

Radical movements – a challenge for moderate Balkan-Islam?

Esad Hećimović

In this paper, I will try to explain my understanding of the international influence on and internal dynamics within the Islamic communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as within the Islamic scene in Bosnia, Herzegovina and Sandžak as regions in three different states of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Montenegro. In order to understand the developments discussed in this contribution, it will be necessary to give an insight into Islamic ideas, groups and organizational structures in Saudi Arabia and Austria. For this purpose I would like to start with some introductory comments on the terms used in this paper. In this context, I will resort to definitions and explanations given by leaders of the Islamic groups and movements in question. In a second step this paper will focus on their explanation of what is regarded as radical or moderate in Islamic circles in the mentioned countries. Only then there will be enough information available to deal with such delicate questions as the intervention of international actors; without these prior clarifications there would be a risk of wrong and prejudicial reading.

Reflections on terms

We should start with reflections on

- the conflict in Bosnia,
- radical Islamic groups, and
- moderate Islam in the Balkans

in view of the complex interaction between political and religious concerns of different Islamic groups operating in this region.

“Conflict in Bosnia“

I will use extracts of speeches from the movie “Martyrs of Bosnia – part I” to illustrate the way of thinking of radical Islamic groups towards the conflicts in Bosnia and Herzegovina. These examples will also demonstrate why their message is very influential. The movie was produced in London in 1999 by “Azzam.com” and later distributed throughout many countries and regions.

There are some common methods used by Islamists preachers to describe the conflicts in Bosnia and Herzegovina. For instance, they often draw a historical comparison between the suffering of Muslims in Bosnia during the war and that in Spain under Catholic rule. I will first quote influential Saudi preachers and then local intellectuals:

“Bosnia is a sister to Andalusia (Spain). It is a country that Islam ruled for five centuries. The Muslims had a state there and Islam enjoyed a position of power and authority. Then Bosnia was ruled by the Crusaders and afterwards by Communists. Today, the last remaining Muslims still live in Bosnia and traces of Islam can still be found. This is the disaster of the Muslims in Yugoslavia”, sheikh Abdul-Wahab At-Tareri said.

Such comparison of Bosnia and Spain is still a very current strategy of Islamists to argue that Muslims are, in their eyes, not welcome in Europe. It is an attempt to construct a historical conflict between Muslims and Europe and is influenced by religious teachings and an interpretation of the historical experience. An influential Bosnian Muslim preacher, Mustafa Spahić, too, in an article written in 1993 and titled “From Granada to Stupni do”, linked the prosecution of Muslims in Spain under the inquisition with the war crimes committed against Muslims in Bosnia and Herzegovina. There are many other similar examples by influential local intellectuals. Rusmir Mahmutćehajić, a leading Bosniac politician, religious and national intellectual, was invited in 1997 to give a lecture on Bosnia and Herzegovina at Stanford University. However, the State Department denied him an entry visa, probably because he had visited a Palestinian camp as a student. He transformed his lecture into a book with the title “The Denial of Bosnia”, published one year later, in which he also wrote about the persecution of Muslims and Jews in Spain by

Christians. The message was very simple: “Europe doesn’t want a viable Muslim nation in Europe, even 500 years after the last Muslim realm was extinguished in Granada, Spain”. This incident was part of a wider attempt to create a global confrontation between Islam and the West. Frustrated by Europe’s hesitation to support a unified state of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the leading Bosnian Muslim politician Haris Silajdžić argued during a meeting of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina in November 1993 that the West was pushing the Orthodox world and Islam into a conflict in a systematic way. At the same meeting, the academic and politician Muhamed Filipović explained his understanding of Europe as “an area with historical intention to build homogenous national states” and “an area of extermination of Jews and Muslims”. “We have remained the only relict”, Filipović claimed on this occasion. Recently, at the beginning of October this year, during a public speech in King Fahd Islamic Center in Mostar he asserted: “Europe doesn’t want us, as it didn’t want the Jews. Europe will not say that someone should exterminate Muslims in Bosnia, Europe will allow our extermination and it will not take any steps to stop that”.

