Bosnia's Muslims

Challenging Past and Present Misconceptions

A report by

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The war in Bosnia–Herzegovina has received ample media attention. However, as Serbia presents its onslaught against Bosnia as a battle against Islamic fundamentalism, few in the West have attempted to understand the history, culture and identity of the Bosnian Muslims, who formed 44 per cent of the population before fighting broke out in April 1992. Indeed, as a September, 1992, report from the US House of Representatives Task Force on Terrorism and Unconventional Warfare shows, Serbian propaganda is easily swallowed. Entitled 'Iran's European Springboard?, the report concludes that the Bosnian war will eventually be transformed into a Jihad against the west. In the following briefing, Dr Cornelia Sorabji, a leading authority on the Muslims of Bosnia, takes an informed look at a nation threatened with horrors on a scale not seen in Europe since 1945.

All Bosnia's Muslims are Bosnian, but not all Bosnians are Muslim

The war in Bosnia-Herzegovina is a war of words as well as a war of weapons. This war is fought both domestically through state controlled media in internationally by representatives of the warring interests. In a minefield of words, each with a thousand connotations and historical implications, one must tread carefully and precisely.

Media coverage of the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina has presented the public with 'the Muslims", a population whose existence had previously been little known outside former Yugoslavia. The very phrase, as well as the manner in which it has been used, has led to various different sorts of confusion.

The name 'Muslims' immediately conveys the idea of a religious community. From the perspective of Western Europe's secular nation states, religious groups have rights to freedom of thought and worship, but no great rights as political entities. Starting from this standpoint, West Europeans may sympathise with the Muslims' suffering and wish to protect them, but somehow find it hard to accept that their political wishes have the same validity as those of the more plainly named Serbs and Croats. In fact Muslims were recognised as a distinct nationality within Yugoslavia.

A second confusion concerns the relationship of 'Muslims' and 'Bosnians.' From the beginning,

the media frequently identified the Bosnian government and Bosnian forces as the 'Muslim side'. unwittingly giving support to those who, for the purposes of taking it apart, presented Bosnia as a fiction. The term 'Bosnians' used to embrace all inhabitants of Bosnia - Muslims, Serbs, Croats, Jews, Romi and others. Since the Serbian assault on Bosnia began in April 1992, the terms has become politicised to describe anyone committed to a united Bosnia. As well as the 44 per cent of the population who are Muslim, this also includes those other loyal to a Bosnian state, All Bosnia's Muslims are Bosnians, but not all Bosnians are Muslim.

The third confusion springs not merely from the objective difficulties of terminology but from a conscious desire to manipulate those difficulties. Plying on the Western fears of the Islamic World, nationalists propaganda, both Serb and Croat, depicts the Muslims as fighting for an Islamic state in Europe.

Origins

Bosnia's Muslims are not Turkish or Arab settlers but indigenous Serbo-Croatian speaking Slavs, the vast majority of them descendants of those Bosnians who converted to Islam following the Ottoman conquest of the fifteenth century.

This fact leads to the frequent but flawed assumption that they are all 'originally' either Serbs or Croats. One problem with such an apparently reasonable notion is that it implies the existence of modern style Serb and Croat nations during the fifteenth century. To contend that medieval Bosnia already contained self conscious Serb and Croat nations is rather like saying that Queen Budicea's Britons were already 'the British' in the sense that those `British think of themselves today. The concept of nationhood was simply not in currency during that period and was not to be minted for centuries to come. The fifteenth century inhabitants of Bosnia understood themselves as divided along family and religious, as opposed to national, lines.

This is not just an academic point: in the former Yugoslavia the history game is in full swing. Everyone is tracing their national heritage back through the millennia and assuming a perfect continuity of national consciousness. In this context, the idea that pre-Ottoman Bosnia was com-

posed of Serb and Croat nations, and that Muslims were lambs who strayed from these two national folds, is theoretically defective and plays into the hands of Serb and Croat extremists. For just as the territory of Bosnia-Herzegovina has been and is contested by Serbia and Croatia, so too is the very identity of the Bosnian Muslims.

