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## **THE CURRENT STATUS OF RELIGIOUS COEXISTENCE AND EDUCATION IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA**

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

This report is intended to examine the status of religious reconciliation and coexistence in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH).

Bosnia and Herzegovina's centuries-old tradition of religious coexistence is rapidly disappearing. Memories of a time when people shared the same schools, office space and living conditions are slowly giving way to a fear of "the others." Some positive interactions still take place due to family ties from mixed marriages, economic interdependence and old, enduring friendships. However, some efforts of top religious leaders, similar to those of the nationalistic politicians, seem to be driving society in the opposite direction.

Religious leaders have a multilayered agenda, only one layer being interreligious dialogue and coexistence. Instead of being an example of true Abrahamic spiritual leaders, they very often meddle in politics and pursue their own separate religious and political interests.

Education in religious understanding is unstructured and in most areas nonexistent. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), an international organization with education as one of its major foci, suffers from the same weaknesses as other international organizations — no institutional memory, no coordination nor any vision for the future. Goals set and agreements achieved on a high level do not reach the population and have no effect on their lives.

## **COEXISTENCE**

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines coexistence as the occurrence or existence of several things at once.

Claims have been made that Bosnia and Herzegovina has always been a society where people of different religions have lived together in peaceful coexistence. That claim has been true only under certain historical circumstances.

- a) Religions had no official role or public influence during the rule of the former Yugoslav Communist Party (1945–1990). Property of the religious communities deemed by the socialist authorities as excessive wealth was nationalized, causing additional grievance on the part of religious leaders toward the ruling party. All the religions were equal in their lack of importance.

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- b) Prior to 1945, one religion was always closer to the ruling authorities than the other practicing religions in Bosnia at any given time, and they each took advantage of being in this position. The Orthodox Church had precedence over others during the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, 1918–1941 (originally the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes); the Catholic Church was pre-eminent during Austro-Hungarian rule, 1875–1918, and during the Independent Republic of Croatia, 1941–1945; and Islam dominated during approximately 450 years of Ottoman rule. Judaism was never a part of any ruling elite. So, there have been periods in Bosnian history when each of the three major religions could claim that it was oppressed or that it was associated with a ruling party and had a favored status. The 45 years of atheistic rule equally disenfranchised all of them.
- c) A large percentage of the population received no religious education during the rule of the Communist Party, as it applied Marx's definition of religion being the opiate of the masses. Religion and religious adherence was more or less limited to cultural rituals around family holidays. There is a joke that in the past system the tradition for Bosnian Muslims was not to go to mosque on Fridays, while the Orthodox and Catholics followed their own tradition of not going to church on Sundays.
- d) Because of the complete separation of church and state, the clergy were not politically active, and they and their congregations, however small, suffered discrimination. The clergy usually only served older, more religious generations and mostly in more rural, less "progressive" parts of Bosnia.

When the Pandora's box of war and ethnic conflict was opened in Bosnia, a river of refugees started flooding neighboring countries or moving to regions of Bosnia where they felt they would be safe, and where their religious identification and nationality would not be a detriment. Three armies, the Croatian Council of Defense (HVO),<sup>1</sup> the Bosnian Serb Army (VRS)<sup>2</sup> and the newly formed Bosnian Army,<sup>3</sup> generally defended only their own ethno-religious group. The Bosnian Army was the least well armed and lost territories to the other two armies. By the end of 1992, it and the ruling SDA Party (Party of Democratic Action) became the champions of Bosnian Muslims (later called Bosniaks), alienating those who fought for a multiethnic and multireligious

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<sup>1</sup> The HVO was supported by Croatia.

<sup>2</sup> Heavily armed by the former Yugoslav Army and supported by Serbia.

<sup>3</sup> In the first few months of 1992, the army consisted of Bosnian patriots from all nationalities, but very soon started favoring Muslim nationalists, forming Muslim brigades, carrying banners with text from the Quran, and so on.