Further examples can be based on this model. They show why the suffering of Muslims and Jews in Spain from the perspective of radical preachers continued.

“The scholars of history have said: The most distinguished wars in history are those based on belief, because a man who fights for his creed believes that when he dies, he dies as martyr. What occurred in Bosnia and Herzegovina was not only a war between the Muslims and the Serbs, but also between Islam and Christianity. And this is the way we must understand it. It was waged by the entire West against the Islamic world”, Salman al-Awdah, another influential Saudi preacher told an audience of Muslim believers.

“The planned holocaust at the hands of fanatical Christians who seethe with anger against Muslims is merely a further chapter in the dark history of the Crusaders. How similar are the events of today with the events of the past? The calamity of the Worshipers of Allah is that the Muslims are being slaughtered and we are still occupied”, Sheikh Sa’d Bareak argued.

“The suffering of the Muslims in Bosnia is just a new crusade against the Muslims around the world”, Muhammed Qutb maintains in his book “The Dirty face of the West”.

There is another way to look at the issue. If we want to understand the reasons behind the Islamists' appeal, we have to focus on their efforts to link the armed conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina with the religious identity of Muslims. The message of the Islamists is so strong and influential because it connects the suffering of the war victims to their Muslim identity. This ideological interpretation of the conflict is explained by "the infidels" alleged hatred towards Islam. The war is being described as a new Crusade against the Muslims in Europe. According to this theory, genocide on Muslims in Bosnia is seen as a divine punishment for their failure to adhere to Islam. As a consequence, a return to faith and the creation of an Islamic state is recommended in order to prevent a new genocidal punishment. From an Islamic standpoint power does not come with arms, but by returning to true faith. The psychological experience of siege, an experience dating back to the middle-ages had great influence on the formation of a Bosnian Muslim identity. The traumatic experience stemming from mass suffering and loneliness due to an age-long siege still remains buried in the collective consciousness of the Muslims in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Such a background, of course, facilitates the spreading of Islamic ideology.

It is important to realize that the definition of "conflict in Bosnia" has not been just about the political situation in this country. For many Islamic preachers and intellectuals it is rather about the suffering of Muslims on the periphery of the Islamic world, as there is yet no transnational Islamic organization which would be able to ensure appropriate communal protection.

There seem to be only two possibilities for a future development in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Either the conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina continues or this country will be successfully integrated into EU and NATO. For many Islamists and nationalists the conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina has not ended. Radical Islamic groups are waiting for a resurrection of the violent conflict. Such a new violent conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina would be an opportunity for them to present themselves as real protectors to Bosnian Muslims. Besides, many nationalist forces in the region are trying to instrumentalize the issue of terrorist threats for their own purposes, presenting themselves as frontline in the global war

against terror. There are many groups with different agendas in Bosnia and Herzegovina that misuse the international interest in this issue for their own goals.

“Radical” Islamic groups

For the purpose of defining the expression “radical” in relation to Islamic groups it seems helpful to look at the biography as of sheikh Salman al-Awdah. He was one of the leaders of the Islamic opposition in Saudi Arabia, when he was arrested in 1994 by the Saudi authorities. In the movie “Martyrs of Bosnia” al-Awdah, who spent five years in prison, described the conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina as “war between Islam and Christianity”. At that time, he was a key Islamic preacher supporting jihad in Bosnia and Herzegovina and very close to Osama bin Laden. Al-Awdah’s last visit to Bosnia and Herzegovina – now presenting much more moderate views – was in May 2007 as a delegate of the European Council on Fatwa and Research (ECFR). His host in Bosnia and Herzegovina was the Rais ul Ulema of Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Mustafa Cerić.

During his visit to Sarajevo, Sheikh al-Awdah warned the Muslim community in Bosnia and Herzegovina of the danger posed by radical “Takfiri” preachers and groups. Sheikh al-Awdah also delivered a public address to Osama bin Laden live on NBC television on September 14th, 2007, arguing against the killing of innocent people and against the complete destruction of the nations of Iraq and Afghanistan. In this public address he oppugned bin Laden by commenting that “the difference between one who kills and one who guides is obvious”:

“Brother Osama, what happened on September 11 – crimes that we have condemned vociferously since that very day – was the murder of a few thousand people, possible a little less than three thousand. This is the number that died in the airplanes as well as in the towers. By contrast, Muslim preachers – who remain unknown and unsung – have succeeded in guiding hundreds of thousands of people to Islam, people who have ever since been guided by the light of faith and whose hearts are filled with the love of Allah. Isn’t the difference between one who kills and one who guides obvious?”

