

Islam in the Western Balkans - primarily in Albania, Bosnia and Kosovo**Chairman: Tomasz Mickiewicz****Discussion leaders: Bernard Brscic, Joel Anand Samy & Natasha Srdoc**

Bernard Brscic: I want to address the development of Islamic proliferation in the Balkans. For those in the west, it is the accepted story that Yugoslavia's disintegration is connected only with rising nationalism. But one of the salient characteristics, in my view, is the rise of Islamic ideology, at least in the case of Bosnia. The three countries we shall talk about are Albania, Bosnia and Kosovo, but each country has a different story. I think that the situation in Albania and Kosovo is somewhat different (although the religious structure is such that one could certainly discuss the prevalent Islamic impact). For example, in Kosovo the issue is of the unresolved national problem of the 'Greater Albania', so in a way it could be addressed in the usual language of Yugoslavia's disintegration. However, in Bosnia we are witnessing a very different phenomenon, mainly an attempt to establish a kind of Islamic state. I will not go into the historical development, or the interpretation of how the Bosnian tragedy happened, but my point is that to a great extent the disintegration and the problems in Bosnia today can be explained through the increasing impact of Islamist ideology.

The received story, and this is also in ex-Yugoslavia, is that Bosnia (during Yugoslavia's existence) used to be a multicultural society; a paragon of multiculturalism with three or four religions living together, particularly in Sarajevo. Those who visited the city saw within a very small area, Catholic and Orthodox churches, mosques and even some synagogues. Bosnia used to be considered as an example of tolerance, but those of us who are aware of some history during the communist regime know this is a lie. The religious problem was not solved at all, nor was the national problem, and Bosnia was the place where communist oppression (in ex-Yugoslavia) was the harshest, the most Stalinist. The communists actually tried to quench the national religious tensions. Therefore, it is not surprising that the bloodiest clash occurred in Bosnia in 1992, although in the West it was presented as a simple case of Serbian nationalist 'ethnic cleansing' innocent Bosnians. Interestingly enough, for cultural studies, the nationhood of Bosnians was somehow socially constructed from the religious point of view, because we do not have in Europe (at least to my knowledge) a nationality whose salient characteristic is its religion. So my point is that in Bosnia there was not only a national conflict between Serbs, Croats and Muslims but also this Islamist element that was present from the start. Bosnia's first president, Alija Izetbegovic, was a well-known Islamic scholar and had been imprisoned in ex-Yugoslavia for designing and establishing an Islamic Jamahiriya in Bosnia.

Now, through this conflict between the Croats and the Serbs, this Islamism somehow strengthened in Bosnia. In addition there was outside interference namely the Muhajadeen and other fighters from Islamic countries who joined the Muslims against the Serbs and Croats. To some extent, one is puzzled how a rather mild version of Sunni Islam in Bosnia, before the war, has developed in the last twenty years into an almost semi-Islamic state. It is less puzzling when one recalls the financial support of Saudi Arabia and other Islamic countries.

Perhaps it is due to a guilty conscience that the European Union and the United States turns a blind eye to the transformation of this country and the obvious attempts at altering the Dayton

Agreement and centralizing the country¹. To the eyes of an outsider, this is in the interest of Bosnian Muslims who are now transforming the decentralized state that would be controlled by the Muslim majority. At first, from the point of influence one has to mention Turkey, which is playing an increasingly important part in the Balkans. Historically, it was the major force in the Balkans and now because of its strengthening economy and respectable international status, Turkey is playing an important part in Bosnia and in a way supporting the Muslim attempts to centralize the government. Of course, besides the Sunni influence of Turkey, one should mention the very negative impact of the Wahabi, Saudis. They are not only financing religious institutions but also the reconstruction of Bosnia's demolished mosques. Most importantly, however, Wahabism is becoming the influence in certain educational establishments. Through the infiltration of Islamic attempts, the Wahabi version is especially important. There is this negative trend of Islamisation in Bosnia.