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Bosnia. The HVO and VRS armies clearly followed the lead of their nationalistic parties and their policies of ethnic cleansing. People continued to flee areas where “their” nationality/religion was a minority. Some fled to third countries and became refugees. Others found refuge in parts of Bosnia where their group formed the majority and became displaced within their own country. After the war, many of them decided to stay in the areas to which they had fled. Although international organizations claim that the return of internally displaced persons and refugees was successful, it was so only on paper.<sup>4</sup>

The reality in Bosnia now is that coexistence, the religions living side by side and cooperating with each other, is nothing but a memory of the time when they had a common enemy in the Communist Party. People live in three mostly separate areas where each one is a majority in one, and the other two minorities. And in each area, only one religion is preeminent.

### **EARLY POSTWAR EFFORTS IN BRINGING RELIGIOUS LEADERS TOGETHER**

As the war was ending, there was no real strategy developed by any international organization on the ground that was dealing with democratization. The international organizations were aware of the division and existence of the three actual entities.<sup>5</sup> The international agency most involved in democratization and reconciliation, the OSCE, had a small mission that expanded dramatically after the Dayton Agreement was signed. Although tasked to organize the first free and fair elections after the war (with a very unrealistic deadline of six to nine months), the mission’s first head, the late Ambassador Robert Frowick, supported members of his staff who had innovative ideas on how to promote tolerance, coexistence and cooperation. The priority was to re-establish physical communication among separated groups, entities, and even relatives who took different sides and became virtual enemies to each other.

During Ambassador Frowick’s introductory meeting in Sokolac, the temporary seat of the Orthodox Dabar Bosnia Diocese,<sup>6</sup> its head Metropolitan Nikolaj expressed his wish to visit the territory of his diocese in central Bosnia in order to evaluate the situation with churches and

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<sup>4</sup> In order to claim the ownership of their prewar property, refugees had to register their return with the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees and other international organizations set up for this purpose. After getting their property back, a large majority sold it and never physically returned to live in their prewar places of residence.

<sup>5</sup> The Dayton Peace Agreement in 1995 recognized two official entities to form Bosnia and Herzegovina: Republika Srpska (RS) (set up at the beginning of the war by the Bosnian Serb leadership to begin the process of division of the major national groups in Bosnian and ethnic cleansing) and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). The latter was formed to forge an alliance between Bosniaks/Muslims and Bosnian Croats/Catholics but has never worked on the ground the way it was envisioned in 1994 in Washington, D.C., when it was originally brokered by the U.S. government. The reality is that majority Muslim/Bosniak and majority Catholic/Croat areas are distinct and separate.

<sup>6</sup> Moved from Sarajevo in 1992 due to war conditions.

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other properties of the Orthodox community. This happened very shortly after the transfer of the so-called Serb Sarajevo suburbs to the Muslim-Croat Federation in the spring of 1996. The OSCE organized an escorted two-day tour for him around his diocese. He visited and inspected churches in Sarajevo, Visoko, Zenica, Travnik, Blazuj and some other villages. He visited the few remaining clergy and their small congregations who remained in their prewar locations.

At the beginning of his visit, Metropolitan Nikolaj held Orthodox Easter services in the Old Orthodox Church in Sarajevo. He also visited the residence adjacent to the main Orthodox cathedral in Sarajevo, the traditional home of the Dabar-Bosnia metropolitan. It was destroyed by fire during the war. Metropolitan Nikolaj expressed his wish to return to live in the residence if it were repaired.<sup>7</sup>

The metropolitan stayed overnight in Zenica at the house of the local Orthodox priest. The next day he visited the church in Travnik, held services and talked to the local Serb population about their problems in the Blazuj suburb of Sarajevo. Their dilemma was either to flee and follow the majority who left before and leave behind everything they had, or to stay and face life in the midst of a Muslim majority. It was a hard decision, and many of them needed reassurance from the metropolitan. They were the ones who refused to be involved in any process of ethnic cleansing. However, after a few months of living in uncertainty, they felt insecure and unprotected by the new local Bosnian Muslim authorities.<sup>8</sup> After the visit, Metropolitan Nikolaj displayed a strange disappointment about the generally good conditions of the overall property.<sup>9</sup>

