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Wahhabism in the Balkans

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Key Points

- * Growing concern over the rise of Wahhabism in the Balkans have dictated that the issue has shifted from the margins to the mainstream, fast becoming recognised as one the key political-security issues in the Western Balkan region.
- * The growth of Wahhabi groups in the region should be treated with caution. Incidents involving Wahhabi groups in Serbia (including Kosovo), Montenegro, and Macedonia demonstrate that the Wahhabi movement is no longer isolated within the territorial confines of Bosnia and Herzegovina.
- * Its proliferation presents a challenge for already strained inter-ethnic relations and, more importantly, intra-Muslim relations in the region. It is imperative that the ongoing situation is not ignored or misunderstood by Western policy-makers.

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Introduction

Followers of the doctrine of Wahhabism have established a presence and become increasingly active throughout the Western Balkan region during the last decade, most notably in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Sandžak (Serbia and Montenegro). The war in Bosnia, which raged between 1992 and 1995, changed irreversibly the character of Bosnian Islam. Even before the outbreak of war, internal strains within the Muslim SDA (Party for Democratic Action) emerged between a more moderate, secular faction led by Adil Zufilkarpašić, and a more religious and fundamentalist faction, led by Alija Izetbegović.¹ One of the key fundamental changes wrought by this internal struggle was the change in the nature and structure of Bosnian Islam. The persecution of Muslims by both Serbs and Croats during the war and their collective experience during the war sharpened their previously opaque Islamic identity. But, equally significantly, the war also brought aspects of the Islamic world previously rather alien to Bosnian Muslims. The aid provided to the Bosnian Muslim cause by Islamic countries took many forms and some left little in the way of a legacy, extending for only a limited period following the cessation of hostilities. However, some of these residual effects are still visible, most importantly, the influence of Arab volunteers who came to Bosnia during the war and subsequent aid packages (that came with certain conditions) provided by Islamic countries.

Since the Dayton Agreement brought the war to an end in November 1995, Bosnia, despite continuing crises between its constituent parts - the federation of Muslims and Croats and *Republika Srpska* (the Serbian Republic) - has remained at peace and begun the long and painful road to (eventual) European Union accession. But whilst there is much to be positive about, one should not ignore impediments to Bosnia's European future that do exist. One such problem is the emergence and consolidation of the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam. Within the group of Arab volunteers who came to Bosnia in the early 1990s, a number were followers of the Wahhabi doctrine. Following the signing of the Dayton Agreement their activities were largely ignored by the Bosnian government and the International Community; but in the post-September 11th security environment their activities have become a matter of concern, not simply for Bosnian authorities, but for the wider Islamic community and the International Community. Perhaps more worrying for the latter is that problems with Wahhabis are no longer restricted to Bosnia and Herzegovina – the matter has become a concern for authorities in Serbia, Montenegro and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (hereafter Macedonia).

Thus whilst Wahhabism may have taken root in Bosnia as a residual effect of the war, it is no longer confined within its borders. Does this imply a wider security threat? Incidents involving Wahhabis became relatively commonplace in Bosnia, with tensions simmering for a number of years between the Wahhabis (and those who support their ideological aims) and the wider, generally moderate, Muslim

community. Nevertheless, observers determined that incidents were limited and restricted to within a tiny section of the Muslim community - primarily a residual effect of the war (1992–5), which, given time, would dissipate. However, whilst unquestionably on the margins of Muslim life and culture, the growth of Wahhabism in Bosnia has been the cause of growing concern, and not simply in Bosnia. Since the late 1990s, incidents involving Wahhabi groups have extended beyond the borders of Bosnia, increasing in frequency in neighbouring states such as Serbia (including Kosovo and Serbian Sandžak), Montenegro (Montenegrin Sandžak),² and Macedonia. With the discovery of weapons and related logistical essentials in a ‘terrorist training camp’ outside the town of Novi Pazar in Serbia (and the subsequent trial), the issue has transcended the borders of Bosnia and Herzegovina. In the last year, the issue of Wahhabism has shifted from the margins to become a mainstream political topic in Serbia, Montenegro and Macedonia. Indeed, within months of the discovery of the training camp, the spread of Wahhabism, followers of the Wahhabi doctrine, and the nature of their activities, became collectively defined by security agencies in the region as one of the factors most likely to contribute to regional instability in the future. Although discussions of the issue, as with many others in the Balkans, may not be as impartial as they might seem, it is worth surveying the current discourse in the Balkans to attempt to gauge the scale of the problem, as well as providing some historical background.

