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[Religion](#)

A Model for Europe?

History and Practice of Islam in Bosnia-Herzegovina

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Bosnia-Herzegovina can look back on an eventful history of social upheaval and armed conflicts in which especially Bosnian Muslims were frequently the victims. It is therefore rather surprising that Bosnian Islam is characterised by a relatively high degree of cosmopolitanism and liberalism that might even serve as a model for European-style Islam.

The Muslims of Bosnia-Herzegovina¹ practice what can be called “Islam of a European character”. This means that the Bosniaks’ understanding of Islam² is based on liberalism, desire for peace, reconciliation, and openness to the world. The Islamic Community, the representative body of Muslims in Bosnia and the diaspora territories they inhabit, has been pursuing its religious life in harmony with the ruling legal system for 135 years, clearly stands for the separation of state and religion, finances itself, is economically and organisationally independent, offers a high degree of transparency in the face of various monitoring mechanisms, organises itself according to democratic principles, and affirms a pluralistic democratic system of government. It also always emphasises the European identity of the Bosniaks, which includes acceptance of coexistence with other religions based on the Community’s own experience.³

In order to explain this assessment in more detail, this article first seeks to illuminate some of the particularities, developments, and characteristics of the history of Bosnia and the Bosniaks that have shaped the Bosniaks’ understanding of religion to this day. An overview of the history of Islamic institutions, thought, and everyday practice in Bosnia since 1878 follows. An examination of a few recent influences on the teachings of Islam and the current situation of the Islamic Community round off the article.

The Bosniaks and Religion: Historical Peculiarities and their Repercussions

In the Middle Ages, Bosnia was already an established kingdom. For example, one of the

princesses from the Kotroman family married a count from southwest Germany and imperial adviser at the court of Charles IV.⁴ The medieval kingdom has had a great symbolic value for Bosniaks since the Habsburg period (1878-1918), as indicated by the state coat of arms chosen in 1992 – an aspect of Bosniak historical consciousness which stands in marked contrast to the hegemonic discourse in Arab countries and Turkey.

The development of this regional identity was promoted, among other things, by the fact that “Bosnia” was also preserved as an administrative unit under the rule of the Ottomans (1463 to 1878). Thus, the transitions to Islam are obviously connected with the existence of a pre-Reformation “Bosnian church” and its persecution by the Popes – not least as a result of a typically European crisis situation. In any case, it seems doubtful that the region’s Islamisation was coercive in nature, especially as regards the Balkan countries (Serbia, Greece). Instead, as the westernmost province of the Ottoman Empire, Bosnia developed into a country characterised by religious diversity – with Catholicism, Orthodoxy, Islam, and Judaism all represented.

Bosnian Muslims had careers in the political and military apparatus of the Ottoman Empire, making decisive contributions to developing their country and strengthening its reputation. In the final phase of the Ottoman Empire, the strong position of military commanders in the border provinces favoured separatist tendencies, such as the autonomy movement of Husein-Kapetan Gradašćević – the “Dragon of Bosnia”, still popular today – in the 1830s.

After revolts in Serbia and Montenegro triggered the Great Eastern Crisis in 1876, the European powers met at the Berlin Congress in the summer of 1878 and agreed to grant those territories independence, although Bosnia itself was to be administered by Austria-Hungary. While this occupation was something of a shock to Muslims, the majority of them remained in their homeland and began the process of integration into the new political system. For four decades (1878 to 1918), the country was part of Central Europe; modernisation processes took hold in society, economy, infrastructure, and education; and Bosnian Muslims also gradually moved away from the Ottoman Empire and oriented themselves towards Central Europe. This influenced their lifestyle, clothing, and university education, for example, but also the interpretation, practice, and teachings of Islam itself. The Habsburg monarchy succeeded in gaining the loyalty of the Bosniaks, but it was conditional on religious freedom and a sensitivity to religious needs of the affected – of those in the military, for example. For example, the 1882 Military Law defined rights and religious freedoms explicitly and in detail: Muslims in uniform were allowed to perform their daily prayers and Friday prayers and were entitled to a separate diet that was free of pork and lard. Moreover, imams were engaged to hold Friday and holiday prayers.⁵ The First World War confirmed the Bosniaks' identification with the Habsburg monarchy – the members of the elite Bosniak Regiment were regarded as “Austria’s bravest sons”.⁶

The 1914 assassination by Serbian nationalist Gavrilo Princip of Franz Ferdinand, the heir to the throne, and his wife Sophie was regarded in Austria-Hungary as a radical expression of Serbia’s insistence on its territorial demands. When, in 1918, Bosnia and Herzegovina were appended to the “Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes” (SHS) led by Belgrade, that kingdom ignored the Bosniaks programmatically in its very name. It also implemented an immediate “agricultural reform” that ruined the landowners. The state was also hostile to most of its neighbors and made official harassment seem a normal part of life.⁷ The Bosniaks aspired to

self-organisation in order to preserve the territorial integrity of their homeland, Bosnia, and their religious identity within the Islamic faith. The name “Yugoslavia” goes back to the introduction of dictatorship in 1929, which was



followed by an administrative reclassification that destroyed Bosnia as an internal administrative unit. The Second World War brought the Bosniak population in Eastern Bosnia mass executions and expulsions, especially by “royalist”

Serbian military units called *Chetniks*.⁸ The total proportion of civilian victims in Bosnia was eight to ten per cent. The victory of the communist partisans under Joszip Broz Tito was followed by the removal of non-communists