Following the metropolitan's visit and after meetings with reisu-l ulama of the Islamic community of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Mustafa Ceric, OSCE staff agreed to help organize an Eid al-Adha visit to the Banja Luka Islamic community. All the mosques in the city had been blown up as deliberate acts to erase traces of the multiethnic character of Banja Luka. Its imam still lived in a

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<sup>7</sup> The OSCE initiated this effort hoping that his return would trigger the return of Sarajevo Serbs to this area. The residence was repaired after several years with the financial aid of the Republic of Greece and some other donors. The metropolitan, however, never returned full time, claiming that it would not be convenient for him to perform his duties from there (teaching at Foca Orthodox University, etc.).

<sup>8</sup> Many of them joined the others in Republika Srpska, but a small group still remained. They formed a citizen association and even a local radio station. They cooperated with the international community and the new local authority, which was very often not helpful. This was a hard period when violent groups were threatening them and trying to have them vacate their property or sell it for very small compensation. There were also cases of rape and murder.

<sup>9</sup> Being present, I was amazed to hear his comments, as only one of the churches was destroyed due to the proximity of the front line. Some were looted or damaged by grenades or bullets, but most of them were cared for by the local population and even by Muslims (in Travnik) awaiting the end of the war and return of the Serbs to their prewar homes. There were no comments on the destruction of all mosques in Banja Luka, where there were no war activities. They were all destroyed purposely with explosives. I felt that the metropolitan had eyes for members of the Orthodox Church only. Upon his return to the RS, he never publically commented on how his churches had been preserved.

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house next to the site of the famous Ferhadija mosque, and a very small Muslim community remained in that city. The OSCE arranged for the reis's deputy, Ismet Spahic, with a small group of members of the Islamic community from Sarajevo, to go to Banka Luka for Eid. For the first time since the war ended, the security and escort for both tours was provided by the Ministries of the Interior (police) of the Federation and Republika Srpska with no NATO involvement. The transfer of security responsibility was organized at the inter-entity boundary crossing points. The visits were not secret, but there was no press coverage either. It was just a few months since the Dayton Peace Agreement had been signed, and arms were silenced just a few months before. There were no incidents during these visits, which marked the first postwar cooperation between the two entity Ministries of the Interior.

The OSCE leadership was happy and expected that the aforementioned efforts would open the doors further. The visits were followed by Cardinal Vinko Puljic's visit to Metropolitan Nikolaj in Sokolac, which was facilitated by the OSCE as well. The wheel was starting to turn. Everyone was pleased to see things moving. The religious leaders accepted any well-intentioned help that was offered. Other organizations and individuals followed to assist in organizing their joint meetings. These efforts led to a historic meeting put together by Mercy Corps with its local Bosnian partner and the World Conference of Religions for Peace (WCRP) with support from the U.S. Embassy in Vienna, Austria, in June 1997. Although at the last minute due to health reasons Metropolitan Nikolaj had to send his representative, Sarajevo-based Orthodox priest Dusan Jovanovic, to sign on his behalf, the meeting was seen as an important step forward. A representative of the United States Institute of Peace was present as an observer.

**THE INTER-RELIGIOUS COUNCIL OF BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA AND ITS ROLE IN PROMOTING RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE AND INTERFAITH UNDERSTANDING**

The signing of the Statement of Shared Moral Commitment marked the birth of the Inter-Religious Council of Bosnia and Herzegovina (IRC). The expectations of the international community, however, proved more than the IRC could deliver. The international community thought that IRC joint public work would foster coexistence and by working together would promote communication and cooperation among the ethnic groups. It was particularly important that the subordinate members of the clergy follow the IRC's lead and preach harmony and tolerance among their congregations as well as offer support to returnees from other religious groups to their prewar areas of residence. Although the establishment of the IRC was praised

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both by the international and local communities, many Bosnian citizens were skeptical that its work would be more than ceremonial.