The Roots and Channels of Wahhabism

Wahhabism is an import into the Balkans, and stands in stark contrast to the traditional strains of Islam in the region (Sufi mysticism and the Dervish tradition). Wahhabism has its roots in Saudi Arabia in the 18th century. Adherents of this doctrine are guided by the teachings of the Saudi religious reformist Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdul al-Wahab. Traversing the Middle East with the objective of spreading his monotheistic beliefs, Wahab’s core aim was a ‘purification’ of Sunni Islam, which he believed had become corrupted by scholarly revision and a misleading worship of idols and symbols. He argued that Muslims should interpret the Koran literally and that belief in superstition (pilgrimage to shrines, the erection of gravestones, the belief in omens and the use of tesiphs) represented a dangerous diversion which should be abandoned.³ From its Saudi roots, Wahab’s doctrine has today become synonymous with extremist variants of modern political Islam, although his own teachings have been interpreted in a number of ways to fit the political agenda of various groups.⁴ Followers of Wahab’s doctrine are commonly known as Wahhabis, but they themselves often prefer to be referred to as *Salafis* (descendents of the *Salaf*, the companions of the Prophet Mohammed).

Wahhabism quickly attained a following throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, becoming most influential in the Middle East and the Gulf. During the course of the 18th century, a merging of political and religious interests awarded the Wahhabis powerful patrons. A symbiosis developed in Saudi Arabia between the Wahhabis and the tribal chief Muhamad bin Saud of the burgeoning Saud dynasty. One fed off the other to attain their particular objectives, but the symbiosis led to a consolidation of the power of the Saud clan and the extension of Wahhabi influence in Saudi Arabia. The close links between the Saudi dynasty and the Wahhabis have dictated that the latter have wielded significant influence in Saudi religious and political life. The relationship between the two may be rather contradictory, but the symbiosis has continued to develop, and as the political power and financial clout of the Saud dynasty has increased, the doctrine of Wahhabism has done likewise. The impact of the dynasty-Wahhabi symbiosis has generated effects far beyond the

boundaries of the kingdom. Saudi wealth, fuelled by petrodollars, represents only one side of the coin. The export of Wahhabism is an equally significant factor.

As the influence of groups such as the Egyptian-based Muslim Brotherhood increased, governments in the Middle East cracked down on their activities. In a context of oppression against these groups, Saudi Arabia was deemed a relatively safe haven for the persecuted, Egyptian Islamists who fled Nasser's regime in the 1960s, for example. The Saudis calculated that these Islamic extremists, whilst they could be controlled, did not represent a threat to the dynasty. But by the following decade, Islamists (and local Wahhabis) were becoming impatient with the 'corrupt' rule of the House of Saud. Rather than aid the consolidation of social cohesion – and thus stability - by redistributing the country's wealth, the significant riches garnered by the Saudi dynasty during and after the oil crisis in 1973 were absorbed within the small and closed ruling elite. This enormous gap in wealth generated significant societal dislocation, and increased dissatisfaction among the poor, from which extremists garnered support. Events throughout the region in the late 1970s, such as the Iranian revolution, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and - most importantly - the occupation of the Great Mosque in Mecca (and the subsequent battle between Saudi Wahhabis and foreign Islamists on one side and the Saudi National Guard on the other), made the royal family increasingly nervous.⁵ To deal with the burgeoning domestic threat posed by local Wahhabis and foreign extremists, the house of Saud actively encouraged the export of Wahhabi personnel and ideology, primarily to the *jihad* in Afghanistan. As a consequence, many Saudi Wahhabis would participate in conflicts far beyond Saudi borders, and following the end of the Soviet-Mujahedin conflict, many moved on to engage in new conflicts, such as those raging in Chechnya, Algeria and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The latter especially would bring Arab volunteers to the *European jihad* in support of oppressed Muslims. But foreign volunteers, driven by the energetic zeal of Wahhabism, and the rather relaxed Bosnian interpretation of Islam would make uncomfortable bedfellows.