“Return of genocide”: The massacre of Srebrenica is seen as the most serious war crime on European soil since the Second World War. Source: © Damir Sagolj, Reuters.

from offices and functions: believers and dissidents were met with an aggressive policy of atheisation and repression. Some laws and ordinances targeted Muslims specifically – the ban on veils, the nationalisation of property belonging to the Islamic Community, the closure of Islamic schools and Sufi orders, and the prohibition of religious literature are just some examples. Bosniaks were strongly represented in precisely those urban middle classes which, after 1945, were considered social enemies who did not fit into communist society. They were characterised, among other things, by independent craftsmen and merchants as well as members of the conservative, educated middle class. The Islamic Community was placed under state control, its property – mosques, schools, real estate – was largely nationalised, and its personnel were often directed by the secret service. On the other hand, socialism contributed to industrialisation and urbanisation. Primary education for girls was compulsory, and women were better represented in the labor market. The regime attempted to exploit Muslims within the framework of non-aligned policies in pursuit of foreign policy goals vis-à-vis socialist dictatorships in the Arab world such as Egypt, Libya, Syria, and Iraq.⁹ With the help of a powerful secret service and indoctrination, the communist ideology conquered the public space and permeated private life. Religious life often withdrew into the private sphere, and for a few decades, the religious life of many Muslims took place under a glass bell jar. During this time, the Bosniaks learned to mobilise their own forces and to promote their own Bosniak way of reading and practicing theology. Secularisation was subsequently forced and pushed ahead by means of open or informal pressure in the context of broader social transformation processes. In a survey of 600 Bosniaks, religious sociologist Dino Abazović found that 60 per cent preferred to treat religion as a private matter. Only a minority performed the five daily prayers.¹⁰

After the retirement of the head of secret service Aleksandar Ranković in 1966, a process of political opening began and lasted until the 1970s: mosques could be built, the Islamic girls' school

was reopened, Islamic books could be printed again, foreign studies in Cairo and other places were approved, and more. In 1968, the Bosniaks were also recognised as an equal nation, but under the misleading name of “Muslims in a national sense”. Tito’s death in 1980 led to a renewed intensification of repressions. The condemnation of 13 intellectuals, including Alija Izetbegovic, in a staged trial in 1983 was intended to intimidate, but instead displayed the irrationality of the regime on the international stage.

Due to reprisals during the Communist dictatorship, religious life mainly took place in private.

Slobodan Milošević, who became head of the party in Serbia in 1986, sought to re-centralise Yugoslavia. The party organisations in Slovenia and Croatia fought back and after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1990, an absolute majority of the people of these republics voted in referenda to leave Yugoslavia. When Bosnia followed this model in 1992, the Belgrade regime reacted with a brutal deployment of the Yugoslav People’s Army, which became complicit in participating in the extermination policy: although the war was primarily over territory, it also represented a war of annihilation on the civilian population, Islamic cultural assets, and on architecture, especially mosques. Brutal acts such as cutting crosses into the skin of prisoners led many Bosniaks to believe they were being attacked only because of their religious convictions – although the majority of them scarcely involved religion in their daily routine, but lived Islam at best according to the principle of “belonging rather than believing”.¹¹ Apart from the war itself and all that it entailed, the effect of such – albeit paradoxical – attributions seems to have led the Bosniaks to an interest in their own origins that has since continued to grow.

In the summer of 1992, American journalist and Pulitzer Prize winner Roy Gutman spoke of a return of genocide to European soil. The discovery of mass graves had confirmed the massacre of the civilian population in the meantime. The collective execution at Srebrenica was only one of many prominent war crimes. Expulsions and deportations to concentration and rape camps had been routine since the spring of 1992. The Security Council had also imposed an arms embargo on Bosnia. When Tuđman and Milošević concluded a pact in 1993 with the aim of dividing Bosnia between Croatia and Serbia, the Bosniaks were attacked by both sides, although many Bosnian Serbs and Croats fought in the Bosnian army for the country's independence and territorial integrity.¹² Iran deserves the credit for undermining the arms embargo. It should be emphasised that the arms deliveries were made in coordination with the U.S. According to Helmut Kohl, who was Chancellor at the time, Germany, then in "critical dialogue" with Tehran, also "ignored" the embargo from 1994 onwards.

Of European Character:

The Islam Practiced by the Bosniaks

Bosniaks are indigenous European Muslims who are part of Europe not only geographically, but also historically and culturally. Islam in Bosnia is rooted in the Sunni tradition, Hanafi school of law, and Maturidi theology, in which various Sufi orders represent a mystical interpretation of Islam.¹³ An important part of religious practice is intercessory prayers performed at places of pilgrimage (*dovišta*). The practice itself comes from pre-Islamic times, from medieval Bosnia, where followers of the heretical sect gathered to pray on the hillsides and river banks. Even today, believers and representatives of the Islamic Community meet on fixed days to maintain this tradition. A reformation movement for the revival of Islamic thought became an important element of the Bosniak Muslim identity. In view of the intensive encounters and experiences with various political, social and economic systems, religious scholars felt compelled to find solutions

to new living conditions, especially in the late 19th century, when Bosnia was under the administration of Austria-Hungary and when Islam and Muslims were brought into close proximity with European culture. Progressive modernists or reformists such as Mehmed Teufik Azabagić, Mehmed beg Kapetanovačić-Ljubušak, Mehmed Džemaludin Čaušević, Husein Dozo, and others accepted the current challenges and adapted their interpretation of Islam to the changed living conditions. Even in the "first Yugoslavia", when the Bosniaks were no longer recognised as a people and the property of the Islamic Community was largely nationalised, the reformist tradition of scholars made their contribution to the preservation of religious life and of Bosnian identity. A school of thought arose which, based on the sources of Islam, the Quran and *Sunnah*, sought ways to enable Muslims to live in various secular state systems without abandoning their own religious identity. The experience of finding their way in different social systems and living in close proximity to other religions and nations while at the same time reinterpreting Islam contextually on the basis of legitimate sources – again, the Quran and *Sunnah* – with the help of legitimate means (*ijtihad*),¹⁴ promoted the experience of diversity and strengthened the adaptability of the Bosniaks.