The first members of the IRC were Reisu-l Ulema Mustafa ef. Ceric, Islamic community in BiH; Metropolitan Nikolaj Mrdja of Dabar-Bosna, Serbian Orthodox Church; Vinko Cardinal Puljic, Archbishop of Vrhbosna-Sarajevo, Roman Catholic Church; and Jakob Finci, Jewish community of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The WCRP provided financial and logistical support until 2004. It raised funds on behalf of the IRC and had staff members working from a Sarajevo office. The IRC was registered as an independent local nonprofit, nongovernmental organization (association of citizens) in 2005. Since then, it has run its staff and projects independently. The presidency of the IRC is based with one of the communities on an annual rotating system. Serb Orthodox representatives change every year, so that each of five episcopates of Bosnia and Herzegovina participates equally. Of the three Catholic dioceses of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the diocese of Herzegovina is not represented. Bishop Ratko Peric advised his clergy to refuse to participate in any projects initiated by the IRC. His area of influence and jurisdiction is all of western Herzegovina.<sup>10</sup>

The IRC has since opened an office in downtown Sarajevo and hired a very competent young staff representing each religious community. The secretariat consists of five part-time staff, one of whom performs administrative duties. The staff conceives new projects, executes them and coordinates after they are approved by the IRC leadership. No project can be carried out without being unanimously agreed upon by the IRC members.

The IRC works through an Assembly which consists of high religious leaders of the Islamic Community, the Orthodox Church, the Catholic Church and the Jewish Community. The Assembly meets at least once a year and makes decisions by consensus. Otherwise, their joint appearances are rare and merely ceremonial.

The Executive Board consists of the four members, each appointed by a religious leader of their respective community. They meet at least once a month, and make decisions in coordination with the Secretariat on project activities and administrative issues for the IRC.

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<sup>10</sup> This area is inhabited by a majority of Catholic Croats and is adjacent to the Republic of Croatia. It uses the Croatian kuna as currency (as well as the Bosnian convertible mark) and Croatian school textbooks, and has close cooperation with Croatia in all spheres of life.

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The work of IRC is focused on these five areas: legal, media, education, gender and youth group. Each of them is organized in a working group. They prepared the “Draft Law on Freedom of Religion and Legal Status of Churches and Religious Communities in BiH; published the Glossary of Religious Terms; published a book on religious customs of Muslims, Orthodox Serbs, Catholics and Jews in Bosnia and Herzegovina; issued several issues of the magazine *Religious Perspectives*; organized dozens of seminars for children, youth, women, religious ministers, religious educators and young theologians; published a monitoring-based report on the status of the freedom of religion in Bosnia and Herzegovina; and implemented a series of other projects focused on building tolerance and civil society.<sup>11</sup>

According to the IRC Web site, current IRC work is supported by World Vision, the Charles Stuart Mott Foundation, the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, the British Council and the U.S. Embassy in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

IRC projects are very innovative and have not been a repetition of numerous workshops organized by other nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). A few particularly interesting projects are worth highlighting. The IRC had a very successful radio show, “Encounter,” that was broadcast for almost a year. Instead of pointing out the differences among the Abrahamic faiths, which amount to only 10 percent, this show emphasized that 90 percent of the faiths are based on the same beliefs. However, the funding was exhausted and the program was eliminated. For the first time in the history of religious educational institutions in Bosnia, students of seminaries and religious schools and universities have been given the opportunity to meet each other and visit the schools of other religious communities. These students are future religious leaders, and it is hoped they will work to promote tolerance and religious understanding. “The youth group ‘All Together’ was formed in 2007. They have organized visits to and compiled information on 13 orphanages and children’s villages. This comprehensive compilation has addresses and bank accounts with lists of needed materials.”<sup>12</sup> The “Book of Customs of Muslims, Orthodox Christians, Roman Catholics and Jews in Bosnia and Herzegovina” was published by the IRC in 2005. It was put together by a working group of women from the four religious communities. It describes different traditions of how each

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<sup>11</sup> [http://mrv.ba/site/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=14&Itemid=26](http://mrv.ba/site/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=14&Itemid=26).