In my view, Turkey's role, in particular, is a destabilizing force in Bosnia, and I am afraid that neither the EU nor the Americans have any idea what to do about it. Somehow because of the Srebrenica effect, if I can express it that way, they are turning a blind eye to the fact that Bosnia is a failed state, and it will pose huge problems for the EU -- a kind of European cul-de-sac. The problem with Bosnia is that the West does not apply the same rules of the game as it applied to Kosovo, for example.

Of course, Kosovo is a different problem, but the recent ruling by the International Court of Justice that somehow acknowledges the right of independence for Kosovo, and that somehow the Kosovars were able to declare a second national state of Albanians is a *sui generis*, and one cannot deny the right of Serbs, either in northern Kosovo or in Republika Srpska, to declare independence. If we do want to uphold international law, then the same rules should apply, and given that there is a European people, like Albanians, who are allowed to have two independent states, why should not the Serbs, or the Catalans, or the Basques, or the Scots have the same right of independence?

Thus in the Balkans these very interesting experiments are taking place in the field of international law, and thus international law is being (in my view), breached. As I mentioned, one has to discern that this is not an issue of Islamic expansion in Kosovo and Albania, as the project of Greater Albania (to my knowledge) is nothing to do with the expansionist Islamism. But the attempts in Bosnia give cause for concern, and especially now in the region of Sandjak – a small area between Montenegro, Bosnia and Serbia with a Muslim majority,.

I believe that the West should deal not only with the question of expanding Islamism in Iraq and Afghanistan, but also in the way the enemy of the great society is already within the gates and these gates are in Bosnia. There is a kind of parallel society, with villages around Sarajevo that are basically inhabited by the Muhajadeen, who (at least one reads this) apply sharia law and in a way exerting pressure on the Serbs to force them to live in a unified state that would not only exhibit centralizing tendencies, but is about to fail. The possible alternative of course would be the return to the 'Switzerland project' of 1993, which would

¹ See: Corrupted Political Elites or Mafiotic State Structures? The Case of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina by Dunja Larise, HUMSE Journal, Issue 3
www.graz.at/cms/fileadmin/user_upload/humsec/Journal/dunnja_larise_final_version.pdf
see also: Getting Back on Track in Bosnia-Herzegovina - October 2010 Aug 2010 ... relevant in the three-way contest against Bakir Izetbegovic, the son of Alija Izetbegovic, and the media-mogul Fahrudin ...
www.thewashingtonquarterly.com/10october/docs/10oct_Chivvis_Dogo.pdf

transform Bosnia along the Swiss lines, with the introduction of cantons and transform it into a decentralized state without a strong central government.

The current trends are in the opposite direction. Both the EU and United States are behind the Muslim tendency to centralize Bosnia and I am very much afraid that if the West's policy does not change in the region, we shall face huge problems in the future.

Joel Anand Samy Thank you very much for this opportunity to share a few thoughts; it is truly a relevant discussion. The issues of Islam and radical Islam are not only top news in Europe but also in the United States, as we have witnessed with the developments in Manhattan and also in some of the smaller communities across America. It is also interesting to realise that on the eve of this colloquium here, The Washington Post published an article, 'Radical Islam is rising in the Balkans', by Constantine Testoritis, a writer with Associated Press. In one of his paragraphs he states that 'the Balkans is a breeding ground for terrorists, with easy access to the EU'. My observations are based on my previous experiences in the region in the 1990s as an executive for a foundation that provided tremendous assistance to the region and also a private initiative that Dr David Roth and I formed. He was a senior adviser to General Colin Powell during the efforts that led to the pushing back of Saddam's troops into Iraq after the invasion of Kuwait.

For our discussion today, I would like to draw your attention to Dr Samuel Huntington's thoughts on this very issue. Dr Huntington, the author of *The Clash of Civilizations* had relayed the following:

"It is my hypothesis that the fundamental source of conflict in this new world will not be primarily ideological or primarily economic. The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural. Nation states will remain the most powerful actors in world affairs, but the principal conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and groups of different civilizations. The clash of civilizations will dominate global politics. The fault lines between civilizations will be the battle lines of the future. Conflict between civilizations will be the latest phase in the evolution of conflict in the modern world."