As a central authority in religious affairs, the Islamic Community has clearly positioned itself against an extreme interpretation of Islam.

The Islamic Community:

A Repudiation of Extremism and Violence

An essential part of Bosniak religious identity is the Islamic Community (*Islamska zajednica u Bosni i Hercegovini*, or IZ), which was founded in 1882 during the Austro-Hungarian era, and



Light in the darkness: Many Bosniaks who have been traumatised by war and genocide regard Islam as a religion of freedom, promises of happiness and tolerance. Source: © Dado Ruvic, Reuters.

represents the Bosniaks' official religious organisation. This Bosnian form of Islamic organisation is considered exemplary for Europe today. The Islamic Community is independent of the state and other organisations, finances itself, and has an elected head (*Reisu-l-ulema*), a semi-democratically elected legislature (*Sabor*),¹⁵ a constitutional court that ensures that the Islamic Community's work complies with the constitution, and an administrative apparatus (*Rijaset*). Most of the income is from membership fees, taxes (*zekat*, *sadakatu-l-fitr*), and foundations (*vakuf*). The community is responsible for mosques, trains and appoints

imams and religious teachers, draws up legal opinions (*fatwa*), and is responsible for religious instruction and for theological studies at three universities.¹⁶ The Faculty of Islamic Studies in Sarajevo, which is responsible for the education of imams, theologians, and Islamic scholars, has clearly positioned itself against any extreme, violent interpretation of Islam. The Islamic Community sees itself as the central Islamic authority for Muslims in Bosnia and abroad, including imams who pray in Bosnian mosques in Germany, Australia, or the U.S. They are appointed in their entirety by the *Reisu-l-ulema*. This central organisation of the Islamic

Community, with the imams, religious teachers, and theologians trained in their educational institutions (*madrasas* and faculties), is considered a model for Muslim organisation, leadership, and representation. This centralisation has proved to be beneficial and stabilising, since there have been no cases of radicalisation in the mosques controlled by the Community itself. According to its own statute (constitution), the Community bases its activities on the Quran and *Sunnah*, the Bosniak Islamic tradition, and current needs. This tradition is understood to be the way in which Bosnian Muslims have practiced, interpreted, and taught their religion in Bosnia for about 600 years. The Islamic Community has repeatedly affirmed the principle of the separation of religion and state.¹⁷ There has therefore been no explicit demand for the introduction of Sharia, the Islamic law. The attitude of the Bosniaks, who respect the law and whose lifestyle tends to be European, can also be observed in the fact that polygamy has never been practiced. Xavier Bougarel, for instance, calls the Bosniaks “irreversibly secular”.¹⁸ The Islamic Community is based on democratic principles. Office holders, starting with *Reisu-l-ulema*, are elected by ballot. Their terms are limited to a period of four to seven years and can be extended by a maximum of one term. This also reflects a European-coined understanding of Islam. The religious sociologist Merdjanova, who dedicates herself to researching Islam in the Balkans on the basis of comparative studies, has found that the Islamic Community of Bosniaks is playing a key role in conveying a positive image of Islam and that it can serve as a model for Muslims in Europe.¹⁹

Revival of Islam: Causes, Dangers, Opportunities

The processes of democratisation in the late 1980s and 1990s led to the collapse of the communist system. Since human rights and therefore religious freedom are among the values of a democratic society, religion could again be practiced in public. The newly formed political parties appealed to the national and religious identity of their people, which in most cases

quickly resulted in nationalism. Among the signs of the growing presence of religion in the public sphere were, among others, the introduction of religious instruction in schools, the increasing use of places of worship, headscarves on women, weddings in mosques, and the opening of Islamic schools and faculties. As in other post-communist societies, a revival of religions began.

Additionally, the war in Bosnia from 1992 to 1995, in which the Bosniaks became the primary victims of genocide, mass destruction, expulsions, and rape, also led to a growing return of Muslims to God and religion. The influence of globalisation processes, multimedia networks, social media, and internet forums also played a role. They facilitated the rapid dissemination of new ideas and interpretations of Islam. There is now a wide range of self-appointed preachers who post their sermons online, but also questionable Islamic (online) legal opinions of dubious origin, composed on the basis of inadequate theological knowledge.²⁰