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.



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religious community celebrates religious holidays and other important milestones in life. The women wanted to present the most common customs and contribute to religious dialogue and tolerance. The book was very well received and sought after, especially by schoolteachers. Regrettably, it is not sold in bookshops, so it is not widely available. It has recently been published in braille script to make it available to the blind and sight-impaired population.

Despite all these joint efforts, the media on all sides portray the leaders as very political public figures. Very rarely do the leaders emphasize the projects that foster tolerance and coexistence. All the religious leaders, moreover, often use the media to complain that none of the sides has fully reoccupied the property that belonged to their communities before World War II and was nationalized by the Communists. They rarely make any joint statements. From time to time the metropolitan and the cardinal call for a joint prayer, as they did in January 2009, on the occasion of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.

Cardinal Puljic and the Orthodox episcopates often complain about the status of their church property in areas under the control of the SDA, a party that favors the Islamic community. Orthodox and Catholic communities are still waiting to regain ownership of their property in Sarajevo and other parts of the Federation. At the same time, the reis was able to get permission and funding for an imposing new facility to house his offices in the old-town area of Sarajevo. Aside from funding that mostly comes from donations from abroad, the Islamic community has an easier time obtaining land deeds and building permits because it has better access and favorable treatment from the Sarajevo authorities. Likewise, the Orthodox Church is favored in the RS, as is the Catholic Church in areas under Croat control. For example, the Catholic Church in Sarajevo has tried for years to get a building permit for new churches in the city quarters called Grbavica, and in Dobrinja. As reported in a local paper on June 22, 2009, permission was finally given to the Franciscan provincial to build a new church in Dobrinja — it had been located in an atomic bomb shelter since it was founded in 1998. But permission for the Grbavica church is still pending. It is only fair to mention, however, that in parts of the Federation under Muslim control, Catholic elementary and high schools are operating freely.

Numerous new mosques and churches are being built all around Bosnia. It is easy for the privileged community to get permission. The international community has had to get involved several times. Some mosques, churches and monasteries have been rebuilt in the areas where local authorities did not support their reconstruction. They have been built to stand as symbols

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of the right of minority religions to practice their faith and reminders that there was once coexistence in Bosnia.

It seems that this status quo, where each side has its area of control, is supported by the religious leaders, as they do not do much to help their counterparts in other communities to achieve goals and return to the areas where their congregants used to form a large portion of the prewar population.<sup>13</sup>

An interesting example of poor cooperation was when an Orthodox priest and his son were injured in Pale by NATO troops searching for war criminals. There was an outpouring of anger from the Orthodox religious community, while other religious leaders did not join them in attacking the international community and their behavior. The metropolitan even temporarily ceased his participation in the IRC when that happened.

The reis is more overtly politically active than the other members of the IRC. He maintains a high profile in the press and works on imposing himself as a regional leader for Muslims. He is working toward becoming a Muslim “patriarch” with temporal authority throughout the region, and not just over those Muslims in Bosnia and Herzegovina. He appears to want to have the same kind of authority over all Muslims in the region that the Serbian patriarch has over Serb Orthodox believers. He may even aspire to being the leader of all Muslims in Europe. This appears to be his main agenda, rather than fulfilling his role of working toward peace, tolerance and coexistence among religious communities in his homeland.<sup>14</sup>

This twofold agenda complicates the situation further. It seems that everybody is willing to work on interreligious dialogue and cooperation only in the areas where they are a minority. As Catholic Bishop Franjo Komarica from Banja Luka had publicly stated at numerous occasions, “It is easy to be the good guy when you are in the minority.” Where a particular group is a majority, however, the priority seems to be primarily the interest of its own co-religionists, leading to a situation that is detrimental to coexistence and tolerance.

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<sup>13</sup> I am not elaborating other political factors in this report, just the role of religious leaders.