Islam in the Balkans has traditionally taken the form of Sufi mysticism, and remained untouched by Wahhabi ideas and influences. Throughout the 20th century, Balkan Muslims in Bosnia and the Sandžak were relatively secular - although the latter were, and remain, more conservative. But it was the conservative forces that prevailed in the intra-elite struggle that dogged the early months of the existence of the Muslim SDA, and they promoted Islam as a central facet of the Bosnian Muslim identity. To compound this, the 1992-5 war brought a significant number of foreign fighters (among them many Wahhabis) to Bosnian territory. Tensions were almost immediate. Despite the existence of a wartime solidarity and despite adhering in the broad sense to Sunni Islam, stark differences between Bosnian Muslims and the adherents of stricter interpretations of Islam would quickly emerge. Fundamentally, Sufi mysticism is regarded by Wahhabis as a corrupted variant of Sunni Islam which, ideally, should be eradicated. Being the vanguard of the 'true faith', Wahhabism discourages diversity within Islam, rejecting alternative interpretations as corrupt and 'un-Islamic'. Intellectualisation of Islam is rejected by Wahhabi scholars (a contradiction in terms) who insist that only the original textual sources of the Koran and the Sunnah (as laid down by the Prophet and his followers) should be consulted. In their view, no scope for creative interpretation exists, and those who do interpret the Koran differently are deemed infidels.

Perhaps the most striking difference between Balkan Muslims and the Wahhabis, however, is their opposing interpretation of the dynamics between the sexes. Unlike Sufi mysticism, Wahhabi doctrine dictates that the sexes should be strictly

segregated in almost all areas of public life (female sexuality is viewed as dangerous, even subversive). According to Wahhabi doctrine, men are preordained to run all aspects of public life whilst women must adhere to domestic duties. Additionally, women are required to wear full veils (burqas), must remain largely separate from men, and must observe different rituals within the mosque. Women are almost entirely excluded from public life, with physical contact between men and women forbidden; polygamy, however, is permitted.

Wahhabism in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Wahhabism, then, began to emerge in Bosnia during the early 1990s and has continued to consolidate since then.⁶ The war psychosis which was produced as a result of the wartime experience of Bosnian Muslims, and the gradual erosion of the ideal of a multi-ethnic Bosnia, could well have dictated that the republic became fertile ground for the proliferation of extremist Islamic ideology. Yet it wasn't so. Whilst the conflict between Serbs, Croats and Muslims was portrayed by Islamists as a genocide which represented only part of a wider global persecution of Muslims by Christians, the majority of Bosnian Muslims did not perceive the conflict as one possessing such 'civilisational' dimensions. Given the rather moderate character of Bosnian Islam, for doctrines such as Wahhabism to take root would require the religious zeal of two groups - Arab volunteers who attempted to impose their world-view upon the Bosnian conflict, and to a lesser extent, individuals who had been educated in Middle East countries. The former began to appear during the first year of the war, arrangements for their arrival made primarily through the Bosnian embassy in Vienna. Islamic volunteers (estimated to be in the region of 3000) had come to Bosnia to fight in defence of their Muslim brethren against the Serbs (and later Croats). Many were incorporated into a unit called *El Mudzahid* formally part of the Muslim 7th Brigade, a feared combat unit based largely in the central Bosnian towns of Tuzla, Zenica and Maglaj.⁷ But upon arrival they found Bosnian Muslims to be largely unreceptive to their rigid interpretation of Islam. Brought up in communist Yugoslavia, where religion had been dismissed as an 'opium of the masses', the majority of Bosnian Muslims bordered on the secular. It was not unusual for Muslims in Bosnia to smoke, drink alcohol, even eat pork.⁸ Such behaviour shocked the Arab and North African Islamists. In his book, *Journey of the Jihadist*, Fawaz Gerges notes that when Nasir Ahmad Nasir Abdallah al-Bahri, better known as 'Abu-Jandal' (a man who would spend four years as Osama bin Laden's personal bodyguard) arrived in Bosnia to help the Muslims in their struggle, he found that "Bosnia's Muslims (many of whom were fighting for a multi-cultural Bosnia) bore about as much relation to Wahhabism as the Church of England gardener had to a Bible Belt evangelist".⁹ Abu-Jandal himself recalled that:

Communist ideology had wiped out all the features of the Islamic religion and understanding of Islam. We saw some Muslim youths wearing a cross around their necks without knowing what this meant, although they belonged to Muslim families and some of them had Arab and Muslim names. They were completely ignorant of Islam. Therefore, we saw that the responsibility we shouldered in Bosnia was broader and more comprehensive than the mission of combat, for which we had come. So we found that we became bearers of weapons and at the same time bearers of a call, a book, a message.¹⁰

As the conflict wore on and the ideal of a multi-cultural Bosnia gradually eroded, the energetic Islamic zeal of the foreign fighters became more influential among even previously secular Muslims. However, this did not mean that Bosnian Muslims could be infiltrated and manipulated out-with certain acceptable boundaries. Whilst

the commitment of the Arab volunteers was appreciated, attempts to impose stricter interpretations of Islam upon local Muslims caused significant problems within the Islamic community in Bosnia. Although receiving little media attention, clashes between Wahhabis and moderate Bosnian Muslims were commonplace throughout the war.¹¹ The moderates opposed attempts by foreign fighters and their domestic followers to impose Sharia law in some Bosnian towns. According to recollections of a number of citizens of the central Bosnian town of Zenica, the foreign volunteers imposed a strict regime upon the citizens, destroying shops which sold alcohol or pornography, harassing men who failed to grow beards and women who refused to wear the veil.¹² However, whilst these impositions caused significant tensions within the Muslim community in Bosnia, with the signing of the Dayton Agreement in November 1995, it was assumed that many of the foreign fighters would depart Bosnian territory. Indeed, at the end of the war, *El Mudzahid* was officially disbanded as a unit. A number of their members remained in Central Bosnia, however. According the International Crisis Group's (ICG) estimate, around 12,000 Bosnian passports were distributed to foreign fighters during and after the war - although only a small number of these could be identified as Mujahedin.¹³

Following the Dayton Agreement, many Mujahedin moved to the remote northeast Bosnian village of Boćinja (31 miles west of Tuzla), which became known as the nerve centre of Wahhabism in Bosnia. Among the many high-profile visitors to this village was Aiman al-Sawahiri (known to be Al-Qaida's second-in-command).¹⁴ Their presence was noted by the authorities and by the UN forces but no attempt was made to eject them; after all, some were now Bosnian citizens. When the Bosnian government attempted to evict them in July 2000, the Mujahedin erected roadblocks and an ensuing stand-off led to 19 arrests.¹⁵ But the context changed following the September 11th attacks in the USA. The threat from extremists in Bosnia was deemed significant enough for the UK, US and Dutch embassies to close temporarily in October 2001. Significant pressure was applied by the international community, and in 2001 a number of foreign fighters voluntarily departed Bosnian territory. The Bosnian government, now keen to demonstrate their Western orientation in the post-September 11th environment, also acted - in 2002, for example, six men of Algerian origin were arrested by the Bosnian police and handed over to the US authorities for their alleged role in terrorist activities.¹⁶ In the same year, after a number of incidents, including shootings and physical affrays, locals forced the Mujahedin in Boćinja to leave, although a number are thought to have remained in outlying areas.¹⁷