Even though Western countries, especially Germany and Austria, provided humanitarian aid during the Bosnian war and sheltered and supplied refugees, there was no discernible strategy on the part of the EU or the U.S. for ending the armed conflict in Bosnia. Thus, the Bosnian army was on its own, and Bosnians felt abandoned by the Western world, the UN, the EU and the major powers. The people of Bosnia had firmly believed that the West would not allow a multi-ethnic and multi-religious country with its numerous historical monuments to be destroyed right under their noses. Disillusionment was swift. The Bosnian government sought help from countries that were willing to provide weapons, money, and food. The primary benefactors were Iran and Saudi Arabia.²¹ Other countries, such as Libya and Syria, were cautious, and Gaddafi even received a medal from Milošević for oil deliveries to Serbia during the war. Aid for Bosnia from these countries included fighters and Islamic missionary aid organisations, which also distributed complementary Islamic literature. This

included translations from Arabic, which propagated a perspective on the correct way of life according to Islam, and interpretation of Islam itself, which was previously unknown to the Bosniaks. According to this literature offered, the Muslims in Bosnia were too irreligious, having drifted far away from the “true” Islam. Scholarships for theological studies in Cairo, Medina, Damascus and Amman were awarded to graduates, some of whom, on their return home, brought a new understanding of Islam back with them. Majority Muslim countries, especially those, such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar, that had been avoided by the communist regime, also contributed a great deal to the reconstruction of demolished Islamic architecture. To this day, various organisations are still active with their cultural centers, offering language courses or similar assistance. This led to a pluralisation of the Islamic scene in Bosnia. On the one hand, the formal structures of the Islamic Community changed as they opened to other schools of law; on the other, informal changes resulted from globalisation processes. Beyond the control and influence of the Islamic Community, this led to a propagation of an alternative, sometimes literal, non-contextual interpretation of Islam. Many Bosniaks, traumatised by war and genocide, perceive these new ideas as attacks on the traditional Bosnian understanding of Islam, rejecting their rigidity as an attempt to replace a religion of peace, happiness, and tolerance with one of dissatisfaction, darkness, and exclusion.²² There is even talk of a secret war between Iran and Saudi Arabia over long-term influence on political, religious, and security-related institutions in Bosnia.²³ Turkey’s influence has increased in the form of Turkish governmental and non-governmental organisations, especially since the AKP came to power. Many Bosniaks welcomed this development as a counterbalance to the Salafists and emphasised the relationship with the Ottoman Turkish culture as an integral part of the Bosniak Islamic tradition. This has manifested itself both in the practice of Islam and in the development of a secular understanding of the state since the time of *Tanzimat*, the era of the modernisation initiated by the Ottoman

Empire in the 1830s, which stands in contrast to developments in Saudi Arabia or Iran. In fact, in addition to the indigenous Bosniak understanding of Islam, a competition has developed between Turkish and Saudi Arabian interpretations of Islam.²⁴

The Islamic Community’s strong position makes it harder for radical Islamic groups to establish themselves in Bosnia.

Other Islamic groups that operate among the Bosniaks in Bosnia and the diaspora communities they populate, but outside the Islamic Community itself, are *Shia*, *Ahmadiyya*, Bahá’í and *Sufi* Orders, and the followers of Fethullah Gülen (*Nurdschije*). They are not covered in the media even though they have followers among the Bosniaks. *Shia* organisations in Bosnia such as the *Ibn Sina* Institute, the *Kewser* women’s organisation, the *Mulla Sadra* Foundation, the *Djulistan* pre-school and primary and secondary school, the *Znakovi vremena* journal, the *Sahar* TV channel, etc. are financed by Iran. They address all levels of society in Bosnia and have the potential to import a new religious practice. The *Ahmadiyya* and the *Bahá’i* movements are active in Bosnia through peace-building education projects, although there are also various other Islamic movements and educational institutions, including those from Turkey. These include the new *Sufi* orders (*tariqat*), the government-friendly International University of Sarajevo (IUS), several primary and secondary schools (*Bosna Sema*) and a university (International Burch University) founded by Fethullah Gülen and the humanitarian organisations of religious origin associated with him (*Hizmet*). However, the media attention is mainly directed towards foreign “fighters” and Salafists. Nationalist politicians, such as Croatian President Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović and Czech President Miloš Zeman, make use of populist rhetoric when they accuse all Bosniaks of being radical Islamists and a threat to Europe, contributing to

the current uptick in intolerance towards Muslims in the Balkans and Europe.

In fact, the radical movements from abroad have an implementation problem in Bosnia, so that their influence on everyday Islamic life is limited: Bosniak parents use their educational institutions for their children, take part in the language and computer courses they offer, and are grateful for humanitarian aid. However, the imams and teachers of religion are still being trained and appointed by the Islamic Community. Islamic literature is published and distributed by the *El-Kalem* publishing house, and the Islamic Community's educational institutions also retain the greatest influence.

The Phenomenon of Foreign Fighters and Salafists

The foreign fighters of the war years largely represented a different understanding of Islam, one which was also the basis of the Salafist movement, which represented the greatest challenge to traditional Islam. With their claim of practicing "true" Islam, the Salafists appeared from the outside to be a monolithic construct from Saudi Arabia, but are actually at odds with each other. A distinction is made between four political groups,²⁵ each of which is entirely represented in Bosnia: The *Taqliidiyun* stand for a conservative interpretation of Islam, even though they are explicitly non-political and distance themselves from violent extremism. For example, they see Osama bin Laden as someone who merely brings disorder and confusion. Nonetheless, they criticise the way the Bosniaks practice Islam and by no means accept the authority of the Islamic Community. Instead, they advocate segregation from society. The *Sahwa* (resurrection) have the largest following inside and outside of Saudi Arabia. Their focus is on education, although their ideological (non-militant) confrontation with secular and liberal values has opened themselves up to precisely these Western values. They take a stand against violence and respect the state of Bosnia and the Islamic Community, even if there are controversies. In Bosnia itself, they have a presence in Internet

