

Muslims in Serbia

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ITS HISTORY

The Muslim population in Serbia has a deep-rooted historical presence dating back centuries. While the exact origins of Muslims in this European country are complex, their history can be traced to various ethnic groups, including Bosniaks, Albanians, Turks, Roma, and converts from the Serbian population. Geographically dispersed across Serbia, they have varying degrees of influence in different regions. Two regions, Sandžak and the Preševo Valley, have substantial Muslim populations.

The historical journey of Muslims in Serbia is closely tied to the Ottoman conquest of the Balkans, and the Ottoman era marked the beginning of significant Islamization in the region. As the Ottoman Empire gradually weakened, conditions for the Muslim population fluctuated, and, in some cases, areas once predominantly Muslim were ethnically cleansed, erasing their historical presence¹.

The final withdrawal of the Ottomans from the Balkans led to significant border changes and the division of the Bosniak population into distinct entities. Bosnia and Herzegovina remained a separate administrative and territorial entity, while Novi Pazar Sandžak was divided between the newly formed Kingdoms of Serbia and Montenegro².

CULTURE

A rich and sophisticated Muslim culture and civilization developed during the Ottoman Empire's five-century presence in the Balkans³. Even in areas where ethnic cleansing occurred, remnants of Ottoman architecture persist, albeit sporadically. The influence of the Ottoman period extends to the Serbian language, which has incorporated over 10,000 words from Turkish, Persian and Arabic, shaping its lexical core.

The Sandžak region, in particular, preserves Ottoman culture and heritage. Novi Pazar boasts 25 mosques from the Ottoman era, and various monuments of material culture, such as the Main Sjenica Mosque and Musala in Prijepolje, have been preserved. Many prominent Ottoman dignitaries were buried in old cemeteries and mosque courtyards.

The traditional lifestyle, family structure and so-

cial life of Muslims in Serbia are rooted in patriarchal and oriental sources. Over five centuries, thousands of scholars, thinkers, and writers from the region made significant contributions to Islamic culture and civilization in Turkish, Persian and Arabic⁴.

Despite preserving this cultural heritage, the Bosniak population faced challenges to their national identity, language and literature under Yugoslav regimes. Attempts were made to erase their identity from official history and destroy monuments.

LANGUAGE AND SCRIPT

Muslims in Serbia represent a diverse linguistic and cultural landscape. Their language and script choices vary based on ethnicity.

Bosniaks: a significant part of the Muslim population who primarily speak Bosnian. They utilize both Latin and Cyrillic alphabets, with preference for the Latin script⁵.

Albanians: another prominent group that has its own distinct language and script, which belongs to a separate language family, and has little overlap with Serbian.

The Roma population: includes Muslims, communicates using Romani mixed dialects, Serbian and Bosnian, depending on the majority population in their particular communities.

Muslim converts: from the Serbian population, generally speak Serbian and use the Cyrillic alphabet as their primary script.

POLITICAL ASPECTS

The political landscape in Serbia underwent significant changes with the introduction of multiparty politics in 1990 and the subsequent disintegration of Yugoslavia⁶. Wars erupted in different parts of the Balkans, including Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, the Preševo Valley, Serbia (NATO bombing in 1999), and Macedonia (Albanian-Macedonian conflict in 2001). During these conflicts, Muslims in Serbia faced various forms of reprisals, including expulsions, kidnappings, repression and torture.

The Yugoslav regime, particularly during the communist one-party system, systematically discriminated against and sought to assimilate Muslims. This included the closure and demolition of mosques, arrests, torture and discrimination in areas such as ed-

ucation and employment. One notable international agreement that contributed to these challenges was the “Gentleman’s Agreement” between the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) and the Republic of Turkey in 1954.

In response to these hardships, Muslims tried asserting their rights and cultural identity. Various declarations and political actions were taken, often in the face of government opposition.

MEDIA

Media representation has played a significant role in shaping perceptions of Muslims in Serbia. Unfortunately, it has often been characterized by aggressive and sensational reporting, particularly concerning regions like Sandžak. Media outlets have sometimes portrayed Muslims as disruptive or destabilizing forces in society. During periods of conflict, media coverage has exacerbated tensions.

