

Bosnia: Foreign-Funded Mosques Under Scrutiny

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Questions are being raised over foreign funding of Muslim organisations - and exactly what that money buys.

Recent police raids against a number of Arab charities and the arrests of suspected terrorists alerted local and international attention to the resurgence of Islam in Bosnia. And among the questions being raised about the revival is who controls the new mosques funded by Muslim charities and governments and what conditions they set for their support?

For example, a report by the Brussels-based think-tank the International Crisis Group published late last year said that assistance from charities such as the Saudi High Commission for Relief, which helps war widows, orphans and other victims of war, required "female beneficiaries to cover their heads and their children to attend classes in their faith".

Reisu-l-ulema Dr Mustafa Cerić, head of Bosnia's Islamic Community, defended the operation of such charities, saying, "Without them we could not survive". Cerić added that he had seen no proof that any had done wrong and asserted that no "good Muslim" could have taken part in the attacks of September 11.

He rejected claims that Saudi Arabia's dominant faith, Wahabbism, an extremist form of Islam with a literal interpretation of the Koran, is trying to take root, telling IWPR that all "gift mosques" are under his jurisdiction, even if the form of Islam promoted is "slightly" different to the Hanafi tradition.

The Hanafi school, a branch of Sunni Islam founded in Iraq in the 8th century, is followed by the majority of Muslims in Turkey and the Balkans and is extremely tolerant of differences within Islamic communities.

Head of protocol for the Islamic Community Ifet Mustafić, backed Cerić, saying, "You will find in every mosque some individuals whether Saudi or domestic that pray the way Saudis do, but officially the prayers are led by Hanafi Imams."

The Sarajevo-based Active Islamic Youth is among the groups rumoured to be linked with Wahhabism and more extreme elements, but its head Muris Čupić denies his group is involved in "militant Islam", insisting that it focuses on expressing and preaching their religious identity. (BCR No. 286, http://www.iwpr.net/index.pl?archive/bcr/bcr_20011005_1_eng.txt)

One of the most visible foreign-backed projects in Bosnia is the King Fahd Cultural Centre inaugurated in Sarajevo last year. Incorporating a mosque for 5,000 worshippers and housing the Saudi High Commission, it cost an estimated 10 million euros. In central Bosnia's Muslim-dominated Bugojno region, the generosity of one of the Saudi king's wives saw the opening of the giant new Princess Al Jooharah Al Brahim Mosque and Cultural Centre last autumn, complete with space for 2000 worshippers, library, and Arabic language laboratory.

Local Islamic leader Imam Efeđija Arnaut expresses gratitude to the Muslim charities that have helped with what he calls the religious "rebirth" of his area.

He says he is seizing the opportunity to try and educate Bugojno's Bosniak community - 87 per cent of the population, compared to 42 per cent pre-war - about Islam's "message of peace", expanding local outreach programmes, the number of services in the mosques and youth religious classes.

The Islamic Community estimates that eighty per cent of the state's 1750 mosques were destroyed or damaged during the years of war with 50 or 60 of these having now been totally rebuilt, and many more repaired. But it's the new mosques, especially the ones financed and designed with help from Islamic countries, which have provoked most controversy. To Croats and Serbs in Bugojno, Sarajevo and other areas where there is a Bosnian Muslim majority, these new buildings symbolise a new Muslim dominance.

For example, last October the Saudi High Commission for Relief to Bosnia printed and distributed a brochure in Bugojno at the time of the inauguration of the new local mosque. "Bugojno is one of the few cities in Bosnia where there are almost no Croats, although it borders Croat-inhabited territories," it read. The Bosnian foreign ministry swiftly lodged a complaint with the Saudi embassy, saying the remarks alarmed Bosnian Croats.

"There's a growing danger of religious imperialism," local Catholic priest Fra Ivo Markovic told IWPR. Indeed, since the war and the end of officially secular communist regime, there has been a significant resurgence in religiosity amongst all three of Bosnia's dominant faiths Islam, Serb Orthodoxy and Catholicism

International Crisis Group analyst and Balkan historian Mark Wheeler, who first visited the region in 1969, argues that Bosniaks increasingly see Islam more as a religion than an identity badge.

"People that were here before the war when mosques were museums and tourist attractions, and women in Islamic dress were completely and utterly absent, can't help but be struck by the extent to which Muslims have become more and more prone to practice their faith rather than simply have it as one of those things that connotes their historical identity," he said.

A growing number of young Bosniaks have been seen taking up Islamic rituals, like marrying in the mosque, after completing the mandatory civil ceremony.

For example Aida, of a Croat-Bosniak background who took Islam as her religion as a child, married a Muslim man two years ago. And while stressing that it was not vital that she choose a husband of her own faith, she did admit "it's easier when you are the same religion". Marrying in a mosque "for the sake of tradition" offered "some kind of protection".

There has also been a noticeable increase in young men with beards and young women in headscarves, although they still remain a minority even within the Bosniak population.

Wheeler says fundamentalism, largely in the form of foreign Muslim groups, does exist in Bosnia. But, at the same time, he considers the threat no greater than that of Le Pen to France, suspecting "an awful lot of journalists, who tried in the aftermath of September 11 to create a great story out of this, have been exaggerating".

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