

Salafism in Bosnia and Herzegovina

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The term *Salafism* comes from the Arabic *salaf* (predecessors or ancestors), describing the early Muslims who, adherents believe, provided the essence of Islamic practice. As Robert Lacey has explained, Salafism calls on Muslims to follow the example of the first three generations of Muslims, known as the *salaf*.¹ The development of Islam in this direction began in its early period and continues to this day, under various names, such as the Wahhabis in Saudi Arabia or the Muslim Brotherhood in many Muslim countries including Egypt, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Indonesia, etc. It should be noted that Wahhabism is another name for Salafism, and it concerns the same movement within Islam. The term *Wahhabism* is usually used by people outside the movement, while followers prefer to define themselves as Salafists.

The founder of Wahhabism, Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1792), began with the assumption that most of the intellectual history of Islam was a history of heresy, unacceptable innovations and external influences. In order to return to the genuine message of Islam, one had to reduce it to a very literal and puritan understanding of the Quran and hadiths.² The outcome was therefore a reductionist and anti-rationalist movement postulating the recreation of the social conditions of 7th century Arabia and the understanding of the world at that time. A natural consequence of this approach is an interac-

tion with “others” in an attempt to dominate or isolate them. In their fatwas, leading Wahhabi religious authorities recommend social contact with non-Muslims and Muslims considered to have “strayed” only for the purpose of conversion. Those for whom there is no hope of conversion should be avoided. Needless to say, this understanding of Islam is a hotbed for all sorts of extremisms.

After years of relative isolation within a communist system, Muslims in Bosnia and Herzegovina (B&H) were unprepared in axiological terms to deal with a variety of Islamic ideas, ideologies, sects and other social phenomena introduced to them in the 1990s. Furthermore, poor socio-economic conditions ever since the war ended in 1995 (such as unemployment and poverty, migration from rural to urban areas, inadequate infrastructure, and demographic growth) made them vulnerable to rebellion and religious radicalization. Bosnian Muslims are not the only target for Salafists. For decades Salafism has been seeking a way to evolve into a global movement and force itself into traditional Muslim communities in areas of crisis, such as Kashmir, Palestine, Kosovo, Chechnya and Iraq. In areas where the social and economic structures have been destroyed by conflicts and poverty, the strict value system that Salafism offers often becomes the only refuge able to instil strength and give hope.

It should be emphasized that an individual's right to choose a lifestyle according to an understanding of his or her faith, regardless of how conservative it might be, is not under dispute. That cannot automatically be taken as evidence of radicalization or something dangerous. The controversy arises when the impact of that understanding results in exclu-

¹ LACEY, Robert. *Inside the Kingdom: Kings, Clerics, Modernists, Terrorists and the Struggle for Saudi Arabia*. New York: Viking, 2009, p. 9.

² Hadiths (Arabic **أحاديث**): reports describing the words, actions and habits of the Prophet Muhammad.

sive, militant, radical views, mostly inadequate to the specificity of Islam in, for example, B&H.

Salafi Islamic teachings first came to B&H during the war, in 1992, with the arrival of foreign volunteers - mujahedeen from Islamic countries. They formed the El-Mujahid unit and were put under the command of the Bosnian Muslims' Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The unit, which mostly consisted of Muslim volunteers, was joined by local Muslims as well. According to some estimates, between 2,000 and 5,000 such volunteers fought in B&H before the 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement was signed.³ After the war, most were expelled under strong US pressure on the government of B&H. However, some settled permanently in the country, where they became a growing internal and foreign policy problem. According to Esad Hećimović, a journalist from Sarajevo, "The volunteers and missionaries from Islamic countries were convinced that Muslims in B&H were brought to a position where they had to fight for their survival precisely because they had abandoned the foundations of their faith. For them, there was no difference whatsoever between religious identity and earthly status. (...) They were trying to persuade Bosnian Muslims that only a return to faith would give them the power they needed to survive. So their belief was that strength lies in faith, not arms."⁴

Although the global Salafi movement has never been homogeneous (consisting of many different, sometimes competing groups), a similar situation gradually emerged in the Salafi community in B&H. After 1995, the Active Islamic Youth (AIO), a group of former Bosniak members of the El-Mujahid unit, and their magazine *Saff* became the most important heirs of the Salafi doctrine. AIO worked for almost a

decade on a religious "awakening" of Bosnian Muslims, embracing the earliest Islamic teachings and practice and rejecting "novelties" in Islam. People connected with the organization participated in a series of public protests and often used rhetoric against other ethnic and religious groups in B&H, as well as against local Muslims who did not share their views. As a result of various investigations connected with terrorist activities and the bad reputation it acquired, foreign donors eventually stopped sending money. AIO ultimately disbanded in 2006, due to a lack of funds.