I am inclined to share parts of Dr. Huntington's speech delivered on February 4th 1999, at Colorado College.

"Nonetheless major forces are at work producing changes in relative power. These include the demographic stagnation and economic slowdown of the West, on the one hand, and the economic growth of East Asian societies and the demographic dynamism of Islamic societies on the other. Third, in this new world, the relations between states from different civilizations will normally be distant and cool and often highly antagonistic. While ad hoc coalitions may exist at times across civilization boundaries, intercivilizational relations are more likely to be described by such terms as competitive coexistence, cold war, and cold peace. The term "cold war," la guerra fria, it is interesting to note, was invented by thirteenth century Spaniards to describe their relations with their Muslim neighbours, and the world is now likely to be a world of many cold wars."

Samuel Huntington continued:

"In this new world, the most dangerous form of violent conflict would be core state wars between the major states of different civilizations. The principal sources of these two forms of conflict and hence of political instability during the next quarter century will be the resurgence of Islam and the rise of China. The relations of the West with these challenger civilizations - Islam and China - are likely to be particularly difficult and antagonistic. The potentially most dangerous conflict is that between the United States and China."

And Dr. Huntington has further intriguing thoughts as well. Please bear in mind that these

opinions were stated in February of 1999, prior to the events of September 11th 2002.

The Balkan region he cited is also where the East has violently confronted the West. These events began in the 14th century - and shaped this part of the world in ways that may not be noticeable to the Western eye. And herein lies what he calls one of the main civilizational fault-lines. Over the past two decades, this perceived fault-line has been exploited by many, including individuals like the infamous Osama Bin Laden. It is important to remember that Bin Laden himself was an engaged participant who raised funds for the cause in Bosnia and helped to train soldiers. There are reports that Bin Laden was seen in the Balkans. He not only recruited and sent soldiers, he also brought a more dangerous element - radical Islam's ideology to the Balkan region. It is also reported that he also worked very closely, interestingly enough, with individuals in Croatia. During the time of the UN arms embargo being enforced, Bin Laden and his cohorts had to work out a deal with Croatia's then established leadership in order to bring weapons into Bosnia. You can imagine the unsavoury relations that were established then.

Followers of radical Islam, such as Bin Laden, remember the fact that the Turks gained control of Bosnia in 1643 and their failed historic attempts to conquer Europe. Al Qaeda operatives in Bosnia grew to four thousand because they were training military personnel. The Dayton Accord signed fifteen years ago this November stated that the imported Muhajadeens were illegal. However, Sarajevo's government provided Bosnian passports to most of them. According to reports, 3000 people in Bosnia have been raised in Wahabism, and basically this is a somewhat more radical form than that being reported by those from the Islamic Centres.

Bojan Pancevski, who reports for the *Sunday Times*², wrote a relevant piece on March 31st 2010. He mentioned that fifty Al Qaeda volunteers in Macedonia are being monitored by the government. Pancevski also reports that the Saudis have invested over £415m to build more than 150 mosques and Islamic centres in Bosnia alone.

A private group which I spearheaded in the 1990s (without any government funding) provided humanitarian and medical assistance to families and responded to the orphans and those displaced in Bosnia. In a small Bosnian city called Sanski Most, the size of Kranj, in Slovenia, my colleagues and I noticed that there two mosques in the city. Sanski Most, a city of nearly 70,000 at its height in 1991 had dwindled to 5,000 refugees during the mid-1990s. The ethnic cleansing was specifically orchestrated by 'Arkan' - Željko Ražnatović - a paramilitary leader who led a ferocious force, caused widespread havoc in northwest Bosnia.