Access to media for Muslims in Sandžak is somewhat limited. They rely on media outlets established by the Islamic community and a handful of independent sources⁷. However, certain media outlets tend to align with the ruling majority and present a subjective view of reality.

EDUCATION

Historically, the education system in Serbia was influenced by Islamic institutions, thanks to the institution of *waqf*, which supported the establishment of various educational institutions. These included *sibyan-maktabs*, madrasahs, *rushdies*, and *dar al-idadija*. In contrast, the Orthodox Christian population had fewer educational institutions, primarily within churches and monasteries⁸.

After the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes was formed in 1918, Muslims faced challenges, in-

cluding the absence of a unified Islamic community at the state level until 1929. The official leadership of Muslims was vested in the *reis-ul-ulema* (head of the Islamic community), but the Ministry of Religions controlled appointments and aimed to reduce the influence of the Islamic community while seizing *waqf* property.

Yugoslavia underwent significant political and ideological changes in the post-World War II era. The communist government abolished religious teachings and shariah courts, leading to the closure of most madrasahs, mosques and Islamic community properties.

The Islamic community in Serbia recognized the need to address educational deficiencies. In 2001, it established the Islamic Academy of Education, which was later transformed into the Faculty for Islamic Studies. Additionally, the International University of Novi Pazar was founded in 2002 to enhance educational opportunities for Muslims. Despite these initiatives, there were efforts by the government to establish branches of other Serbian universities in Novi Pazar, creating competition.

The Islamic community has developed a comprehensive educational network to supplement the existing education system, including kindergartens, preparatory *maktab* schools, madrasahs, and the Faculty for Islamic Studies.

ISLAMIC COMMUNITY

Upon the Ottoman Empire’s departure and diplomatic negotiations, the Islamic community in Bosnia and Herzegovina gained independence from the Ottoman Empire. Muslims in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (later Yugoslavia) faced a challenging period due to the lack of an Islamic community at the state level until 1929. The Ministry of Religions controlled the appointment and supervision



of officials, often aiming to diminish the influence of the Islamic community.

After World War II, Muslims in Yugoslavia found themselves in a new political framework. The communist government abolished religious teachings and shariah courts, closing madrasahs and seizing *waqf* properties. It wasn't until 1969 that a constitution successfully defined the Islamic community in Yugoslavia, establishing Republic Councils and a Supreme Council based in Sarajevo. However, this structure disintegrated with the breakup of Yugoslavia.

After the change of the Serbian regime in 2012, and especially after the entry of the late academic Mufti Muamer Zukorlić, and other deputies of the BDZS/SPP into the National Assembly of the Re-

public of Serbia and the promotion of the partnership policy, a completely different environment was created in which the rights of Muslims in the Republic of Serbia began on an upward trajectory and positive shifts became very noticeable.

IN SUMMARY

Today, the Islamic community in Serbia is recognized by the entire state system, which slowly restores the faith of believers in state institutions and normalizes relations that have been disturbed for decades. Of course, many more concrete steps must be taken to resolve all issues and correct injustices, and all factors must work diligently.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 For example, in 1868, 34 mosques were demolished in Užice and 24 in Smedrevo. There were between 270 and 300 mosques in Belgrade alone, and only the Bajrakli Mosque on Dorcel has survived. A similar fate befell Šabac, Niš, Vranje and all other cities that are part of the Principality of Serbia. Imamović, Mustafa: *Historija Bošnjaka*, BZK “Preporod”, Sarajevo, 2006., str. 328-331.
- 2 Imamović, Mustafa: *Historija Bošnjaka*, BZK “Preporod”, Sarajevo, 2006., str. 349-350.
- 3 Ismet Bušatlić, *Islamska kultura i civilizacija na Balkanu (Hrestomatija)*, Fakultet islamskih nauka u Sarajevu, Sarajevo, 2006.
- 4 Details: Duraković, Enes; Duraković, Esad; Nametak, Fehim: *Bosniak Literature in Literary Criticism, Volume I, the older literature*, Alef, Sarajevo 1998.
- 5 Jahić, Dževad; Halilović, Senahid; palić, Ismail: *Gramatika bosanskoga jezika*, Dom štampe, Zenica

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6 Halilović, Alija: The identity card of Sandžak, SENT no. 7-8, Novi Pazar, November 2003, pp.37

7 Glas Islama, Radio Refref, TV Universa.

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