

Islam in Yugoslavia Today

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In September 1989 I visited Yugoslavia for the sixth time. As always, there was electricity in the air, and as always, the national question, as Yugoslavs fondly call it, had a great deal to do with that electricity. Serbs fear everyone (so it seems these days), everyone fears Serbs, Macedonians and Montenegrins fear Albanians, and Montenegrins fear each other. Typical of this atmosphere was a conversation in which I found myself, at a Belgrade cafe, as two local journalists drew and redrew maps of the Balkans, showing a menacingly large arrow projecting northward from Istanbul through Serbia, while they told me of their fears of a Muslim threat to European civilisation. 'Albanian Muslims and Bosnian Muslims are in this together,' they told me in deadly earnest. 'They have big families in order to swamp Serbia and Yugoslavia with Muslims, and turn Yugoslavia into a Muslim republic. They want to see a Khomeini in charge here. But Belgrade is not their final goal. They will continue to advance until they have taken Vienna, Berlin, Paris, London — all the great cities of Europe. Unless they are stopped.'¹

Non-Muslims in Yugoslavia recall Libyan dictator Qaddafi's generosity in providing for the Yugoslav Islamic community's mosque-building programme, note Bosnia's long-term interest in building economic and cultural contact with Syria, Iraq, and other Arab states, point to the Muslims' efforts to align Yugoslavia with the Arabs during the October 1973 war in the Middle East, and underline the on-going contacts between Islamic clerics and believers in Bosnia and their co-religionists in the Middle East, as, for example, in the case of young Yugoslav Muslims who go to the Middle East for Islamic theological training. For some non-Muslims, these are all signs that the Muslim community is in some sense a foreign implant, that

¹ Psychiatrist Jovan Rašković told *Intervju* magazine in September 1989 that Muslims are fixated in the anal phase of their psycho-social development and are therefore characterised by general aggressiveness and an obsession with precision and cleanliness. (Croats, by contrast, suffer from a castration complex, according to Rašković.) *Intervju* (Belgrade), No. 216, 15 September 1989, pp. 15-16.

Muslims are not fully integrated into Yugoslav society, that they should be feared.

Hence, when, after repeated delays, permission was finally granted to Muslim, in 1981 to construct a new mosque in Zagreb, to replace the one closed down after the war, controversy was inevitable. Like the Serbs, Croats expressed concern that their republic would be Islamicised. Three years later — in June 1984 — when much of the construction on the mosque had been all but completed, arson destroyed much of what had been built. Yet eventually in September 1987, the mosque was opened, with considerable fanfare.²

Needless to say, this fear of the Muslims has aggravated inter-communal relations within Bosnia, and sharpened the recent debate about Bosnia's place in the federation. Bosnian Muslims have repeatedly talked of wanting Bosnia declared a 'Muslim republic', while Serbs and Croats have from time to time hinted that Bosnia might best be divided between Serbia and Croatia. Within Sarajevo, one hears people declare for a united Yugoslavia, on the argument that for inhabitants of Bosnia, there is no other realistic option: any attempt at dividing it up — so they argue — would stir up inter-communal violence in this divided republic.

Yugoslav Islam

Some 40 per cent of Bosnia's population registered as 'ethnic Muslims' in the 1981 census, as against 32 per cent Serbs, 18 per cent Croats, and 8 per cent ethnic 'Yugoslavs' (the latter usually the produce of mixed marriages).³ That makes Bosnia the only federal unit in Yugoslavia in which no single nationality group constitutes a local majority (See Table 1). More broadly, however, ethnic Muslims remain a relatively small minority in this country — tallying about 9 per cent of the total population in 1981.⁴ In religious terms, one may speak of some 3.8 million confessional Muslims in Yugoslavia, accounting for about 16 per cent of the total population of the country. Religious Muslims include not only the greater portion of ethnic Muslims, but also varying numbers of Albanians, Turks, and Macedonians, as well as some Gypsies, Montenegrins, Croats,

² *Nedjeljna Borba* (Zagreb), 5-6 September 1987, p. 4; *Vjesnik* (Zagreb) 7 September 1987, p. 3; and *Danas* (Zagreb), No. 290, 8 September 1987, pp. 23-24.

³ Viktor Meier, 'Bosnien und seine Muslime als Sonderproblem des Vielvölkerstaates', in *Nationalitätenprobleme in Südosteuropa*, edited by Roland Schönfeld (R. Oldenbourg Verlag: Munich, 1987), p. 125.

