Islam in Post-Socialist Hungary

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Europe

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In the official Hungarian census of 2001, some 4000 of the country's legal residents, mostly immigrants, declared themselves as Muslims – conversion of Hungarian-born citizens to Islam still being a rare occurrence. Over the last decade, nonetheless, noticeable public and official interest in Islam has been provoked inevitably by the wars in the neighbouring former Yugoslavia and, of course, 11 September. Islam in Hungary demonstrates a unique path of development and specific responses to local and global circumstances throughout its history.

GEZA FEHERVARI, (1990)–

Unrealized plans for an Islamic Centre at the T rbe of G l Baba.

Despite the 150-year Turkish rule over Hungary in the 16th and 17th centuries, later Hungarian public opinion was not antagonistic towards Islam.[1] In sharp contrast to the Orthodox Christian Balkan nations, many Hungarians expressed sympathy towards the Ottoman Empire at the time of the 1877–1878 Russian-Turkish war and then with the Muslim Bosnians whom certain Hungarian entrepreneurs wished to colonize. The reason for the Hungarian parliament's enthusiastic vote for 'Act 17' in 1916 – recognizing Islam – was the war alliance with Turkey and the integration project of Bosnia-Herzegovina. In 1918 the Kingdom of Hungary lost the latter dream along with two-thirds of its territory in which, except for the Ottoman occupiers, the number of Muslims had never been significant. The few hundred Bosnian refugees and Turkish immigrants living in Hungary in the interwar period were ignored by the nationalistic authorities. The long-standing idea of building a mosque in Budapest was also ignored.

'Act 33' of 1947 cancelled the discriminatory distinction between 'recognized' (such as Islam) and 'accepted' denominations (as Catholicism and the 'Israelite' faith), which had few practical consequences at that time. The socialist era was not, to say the least, conducive to religious activities. Practising Muslims, old Bosnians and Turks, having passed away – some having left in 1956 – coupled with the fact that their children did not follow their fathers' faith, meant that virtually no Muslims survived.

The Middle Eastern connection

From the late 1970s onward, thousands of Arab students resided in the country. They were allowed to pray in their university dorms if they desired. Most did not. Opening a house of worship for them was not given serious consideration, not really because of the atheistic regime but because they were not seen as sufficiently important. Socialist Hungary had excellent commercial and other relations with certain 'anti-imperialist' Arab countries. The project of an 'Islamic centre', including a mosque, at the Türbe of Gül Baba or elsewhere in Budapest, was cautiously raised several times from the mid-1980s, but to no avail.

Agrarian engineer Balázs (Abdul Rahman) Mihálffy became a Muslim while working in North Africa in 1984. He attended an unpublicized August 1987 Budapest meeting between a delegation of the Muslim World League, led by then Secretary-General Abdullah Omar Nasseef, and the Chairman of the Hungarian Office for Church Affairs as well as other greedy Communist officials longing for Saudi generosity. Mihálffy received the authorities' approval. He elaborated a statutory document and formed, in August 1988, the Hungarian Islamic Community of a few Hungarian citizens, mostly young females. When 'Sheikh-Chairman' Mihálffy claimed to be the sole Hungarian Muslim – as he often did in the 1980s – he was hardly exaggerating.

Although the Community's membership allegedly grew to several hundred in the early 1990s (non-citizen Arabs still did not count) it remained under the Sheikh-Chairman's tight control. Due to then Prime Minister József Antall's personal interest in Islam and relations with Muslim countries, Mihálffy worked for a while in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He then organized Arab-sponsored humanitarian relief and other shipments to Bosnian refugee camps during the war. In April 1996, following disputes within the Community, he was replaced as Head by Zoltán (Sultan) Bolek, a young convert with a college diploma in state administration.

At that time, the number of Arab and other Orientals of Muslim tradition residing in the country was probably close to five thousand. The proselytizing activities of a small part of them were supported and coordinated from abroad, mainly the Arabian Peninsula. The Vienna-based East European office of the World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY) was perhaps the main regional source of inspiration, printed propaganda material in local languages, and funds. WAMY's Vienna representative, who had his network of Arab co-workers in Budapest as elsewhere in the post-socialist region, happened to be then Bosnian President Alija Izetbegovic's Sudanese friend, Elfatih Ali Hassanein. He was also Director of the famous Third World Relief Agency (TWRA) providing the Bosnian army with Saudi-bought weapons in 1992–1993.[2] The breaking of the controversial UN arms embargo and the East European (re-)Islamization project were thus, for a while, inter-related. WAMY and TWRA helped the Muslim organizations of Hungary, the country's resident Arabs, more than the Hungarian Community. These Arabs created several associations and foundations in Budapest and the countryside (Arrahma, Alouakf, and Kibaᶜa were the most important ones), also to justify the various grants they expected or actually got from the Arab world.