In this public address Sheikh al-Awdah supported the effectiveness of missionary work, but disclaimed that of armed fighting: “Guiding one soul to knowledge and faith is a momentous achievement. It is this, what will earn us great blessings.”

The message of al-Awdah’s speech is important for our understanding about what is happening today in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Sheikh al-Awdah is a so-called moderate preacher closely cooperating with the official Islamic community in Bosnia and Herzegovina. His activism provides an instructive example for the transformation of Saudi religious influence in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Someone who once described the conflicts in Bosnia and Herzegovina as “war between Islam and Christianity” is now urging Muslims to become more integrated in European societies.

In order to understand the phenomena of “fundamentalism” in Bosnia and Herzegovina it is important to deal with the term “Takfir”. This term refers to apostasy from “true” Islam. The term “Takfir” is the central point in debates between different Islamic groups from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Sandžak and Austria. “Takfiri” is the usual label Islamic intellectuals use to attack Islamic extremists.

“Moderate Islam” in the Balkans

Describing Islam in the Balkans as “moderate” seems politically correct. However, such a categorization is not enough to explain what is happening inside the different Islamic groups. It is necessary first to explain how these movements started after the collapse of socialism and dissolution of the ex-Yugoslav state.

When the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia came into crisis in the late eighties, the primary source for what one might call the Islamic revival in Bosnia and Herzegovina was the activism of a group called “Young Muslims”, led by Alija Izetbegović. Members of this group were later the founders of the SDA party. They started with the indoctrination of the Islamic community of ex-Yugoslavia by equating the “Bos-

niac nation” exclusively with an affiliation to Islam. Within the Islamic community of Bosnia and Herzegovina preachers nowadays speak of a “traditional Bosnian Islam” which, however, is understood more in terms of as it is practiced in Turkey rather than that common in Saudi Arabia.

On the other hand, there are also more recent sources for Islamic activism in Bosnia and Herzegovina, stemming mainly from foreign influences. These increasingly influential doctrines originate in a diverse selection of countries, such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey and Malaysia. They are eagerly transmitted by different forms of competing socio-political and religious organizations: Islamic military volunteers or mujahideens, Islamic missionaries and Islamic aid workers, Bosnian Islamic centres and Bosnian authorities, Iranian mission in Bosnia, as well as diplomatic and other missions from the Islamic world.

We should now focus on one particular source of Islamic revival activism. In autumn of 1993 Sheikh Imad al-Misri published a programmatic booklet called “Attitudes we should change”. In this pamphlet, he advocated radical changes in the interpretation of Islam in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Sheikh Imad was one of the key Islamic missionaries in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where he worked for a decade in humanitarian, non-governmental organizations and in military units. He was deported to Egypt at the beginning of October 2001, where he was sentenced to 10 years in prison because of an earlier crime. In its 2001 annual report, the US State Department’s Anti-terrorist office stated that al-Misri was a member of the Egyptian terrorist group known under the names “EI Jihad” and “Islamic Group”. This group is on the State Department’s special list on terrorist groups as well as on all the lists of perpetrators and sponsors of terrorism kept by Western governments and the UN.

However, the influence of foreign doctrines on the Islamic communities in Bosnia has nowadays ceased. There is now a new generation of Islamic preachers in Bosnia who were educated after the war at Islamic universities in Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Syria and other countries. This new generation of preachers has a much better understanding of the religious and political developments in Islamic countries. They are not foreigners

but citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina with roots in the local societies. Thus, it is no longer possible to distinguish between “imported” and “local” versions of Islam in Bosnia and Herzegovina anymore. It would not be feasible to draw a clear line between the different sources and agents of Islamic revivalism in Bosnia and Herzegovina. There was a debate between and within different Islamic groups and organizations in Bosnia and Herzegovina what is proper Islamic teaching and behavior.