⁴ *Statistički kalendar Jugoslavije 1982* (Savezni zavod za statistiku: Belgrade, February 1982), p. 37.

Serbs, and even small groups of Pomaks in the region surrounding Pijanac.⁵

The Islamic community in Yugoslavia is organised into four administrative regions: *Sarajevo Region* (Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, and Slovenia, with its Supreme Head office in Sarajevo); *Priština Region*; *Skopje Region* (Macedonia, with its Head office in Skopje); and *Titograd Region* (Montenegro, with its Head office in Titograd). The Reis-ul-ulema, the head of the entire Yugoslav Islamic community, has his office in Sarajevo.

At the dawn of the post-Tito era, the Islamic community had at its disposal the following institutional resources and facilities:⁶

Sarajevo Region:

- 1,092 mosques
- 569 mesdžids (smaller places of worship)
- 394 places for religious instruction
- 2 madrassahs (religious schools)
- 5 tekijas (cemeteries)

Priština Region:

- 445 mosques
- 125 mesdžids
- 35 places for religious instruction
- tekijas (*unknown*)
- 1 madrassah

Skopja Region:

- 372 mosques
- 19 mesdžids
- 10 places for religious instruction
- tekijas (*unknown*)
- 1 madrassah

Titograd Region:

- 76 mosques
- 2 mesdžids
- 36 other buildings
- 4 turbe (mausoleums)
- tekijas (*unknown*)

⁵Ahmed Smajlović, 'Muslims in Yugoslavia', in *Journal Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs*, Vol. 1 No. 2 (Winter 1979) and Vol. 3 No. 1 (Summer 1980), p. 132; Rudolf Grulich, 'Der Islam in Jugoslawien', in *Glaube in der 2. Welt*, Vol. 7 No. 4 (1979), p. 6; see also S. P. Ramet, 'Primordial Ethnicity or Modern Nationalism: the Case of Yugoslavia's Muslims, Reconsidered', in *Muslims in the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia*, edited by Andreas Kappeler *et al.*, (forthcoming).

⁶Smajlović, 'Muslims in Yugoslavia', pp. 135-136.

In addition, every Muslim town or village has a separate graveyard for Muslims. The figures for mosques would be much higher today, having passed the 3,000 mark in 1986 and given the energetic building programme which the Yugoslav Islamic community has been able to maintain.

As of 1980, some 120,000 children were receiving Islamic religious instruction at the primary school level. This instruction is provided free of charge to believers. Secondary religious instruction is available at two madrassahs: Gazi Husrefbey's madrassah in Sarajevo, and Alaudin madrassah in Priština. The former is more than 450 years old. In addition, an Islamic Theological Faculty opened in Sarajevo in 1977, and a women's department was created the following year.

The Gazi Husrefbey Library in Sarajevo is an important repository for Islamic materials, and contains several thousand original manuscripts in Arabic, Turkish, and Persian. Courses in Arabic are offered in Sarajevo, Priština, and Belgrade.

Each of the four regions also has a clerical association, known as an Ilmija. These associations were integrated into the work of the Socialist Alliance of Working People of Yugoslavia, and in this way acquired a legitimate role in the public arena.

The Islamic community naturally maintains a number of periodical publications. The chief ones are: *Preporod*, a fortnightly newspaper published in Serbo-Croatian, in Sarajevo; *Islamska misao*, a monthly journal devoted to theological reflections and news of the community, likewise published in Sarajevo; *El-Hilal*, a Skopje journal, published in Macedonian, Turkish, and Albanian; the bimonthly journal *Glasnik*, the official bulletin of the Supreme Head office of the Yugoslav Islamic Community, published in 15,000 copies; *Takvim*, an annual publication; *El-Islam*, which concentrates on religious information; *Edukataiislam* an Albanian-language publication of the Priština office; and *Zemzem*, a newspaper published by the Gazi Husrefbey madrassah and which is said to have won credibility among young people. All four regional head offices also have extensive book-publishing programmes for religious literature.⁷

Many Bosnian Muslims emigrated abroad, some of them prior to World War One. Today there are Muslims who trace their origins to the lands of present-day Yugoslavia, living in the US, Canada, Australia, Turkey, and in smaller numbers in several West European countries, including Austria and Germany. In 1977, Yugoslav Muslims in Canada sent a request to the Islamic Community of Yugoslavia to send a delegate to help organise their religious life. A similar request was subsequently submitted also by the Yugoslav Muslim community in Australia. Yugoslav Muslims

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 141-42.

have also taken employment, at certain times, in Libya, Iraq, and Kuwait. This experience must be presumed to have strengthened the affinity of at least some Yugoslav Muslims for the Middle East.

