



# ESTABLISHING A BOSNIAK ISLAMIC TRADITION: A RELIGIOUS OR POLITICAL ACT?

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In recent years, the Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina (IC in BiH) has consolidated its socio-political role in the country, mainly after the enactment of the 2004 Law on Religious Freedom, which officially confirmed its monopoly on the management of the Islamic religious field. Even if such monopoly has been challenged on several occasions, the IC has proved its resilience and its ability to adapt to new circumstances through a process of gradual bureaucratization of its internal structure. On one hand, it created new bodies and institutions. On the other hand, it strongly affirmed its identity, which is entirely based on the definition of an “Islamic Tradition of Bosniaks” (Islamska Tradicija Bosnjaka). The article aims at investigating the historical trajectory that led to such reforms and its socio-political implications.



## **Governing the religious field: the Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina and its historical trajectory**

The tendency to standardize within a single structure the different components of the Muslim community, particularly heterogeneous within it, was initiated during the annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina by the Austro-Hungarian Empire (1878), a period to which the foundation of the Islamic Religious Community (which later became the Islamic Community, IC) can be traced back. What happens then is the definitive separation of Bosnian Muslims from the Ottoman Empire, therefore from the spiritual centre of Istanbul, and the appointment in 1882 of the first Bosnian Reis-ul-ulema (Grand Mufti - namely the religious leader of the community as a whole). Therefore, the Islamic Community has always been, since its creation in 1882, an institutionalized organization, structured in a hierarchical way and made up of professionals in charge of managing the religious affairs of those Muslims who remained in Bosnia after the defeat of the Ottoman Empire (Duranovic, 2017).

With the advent of the Communist Party, the centralized representation of Muslims was maintained under the leadership of the Islamic Religious Community. Compared to the previous period, with the internal constitution of 1947, the IC extended its field of government beyond Bosnia, to all Yugoslav Muslims (Novakovic, 2007). In addition, the institution was put under the direction of the Commission for Religious Affairs, a body created to control the position of religious communities within the Yugoslav Republic (Cimbalo, 2017). Thereby the structure remained more or less the same, although the IC suffered severe repression (especially in the first two decades of the communist regime): it was deprived of its autonomy and of some prerogatives, such as the management of religious courts, the possessions of the "*waqf*" (religious holdings) and the management of religious schools. Publishing activities were prohibited, and imams' work was limited to mosques, where they could solely carry out the main religious rituals (Karcic, 2018).



In the 1960s, Yugoslavia initiated a new foreign policy, moving away from the Soviet Union and approaching Muslim world countries, founding the Non-Aligned Movement. This new positioning at the international level brought about a rapprochement between the state apparatuses and the Islamic Community, whose members were widely involved in diplomatic relations with Muslim countries (Bougarel, 2017; Karcic, 2018). The first period of "Islamic revival" began, as described in the literature (Karcic, 1997; 2010), characterized by a renewal of religious activities: contacts and exchanges with foreign countries increased, the construction of religious buildings took on new impetus, editorial activity was restarted, and religious schools were opened. At this point, it is significant to notice how, even during the communist regime (which officially declared itself as atheist and proclaimed the separation between state and religion), the IC was not dismantled, but was maintained because it was functional to the political aims of the party.

In the subsequent years, after the fall of Yugoslavia and during the 1990s war, within the IC a period of transition began, marked by the revolt of the "imam movement", the first democratic elections, and the renewal of the organizational structure of the religious institution (Novakovic, 2007). In the first years of the war, the IC remained deeply divided internally, especially because it continued to be a regional institution in a territory that was increasingly fragmenting along national lines. For instance, the Reis-ul-ulema Selimoski has always remained oriented towards the building of a regional, southern European Islam and pushed to put in the foreground unity of the "umma" against any nationalist claim (Filandra, 2012).

In the same period, the institution suffered serious losses, both in terms of religious personnel and in terms of religious buildings, due to the Serbian aggression in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Some local offices had to stop working completely, others managed to



carry on some activities such as prayers in mosques or humanitarian activities. Given the difficulties and its isolation following the siege of Sarajevo since April 1992, the IC at the central level (based in the capital city) did not intervene substantially, it limited itself to issuing communications through the newspapers or its press agency and provide views on some of the most pressing issues for the community. Due to the context, the IC was reformed in 1993, officially becoming the IC of Bosnia and Herzegovina with the new Reis-ul-ulema Mustafa Cerić, thus losing its regional character and nationalizing itself (Karcic, 2017). The new orientation went hand in hand with the proclamation of independence of Bosnia and Herzegovina which took place a year earlier. Such nationalization corresponded to a greater interconnection between political and religious actors. While beforehand the IC showed a fragmented attitude towards the nation-building process in Bosnia, now it officially took part in it. This process, according to Sacir Filandra, was manifest above all in the involvement of imams within the Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina and in the formation of a Commission for Relations with the Armed Forces and other bodies dedicated to managing the morale of Bosniak fighters (2012).