The development of Islam in the Balkans can thus be seen as a consequence of different influences since the end of the socialist period and dissolution of Yugoslavia: the sufferings of Bosnian Muslims during the war; the engagement of fighters from foreign Islamic countries, who partly stayed in Bosnia and Herzegovina after the end of the war; Islamic missionary work aiming to build a real Islamic nation and other factors already discussed above. Many of these groups of preachers would declare themselves as Islamists, if we were to understand Islamism as the use of religion for political ideologies. Current debates focus on which groups or whose ideas are more Islamic, more productive and more useful for Muslims and, related to militancy, which groups are causing damage to Muslims and which are wrongful.

International support for moderate Islam and its misuse

The current situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina has been influenced by a debate which started at the beginning of 2006. In February and March of 2006, three declarations on Islam were published in Bosnia and Herzegovina by the Mufti, the official Islamic community of Bosnia and Herzegovina and a group of 15 Islamic missionaries.

The Mufti addressed the European Muslims, urging an institutionalization of Islam in Europe. His declarations are contributions to a wider debate on the “European Islam” that emerged as a consequence of the terrorist attacks on New York in September 2001, the massacre in Madrid in March 2004, and the bomb explosion in London in July 2005. Three separate declarations were addressed to the European Union, another to the Muslims living in Europe and one to the Muslim world. The aim was

to initiate a debate on creating a “European culture of Islam” as something distinct from national cultures of Islam: “Muslims who live in Europe should present Islam to the western audience as a universal world view, and not as a tribal, ethnical, or national culture,” the Mufti declared.

However, this move was not representative of the processes happening inside Europe or Bosnia and Herzegovina. In fact, the actual situation is very different: we are entering a phase in which the national and traditional interpretation of Islam in Bosnia and Herzegovina is changing under the influence of different Islamic schools and formations. The leaders of the Salafi or Wahhabi movement in Bosnia and Herzegovina and in Islamic centers for Bosnian Muslims throughout Europe present their theories as the “universal Islamic view”. The radicals in this debate describe themselves as being even more universal and more Islamic. At the same time they criticize Bosnian preachers who place stronger emphasis on the practice of local religious traditions for spreading nationalist ideas. The radicals have the intention to purify and unify the different national versions of Islamic teaching. However, for most Muslim believers in Bosnia and Herzegovina their national Islamic tradition is still preferable as it “protects” them from any form of radical interpretation. Radicals are meanwhile invoking the Islamic right for revenge (Al Qisas law), yet the local interpretation in Bosnia and Herzegovina differs in this important point.

“Oh you who believe! Prescribed for you is Al-Qisas (legal retribution) in the case of murder: the free for the free, the slave for the slave, and the female for the female. But if the killer is forgiven by the brother of the killed against blood-money, then adhering to it with fairness and payment of the blood-money to the heir should be made in fairness. This is an alleviation and a mercy from your Lord. But whoever violates this rule will have a painful punishment. And in Al-Qisas (legal retribution) there is a saving of life for you, Oh people of understanding, that you may become righteous.” [Al-Baqarah 2:178,179]

A further example for the battle between the moderate national and the more radical universal version of Islam is explicated in the discussion around the question of mixing the local traditions of Islamic practices

with the customs of the Christian people in Bosnia and Herzegovina or elsewhere. This very question has also caused fierce debates between traditionalists and Salafists.

Another aspect of the debate on “European Islam” in the Bosnian context has been triggered by its transference onto a debate about the foreign activities of Rais Cerić. There are several reasons for that. The close co-operation between this religious Islamic leader and foreign diplomats is seen as a bad sign by many of his close associates. They have started a campaign against him, fearing that his cooperation with foreign states will allow foreign intelligence agents to act within the Islamic community. His opponents put forward a publication entitled “Green book”, which contains documents from the archive of former Yugoslavia’s security service about the co-operation of some religious leaders with state agents during the socialist period. Victims of persecution during the socialist period asked for the removal of collaborators from influential positions within the Islamic community of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Rais Cerić refused to do so which led to an open confrontation with the public. He consequently lost influence and respect in some circles of Islamic preachers and national politicians.