The Social Presence of Islam

Despite this formidable institutional base, the Islamic leadership has adopted a much lower profile than either the Roman Catholic Church or the Serbian Orthodox Church. While the two Christian churches have been able to celebrate Christmas quite openly for several years, with Christmas Day even declared a state holiday in Slovenia as of 1989,⁸ one cannot imagine the Islamic community obtaining the same access to the media, let alone seeing its festivals declared state holidays in Bosnia.

A comparison of the leading Muslim newspaper, *Preporod*, with its Croatian Catholic and Serbian Orthodox counterparts — *Glas koncila* and *Pravoslavlje* respectively — is telling. *Glas koncila* has for years struck a defiant posture, openly polemicising with the secular press on a regular basis and publishing highly informative interviews, as well as articles about state atheism, Christian-Marxist dialogue, proposals to change the laws governing religious life in Yugoslavia, and other social issues; *Pravoslavlje*, for its part has become ever more strident (since 1981) in its defence of Serbian interests in Kosovo and its advocacy of Serbian nationalism in general.⁹ Yet *Preporod* rarely if ever enters into the social arena, restricting itself by and large to reports on the construction of mosques and the observance of religious holidays, along with information about Islamic teachings.

The same pattern carries over into the behaviour of religious leaders. Catholic prelates (such as Zagreb's archbishop Franjo Cardinal Kuharić) deliver sermons defending human rights activists (e.g. Dobroslav Paraga) or demanding an official exoneration of the late Alojzije Cardinal Stepinac, archbishop of Zagreb 1937-60 (tried and convicted in 1946, on charges of collaboration with the *Ustaše* fascists). Serbian Orthodox prelates are somewhat less bold, but may be found celebrating Serbian heroes such as Tsar Lazar,¹⁰ Tsar Dušan, and Vuk Karadžić, and taking part in commemorations of Serbian national holidays — most pointedly, the 600th anniversary (in 1989) of the famous Battle of Kosovo polje. One cannot imagine Islamic leaders being allowed to celebrate the anniversary of the

⁸ *Keston News Service* No. 336, 19 October 1989, p. 14.

⁹ See, for example, *Pravoslavlje*, 15 May 1982, p. 1.

¹⁰ Re. Tsar Lazar, see *Nin*, 17 September 1989, pp. 42-43.

Ottoman conquest of Bosnia, or feeling sufficiently confident to undertake to speak out on human rights issues — at least not in the years prior to 1990.

On the contrary, the Islamic community has often found itself on the defence. For example, in November 1987, the Republican Conference of the Socialist Alliance of Working People of Serbia discussed the activities of the Islamic community and concluded that Islamic fundamentalism 'had reached Yugoslavia and . . . threatened to spread all over Europe'.¹¹ There have also been rumours and charges from time to time, whether in Bosnia, or Macedonia, or Serbia, that Islamic religious education is inspired by nationalist and separatist orientations. (This will be taken up below.)

In fact, the Islamic community adopted a more quiescent and defensive posture — by comparison with the Catholic and Orthodox churches — from the very beginning, and from an early time was able to boast smooth relations with the authorities. In the initial years — roughly 1945 to 1966 — religious policy was basically worked out in Belgrade, which meant that religious policy throughout the country was guided, within some limits, by a single vision. The decentralisation of the political and administrative system which began in the late 1960s and which was designed to satisfy irresistible pressures on the ethnic level inevitably had consequences for the religious communities. Hereafter, the Catholic Church, with most of its believers living in Slovenia and Croatia, had to worry principally about the orientation of secular authorities in Ljubljana and Zagreb, authorities who, at least in Slovenia, generally showed themselves to be more liberal than their counterparts elsewhere in the country. The Orthodox, living predominantly in Serbia, Macedonia, and Montenegro, had an entirely different set of authorities to deal with. At times, a kind of alliance between church and party developed at the republic level — as, for example, has occurred in Serbia under Slobodan Milošević. And for the Muslims, with their largest concentrations inhabiting Bosnia and the autonomous province of Kosovo — the authorities in Sarajevo and Priština have been their principal reference points for coexistence. This has made for a more complex situation for Muslims for two reasons. First, the authorities in Bosnia tended toward the dogmatic side through much of the 1970s and 1980s. (This is not the case today, however.) This meant that Bosnian Muslims were more likely to be attacked in the press than were, for example, Slovenian Catholics or Macedonian Orthodox, and more likely to find their news organ subjected to pressure. Second, Bosnia and Kosovo are the two regions in Yugoslavia with the