Two communities

In 1996, the Hungarian Community of Bolek received from the Municipality of Budapest a modest 150m² property (a former pharmacy) for ritual use in the 13th district. They renovated it with foreign Muslim financial assistance. In other Hungarian cities, such as Szeged, Miskolc, and Debrecen, Muslims pray in private apartments. In Pécs, they are permitted on Fridays to pray in the Yakovali Hassan Pasha Djami, an Ottoman monument still in relatively good condition.

The country's biggest working 'mosque' and proselytizing centre is in Budapest's 11th district: 300m² premises, with an inside upper floor, known as 'Dar us-Salam'. It is run by 'The Church[3] of the Muslims of Hungary', which was registered in 1999 in terms of Act 4 of 1990 on religion, separate from the Hungarian Islamic Community. At the time of writing, Mohamed Abdulgalil Dubai and Mustafa Anwar, both naturalized Hungarian citizens of Arab origin, as well as the latter's Hungarian-born son-in-law Zoltán (Sultan) Sulok lead 'The Church'. It was created by resident Arabs, mainly students and young intellectuals, partly as a continuation of the Arrahma Foundation. Dubai edits a Hungarian-language Islamic periodical entitled *Gondolat* (Thought) publishing many translations from *Al-Europiya*, the journal of the Federation of the Islamic Organisations in Europe, and other articles articulating his and his colleagues' views on Islam and the society in which they live.

The number of the two (Sunni) communities' active members is not likely to exceed a few hundred each, while that of the immigrants of Muslim descent in general may reach several thousand if families are included. Public interest in Islam is limited despite the Balkan events of the last decade. Most Bosnian refugees had already left the country, while the Oriental Muslim asylum seekers (Iraqis, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, etc.) living in camps expect to somehow get to the West. Hungary, after all, is hardly the place refugees dream of. The authorities have provided religious services in some of the facilities where refugees are kept. Their changing number is not included in the above estimate.

Islamic studies comprises the Islam-related field in which Hungary undoubtedly excelled. Since Ignac Goldziher, numerous outstanding Hungarian Islamicists have contributed to this scholarly discipline, not least the late Julius (Abdul-Karim) Germanus, well known for his conversion to Islam and his numerous popular books on it. Besides Alexander Fodor's Department of Arabic Studies at Eötvös Lóránd University, Róbert Simon, Head of the Department of Oriental Studies of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and Letters must be mentioned. The Hungarian translation and interpretation of the Qur'an is one of his most famous works.[4] No other Hungarian version of the Holy Script has reached its level of accuracy and erudition. It was nevertheless not intended for ritual or *daᶜwa* (Muslim propaganda) use.

The *daᶜwa* material printed in Hungarian is of varying quality. Increasing the local Muslims' awareness and providing spiritual and community services for them (as ritual slaughter for instance) are difficult tasks in an un-Islamic environment. The majority of today's Hungarians are secular. Two-thirds are said to be of the Catholic tradition; less than one-third of the Protestant tradition. In Budapest many are of Jewish origin. A considerable number of Hungarians have joined newly established religious communities and sects. Most view Islam as an alien body despite, or perhaps because of, the historical precedents. Non-assimilating foreigners and minorities have never been highly regarded in this still very patriotic country. It is in the interest of the Muslims to emphasize their belonging to the nation, something they usually do in a variety of ways.

Until recently the Muslims of Hungary had seemed to stand closer to Christian conservatism than to the Left, which won the May 2002 parliamentary elections. A few days later Bolek was re-elected Chairman of the Hungarian Community after he had been ousted from that post three years earlier. He preaches tolerance, moderation, and Western commitment, which are rather topical in the post-11 September context. His relations became strained with 'The Church of the Muslims' since the latter is not really pro-Western. Its review *Gondolat* is critical of libertarianism, sexual freedom, women's rights in a Western sense, and Israel. It refers to strict Middle Eastern ideals, while Bolek's Community of Hungarian converts, including one Shiᶜi council member, remains far from that uncompromising spirit. The dire need both have for foreign Islamic funding may be their main, if not only, common feature. Internal dissent, competition, and altercation have always characterized both although things seem to have improved in Bolek's Community since his re-election.

As in other Central and East European cities, concerns have been raised recently as to whether Budapest's immigrant Muslim community could serve as a hiding place or logistical base for 'sleepers' or other agents of radical international Islamist organizations, which might recruit from among its members. If so, they probably take lower risks in Hungary than they currently do in Western Europe, where they have come under professional intelligence scrutiny. Hungary's few Muslims obviously feel at home. They tend to condemn terrorism, some of them, however, with qualifications.

Notes

1. Gyorgy Lederer, 'Islam in Hungary', *Central Asian Survey* (1992): 1–23.
2. Gyorgy Lederer, 'Islam in East Europe', *Central Asian Survey* (2001): 12–13.
3. The Hungarian term for church, *egyház,* probably refers to the text of that Hungarian law.
4. *Koran*, Hungarian translation by Róbert Simon (Budapest: Helikon Publishing, 1987).

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