In relation to Cerić’s problematic political strategy, one should add that there had been a misunderstanding between foreign diplomats and him about the reason for support of his moderate position. Cerić had tried to instrumentalize international support for moderate Islam in order to improve his personal position of power and influence and to push his partisan view of the future constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Some European countries, such as United Kingdom, Germany and Austria supported his activism on the international level. This however was obviously rather brought forward as a political tactic to encourage religious leaders to publicly speak against terrorism.

There are several problems related to this kind of activism of religious leaders. The most important one is that, as it seems, such forms of activism wrongly encourages those Western countries that support a foreign policy which transforms Bosnia and Herzegovina into an Islamic country. Many diplomats have visited Cerić’s main office in Sarajevo. For

some Western diplomats contacts with this religious leader have become at least as important as meetings with high ranking politicians in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Thus, some foreign governments have started to reshape their policy towards Bosnia and Herzegovina as part of the so called “Islamic world” or as belonging to the group of countries with Muslim majority. Finally, the Office of the High Representative criticized Rais Cerić in public because he had openly called for the transformation of Bosnia and Herzegovina into a nation state for the Muslim population. There are many intellectuals who criticize Cerić’s misuse of religion for achieving political and national goals, his interference in political life and his too close relation to Saudi or Wahhabi preachers. Such critical perspectives are very important for the democratization of the public and the political atmosphere in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The usual argument of religious leaders for such misuse of power is their intention to retain the so-called “Islamic legitimacy”. In this sense, they have on many occasions asked Western diplomats “not to tie their hands”, because otherwise they would lose control over radicals without Islamic legitimacy. Religious leaders should be respected by society, but they should not take advantage of their position and confuse the public or the so called international community regarding their influence on political life.

This example shows that the deceptive appeal for a wrongful utilization of international support by moderate Islamic circles could develop into a source of potential new conflicts in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In this regard, the debate about the political and constitutional future of Bosnia and Herzegovina represents a very sensitive issue. If there is no attempt to mark a clear distinction between supporting moderate Islamic views and banning the misuse of religion for political and national purposes, the presently already tense situation might escalate and lead to dramatic results.

“Traditionalists” vs. Wahhabis

The debate between Traditionalists and Wahhabis is of immense importance for the future development of Bosnia and Herzegovina. In one of its declarations the main religious body of the Islamic community in Bosnia and Herzegovina has criticized the incorrect interpretation of Islam in Bosnia and Herzegovina and called for the protection of the age-long Islamic tradition in this Balkan country. In this declaration nobody specific is blamed for the incorrect interpretation of Islam. Local Islamic teachers in Bosnia and Herzegovina, however, are talking about Wahhabi influence as “the castration of the Bosniac national identity” (Enes Karić).

From 1992 to 2001, Saudi Arabia collected some two billion Saudi riyals and later distributed it in Bosnia and Herzegovina. According to the Islamic community, this money was spent on several projects to rebuild mosques that had been destroyed or damaged during the war. At the end of 2006, there were more than 500 reconstructed mosques, 145 new mosques, 147 in a phase of reconstruction and 289 mosques were still waiting for repair, including some historically important mosques. However, Saudis have not only paid for the reconstruction of many mosques but, as indicated above, also for the building of large new mosques, which do not correspond to the style and culture of Bosnian Islam. The Salafis want to change traditional Islam in Bosnia; in particular, they intend to alter some traditional practices of mixing Islamic and non-Islamic traditions in Bosnia and Herzegovina. For Salafis and Saudi preachers, many of the popular religious practices and ceremonies in Bosnia and Herzegovina are too similar to the practices of Catholics and Orthodox, Croats and Serbs, which are not acceptable to them. Their intension to purify Islam in Bosnia and Herzegovina consequently is meant to have an impact on political and security issues.