¹¹ *Aktualnosti kršćanska sadašnjosti (AKSA)*, 13 November 1987, summarised in *AKSA Bulletin*, No. 8, 26 January 1988, p. 14; see also *Vjesnik*, 12 November 1987, p. 4.

most delicate inter-communal relations. And while these relations are usually defined in terms of ethnic groups, there are also religious dimensions — as was patently clear in 1981 and 1982, for example, after Albanian Muslims desecrated the Orthodox shrines of Kosovar Serbs, setting fire to the monastery at Peć. An 'alliance' between the Muslim community and secular authorities in either Sarajevo or Priština — on the model of Milošević's 'alliance' with the Serbian patriarchate or even on the model of the friendly relationship which emerged between the Catholic Church and the communist authorities in Ljubljana — is obviously ruled out, although as Bosnia follows the lead of Slovenia and Croatia and adopts a multi-party system, as seems likely, different parties will surely offer different programmes affecting the religious sphere. Liberalisation is bound to be the result.

Yet despite the tradition of dogmatic rule in Bosnia and despite the complexities arising from the republic's ethnic fragmentation, Muslims were able to maintain a vigorous mosque construction programme throughout the postwar period. In Bosnia-Herzegovina alone, some 400 new mosques were built between 1945 and 1985, and some 380 mosques were renovated. By 1986, there were some 3,000 mosques in Yugoslavia as a whole.¹²

From time to time, the communist press would attack the Muslim community for allegedly misusing religious training. For example, in 1973, officials of Tetovo *opština* in Macedonia estimated that some 20 per cent of students were receiving religious instruction after regular school hours. The officials claimed, however, that religious instruction was not being used strictly to instruct children in matters of faith and worship. On the contrary, *Nova Makedonija* charged that

in some places, religious education is even used to orient the children in a direction entirely different from our social system, in broadening national intolerance, and in promoting other anti-socialist manifestations.

But efforts to reach some understanding with local clergy proved unavailing, according to the Macedonian newspaper.

The measures that we have implemented in this respect have not brought any particular results. We have had discussions on this subject with the Islamic religious community which has claimed the opposite.¹³

Aside from questions of the authorities, it is clear that in a multi-confessional society (e.g., Bosnia), individual religions may

¹² *Radio Free Europe Research* 30 June 1986, pp. 21-22.

¹³ *Nova Makedonija* (Skopje), 19 June 1973, p. 2.

have to be more circumspect than would be the case in a religiously homogeneous society (such as Slovenia).

For that matter, the Islamic community in Yugoslavia is itself internally divided, insofar as the leaders of the Yugoslav Islamic community have given the cold shoulder to the dervishes (or, as they are more formally known, the Community of the Islamic Alia Dervish Monastic Order). The dervish order was introduced in Yugoslavia in 1974, and by 1986, numbered 50,000 followers, organised in 70 monasteries across southern Yugoslavia (53 in Kosovo, 10 in Macedonia, and seven in Bosnia).¹⁴ At one point, the Islamic Community ordered Sheikh Jemaly Haxhi-Shehu, senior leader of the dervishes, to disband the order. Shehu replied by registering his order as a 'self-managing' organisation, thus giving himself legal protection — a move paralleled in Croatia, if for different motivations, by the Catholic 'Christianity Today' publishing house.

Women and Islam

In the course of the 1980s, Muslim women have been taking a more independent role in public life. The fact that a large group of Albanian Muslim women organised a demonstration independently, in late 1989, to protest deteriorating conditions in Kosovo is a sign of increased awareness and self-confidence. Another sign of change came earlier, in 1981, with the graduation of the first woman (Nermina Jasarević) from the Islamic Theological Faculty in Sarajevo.¹⁵

By 1986, the first female imams had been educated in Skopje, and were delivering sermons (the first being in the Kumanovo mosque). In the course of 1986, Albanian men in Kumanovo went to the authorities to protest the appearance of women at the mosque, since, according to Islamic teaching, women and men should not mix at the mosque. It turned out that the sudden appearance of the women was the result of direct pressure from the Islamic Central Board in Skopje, whose elders were intent on upholding the equality of women and who pointed to the tradition that every mosque has a special, separate room for the women. Why had the women not come earlier? Isa Ismaili, leader of the Islamic community in Kumanovo, explained it thus:

For two reasons: first, until now we did not have female imams; now we have them and they are capable of delivering their

¹⁴ *Start* (Zagreb), 19 April 1986 as cited in *Radio Free Europe Research* 30 June 1986, p. 21.