Just five years after the Dayton Peace Accords were signed, there were twelve brand new mosques serving a population of 50,000 in Sanski Most. We should also remember that since the 1990s, it has been reported that 150 mosques (I am deviating from our topic here) and training centres have been built by those following Wahabism in Bulgaria. Krassen Stanchev will correct my statement if I am wrong; however, these reports are being circulated. In America there were three Albanians from Macedonia who were arrested in the U.S. for attempting to bomb a public facility in New Jersey. It should be noted that the Wahabi sect is growing.

Let us look at some of the numbers and unemployment rates in some of these countries that I have pinpointed: Bosnia, where on August 24th 2010 there was a report that 40% of the

population was unemployed; and over 50% of the youth were unemployed. Youth unemployment in Kosovo in 2009, according to the EU, was 76%. So when you think about the context of fresh recruits in this region, you have a significant network of individuals to work with - who are desperate for something meaningful in the lives.

During my time in Bosnia in the 1990s criss-crossing the nation, there was an occasion for us to stop at a specific location between Zenica and Sarajevo with a group of American volunteers. There, I met up with the head of the Saudi Relief Agency focusing on Bosnia. I did not share my credentials as an American, but just sat down and we began a conversation. I wanted to learn more about their mission, activities and how they were accomplishing their objectives. His response was chilling when he said: "Bosnia is our Islamic movement beach-head into Europe." He also further stated that: "the West will spend millions, and we will not tire in spending billions." And this was during the late 1990s.

It may surprise some when I say that children in Sarajevo at training centres and schools - even pre-school establishments - are also being trained in Arabic; hence, they are reciting prayers in Arabic. When you think about the culture, the current dynamism and radical Islam's strategies, these are drastic changes from what happened in Bosnia before 1990. One myth in certain circles is that Islam is a religion of peace. Even moderates that I have met with will admit the fact that Islam is not a religion of peace. When you read the Koran in its entirety, you will notice texts that certainly communicate a message contrary to that being promoted in various circles.

I would like to mention a few concerns for us, some that were shared by Bernard Brscic here. The U.S. and Europe truly lack a clear strategy in addressing the rise of radical Islam in the Balkan region.. One issue that Bernard raised is the Dayton Accords, and the importance of reviewing and modifying them, and coming up with something that works better.

As I have observed over the years, the region's weak rule of law, lack of protection of property rights and even the absence of basic elements that contribute to a functioning free market environment have perpetuated these high levels of unemployment. The region does not have a market economy, and its leaders are loath to admit it. The region's leaders have purposely not addressed political corruption - political corruption and organised crime real issues that must be dealt with through an effort to strengthen the rule of law and create an independent judiciary.

The transfer of large amounts money from Saudi Arabia and its friends to the region are not well-monitored. We realise that young people are sent to other countries from Bosnia to places such as Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Indonesia. It is definitely a potential security threat to Europe as well as to the United States. There are also concerns about Albania and its high levels of corruption, particularly the ties their military personnel have with the extremist groups. Do not forget that Albania entered NATO not too long ago. We also have to begin efforts to co-ordinate more information, because if you go on the web or read periodicals, not much has been written about this. It is something of a taboo subject, saying that we might infringe on the Muslim population. These sensitivities have been communicated, but I believe it is high-time to look at these clear and present dangers.

Also, the civilizational fault line will certainly deepen, and when we think about funding, we cannot just hold the Balkans' responsible. Libya and Iraq, in recent reports from Austria's Hypo Alpe Adria Bank scandals have stated that Libya and Iraq were providing funds to

support political candidates in Austria. So when you look at the ties present in the Western hemisphere, and Western democracies, there are significant compromises that ought to be examined. The West must not be complacent; and there is concern that some have in Washington is that there are people emerging who are becoming apologists for the Islamic community and lobbying on behalf of Islamic views within the centre-right movement. We must not acquiesce to political expediency, but verify some of the details when it comes to embracing leaders from the Muslim community that have an agenda to advance Sharia law.