<sup>14</sup> Most of the coverage of the reis’s activity in the Bosnian media is about his international organizing activities rather than anything he does regarding interreligious dialogue within Bosnia and Herzegovina.

## **TEACHING RELIGION AND CULTURE OF RELIGIONS IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA TO PROMOTE MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING**

Numerous working groups have examined national subjects such as the teaching of history and language (Croatian-Serbian-Bosnian differences). There has not, however, been a similar systematic examination of religious education. Teaching religion and culture of religions in a way that is in accordance with democratic principles is the only hope for new generations to learn about themselves and others in their region. This is especially important since most young people no longer come into regular contact with their peers in other ethno-religious groups. The goal is to educate generations that will not be biased and want to start new wars because they want to protect themselves from “the others.”

As news coverage has been very often controversial, it is not clear what was happening in that field. The Islamic community introduced the teaching of Islam for day care centers in parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina with a Muslim/Bosniak majority. This triggered protests from parents and citizens who did not agree with the decision. Although opposition was significant, the director of the programs for the Sarajevo canton day care centers went ahead and started the program for selected centers. It is unclear what materials are used, who the teachers are and what program will be provided to children whose parents opt them out.

This situation showed that there is one segment in education of Bosnian children on all sides that is not particularly explored or widely discussed. Common history and language has been a topic of many workshops, but I could find hardly any material written about religious education in public schools.

During my August 2009 trip I met the representatives of the Education Department of the OSCE Mission to BiH, Claude Kieffer, director; Valery Perry, deputy director; and Luc Lietaer, policy and coordination adviser.

It seems that members of the international community in Bosnia do not have a grasp of what is going on in the country. They are familiar with the overall situation, but when asked specific questions, they could not provide answers.<sup>15</sup> Most of the information they provided was from news outlets. When asked about the introduction of religious education in day care centers, they

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<sup>15</sup> Although many attempts were made in the past 15 years to coordinate international organizations (Office of High Representative, OSCE and the United Nations organized weekly briefings to the representatives of NGOs and international organizations), they are still not coordinated and very often do not know to what extent other organizations are doing the same or similar projects.

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said that it was up to the centers to decide if there was enough interest. Not all the centers have started the program. They did not have information about whether similar programs exist in the rest of the country, as only the Sarajevo canton was in the news.

Religion was introduced in all public schools in early '90s. It has been taught throughout elementary and secondary schools as an elective course. However, once students enroll, they cannot drop out in the middle of the school year. It is graded, so they would fail this course. For the majority of children attending these classes it is "an easy A," as one parent explained to me. Although everybody is free to choose the religion they want to study, often only the majority religion of the area is offered. The common explanation by the authorities is that it is not possible to provide teachers for a handful of students who are adherents of religions other than the main one. This corresponds to the de facto division of the country.

The following are a few experiences of parents whose children are from mixed or minority marriages, or who are simply not willing to have their children receive religious instruction via the public school system.

- Mrs. M.'s daughter was not signed up for religion, but being the only child with a different, non-Muslim name (father cultural Muslim, mother Serb, atheist/agnostic), she wanted very strongly to be "like the rest." She studied the Quran, did homework for Islam class with her Muslim friends, started going to the mosque with them and even fasted during Ramadan. After a few years she "grew out" of it and became comfortable with her own identity, one not defined by one religion.
- Mrs. B., both of whose sons are children of nonobserving, cultural Bosnian Serbs and go to school with a majority of Muslim students, noticed that children very often decide whether to take religion based on whether the grade would be an easy A and improve their overall average. She is not in favor of religion in schools, especially when the classes are in the middle of the day so the students not attending very often have nothing to do and are not supervised.
- Mrs. T. didn't want her son to take any religion class (especially since only one was offered), but he attended anyway. His comments at home were more about how the religious teacher (hodza) introduced archaic vocabulary, mostly loaned words from Turkish or Arabic.

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Culture of Religions is a course in which there is much interest, but it is still not taught in the whole country. The OSCE presents a rather rosy view of religious education in Republika Srpska on its Web site. This summary is a theoretical and idealized picture of religious education in Bosnia.