portals, NGOs, TV broadcasts, publications, and educational institutions. *Jihadists* are the third group. They represent the militant branch of the Salafists, considering war as a religious duty of all Muslims, provided that Muslims are attacked and the enemy is clearly definable, as was the case in the war against Bosnia. That is why they speak of "legitimate jihad". The fourth and most militant, extreme, and dangerous group are the *Takfirists*.²⁶ The term is considered synonymous with Al-Qaeda, ISIL, or the *Al Nusra* Front in Syria. *Takfirists* claim the right to declare Muslims, Muslim societies, politicians, intellectuals, and anyone who does not identify with their idea to be unbelievers and apostates and to liquidate them.²⁷

For 25 years, this complex Salafist scene has been trying to establish itself in Bosnia, albeit against the resistance of the Islamic Community and most of the Bosniaks. Only individual groups were active in small parallel groups (*para-džemat*) or live secluded in two villages. In 2016, the Islamic Community called for the so-called parallel groups to be dissolved and structurally integrated into the community. The result varied according to the understanding of Islam of the group in question: some groups represent a conservative but non-violent form of Islam that challenges the secular society with the aim of change, while others, who are more militant extremists, view almost all Bosniaks, including the *Reisu-l-ulema*, as unbelievers.²⁸ The former were finally integrated into the Islamic Community, but the militants reject such a concession: Of 38 groups working parallel to the Community, 14 joined. The Bosnian state is now dealing with the anti-integration activists, however, with little interest on the part of the authorities in monitoring these micro-groups closely and ensuring that they comply with the legal requirements of non-governmental organisations and religious institutions, or to ensure that their activities are carried out in accordance with the law, or to close them down in the interests of internal security if they are not.

The influence of these parallel micro-groups should not be underestimated, even though

there is great animosity on the part of traditional Bosniaks towards the Salafists.²⁹ These groups are by no means purely spiritual, but represent a risk to society and security, because they attack wherever the state shows weakness. Corruption, nepotism, incompetence, unemployment and other political obstacles are worth mentioning here.³⁰ These groups were also the ones who sent fighters to the Middle East. While fighters came from the Middle East to Bosnia during Bosnia's war, Bosnians are currently fighting in the wars in Iraq and Syria. For several years now, a mobilisation has been under way in Bosnia, but also in other Balkan countries such as Kosovo, Albania, and Macedonia – with all the associated security risks.³¹ It is estimated that 164 Bosnian citizens (men and women) have so taken the field in Iraq and Syria.³² According to Azinović, security expert at the University of Sarajevo, this figure is considerably lower than that of other Western European countries, for example.³³ Recent studies have shown that these fighters are often former criminals – unskilled, unemployed, often from broken families or marriages and in poor health or a precarious mental state. Their motives are manifold: in addition to personal problems, ideological orientation is a driving force.³⁴ Personal contact and exchange with people from radicalised circles plays an important role in recruitment. The core issue here is separation from the familiar and integration into a new, ideological family, one that offers respect, care, support, a sense of belonging and meaning, and also often money.³⁵ The aim of these militant Salafist groups is to undermine the cultural and ethnic identity of the Bosniaks, marked by a tradition of tolerance and coexistence that reaches back for centuries, instead emphasising an illusory global and religious community – the Umma – which must be fought for.³⁶ The motives are manifold, ranging from the idea of a religious duty to emigrate to an “Islamic state” to the urge to experience an adrenaline rush.³⁷

Among the Bosniaks as a whole, the number of adherents to extreme interpretations of Islam is low, as studies by Evan Kohlman and Juan Carlos Antúnez Moreno, religious extremist

experts, have shown. The Bosniaks tend to be reluctant to embrace new interpretations of Islam, but open to a civil, non-violent, peaceful Islamic way of life: “The main obstacle to the spread of radical Islam in Bosnia is not NATO or the European Union or any other international organisation, but the Muslims of this country. [...] Bosnian Muslims are not a threat for Europe, they are an opportunity.”³⁸ In recent times, the Bosniaks' relations with the Muslim world have enjoyed many commercial ties, but in the religious milieu the relationship is characterised by emotion in the sense of a religious, but not a political, bond.³⁹ Feelings of belonging to Europe or the West on the one hand and to the Muslim world on the other are no longer mutually exclusive because, in the course of globalisation and modernisation, the West must find its way in the Muslim world, just as Islam must find its way in the West. EU counter-terrorism expert Gilles De Kerchove said in an interview with the Spanish newspaper *El Mundo* in September 2017 that Britain had the highest number of extremists with a figure of at least 20,000, followed by France with about 17,000, Spain with 5,000, and Belgium with 2,000.⁴⁰ Measured against this figure, the number of adherents to violent Islam in Bosnia appears to be negligible – despite the fact that the absolute majority of the population in Bosnia are Muslim Bosniaks.

Radical Islamists have also travelled from Bosnia to Iraq and Syria to fight.

Setting Limits, Taking Preventive Action, Working Together

In 2014, Bosnia became the first state in the region to change its penal code to make participation in foreign paramilitary and para-police organisations a punishable offense. This means that participation in the war in Iraq and Syria will be prosecuted. It is important that the state does not operate separately from society in this



Authority: According to prevailing laws, only the Islamic Community is authorised to teach and interpret Islam in Bosnia. Source: © Dado Ruvic, Reuters.

respect, but that both sides are involved in prevention and security preservation issues.