Natasha Srdoc: I have found some of the data on the internet, when researching Bosnia. Apparently in 1468-9, just after the Ottoman conquest of Bosnia, there was the rise of multi-confessional Bosnians, so it was not so much an influx of Turks as we believe today, but the rise of Islamic conversion. In 1468, there were some 185,000 Christians, and 1700 Muslims and some twenty years later, there were 30,000 fewer Christians and some 20,000 more Muslims; thirty years after that, there were 60,000 fewer Christians and about 60,000 more Muslims; and in 1600 Muslims had become the majority. The two reasons given for this dynamic pace of development, was the lack of church organization from the Catholic side, and the second reason was *jizya*, the tax that was paid by all non-Muslims, in the Islamic Empire. Basically it was an opportunity to 'save a soul'; that conversion would be beneficial.

When I was at elementary school, a question repeated throughout the year was: 'what are the ethnic groups living in Bosnia?' The answer was: 'Croats and Serbs'. 'What are the religions in Bosnia?' 'They are Catholics, Orthodox and Muslims'. 'So who are the Muslims?' 'The Muslims are Croats, or Serbs of Muslim faith.' It may have been brainwashing at that time, but I believe that people lived more or less in a secular setting then. If you ask Steve Hanke, a lecturer in applied economics at John Hopkins University, who advised Ante Markovic (prime minister of Yugoslavia before the war started)², what was the reason for the war, and how did it begin, he would tell us: it was the critical moment when Milosevic started printing money that was devaluing and giving money to his buddies. At that point nobody else could live in the same country with no monetary supervision, so Slovenia decided to leave as did Croatia in an effort to control their currency. Inflation was 1% a day and perhaps higher than that which contributed to igniting religious conflicts. But that is a discussion for another day. I believe that life was more secular, and perhaps under communism almost suppressed. I certainly did not see many practicing Muslims at that time.

Tomasz Mickiewicz: Natasha, thank you. So we have questions about the diagnosis of what is going on, we have questions about this policy response and those questions are on all levels, starting from the constitutional level, from international law, specific policies, economic policies. So we can follow by discussing any of these.

Silvana Malle: I am just intrigued by one thought when I hear these explanations of the situation in Bosnia, I know this table is not exactly surrounded by fans of the European Union, but the EU has had quite a good way of dealing with East Central Europe in the sense of conditions required for accession to membership. And that seems to raise a question about the western Balkans in general: what, in your assessment, is the great magnetic power of European accession in the current situation that has been described?

² See Steve Hanke and Kurt Schueler, "Monetary Reform and the Development of a Yugoslav Market Economy" CRCE, London, 1991

Bernard Brscic: Are they not interpreted in the context, for example, in the recent referendum in Turkey, an interesting event and why did the West support the anti-Ataturk reforms which were allowing the de-secularisation of society, because it seems that Turkey was the only functioning Islamic state in the eastern world. But it was functioning only because it was authoritarian, almost a totalitarian society. And now, of course, we want to appear as champions of democracy. But nobody is actually looking at the substantive issues, which are that through democracy, as such, it is only a procedural rule to introduce certain changes that will be anti-liberal and hostile to an open society. In the same sense, I do not think that Europe has any weapons to combat Islamism. Why? Because it treats it as simply a religious issue. But it is not only a religious issue, Islamism is a very dangerous ideology that is ultimately completely hostile to western values. For me, a great disappointment, where the European Union is concerned, was the inability, when the preamble on the European constitution was discussed, that we Europeans were somehow unable to acknowledge Western values. We belong to the Judeo-Christian tradition, and to the tradition of Greco-Roman history. I think this would be a very important step towards defining the European - if you want - paradigm. What are European values? Do we stand for the open society? And what do we do with ideologies like Islamism that is openly hostile to our values?

I think that Europe and the West are committing cultural suicide. The problem is we are unable to articulate the basic value system of Europe because of modern liberalism and relativism. The vital liberal question is, how do you deal with the enemies of the open society? Do you show your liberalism in such a way that you tolerate, for example, the communists and the Islamists, who are hostile to differences of opinion and who want to impose a totalitarian regime?

Who are we in the west? What is the western tradition? How are we actually willing to articulate our moral and political paradigms?