Poor socio-economic conditions made Bosnian Muslims vulnerable to rebellion and religious radicalization

Recent years have seen other Salafi groups in B&H, as well as in the Bosnian Muslim diaspora (mostly in western Europe). Three major currents have been identified.⁵ They differ primarily in terms of their attitude towards the Islamic community in B&H and the global jihad movement. The first group, headquartered in north-eastern B&H in the village of Gornja Maoča, was led by Nusret Imamović. He and his followers opposed the secular concepts of law, democracy, free elections and any law not based on Sharia law. Imamović has publicly and repeatedly supported violence and the global jihad movement. In late 2013, he and some of his followers went to Syria to join the Al-Nusra Front for the People of the Levant. As a result, he was included on the UN Al-Qaeda Sanctions List.⁶ He was succeeded by Hussein "Bilal" Bosnić.⁷

³ INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP. "Bosnia's Dangerous Tango: Islam and Nationalism," *Europe Briefing* No. 70, Sarajevo/Brussels, 2013, p. 14.

⁴ AZINOVIĆ, Vlado, *Al Ka'ida u Bosni i Hercegovini: Mit ili stvarna opasnost*, Sarajevo, 2006, p. 18.

⁵ AZINOVIĆ, Vlado; BASSUENER, Kurt and WEBER, Bodo. *Procjena potencijala za obnovu etničkog nasilja u Bosni i Hercegovini: Analiza sigurnosnih rizika* [Assessing the potential for renewed ethnic violence in Bosnia and Herzegovina: A security threat assessment]. Sarajevo: Faculty of Political Sciences, University of Sarajevo, and the Atlantic Initiative, 2011, p. 176.

⁶ "Nusret Imamovic was listed on 29 February 2016 pursuant to paragraphs 2 and 4 of resolution 2161 (2014) as being associated with Al-Qaeda for 'participating in the financing, planning, facilitating, preparing, or perpetrating of acts or activities by, in conjunction with, under the name of, on behalf of, or in support of' Al-Nusra Front for the People of the Levant (QDe. 137)." See: SECURITY COUNCIL COMMITTEE PURSUANT TO RESOLUTIONS 1267 (1999) 1989 (2011) AND 2253 (2015) CONCERNING ISIL (DA'ESH) AL-QAIDA AND ASSOCIATED INDIVIDUALS, GROUPS UNDERTAKINGS AND ENTITIES, "Narrative Summaries of Reasons for Listing," at: www.un.org/sc/suborg/en/sanctions/1267/aq_sanctions_list/summaries/individual/nusret-imamovic (last accessed: 1 March, 2017).

⁷ However, Bosnić was accused of having publicly incited other people to join the organizations of the so-called Islamic State in 2013 and 2014. Thus, on 5 November 2015, he was sentenced to seven years in prison for public incitement of terrorist activities, recruitment of terrorists and organization of a terrorist group. See: TOE, Rodolfo. "Bosnia Jails Salafist Chief for Recruiting Fighters," *BalkanInsight*, 5 November 2015, at: www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/bosnia-jails-imam-for-recruiting-islamic-state-fighters-11-05-2015 (last accessed: 1 March, 2017).

The second largest Salafi group is based out of Vienna and led by Muhamed Porča, the imam of the Tawhid mosque in the Austrian capital. He and his followers in Salafi communities in Austria, Germany, Denmark, Serbia and Montenegro also claim they follow and practice what they call “the authentic Islam.” Since 2007, he has been embroiled in a severe conflict with the Islamic community in B&H, which he claims is full of corruption and religious disbelief (*kufr*, كُفْر). He nevertheless remains very influential in Sarajevo and has the support of the para-intelligence service. According to some sources, his contacts lead to the highest political structures in the Federation of B&H.⁸ Porča preached in Austria and Germany and was considered to be close to the German Salafist Pierre Vogel, as well as to Nusret Imamović before the latter left for Syria. Following Imamović’s departure, Porča’s contact person in B&H was Bilal Bosnić, until Bosnić’s arrest. Porča has been the beneficiary of vast funds for the creation of a Salafi “umbrella” organization in Europe called the *Jama’at Salafi ud-Dawa* Union, whose ultimate goal was to win over Muslims faithful to the Islamic community in B&H. It is important to note that Arab-sponsored “charity organizations” such as *Jama’at ud-Dawa* were the link between religious leaders and local Muslim communities. In order to evade restrictions and sanctions, it has diversified its portfolio of charitable organizations into separate branches around the world. However, all are believed to be branches of *Jama’at ud-Dawa*.⁹ Although it is suspected that the money from the Middle East is funnelled to Vienna via Amsterdam, the Austrian authorities have never allowed *Jama’at*’s bank accounts to be monitored. Thus, despite the numerous internal diplomatic notes sent by the US State Department to the Austrian government since 2001, the Salafis’ money in Austria has been protected and remains under Porča’s control.

⁸ www.glassrpske.com/novosti/vijesti_dana/Medju-uhapsenima-u-akciji-Palmira-i-Muhamed-Porca/lat/169109.html (last accessed: 1 March 2017).