According to the current legal situation in Bosnia, the Islamic Community is the only organisation authorised to teach and interpret Islam there. Since the emergence of alternative Islamic doctrines, the Community has initiated and implemented many measures, only a few of which can be mentioned here: As early as 1993, in the midst of the war, the *Reisu-l-ulema* of that time prepared a legal opinion which established the teaching of the Hanafi school of law as a generally binding standard for rituals in mosques, prayer rooms, and *tekkes*, at religious

events, for example. The Islamic tradition of Bosniaks became an integral part of the statute of the Islamic Community. In a 2006 declaration, Europe was recognised in the Islamic theological sense as a “house of peace and security”, and the signatory Muslims committed themselves to the rule of law and democracy, tolerance and human rights in accordance with the principle of a social treaty. 2006 also saw a resolution on the interpretation of Islam: Since then, numerous continuing education seminars, discussions, and conferences on alternative interpretations of Islam, moderation in Islam, youth work, etc. have been organised with the aim of providing clarification, prevention, and

information.⁴¹ In 2007, there was a further declaration that any interpretation of Islam must be institutionally anchored. In 2008, the Institute for Islamic Tradition of Bosniaks was founded. Through research projects, publications, conferences and similar activities, the Institute scientifically explores and processes its understanding of Islam, thus consolidating it. In 2012, the Center for Intra-Muslim Dialogue (*Vesatijja*) was founded. It has translated several books focusing on Islamic moderation, religious abuse, and violent extremism from Arabic into Bosnian. The platform on the cooperation of the Islamic Community and the organisations of Islamic orientation was also a guide in these efforts. In 2015, 37 influential Bosniak representatives from state, political, religious, scientific, and cultural institutions signed a joint declaration condemning violent extremism and religious abuse. In 2016, the Council of Scholars (*Vijeće muftija*) issued instructions on the integration of individuals and groups who are active in Islam but not members of the Islamic Community. *Reisu-l-ulema* was firm: “We will not allow others to teach us Islam.”⁴²

Summary

In summary, the history of the Bosniaks has always been bound up in the context of European history. The Bosniaks have always lived together with members of other religious faiths and ethnic groups. In spite of circumstances that were difficult at times, they learned to integrate into different states and systems, preserving their faith in Islam, but also to adopt ideas and concepts, such as human rights and democracy, from their surroundings. However, instead of “tolerance” (sufferance by an absolutist central state), many Muslims in Bosnia nowadays prefer the concept of acceptance, as it more clearly reflects the experiences of pluralistic coexistence (*suživot*). This and the intensive exchange with members of different ethnic groups and religions fostered adaptability and acceptance of diversity – despite migration, repression, and the struggle for physical and cultural survival. The history of Yugoslavia (1918-1992) in particular was repeatedly

marked by discrimination and setbacks, especially for the Islamic faithful, but also for Bosniaks as a group. On the other hand, the desire to maintain the Bosnian language, Bosnian territorial integrity, and religious identity (though perhaps not in daily practice) as a cultural heritage, became ever more pronounced. Despite repression, the Bosniaks neither resorted to violence nor revised their own understanding of Islam, which is based on freedom and peace.

The democratisation processes initiated with the end of socialism facilitated the anchoring of human rights and religious freedom. Later, globalisation and the internet allowed a lively exchange with new ideas and an understanding of Islam different from the one Bosniaks had previously held. But the war of annihilation against Bosnia, and especially against the Bosniaks, and the indecisiveness of the Western powers when it came to ending the war, opened the door to other Muslims who supported their brothers and sisters – including by missionary means. The pluralistic Islamic scene since the 1990s has put the monopoly of the Islamic Community into perspective. Even if the Community is the only recognised Islamic authority in Bosnia, it must respect democratic principles and religious freedom. More than 20 years after the end of the war, the state of Bosnia is still in a transitional phase. Corruption and incompetence, shortcomings and a lack of sense of responsibility in politics, nepotism and high unemployment, an economic crisis and a dysfunctional administration still harbor the danger of radicalisation and may lead to violent extremism. The failure of state and social structures is seen in the circles susceptible to such extremism as proof that people with no divine order or absolute submission to God are unable to build just, functioning systems.

For this reason, it is essential that the EU and NATO renew their interest in Bosnia and make that interest more obvious if the forces working towards destabilisation are to be thwarted. The primary objective here must be to strengthen the rule of law and to support a policy aimed at integration, one which firmly anchors the

values of dignity and equality, in order to maintain stability, security and prosperity in the region and secure them over the long term.

