

## **THE EVOLUTION OF BOSNIAN ISLAM IN THE 1990S**

The current Western perception of the Bosnian Islam is double: for some, it is a unique model of tolerance, developed through centuries; for others, it is a nest for islamists and *mujaheddin*, de-veiled by the war.

This work aims at investigate the model of Bosnian Islam, comprehensive of history, institutions and recent changes, in an attempt to clarify the terms of the matter. I will present the scene of Islam in Bosnia and Herzegovina at the eve of the Yugoslavian war, the changes brought about by the conflict; the political project of the dominant party between Bosnian Muslims, the *Stranka Demokratske Akcije* (SDA), and of the panislamists club of its founder Alija Izetbegovic; and finally the actions of world islamist organizations during and after the conflict.

The current image of Balkan Islam, composed of clear aspects and cones of shadows, was born out of the changes that the stormy 1990s brought about on the ground in the composition of religious actors and their relations with political actors and the population.

In the first part of the essay, dealing with the years 1990s, I analyse the main reasons of evolutions: the conflict and the re-islamization program of the SDA party and its panislamists directive, anyway composed by local actors. In the second part, dealing with the years 1995-2006, I consider the role of the world islamist networks, arrived in Bosnia with the conflict and remained on the ground during the reconstruction, in fostering the transformation of Bosnian Islam, in its three objectives of armed fight (*jihad*), humanitarian help (*ighatha*) and predication (*da'wa*).

A rapid comparison between those two actors of change in the Bosnian Islam can be made reading their two exemplar texts: the "*Islamic Declaration*", written by Alija Izetbegovic nel 1970, and the programmatic pamphlet "*The beliefs we must correct*", edited by the Egyptian Imad al-Misri in 1993. Even if, as stated by Dérens (2005), both attack «the two illusions of the Yugoslavian period: the definition of a "Muslim" nationality defined by cultural and historical criteria, without necessarily implicate a living faith, and the promotion of a multinational and multicultural Bosnian society», differences are more striking than similarities. Besides the different origin of the authors (local versus foreigner), and the different context of publication (the debate for the "national affirmation" of Bosnian Muslims versus the Bosnian conflict as part of a world islamist *jihad*), we have to evaluate the different programmatic value, in terms of change of the social and religious Bosnian reality.

In the “*Islamic Declaration*” Izetbegovic, even if keeping the ideal of the Islamic State, recognizes its impossibility in the context of a society in which sincere practising Muslims are not the absolute majority. In order to get to such an objective, the SDA, led by its panislamists ruling club, will implement in the following years, greatly helped by the war, an ambitious program of re-islamization of the Bosnian Muslim population. But the various ambiguities due to the same nature of the SDA (panislamists ruling club, nationalist majority), to the necessities of foreign policy in the context of the conflict (search for *umma* solidarity, necessity of western support) and to the transformations in the popular feeling (passage from the re-islamization of the national identity to the “nationalization” of the Islamic identity, massification of Islamic practices with decrease of quality and discredit), the panislamists current of the SDA would not be able to achieve its aims.

“*The beliefs we must correct*”, to the contrary, presents itself as a list of theological mistakes made by the Bosnian Islam. The aim of Imad al-Misri, and of the other foreign islamists, is not the authoritarian re-islamization of a society authoritarily secularized under Tito, but to bring the Bosnian Islam in itself back to the “straight path”, as it is considered to have diverged from Islamic orthopraxy during time. Such an action is not directed only towards the society, but in opposition to the same local Islamic actors, to begin with the Islamic Community, to which islamists want to substitute themselves with their theological and financial force. As a matter of fact, not even the islamists achieved their aims during the war. Although they put effort in linking predication and humanitarian help to the return to Islamic orthopraxy, their action didn’t produce a massive and durable change in the behaviour of the population. Paradoxically, the different ways to return to the unique, true, Islam that they presented brought about a pluralisation and individualization of the religious practice. Anyway, the persistence of their predication even after the end of the conflict is set as an element of deep change of the structure of Bosnian Islam. As stated by Karajkov (2006), «if islamophoby is the wrong answer to the renewed strength and authoritativeness of some forms of Islam in the Balkans, the same is for a sort of blindness induced by ideology and by political correctness. Threats to death and aggressions are real, but it is also real that Islam in the Balkans during centuries has been generally pacific. Notwithstanding the many factors which don’t get along with the tradition of moderation of Balkan Islam, up to now there has not been any serious act of islamist violence». Dérens, moreover, highlights how, in fact, «religious practice is bigger today than before the war, a fact that can be reasonably explained with the width of the traumas suffered. In the same way, Islam acquired a social visibility that it did not have in the period of the socialist Yugoslavia. Anyway, militant islamism remains the action of a minority, and the aim of *jihad* and *da’wa* volunteers of turning Bosnia into an Islamic society similar to their dreams was not achieved. Militant organizations like AIO remained marginal, notwithstanding their intense proselitism in Bosnian universities».

The problem is not to be overrated in a sensationalist way, as it usually happens in Italy as well as in the world media; but it is not to be forgotten either. A serious inter-religious dialogue in Europe and in the whole world can only pass through enhancing all the similarities, as stated in the often-forgotten last chapter of Samuel Huntington's "The clash of civilizations and the new world order", and through the study of those regions, such as Bosnia, where different religious communities have lived together, more or less pacifically, for centuries.

Predrag Matvejevic said: «One of the worst errors of Europe and of the United States in the last Balkan war is not to have recognized in Bosnia one of the most laic Islamic communities in the world. And not to be able to impose it as itself to the other, more strict and intolerant, forms of Islamic religion, all catalogued under the same denominator of islamism or fundamentalism. A decisive battle could be already lost. Such errors are usually paid very expensively».

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