⁹ For example, Falah-e-Insaniat Foundation, Tehreek-e-Hurmat-e-Rasool, Tehreek-e-Azadi-Kashmir, Idara Khidmat-e-Khalq, Paasbaan-e-Ahle-Hadith, Aasban-e-Kashmir, Al Mansoorian, and Al-Nasaryeen. See: EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT. *The Involvement of Salafism/Wahhabism in the Support and Supply of Arms for Rebel Groups around the World*. Brussels: Directorate-General for External Policies of the Union, Policy Department, 2013, p. 6. At: [www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/etudes/join/2013/457137/EXPO-AFET_ET\(2013\)457137_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/etudes/join/2013/457137/EXPO-AFET_ET(2013)457137_EN.pdf) (last accessed: 1 March 2017).

¹⁰ See: www.kelimetul-haqq.org.

¹¹ “The secret war,” *The Guardian*, 30 September 2001. Available at: www.theguardian.com/world/2001/sep/30/terrorism.afghanistan6 (last accessed: 1 March 2017).

¹² AZINović, Vlado; BASSUENER, Kurt and WEBER, Bodo, *op. cit.*, p. 178.

The third and probably most extreme Bosnian Salafi group also operates out of Austria. Its leader, Nedžad Balkan (also known as Abu Mohammed), is a Vienna-born Muslim from the southern Serbian province of Raška (Sandžak). Balkan is considered a religious authority of the *Kelimetul Haqq* (the Word of the Truth), a Muslim organization in B&H and Raška (Sandžak), and a source of inspiration for several radical groups in the region.¹⁰ The group is highly supportive of the use of violence not only against “infidels,” but also against other Muslims who do not share their views. Balkan’s followers allegedly promote armed jihad. It thus seems justified to associate them with the movement *Takfir wal-Hijra* (Arabic تكفير والهجر, “Excommunication and Exodus”), which has members or supporters in several countries and is allied with Al-Qaeda.¹¹ However, intelligence sources believe that Balkan’s influence in B&H is rather limited.¹²

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In addition to the three most influential Salafi groups in B&H, a number of small, fairly isolated groups simply aim to live in a more orthodox manner, cite the tradition of the Prophet and think their faith is the only authentic one, complete in form and content, and fully inherited from the Prophet.

Nevertheless, recent years have witnessed the clear emergence of a new generation of Islamist radicals, or Salafists, in B&H. This new generation of young Muslims does not accept the state of B&H or its

laws. It is an enormous shift compared to the “war solidarity” of previous generations of Islamists who fought the 1992-1995 war for the sake of the State of B&H. In the name of their beliefs, these youngsters are prepared to go so far as to start an armed conflict between Bosnian Muslims themselves.¹³

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Salafism has attracted many young people because it is a great substitute for subcultures. Ten or twenty years ago, most young people looking to express their nonconformity would have participated in various youth subcultures (in most cases non-existent today). Important elements of such subcultures include underscoring otherness, an original identity, and a radical utopian ideology that gives members a sense of participating in something important. Today's Salafism in B&H meets all these criteria. It moreover offers uncomplicated religiosity, eliminating any doubts, providing simple answers and, in a way, exempting adherents from the need to face the complexity of the contemporary world.

Can the Bosnian Muslim ulema in the Islamic community in B&H offer reasonable and effective answers and make the community attractive again to young believers? This is an important question, as the Islamic community should be one of the main factors preventing these ideas from becoming mainstream within the Muslim community. Some prominent Muslim intellectuals¹⁴ see the problem with Salafists as being the imposition of an interpretation of religion as religion itself. Yet each interpretation is limited by time, space and experience. In other words, religious thought is and must be dynamic. Unfortunately, today the Bosnian Muslim ulema in its entirety is characterized by dogmatism and intellectual and cultural aversion. There seems to be no understanding that spiritual and cultural identity are dynamic categories, as is religious thought, which is an integral part of them. Identities are not something acquired at birth and not subject to change or development. Thus, in B&H we are witnessing a sort of repressed religiosity or “reduced” Islam, consisting of historically worn out cultural paradigms. In order to suppress Salafi beliefs (and any other radical Islamic beliefs opposed to traditional B&H Islam) and offer this new generation of young Muslims a better paradigm of Islam in the new century, the Islamic community will need to change. The Salafi influence is directly proportional to changes and reforms conducted within the Islamic community. For now, Salafism remains just a challenge, not a problem. However, if it is not dealt with properly, it could grow into a serious problem, for the Islamic community in B&H first of all.

¹³ I am referring to the June 2010 Bugojno bombing of a police station that killed one police officer and wounded several others. Six Salafists were charged with the bombing, three under terrorism laws. Haris Čaušević, their leader, was sentenced to 45 years in prison. See: www.reuters.com/article/us-bosnia-verdict-attack-idUSBRE9BJ14L20131220 (last accessed: 1 March 2017).

¹⁴ For instance, Mustafa Spahić, Prof. Fikret Karčić or Prof. Adnan Silajdžić.