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- 1 For the sake of simplicity, references below will be to Bosnia instead of Bosnia-Herzegovina.
- 2 The national identity of the Bosniaks goes back to medieval Bosnia. Bosniak was the name given to all the inhabitants of Bosnia, regardless of their religious identity. During the Ottoman Empire, the population was identified by the *Millet* system on the basis of religious affiliation, making the Bosniak identity irrelevant. Even Serbian nationalists such as Dositej Obradović and Ilija Garašanin referred to Catholic and Orthodox Bosniaks. But in the course of the Serbian and Croatian nation-state movements of the 19th century, school teachers were sent to Bosnia to educate future generations so as to make them no longer be Orthodox or Catholic, but Serbs and Croats. Thus the term “Bosniak” remained for the Bosnian Muslims, for whom the preservation of religious identity was far more important during the various political and social upheavals. Cf. Bringa, Tone 1995: *Being Muslim the Bosnian Way*, Princeton et al., pp. 21, 33-36.
- 3 Cf. Bringa, *ibid.*, pp. 30-32.
- 4 For example, Elizabeth of Bosnia was married to King Ludwig of Hungary. Their daughter Hedwig was crowned the first queen of Poland. She is referred to as Jadwiga of Anjou. She is buried in Krakow with the Polish royal dynasty.
- 5 Cf. Šuško, Dževada 2014: *Bosniaks & Loyalty: Responses to the Conscription Law*, in: *Hungarian Historical Review* 3:3, pp. 529-559, here: p. 536.
- 6 Cf. Neumayer, Christoph / Schmiedl, Erwin 2008: *Des Kaisers Bosniaken. Die bosnisch-herzegovinischen Truppen in der k.u.k. Armee*, Vienna. Schachinger, Werner 1994: *Die Bosniaken kommen! Elitetruppe in der k.u.k. Armee 1878-1918*, Graz et al.
- 7 The Treaty of Saint-Germain-en-Laye prescribed the protection of minorities, but the Kingdom of SHS did not honor the prescription.
- 8 Chetniks are military units that were mainly active in the Second World War as a “Yugoslav army in their homeland” and in the 1992-1995 Bosnian war as allies of the Yugoslav army. Their ideology is based on Serbian nationalism, the defense of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and Greater Serbia, in which ethnically homogeneous territories were to be created. They therefore engaged in ethnic cleansing of Catholics and Muslims in Bosnia. The Chetnik ideology is still present in Bosnia and represented by the organisation *Ravnogorski pokret*, among others. For example, public gatherings and uniformed marches are held through ethnically cleansed cities such as Višegrad and Srebrenica. See Ramet, Sabrina P. 2006: *The Three Yugoslavias: State-Building and Legitimation 1918-2005*, Bloomington.
- 9 In fact, Belgrade’s preferred partners in the Middle East were precisely those regimes over which the Soviet Union exerted influence in the region.

- 10 Cf. Abazovic, Dino 2011: Bosnian Muslims at the Beginning of New Millenia. Lecture at the Akademie der Diözese Rottenburg-Stuttgart, 18-19 Nov 2011, pp. 1-15, here: pp. 10-15, in: <http://bit.ly/2iaaq1i> [24 Nov 2017].
- 11 Cf. Sorabji, Cornelia 1993: Bosnia's Muslims: Challenging Past and Present Misconceptions, London, in: <http://bit.ly/2Af0lc5> [24 Nov 2017].
- 12 The chief generals of the Bosnian army in the Bosnian war were a Serb, Jovan Divjak, and a Croatian, Stjepan Šiber.
- 13 The Hanafi law school (*fikh*) is the most widespread school in Islam. Its influence extends from China and India to Central Europe to Bosnia. It is based on the teachings of the Islamic scholar Ebu Hanife, who was the first to write down Islamic law and categorise it thematically. Maturidi was his disciple and places a great deal of emphasis on reason, or the idea that the primary consideration in interpreting the sources of the Quran should be common sense. The dissemination of the Hanafi school of law and the Maturidi theology is the result of more than four centuries of being a part of the Ottoman Empire.
- 14 *Ijtihad* is a term from Islamic legal theory and means "effort" and "exertion". The point here is that Islamic jurists study a problem or question based on the sources (the Quran and *Sunnah*) and often draw new conclusions that have not yet been clearly addressed in the sources. The method of *Ijtihad* opens up the possibility of reinterpreting Islam under different circumstances of life. See Al-Beirawi, Abu Ismael 2007: Understanding Usul Al-Fiqh. Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence, New Delhi, pp. 75-78.
- 15 The *Sabor* represents the interests of the members of the Islamic Community. One third of the members are imams or employees of this community, while two thirds come from the civilian population.
- 16 In Bosnia, religious education is offered in primary and secondary schools. There are also six Islamic grammar schools (*madrasas*) and three universities (Faculty of Islamic Studies in Sarajevo, Islamic College of Education in Zenica and Bihać).
- 17 Cf. Vijeće Muftija Islamske zajednice u Bosni i Hercegovini 2015: Nacrt platforme Islamske zajednice u BiH za dijalog, in: <http://bit.ly/2BjFHVe> [24 Nov 2017].
- 18 Cf. Bougarel, Xavier 2005: The role of Balkan Muslims in Building a European Islam, EPC Issue Paper No. 43, European Policy Centre, in: <http://bit.ly/2BkELjI> [24 Nov 2017].
- 19 Cf. Merdjanova, Ina 2011: Whither European Islam? Muslims in the Balkans and in Western Europe Compared, in: Stoycheva, Katya / Kostov, A. (eds.): A Place, a Time and an Opportunity for Growth. Bulgarian Scholars at NIAS. Sofia, pp. 33-41, here: pp. 38-39.
- 20 Cf. Bećirović, Edina 2016: Salafism vs. Moderate Islam. A Rhetorical Fight for the Hearts and Minds of Bosnian Muslims, Sarajevo, here: pp. 44-50, 61-65.
- 21 At that time, Germany also pursued a different policy towards Iran, because a critical dialogue was expected.
- 22 Cf. Kavazović, Husein 2016: Bošnjaci nemaju kompleks zato što su muslimani i Evropljani "Bosniaks have no complexes, due to them being Muslims and Europeans", Lecture at the Universtiy of Pécs, 29 Apr 2016, in: <http://bit.ly/2zvzR2D> [24 Nov 2017].
- 23 Cf. Jusić, Muhamed 2016: The Complex Narratives and Movements in Bosnia and Herzegovina, in: Azinović, Vlado (ed.): Between Salvation and Terror: Radicalization and the Foreign Fighter Phenomenon in the Western Balkans, Sarajevo, pp. 43-57, here: p. 44.
- 24 Cf. Öktem, Kerem 2010: New Islamic actors after the Wahhabi intermezzo: Turkey's return to the Muslim Balkans, Oxford.
- 25 Cf. Jusić 2016, n. 23, pp. 48-50.
- 26 In Arabic, *Takfir* means "to declare someone an unbeliever".
- 27 To point out the danger of this group, especially the abuse of fundamental concepts of Islamic doctrine, the Islamic Community published a book which disputes this movement's theological basis. Key terms such as Jihad, *Takfir*, and Sharia are contextualised and logically explained in language that is easily understandable. See Islamska zajednica u Bosni i Hercegovini 2017: Ideologija tekfira i nasilni ekstremizam (Takfir ideology and violent extremism), Sarajevo, in: <http://bit.ly/2j0BUWf> [24 Nov 2017].
- 28 The *Reisu-l-ulema* even received death threats. Cf. TV1 2017: Prijetnje reisu Kavazoviću, osujećeni planovi terorista, in: <https://youtu.be/ydWCt2n8tN4> [24 Nov 2017].
- 29 Cf. Bećirović 2016, n. 20, p. 59.
- 30 Cf. Jusić 2016, n. 23, p. 56.
- 31 Cf. Azinović, Vlado 2017: The Foreign Fighter Phenomenon and Radicalization in the Western Balkans: Understanding the Context, 2012-2016, in: Azinović, Vlado (ed.): Between Salvation and Terror: Radicalization and the Foreign Fighter Phenomenon in the Western Balkans, Sarajevo, pp. 9-20, here: pp. 9-11.
- 32 Cf. Džidić, Denis / Jahić, Amer 2016: Balkan Jihadists. The Radicalisation and Recruitment of Fighters in Syria and Iraq, Sarajevo, in: <http://bit.ly/2iOnMLN> [7 Nov 2017].
- 33 Cf. Azinović 2017, n. 31, p. 10.
- 34 Cf. *ibid.* p. 12.
- 35 Cf. Bećirović 2016, n. 20, pp. 66-72.
- 36 Cf. Azinović 2017, n. 31, p. 15.
- 37 Cf. Azinović, Vlado 2015: Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Nexus with Islamist Extremism, AI-DPC BiH Security Risk Analysis, Policy Note 5, Sarajevo, in: <http://bit.ly/2j01RF1> [24 Nov 2017].