Meanwhile, different types of aid were sent from abroad and mainly from Muslim countries, in the form of humanitarian aid, soldiers (such as the "mujahidin" - name given to fighters coming from Muslim countries such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, Jordan), as well as Muslim proselytes, whose aim was to bring new impetus to Bosnian Islam, for Muslims were too secularized in the eyes of foreigners, which led to an increased pluralization and diversification of the religious offer (Karcic, 2010). The IC reacted to such a trend by issuing a "fatwa" in 1993 on the official interpretation of Islamic practice in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It was officially established that Muslims in Bosnia should follow the Sunni tradition of the Hanafi school and this obligation extended to all imams in all mosques. Later on, it added the reference to Maturidi theology - thus establishing an



Islamic Tradition of Bosniaks (*Islamska Tradicija Bosnjaka*) (Karcic, 2006; Karcic 2017; Bougarel, 2017).

### **Post-conflict challenges**

In the post-conflict period, we notice an increased internal diversification of Bosnian Islam, as a result of the opening of Bosnian Muslims to the world, the arrival of groups of Muslim fighters and proselytes, but also in response to new trends emerging globally. Many authors have highlighted the consequences of globalization, the emergence of new technologies and the increased individualization of practices. In Bosnia, a larger number of individuals and groups, started exploring the new religious markets (finally open after years of communism) and adopting alternative symbolic systems (Elbasani & Roy, 2015). We, therefore, see the revival of Sufi brotherhoods, the rising of Salafi groups, both very diversified internally, as well as some Shiite groups, individuals belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood, or even Turkish groups linked to Fethullah Gulen or Erdogan (Clayer, 2004; Popovic, 2006; Karcic; 2010; Botic, 2018; Raudvere, 2011; Vukomanovic, 2008).

In response to the challenges, the IC has repeatedly reiterated how it is the only guardian of the authentic interpretation of Islam in BiH, by affirming its exclusive authority in governing certain aspects of the daily life of the community: not only the rituals but also the emanation of “*fatwas*”, religious education, the collection of charity, the organization of pilgrimages abroad (such as the “*hajj*”) and the control of cemeteries (Alibasic, 2015; 2017). Such position was further asserted through the 2004 Law on the Freedom of Religion which, along with the Annex IV of the Dayton Agreement, forms the basis for the protection of religious freedoms in post-conflict Bosnia, which recognizes the importance of the IC as a historical organization deeply rooted in Bosnian territory.



### **Bureaucratization of islam in Bosnia**

To wrap up, it can be argued that the establishment of a Bosniak Islamic Tradition represents not only a religious act, but an intensely political act. For Tozy (2009), this affirmation occurs through a process of bureaucratization that develops on two parallel levels: the first consists in the production of an exclusive referential that can give form and basis to the orthodoxy of Islam (in this case the Islamic Tradition of Bosniaks), to differentiate it from other instances that could try to influence its development. As a matter of fact, the assertion of a specific Bosniak Tradition went hand in hand with the fight against internal as well as international terrorism, therefore it could also be seen as part of a broader search for recognition at the European level. Presenting the Islamic Tradition of Bosniaks as moderate, recalling "the tolerance of Islam in Bosnia, its coexistence with other religions and its opening towards other societies and towards the development of knowledge" (Filandra, 2012), contributes to reinforcing Bosnian Islam, and mainly the IC as a model for the institutionalization of Islam at the European level.

The second level concerns religious practices and consists in the centralization of the theological production and organization of the religious life of the faithful in the hands of qualified religious employees. The management of this religious bureaucracy transcends religious and spiritual objectives and becomes a political act of affirmation of orthodoxy and tradition. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, it is the IC that defines the Islamic Tradition of reference, incorporating all religious agents within its vision of the world. This can have a positive impact, for instance on the building of a common identity against external threats, the management of foreign interferences, and radical instances. However, a subsequent necessary question presents itself: what are the consequences for the other minor Islamic groups and what happens to religious pluralism within the Islamic religious field?



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