Those who converted to Islam converted from another religion, not from a nation. On the eve of the Ottoman invasion, Bosnia contained Orthodox Christians, Roman Catholics and the 'Bosnian Chruch', which may have been associated with the Bogomil heresy in the Balkan region. Today's Serbs, Croats and Muslims tend to claim that those choosing Islam were predominantly Orthodox, Catholic or Bosnian Church Bogomil respectively, but historical research suggests that the picture was by no means so simple. Islam gained adherents, the Bosnian Church lost them, Catholicism and Orthodoxy both gained and lost. In short, conversions occurred in almost all directions. Even within a single family, one son might adopt Islam while a second retained the old faith. Such easy adoption of other religions was not, however, a novelty brought about by the trauma of invasion, for even in pre-Ottoman Bosnia conversions from faith to faith had not been uncommon in the response to political expediency or perceived advantage. Medieval Bosnians were simply not as attached to their faiths as their descendants were to become.

Contemporary Muslims are not then the pure descendants either of Orthodoxy or of Catholicism (or of Bogomilism), They are descendants of Bosnians of various religious persuasions. Much less are they ethnic members of a Serb or Croat nation. However dear the concept of unchanging age old nationhood is to some ideologists, nations were not created once and for all in the far distant past, but developed over the centuries.

Nationality

The historical moment at which any community becomes 'national' is not something that can be pinpointed. Even so, it is clear that although they lacked any sort of official recognition until 1961, the Muslims had long before acquired an identity which, in the highly 'nationalised' circumstances of former Yugoslavia, could only be understood as a national one. Ethnic and national identities devel-

op in relation to each other and to the wider political circumstances, and a glance at recent Bosnian history suggests the context in which Muslims acquired such an identity.

Even under Ottoman rule there had been some tradition of Bosnian autonomy from the Empire, and while the arrival of the Austro-Hungarians in 1878 saw Muslim emigration to Istanbul and initial small scale resistance on the part of non elite urbanites, Muslim leaders rapidly settled down to negotiating with the new authorities. The establishment of a three way electoral college system saw Muslims beginning to act as a political unit within the new Bosnia. In the interwar Kingdom of Yugoslavia they created their own mass political party, the Yugoslav Muslim (JMO), whose political support was wooed by both Serbian and Croatian parties.

The period witnessed strong Serb\Croat competition for Muslim allegiance, and pressure for the Muslims to declare themselves either as Serbs or as Croats. The former choice was unpalatable given the widespread Serbian equation of Muslims with the despised 'Turks' and the reluctance to grant them any political power. The latter choice was little more desirable and could only provoke the Serbain camp. Cast as the bone of contention between two mutually hostile competitors, Muslims reacted in different ways. Some intellectuals and JMO officials declared themselves Serbs, others Croats, still others changed their minds over time. The vast majority of ordinary Muslims didn't declare in either direction and a few registered their protest by declaring themselves Slovenes (an absurdity echoed in the 1991 census when some Sarajevans declared themselves Eskimos or members of other equally impossible groups) . From the Muslim point of view, the key task was to maintain an equal distance from both Serb and Croat nations and to keep Bosnia-Herzevoina united and autonomous. This position has nothing to do with unitarist domination and everything to do with sheer physical survival.

In 1929, however, Bosnia-Hercegovina was partitioned into four provinces in each of which the Muslims were a minority. In 1939 a new partition left 13 counties under Croatian rule and 38 within territories planned for Serbian control. The Second World Wary saw the whole of Bosnia incorporated into the Nazi controlled and

Ustashe ruled Independent State of Croatia (NDH) in which, in spite of being feted as the flower of the Croat people, Muslims had no real authority. At the same time, they became victims of Chetnik attack; while the vast losses suffered by Serbs in World War Two are reasonably well known, the Muslim death toll, estimates of which stand in the region on 100,000, is less publicised.

Against this background, Muslims spent long decades stubbornly refusing to be either Serb or Croat and continuing to think of themselves as a third, separate and equal group. When the 1961 census finally allowed people to declare themselves as 'Muslim in the ethnic sense', 26 per cent of the Bosnian population immediately chose to do so. When the 1971 census upgraded 'Muslim' to a national category, 40 per cent those this option . In 1991, almost 2 million Bosnians were convinced that they formed part of a Muslim nation which shared the republic with members of Bosnia's Serb and Croat nations. Claims that these people are in fact a religious grouping or a 'newly emerging nation' must stand up against these two million convictions, and against a history in which Serb, Croat and Muslim identities have fashioned themselves by constant reference to each other.

