

Europe

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The Bosnian Young Muslims, a reformist Islamic movement that emerged in Sarajevo in 1939 and – officially – ceased to exist ten years later, is even today subject to many controversies. The attempts to characterize this movement include a whole range of contradictory designations, ranging from hostile approaches in which the members of the movement are depicted as pan-Islamist terrorists whose activities aimed at the overthrow of the Yugoslavian state and establishing of an Islamic order, to sympathetic views in which it is presented as a basically democratic movement established on Islamic humanitarian principles that tried to resist the dictatorial communist regime of post-war Yugoslavia.

The history of the Young Muslim organization and its impact on the (self-)conceptions of Islam in Bosnia can be examined through different stages of development (1939–1943, 1943–1946, 1946–1949, and 1970s–1991). These stages can be defined in terms of several interdependent factors, of which the organizational forms of the movement and its ideological aims can be regarded as the most important ones.

The Young Muslim organization emerged in Sarajevo in 1939. The time of foundation, the name, and even some ideological postulates suggest that its foundation was related to the more or less simultaneous emergence of similar pan-Islamist movements in the Islamic world, particularly in Egypt and Indonesia. There are, however, no indications of a direct influence of such movements on the Young Muslims, especially bearing in mind their education and age (basically pupils and students between 16 and 26 years of age), the lack of any travelling experience, their non-acquaintance with Oriental languages, the difficult access to the works of contemporary Arabic writers in the Bosnian language, and finally, their non-alignment to the Bosnian ulama, at least at the early stage of their development, which could have compensated for the above-mentioned limitations.

The time of the movement's foundation, the late 1930s and the early 1940s, was marked by several factors of particular importance for the Yugoslavian Muslims: a crisis of national identity; the decreasing importance of Muslims within the Yugoslavian political landscape; the reinforcement of nationalism in Serbia and Croatia; the emer-

Alija Izetbegović

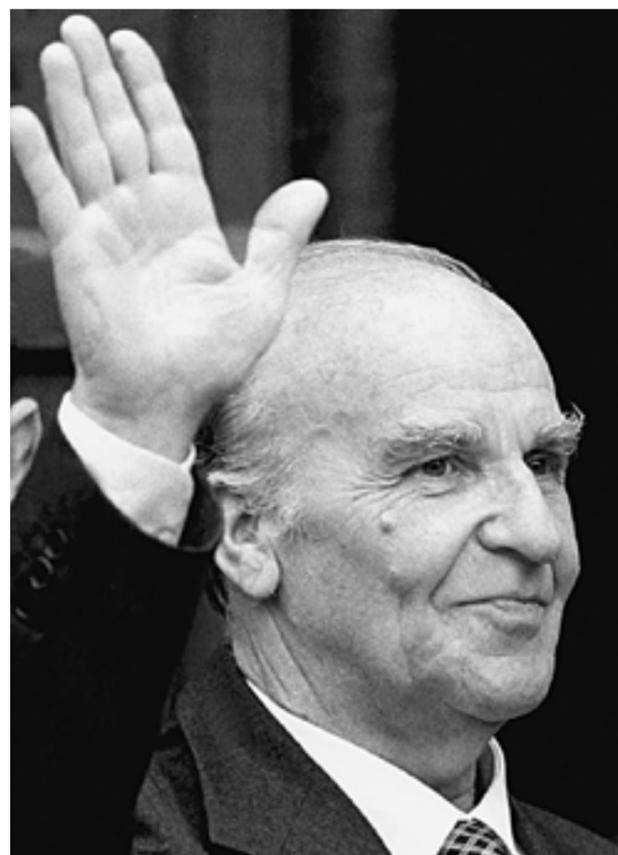


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Bosnian Young Muslims 1939–1991

A Survey

gence of a secular Bosnian intellectual élite along with the parallel decline of the traditional religious Muslim élites; and, finally, the challenge of communist and fascistic ideologies, both of which were opposed to the Young Muslims' conceptions of Islam.

Early developments

The Young Muslim movement developed around a group of students (Husref Bašagić, Emin Granov, Esad Karadžović, and Tarik Muftić), who initiated a common forum for discussions and debates on Islamic subjects. The first Young Muslims were mainly students from universities and high schools aged between 16 and 26 years. Their activities during the years 1939 and 1941 were established on the basis of private contacts and informal meetings. During the latter, some of the activists presented papers on specific subjects connected to Islam, whereupon the group had to discuss the arguments of the presenters.

Despite the lack of hierarchical or organizational structures, this period was decisive for the later development of the Young Muslim organization: it was during this time that their network, which was to spread across all major Bosnian and even some other Yugoslavian cities during the years to follow, was initiated. Furthermore, their main ideological and programmatic guidelines were formulated. Islamic decadence, the relationship between Islam and science as well as that between Islam and other religions and ideologies, the status of Islam and Muslims in Europe and particularly in Yugoslavia, the necessity of a social renaissance of Muslim peoples and the decisive role of Islamic education in it: all these topics were already present in the early Young Muslim agenda and were to run through the members' writings and the group's activities until the 1990s, in more or less elaborated ways.