In the fragmented education landscape of Bosnia and Herzegovina *Culture of Religions* has not been uniformly introduced throughout the country because the decision regarding its introduction rests at the entity level in the RS, cantonal level in the Federation, and district level in the Brcko District. In recent years, however, the subject has been offered in a growing number of schools in certain cantons in the Federation, it has been introduced as a compulsory course on an experimental basis in all secondary schools in the Republika Srpska as well as piloted in the Brcko District.

*Culture of Religions* is a secular course, which, drawing on the students' knowledge of their own faith acquired through traditional religious instruction, teaches students about the country's main religious traditions. Deeply rooted in Bosnia and Herzegovina's reality, the course gives students the practical skills to recognize, understand and appreciate the religious diversity reflected in the society in which they live, and to be able to engage in constructive dialogue with people of different faiths. "The aim of the subject is that we learn about tolerance and respect for one another," says a teacher in Banja Luka. The teacher's role in this course is to engage students in meaningful discussions that develop the students' critical thinking, reasoning, and communication skills with an eye toward building common ground shared by all the people regardless of their religious affiliation. "I like this subject," says one of the students in Banja Luka, "and I think we should learn about all religions. It is not something general, we are learning interesting things, not just history. We work in groups and I like that students actively participate in the class." *Culture of Religions* thus, offers important practical lessons about tolerance drawing on many already existing subjects and putting them in a concrete local perspective.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Polina Kozak and Panagiotis Aristeidou, OSCE Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Feature Story, May 2009, <http://www.oscebih.org/public/default.asp?d=6&article=show&id=2341>.

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It is important to mention an effort by the international community. In 2007, the OSCE and its Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights prepared through their working group of experts, published and disseminated the “Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools.” Jakob Finci, the Jewish member of the IRC, was a member of this working group. It was translated into Bosnian, Croatian and Serbian and endorsed by local religious leaders.

In line with the OSCE’s conflict prevention role and its commitment to fostering a culture of mutual respect and understanding, the Advisory Council of the ODIHR Panel of Experts on Freedom of Religion or Belief, together with other experts and scholars, met in Toledo, Spain, in March to discuss approaches to teaching about religions and beliefs in public schools in the state OSCE region. The experts came from a wide range of backgrounds and included leading scholars, policy makers, educators, lawyers, and representatives of inter-governmental and non-governmental organizations. The Toledo meeting launched an intensive process, involving subsequent meetings in Bucharest and Vienna, and extensive collaboration among members of the Advisory Council, the larger Panel, and other experts, resulting in the formulation of the *Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools*.<sup>1718</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

Despite 15 years of sporadic efforts, religion today in Bosnia and Herzegovina is more of a hindrance than a help to promoting peaceful coexistence. Polarization and extremism make religions other than one’s own even more distant, strange and threatening. Physical interaction that existed before the last war is now almost completely lost because of political division. Teaching culture of religions, history of religions and a comprehensive approach to different religions have not yet started to be implemented throughout the school system. While the staff of the IRC is attempting to implement worthwhile programs, most of the top religious leaders are more interested in promoting the interests only of their own co-religionists or in furthering other political agendas.

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<sup>17</sup> Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools, Executive Summary, Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, 2007.

<sup>18</sup> OSCE staff mentioned at the meeting that the Vatican, being an OSCE member, expressed disagreement, stopping any further implementation of the principles in the field.

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The Religion and Peacemaking Center of Innovation conducts research, identifies best practices, and develops new peacebuilding tools for religious leaders and organizations. The Center helps define and shape the field of religious peacebuilding and develops and implements integrated strategies for the Institute's conflict-specific work, including projects with religious communities in zones of conflict.

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The United States Institute of Peace is an independent, nonpartisan, national institution established and funded by Congress. Our mission is to help prevent, manage, and resolve international conflicts by empowering others with knowledge, skills, and resources, as well as by our direct involvement in peacebuilding efforts around the world.