There Religions and their Interaction

If Muslim national identity is associated with Muslim religious identity, this is also true of Serb/Orthodox and Croat/Catholic identity. It is common knowledge that a Serb is supposed to cross himself with three fingers and kiss three times in greeting (for Father, Son and Holy Ghost), while in pre-war Bosnia-Herzegovina the Croats were frequently referred to as 'Catholics', thus distinguishing them from the 'Croats' of Croatia. Bosnia's Muslims, Serbs and Croats are indigenous Slavs and linguistically all but indistinguishable. Religion and religiously derived customs are the major factors dividing them.

In this context it is hardly surprising that various religious symbols, habits and celebrations are maintained by all three populations. In the Muslim case this means Muslim names (in their Serbo-Croatian variants), circumcision, baklava and the celebration of Ramazan Bajram, getting a godparent to cut a one year old child's hair, a preference for tiny coffee cups without

handles, a sympathy for spiders and various other traditional practices (the origins of which are frequently unknown to those who practice them).

It might be imagined, and is indeed claimed in some quarters, that the assortment of Muslim, Orthodox and Catholic festivities and customs present in a single town necessarily gave rise to tensions, hatred and friction. In fact, what was notable was the degree to which they were used as opportunities for the forging and affirmation of ties between the three communities. The favoured godparent for a child's hair cutting was this often a non-Muslim, Christians gave Easter eggs to Muslims as well as to each other, Muslims gave a baklava to Christians and so on.

The existence of diverse traditions was not perceived as an enormous threat but merely as one aspect of life in Bosnia. In this life, as in human life everywhere, far more mental energy was spent on working, studying, marrying, housekeeping and socialising than on mulling over the merits and menaces of religious customs. Other people's habits were for the most part unremarkable, occasionally a matter of curiosity and sometimes used as a route for the expression of mutual good will and co-operation. It is this tradition of everyday tolerance and coexistence which defined the spirit of Bosnia-Herzegovina.

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Islam as a Religion

The importance of religion as a mark of national identity does not imply that Muslims have no feeling whatever for Islam as a religious faith. Many who defend the Muslims politically do so at the cost of denying them any such sentiments and, focusing on details such as the consumption of alcohol, reason that they are Muslims in name only. A better description is that they are not Muslims of the sort that our collective imagination tends to dwell upon, an imagination frequently built on bits of Islamic theology and Middle Eastern cultural ethnography. This is clearly of limited value in understanding a population which is not Middle Eastern and which, in common with more than a quarter of the world's Muslim populations from China to India, to Bosnia and Harlem, does not live within a Muslim majority

state. Many of the cultural traits we gloss as 'Muslim' give little insight into Bosnia Muslim culture. Arranged marriages, for example, were only ever common to the urban elite in Ottoman Bosnia, polygamy is an amusing foreign practice and pretext for teasing the wife and, unlike in the Middle East, there is no strong patrilinearity. In comparison with Croats and especially with Serbs, Muslims have relatively little interest in heredity, genealogies and tracing their bloodline back through the generations.

The theological details employed in evaluating Islam in Bosnia centre those rules and regulations (daily prayer, teetotalism and so on) whose observance is most easily identifiable. This focus on specific prescriptions neglects the wider moral theology which is often more important to ordinary Muslims whether in Bosnia or the Middle East. Just as Catholicism is more a Catholic than eating fish on Friday, to its adherents, Islam is more than a mere set of dietary and ritual rules.

Not surprisingly, in terms of religious observance individuals and families vary. A small minority at one end is strictly observant, a percentage at the other is out-and-out atheist and the vast majority are somewhere in between; agnostic, humorous on the topic of religion but willing to participate when socially necessary or at least to respect other people's participation, or believing in God and occasionally practising some elements of faith, but generally negligent. For this majority, however, the lack of rigid observance constitutes no great threat to Islam, for while fasting the entire month of Ramazan might be admirable, the basis of the region is not ritual but morality. From this perspective, Islam is about being hospitable to guests, generous with your neighbours, honest in you dealings, clean in your habits, industrious in your labours and so on. It is about how to behave in your social relationships, with Muslims and non-Muslims, and its most important prescriptions are vague ones in the realm of values and virtues rather than specific ones in that of ritual.