The foundation as an organization took place in Sarajevo in March 1941. However, the outbreak of the Second World War obviated an official entry into the Yugoslavian register of associations. In order to avoid complete dissolution, the Young Muslims were compelled to join the ulama association el-Hidaje, despite their critical attitude towards the Bosnian religious officials and the protests of some activists like Alija Izetbegović and Nedžib Šaćirbegović against the linkage to the much-criticized clergy. In 1943, after almost two years of organizational abeyance, the Young Muslims were officially proclaimed the youth section of the ulama association. This status had significant impact on both their organizational structures and ideology. Informal networks became substituted by officially stipulated association structures. El-Hidaje officials, especially the association's president Mehmed Handžić and his vice-president Kasim Dobrača, helped to 'domesticate' the radical, to a certain extent politically determined demands, such as those postulated by the founding members Esad Karadžović and Tarik Muftić. Now, the religious-ethical dimension of Islam was emphasized; this new direction fitted more in the frame

of traditional Islamic subjects rather than in the avant-garde discourse on Islam they had originally tried to establish. During this period, i.e. between 1943 and 1945, the number of members significantly increased and the organization expanded into the major Bosnian, and even some other Yugoslavian cities.

Underground and abroad

In 1945, el-Hidaje was officially dissolved, and the Young Muslim organization went underground. They established an illegal network that influenced both young urban intellectuals and much of the young rural population. Initially tolerated by the new regime, they went for open confrontation with the communists as early as 1946, especially when they protested against the militant secularization policy of the new Yugoslavian government. In 1946, several members were arrested and sent to prison. The final crushing of the organization took place during the Sarajevo trial in August 1949. Four leading members were condemned to death; many others were arrested and sentenced to long imprisonments. A precise number of arrested, persecuted, and/or executed members, though, cannot be definitely specified.

After their release from prison, some of the Young Muslims emigrated to West European countries. Those who remained in Bosnia and confined themselves to private contacts with each other officially retreated from further engagements in the Young Muslim 'cause'. Nonetheless, it was this kind of private contact that enabled them to keep in touch under the vigilant eyes of the Yugoslavian Secret Service, and to take active part in the Islamic revival in Bosnia that was made possible due to the liberalization of policy with respect to religion in 1970s Yugoslavia. However, they not only had been participants in this awakening of religion among Yugoslavian, and especially Bosnian Muslims; to a considerable extent, they also gave this movement their fresh impetus by launching newspapers and magazines on Islamic subjects and by publishing their writings under pseudonyms, either in the official organs of the Islamska Vjerska Zajednica (Islamic Religious Community) or as separate, autonomous works.

Finally, by initializing discussion and education circles, the former Young Muslim members succeeded in creating a new network, which consisted of some former Young Muslims and a number of Bosnian Muslim intellectuals of the younger generation. The latter, both secular intellectuals and young ulama from the Faculty of Islamic Theology, actively took part in the discussion circles. The ideas that circulated among them followed the pattern established by the Young Muslims, though in a modified way. The new works, like Alija Izetbegović's *Islamic Declaration* and *Islam between the East and West*,¹ to name but these two as the best known ones, reflected the new age structure, but also the acquaintance of their authors with various contemporary ideological thoughts, and the influences that resulted thereof.

In August 1983, in a second wave of persecution, some activists of the network were tried for 'separatism' and 'Islamic fundamentalism' and sent to prison with sentences of up to nine years. Among those were the former Young Muslims Alija Izetbegović, Omer Behmen, Salih Behmen, Ešref Čampara, and Ismet Kasumagić, as well as the younger intellectuals Džemaludin Latić, Edhem Bičakčić, Hasan Čengić, Hussein Živalj, and Mustafa Spahić. Izetbegović was accused of having organized a 'group' whose aims were to conduct 'contra-revolutionary' actions in Yugoslavia and to establish an Islamic state in Yugoslavia.² The indictment, however, was more an ideologically coloured deterrent of regime critics rather than an accusation based upon real proof.

The two lines that now constituted the network – the 'old' Young Muslims and the members of the younger generation – became the core of the Stranka Demokratske Akcije (SDA), a political party founded in 1991 and since regarded as the only 'true' political representative of Muslim population in Bosnia – a presumptuous self-description, though repeatedly confirmed during the political elections in Bosnia.

The ideas that had been developed at the early stages of the Young Muslim movement continued – to a certain extent modified – to exist until the last decade of the 20th century, despite the official prohibition of the movement in 1946, its being crushed 1949, and the subsequent imprisonment of the organization's members. The ideological continuity was guaranteed through the 'individual factor', i.e. through the network of informal and private contacts of some ex-Young Muslims amongst each other and with the younger generation of Muslim intellectuals in Bosnia, especially in the course of the general liberalization of policy on religion in Yugoslavia during the 1970s.

Notes

1. Alija Izetbegović, *Islam između Istoka i Zapada* (Sarajevo, 1984) and *Islamska deklaracija* (Sarajevo, 1990).

2. Abid Prguda, *Sarajevski proces. Sudenje muslimanskim intelektualcima 1983* (Sarajevo, 1990), 37–51.

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