- 38 Cf. Nikšić, Sabina 2009: Bosnian Muslims: Threat or Opportunity? With their European culture and Islamic faith, Bosnian Muslims want to act as a bridge between East and West but instead feel rejected, *Balkan Insight*, 18 Oct 2009, in: <http://bit.ly/2zQ2Gej> [24 Nov 2017].
- 39 Today, the Islamic Community's relations with other Islamic countries are being followed and commented on in a democratic society by a critical press. There was no comparable transparency in former Yugoslavia's intensive contacts with dubious regimes. To this day, the ideological communities of the Tito era are among those who influence the perception of the Middle East, for example. This should be reflected upon and examined or processed as self-critically as is typical of academic theology. Today's business relations with Arab countries are characterised by investments in Bosnia itself. They and the large number of tourists from those countries are an economic boon. Nevertheless, even Bosniaks have reservations about these guests – and the fact that these reservations often have to do with foreign ways of covering women is a testament to the European context of debates in Bosnia, which includes self-righteous populism and bourgeois grumbling. On the other hand, "Islamism in Bosnia" includes, for example, those ascetic-post-materialistic "freaks" and eccentrics who are "searching" for "Eastern" wisdom in Western cities, including Sarajevo, in this case from Islam. In the same way, for example, the "fighters" who grew up in Austria are also to be understood in the context of a long tradition of "romantic revolutionary" idolisation of the Orient by young Europeans.
- 40 Cf. Tanner, Marcus 2017: Bosnia's "Islamist Hub" Tag is Complete Nonsense: The EU's anti-terror chief says the UK probably has more Islamist extremists than anywhere else in Europe – so why do people keep going on about Bosnia?, *Balkan Insight*, 4 Sep 2017, in: <http://bit.ly/2wxvzca> [24 Nov 2017].
- 41 These seminars are generously supported by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung in Sarajevo and by other international representatives such as the Embassy of the Kingdom of Norway and the OSCE.
- 42 Radio BIR 2015: *Reisu-l-ulema*: Nećemo dozvoliti da nas drugi uče islamu (Grand Mufti: We will not allow others to teach us Islam), 10 Dec 2015, in: <http://bit.ly/2AhJDqb> [24 Nov 2017]. See also Al-Jazeera's interview with *Reisu-l-ulema* by Mulić-Softić, Snježana 2015: Reis Kavazović: Zabrinutost zbog zloupotrebe islama i njegovog učenja (Reis Kavazović: Concerns about Abuse of Islam and its Learning), *Al Jazeera Balkans*, 2 Jan 2015, in: <http://ajb.me/9sfjp> [24 Nov 2017].