This emphasis on everyday life and values is reflected in the relationship between ordinary Muslims and religious functionaries. Television frequently offers the image of a mullah thumping his podium and somehow conveys the impression of a sheep like congregation happily pulled along in the slipstream of

their preacher. It is an image which does little to illustrate the subtle balance between Bosnian Muslims and their religious personnel.

It is important to realise that, unlike the Christian priest, the Islamic mullah or imam is not consecrated an uniquely able to offer communion, absolution or any other blessing from God; he is merely a person of superior religious education and knowledge. Against this theological background, it would be added that those Bosnian Muslims who do not attend mosque regularly (and they are the vast majority) are likely to come into contact with religious personnel only on specific occasions, for example at funerals or women's tevhid death rituals. At these events the hodja or bula (the traditional Turkish derived names for male and female religious functionaries) is a person invited for a specific purpose and financially rewarded for their efforts.

This implies a very different relationship from that suggested by the television mullah. Bosnia's hodjas and bulas are valued by those who use their services, and their status as educated repositories of the religious learning that ordinary Muslims lack is respected - up to a point. At the same time religious personnel are paid servants answering the needs of their clientele, and this fact is not forgotten. On the other side of the respect there hovers the caustic jest about hodjas and priests being the biggest thieves, living comfortably off the donations of laity.

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Ambivalence or suspicion of religious authorities has lived alongside a wider suspicion or downright contempt for political authorities in Bosnia. The understanding is that leaders of any sort may well be involved only for their own purposes. While one may have to obey them and might want to employ them, their words have no necessary moral weight or relevance to real life but must be weighed in the wider context of their deeds and behaviour. The hodja or bula is there to do a job, but should they overstep the mark and start introducing unwelcome demands into the proceedings, the reception is likely to become frosty.

The traditional relationship between Muslims and their clerics is a delicate one in which the boot,

if anywhere, is on the layman's foot. It is a tacit arrangement in keeping with the general understanding that Islam is primarily a matter of the heart and of everyday life values rather than of meticulous religious detail.

Both aspects are in keeping with the extreme secularity and religious tolerance of Bosnian Muslims. Whether personally observant or not, Bosnia's Muslims are notable for their view that everyone's faith or lack of it is their own business and not to be questioned or interfered with by the state, the priest, the hodja, the neighbours or anyone else.

Izetbegovic and the Islamic Declaration

Alija Izetbegovic, president of the Muslim political party (SDA; Party of Democratic Action) and of the legally elected Bosnian government, has never concealed his own personal commitment to his Islamic faith. Serbian propaganda goes further, alleging his religious fundamentalism and desire to create an Islamic state of Bosnia. The accusations are based on a short text, The Islamic Declaration, which was written in 1970 and parts of which were legally published in Yugoslavia at the time. The full text was circulated as a typescript and translated into various foreign languages.

Thirteen years later, in a new political climate, this essay was to become the central piece of evidence in the trial of Isetbegovic and eleven others who were charged with counter-revolutionary activities and the aim of creating an ethnically pure Muslim state. At every stage of the trial there were blatant abuses of the legal process and the cases were taken up by Amnesty International. Nevertheless, out of an original sentence of fourteen years, Izetbegovic eventually served six, and the text with which the authorities once imprisoned him is now used by propagandists to discredit him.

The first point to be made about the Declaration is that, as the author himself remarks, none of the ideas it contains are new, the text is merely a synthesis of thoughts expressed at various times and various parts of the Muslim world. That world is seen as one of poverty, backwardness and dependence, and the author contends that it is only through a re-assertion of indigenous values, rather than a slavish imitation of the West, that Muslims can

progress. In this regard Japan is highly praised as a country that pursued wealth and advance without abandoning its own traditions and culture, while Turkey's decline is traced to its abandonment of tradition. It is a line of argument espoused by third world reformists of all religious persuasions, the Islamic dimension enters because Islam is seen as the particular indigenous value to be re-asserted.

For non-Muslims, and indeed for Muslims, perhaps the area of greatest concern is the claim that the Islamic Order cannot recognise the principle of secularism. However, it is necessary to emphasise an important point which undercuts the anxieties potentially aroused by this rejection.