¹⁵ *Preporod* (Sarajevo), 15 November 1982, p. 10.

sermons. Secondly, we in Kumanovo have only a single mosque, which is too small to hold even all the males; this is why we did not insist that the women come . . . Long ago we asked the authorities for permission to build a new mosque, but we unfortunately never got an answer . . . if our women are forbidden to go to the mosque, we will ask the men not to go either. Why should the men (be allowed to) pray and not the women? This is an attack on equality.¹⁶

The Future of Islam in Yugoslavia

In 1989, a small publishing house in Zagreb brought out a *Bibliography of Croatian Writers of Bosnia-Herzegovina between the Two Wars*. The publication at once stirred controversy, because of its inclusion of a number of Muslim literary figures in the ranks of 'Croatian writers'. The Islamic Community was outraged, and its organ, *Preporod*, published a lengthy commentary, in which it excoriated the bibliography for the 'Croatisation' of some 38 Muslim writers. Among this number were such Islamic-sounding names as Salih-beg Bakomović, Enver Čolaković, Abdulatif Dizdarević, Husein Dubravić Djobo, Mustafa H. Grabčanović, Kasim Gujić, Osman Nuri Hadžić, Muhammed Hadžijahić, Mehmed Handžić, Ahmed Muradbegović, and others. *Preporod* called this a 'negation of the cultural independence of a national tradition'.¹⁷

This controversy was symptomatic of a deeper problem which has serious implications for the Islamic community — viz., the tendency of the Croatian and Serbian nations to want to claim the land on which the Muslims live, for their own nations, and to absorb or suppress Islamic culture. Both Croats and Serbs have claimed large parts of Bosnia in the past, and Serbs have viewed Kosovo as their ancestral heartland, depicting the Albanian Muslims as intruders. Hence, while Serbs sometimes betray a desire to suppress or eject Islamic culture from Kosovo, where Bosnia is concerned, Serbs and Croats have long registered rival claims to 'annex' the Muslim community, claiming alternatively that Muslims are 'really' Serbs, or Croats.¹⁸

It is against this background that periodic Muslim pressures to declare Bosnia a 'Muslim republic' must be seen. Such a move would provide a small legal reassurance to the Muslims. It also reflects the

¹⁶ Quoted in *Radio Free Europe Research* 30 June 1986, p. 23.

¹⁷ *Preporod*, 1 September 1989, p. 14.

¹⁸ For discussion, see Muhamed Hadžijahić, *od tradicije do identiteta: Genezna nacionalnog pitanja bosanskih muslimana* (Svjetlost: Sarajevo, 1974); and S. P. Ramet, 'Primordial Ethnicity or Modern nationalism', *op. cit.*

fact that *some* Muslims at any rate are apprehensive at the prospect of seeing Serbia and Croatia fight over the partition of Bosnia. It is impossible to speculate as to what the long-term effects of a possible breakup of Yugoslavia would mean for the country's Muslims. Be that as it may, it is quite clear, all the same, that there are some sharp differences in the orientation of Bosnia's Muslims, versus Kosovo's Muslims,¹⁹ towards the question of the preservation of a Yugoslav federation/confederation. For Bosnia's Muslims, at any rate, there does not seem to be any reasonable alternative.

TABLE 1

Proportion of ethnic Muslims, Serbs, Croats, 'Yugoslavs', and other nationalities in Bosnia-Herzegovina, 1948-1981 — in per cent.

	Muslims	Serbs	Croats	'Yugoslavs'	others
1948	30.7	44.3	23.9	N/A	1.1
1953	31.3	44.4	23.0	N/A	1.3
1961	25.7	42.9	21.7	8.4	1.3
1971	39.6	37.2	20.6	1.2	1.4
1981	39.5	32.0	18.4	7.9	2.2

Source: Ante Markotić 'Demografski aspekt promjena u nacionalnoj strukturi stanovništva Bosne i Hercegovine', in *Sveske*, Nos. 16-17 (1986), p. 292.

¹⁹In February 1990 Muslim nationalist leaflets, supporting Kosovo's secession and vilifying Serbian leader Slobodan Milošević, appeared in Novi Pazar. See Belgrade Domestic Service (6 February 1990), translated in Foreign Broadcast Information Service, *Daily Eastern Europe*, 8 February 1990, pp. 74-75.