Abdulmelik Bašić, who was the local associate of Sheik Imad al-Misri, wrote a long article which was meant to be his answer to “the media campaign against the so called Wahhabi and fundamentalists” in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In this manifest he wrote among other things:

“Because there are many new forms of behavior in our religious practice which they do not want to leave, some are still justifying their position by following the Hanafi school of Islamic law, or if this is not enough, Bosnian traditional or modern Islam. They [Bosnian Traditionalists] are silencing anyone who argues against such new practices with the accusation that they are Wahhabi. How long such practices will be possible will depend on the people and their ability to discover what is true and what is false. Hanafi Mazhab is something different than the Bosnian Islamic practice today. If the Bosnian tradition is the reference, all of us should know what the practice of our predecessors was before [the communist] partisans forbade religion.”

Bašić further announced the possibility of a civil war within the Islamic community in Bosnia and Herzegovina:

“What should be the gain from this conflict for Bosnia? What should be the gain for Europe and the world? We should seriously and responsibly ask if they want normal relations with mutual respect or they want injustice and discrimination to set up the fire of fitna? In whose interest is a new Iraq, Somalia, Afghanistan, Lebanon? Followers of the Sahwa movement will not do any harm to anyone if they were not pushed to react to evil which is not possible to tolerate or justify anymore.”

In the mentioned article Bašić generally blames the officials of the Islamic community in Bosnia and Herzegovina for not allowing the Wahhabis to integrate into this community or to build a second Islamic organization as alternative solution. Thus, he is asking for a more serious dialogue with the leaders of the Islamic community.

Declaration against Takfir

In March 2006, a group of 15 local Islamic missionaries in Bosnia and Herzegovina that were educated at the Islamic Science Faculty of Medina University (Saudi Arabia), issued a declaration against the so called Takfir-idea and against spreading Takfir ideas in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In this declaration Muslims in Bosnia and Herzegovina are metaphorically described as being “ill” and not directly as being disbelievers. “We should heal and return them to the straight path and the amputation of some body parts should be the last resort, not the first step”, the missionaries stated. According to their declaration, the basis of Bosnian

Muslim society is Islam, not “Kufr” (disbelief) or apostasy. This is one of the most essential debates from the point of view of security issues.

Most of these missionaries are students from Saudi Arabia; some of them were members of the fighting unit “El Mujahideen”, which supported the Muslim dominated Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina during the war. According to them, their motivation for such a declaration was the debate about Takfir. Their intention was to make clear that the basis of the muslim community in the Balkans were Islam, not Kufr. There were three reactions to the declaration from different students of the University in Medina, Saudi Arabia, which made it obvious that this question was to cause a split between the students from Bosnia and Herzegovina in Saudi Arabia. The key question in this debate concerns the Islamic view on the term Bosniac as the usual national identification of the Muslims in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Are they still believers or not? Is their religious practice in the light of Islamic law wrong or not? In the end, the debate culminated in the declaration of Bosnia and Hercegovina as a state of disbelievers, in which Muslims were not safe and protected.

In previous years Sheikh Abu Anas es Shami had acted as Islamic missionary in central Bosnia. He was one of the key ideologists of the Abu Musab al-Zarqawi- and Abu Muhammed al-Maqdisi Takfir-movement. The idea of Takfir is the greatest danger posed by Islamists to European security. In the last 18 months this debate has developed into a conflict between Islamic preachers who want to cooperate with the Islamic community represented by Rais Cerić and those who don't want to cooperate with them. There is at least one organized group of Islamic missionaries active in Austria which still publishes works of Abdullah Az-zam and Muhammed Maqdisi in Bosnian language. The name of this group is Kelimetul Haqq.

Another example for the controversial discourse inside the Islamic circles is the public debate between Semir Imamović, editor in chief of the Islamic Youth magazine “Saff” in Sarajevo, and Nedžad Balkan called Ebu Muhamed, an Islamic missionary in Vienna. Imamović published an article entitled “Takfir from Wiener Küche” and Balkan replied by publishing a long response of almost 500 pages. In this particular debate,

radical or more moderate perspectives are expressed through respective attitudes towards the person of Sheikh Salman al-Awdah. Imamović was his translator during his lecture in Sarajevo. Nedžad Balkan, however claims that al-Awdah no longer deserves the same degree of respect after the Saudi government released him from prison. Radicals are labeling al-Awdah now an official cleric of the Saudi Government. The group around Nedžad Balkan and groups like Kelimetul Haqq in Austria have declared that the leaders of the Islamic community in Bosnia and Herzegovina were not true believers. In their messages, these radicals, who are actively working in Sandžak and Austria, claim that in their activism they are targeting everyone who is Muslim and can understand their message in the Bosnian language, and not just Muslims living in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