The words 'Bosnia' and 'Yugoslavia' appear nowhere in the entire document. On the contrary, the author explicitly rules out the realisation of the Islamic Order in countries lacking a Muslim majority. In such circumstances any attempt to impose an Islamic system is mere tyranny and Muslims are duty bound to observe their obligations to the existing state. The essay is concerned only with Muslim majority states and stresses that even here an Islamic system

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cannot be imposed from above but must be created from below. The Declaration's aim is 'the Islamicisation of Muslim Peoples'- people themselves must find the will to Islamise society before the second step, Islamic government, can be considered. In this process the ends do not justify the means and the use of coercive force only compromises and grades the aim of the Islamic Order.

The author rejects the charge of Utopianism; yet given his utter condemnation of coercive means, many readers may find that an excess of idealism is the major charge to be laid at his door. It is perhaps not surprising that the text is unpalatable to some, but those who feel wary of the Islamic Order envisaged (in spite of its guarantees for minorities) might do well to consider the histories of other political leaders in the former Yugoslavia. For example, Croatian President Franjo Tudjman's 1981 work, 'Nationalism in Contemporary Europe', revives the claim that Bosnia's Muslims are linguistically and ethnically closer

to Croats than to Serbs and raises numerous other points which might disturb non-Croats. In both cases, however, the same rule applies: it is on the politics and actions of today's leaders rather than on the books they may long ago have written that any genuine evaluations must rest. In his dealings with Serb and Croat leaders, the Yugoslav People's Army and the EC, Izetbegovic has consistently aimed for peace, negotiation and reason to an extend perfectly incomparable with his political counterparts. Above all, in this focus on one man and his works it must be remembered that no amount of Presidential writing of whatever kind could justify genocide against an entire population.

Religious War

Two different notions of religious war have been apparent in the statements of Serbain and Croatian representatives. The first emanates from the Serbian side and is primarily directed at the outside world. The idea here is that it is somehow inevitable that people of different religions should hate and fight each other and that Muslims, Serbs and Croats are all inspired with this hatred (the implication is that all are equally guilty and there is simply no point in outsiders taking any stance on the matter). Clearly, the premise is flawed. Under different circumstances expressions of religious difference may, as has been seen above, become occasions for the assertion of good will and co-operation, the exchange of Easter eggs and baklava and the re-affirmation of unity.

The second notion is noticeable in both Serbian and to a lesser extent Croation outlooks, and is intended for both foreign and domestic consumption. Here, the idea is that it is above all the Muslims who are inspired by religious hatred and who are waging, or about to wage, a *Jihad* (Holy War)

The role of religion in the war has scarcely been mentioned by Muslim leaders and many individual testimonies point to the exactly opposite scenario. While it must be remembered that Muslims are not the only victims of atrocities or Serbs the only perpetrators, it appears that some of the violence meted out to Muslims in the course of the large scale Serbian ethnic cleansing in May, June and July 1992 was accompanied by religious imagery and attempts to degrade, parody or destroy Islamic symbols, or to make Muslims themselves do

so. Rather than Muslims setting a religious agenda for the war, it is they who are defined religiously, and persecuted accordingly. This imposing of definitions on the Muslim population forms part of a long history. What is interesting about the current attempt to present them as rabidly attached to their religious faith and determined to foist it upon others is that it co-exists alongside a second and seemingly opposite view. The second line of argument suggests that, if safely incorporated into a Serbian or Croatian state, Muslims would gradually 'return' to the respective brands of Christianity. On the one hand they are fanatically Islamic, on the other they will give it up if offered the opportunity. The only logic is this self-contradictory thinking lies in the territorial aims it supports. From the point of view of expansionists, Muslim identity has no fixed characteristics: it is negligible and moreover must be negated in order to make way for the expansion. The notion of Islamic Jihad is undoubtedly a useful tool for inflaming soldiers to fight, and there is some hope that it will find a sympathetic ear in the West.

Bombarded by a state controlled media, those soldiers and their families may believe what they hear, but the engineers of war know its real point which has nothing to do with religious hatreds.

The idea of religious war is horrific to us, and yet at the same time there is something daring and bold about it, a kind of romance, exoticism and the Middle Ages.

The reality is plainer and cruder: the Muslims are simply in the way of the creation of ethnically pure territories.

Rather than religious hatred as a cause and cleansing as the consequence of war, cleansing is the aim of hatred both a means and a consequence.