There are some other important Bosnian Islamic preachers and activists in Austria. One of them, Muhamed Porča, declared that it were not possible to negotiate with officials in the Islamic community who cooperated with the security service of communist Yugoslavia; or to communicate with Sufis or any other groups or individuals that do not share their views on what might be regarded as correct Islamic behavior. There have been numerous radical groups and organizations actively operating from Vienna during the last decade; these were mostly linked to humanitarian organizations such as the Saudi High Committee, which helps Muslims in Bosnia and Herzegovina, or the Third World Relief Agency.

Campaigns from this group in Austria and their followers in Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as Sandžak were one of the primary causes for inter-Islamic conflict, which in Sanžak's local capital, Novi Pazar, even led to armed clashes. In order to prevent the takeover of some mosques in Sarajevo and other cities in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the official Islamic community closed some religious mosques and buildings during 2007.

Latest developments and outlook

The conflicts in Bosnia and Herzegovina did not end with the signing of the Dayton accord on December 14th, 1995. Soon afterwards, the Coordination Council for Humanitarian Agencies (CCHA) in Bosnia and Herzegovina declared a new aim – to support Islamic education in Bosnia and Herzegovina as part of the nation-building process. In its report for 1995 the CCHA stated that “education is still the key interest for international Islamic and non-Islamic organization in Bosnia and Herzegovina, because of its importance for nation-building”. Many members of the CCHA were banned because of their links to extremists. There was an international intervention during 2002-2004 against many of these Islamic humanitarian and missionary agencies. In some cases, the local government acted upon request of the United States of America. In some cases Saudi Arabia joined the United States in acting against organizations and individuals in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The most important (political) debates in Bosnia and Herzegovina concern the question of police reform as a precondition for a new constitution. As religious and national leader of the Bosnian Muslims, Rais Cerić in his public statements supports the right of Muslims in Bosnia and Herzegovina to have their own national state. He has repeated this on many different occasions, which has led to sharp reactions on the part of Bosnian Serbs and international representatives in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Office of the High Representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina (OHR) reacted to his last statement during a visit to a Bosnian Islamic Center in Detroit. The OHR called upon Rais Cerić not to launch out into political statements that call for the violation of the Dayton Peace Agreement and cause political instability:

“The mandate of the High Representative is to protect the Dayton Peace Agreement. Bosnia and Herzegovina is the country of all its citizens, which includes Serbs, Croats, Bosniac’s and others. The Dayton Peace Agreement protects the rights of all peoples and citizens and Reis Cerić does not have the right to ask for it to be changed. Amendments to the Dayton Peace Agreement are possible only through procedures provided for by the Constitution. The system of Bosnia and Herzegovina can never be arranged to the detriment of anyone.”

It was the first time that the OHR in Sarajevo reacted to Cerić's political statements. The debates about the political and constitutional future of Bosnia and Herzegovina will determine the future development of many unresolved questions. A further Islamization of the national Bosniac community and of their identity is to be expected. The religious and national leaders of Muslims in Bosnia and Herzegovina continue to build their power basis by resorting to the issue of religious and national identities, thereby contributing to a further ethnic fragmentation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. It is still conceivable that Islamic leaders and groups are waiting for a new jihad. At the same time internal clashes between different Islamic groups might also occur. It is still a two way process. The question of the Bosniacs' identity as Muslims will be the main battlefield in the political future of Bosnia and Herzegovina. At the same time, the political and constitutional future of Bosnia and Herzegovina will determine the identity of Bosnian Muslims. In the past 15 years, manifold doctrines and theories of diverse Islamic groups and individuals have had enormous influence on the reshaping of the religious and national identities of Muslims in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It remains to be seen, which external influences and to what degree will have an impact on it in the future.