However, it was not simply a small number of Islamic extremists who sought to change the character of Islam in Bosnia. The role played by Islamic governments has been no less significant. Aid from Islamic countries (in particular Saudi Arabia) was focused on social programmes such as building madrassas (Islamic schools) and funding programmes for war orphans, and infrastructural reconstruction projects (the rebuilding of mosques in the Muslim-dominated parts of Bosnia & Herzegovina). But the aid came with conditions. Saudi money has indeed helped fund social programmes and reconstruction of mosques, but the character of Islamic places of worship has changed significantly as a consequence. In the ten-year period since the end of armed conflict in Bosnia, around 550 new mosques have been built - primarily in the Wahhabi style.¹⁸ According to a report in the Wall Street Journal in 2004:

Reconstruction aid poured in from Saudi Arabia. Much of it went into Wahhabi proselytizing, bullying, converting, and bribing of destitute Muslims. An austere desert sect, Wahhabism cannot abide what it considers idolatry, frippery, or nostalgia for objects in religious places. When forced by locals to

*renovate rather than supplant, the Saudis obliterated all historical highlights, interior decoration, turquoise tiling, and the like in local mosques, ripping out and whitewashing everywhere.*¹⁹

The most striking example of a newly-built mosque designed outwith the standard Bosnian aesthetic was the King Fahd Mosque in Sarajevo, which was constructed along the stylistic lines of a Saudi Wahhabist mosque. The original interiors and associated decorations, for example, were destroyed and replaced with whitewashed walls characteristic of a typical Saudi mosque.²⁰ Similarly, other existing mosques were rebuilt, but in a fashion out of keeping with their traditional character (the Gazi Huzrevbeg Mosque for example - also in Sarajevo).²¹ According to a Radio Free Europe Report commissioned in 2005 and written by Drita Haziraj:

*many experts and community members were of the opinion that well-intentioned financing of a spiritual revival of Bosnian Muslims is having the unexpected and undesirable effect of importing new architecture into Bosnia and Herzegovina, and with it new interpretations of Islam - mainly Wahhabism.*²²

But aid donated by the Saudis was not restricted to the reconstruction of mosques. According to the Balkan Investigative Research Network (BIRN), the Wahhabi movement in Bosnia was strongly supported by the Saudis, who used an organisation called the High Saudi Committee for Relief (under the auspices of a Saudi government ministry) to channel funds throughout the Bosnian war and thereafter - a situation which continued until SFOR (the NATO-led peacekeeping force for Bosnia) launched an investigation into the activities of the organisation.²³ Financing has continued, however, through other sources. According to a report from 2007, several Islamic aid agencies operating from Vienna have channelled funds to a number of individuals associated with the Wahhabi movement.²⁴ As a consequence, the Bosnian government have been put under intense international pressure to repatriate foreign fighters, and have established a review commission to analyse the cases of 1500 foreign fighters, most of whom had been granted Bosnian citizenship during and after the war. Deportations (and demonstrations against them) commenced thereafter, and it was within this context that Wahhabis led by Jusuf Baracić attempted to forcibly enter the Careva (Tsar's) mosque in downtown Sarajevo, leading to clashes between Wahhabis and local Muslims.

The incident represented the culmination of a series of events which began in Baracić's hometown of Kalešija, during which he had harassed women who would not wear the veil and implored the citizens generally to stop playing music in their homes. He and his followers also occupied a building belonging to the *Islamska Zajednica* (IZ - Islamic Community), leading to further violent clashes and a subsequent police intervention.²⁵ A month after the incidents in Sarajevo, Baracić, the spiritual leader of the Wahhabis in Bosnia, was killed in a car accident. His funeral attracted large crowds.

Whilst it is important to keep these and other events in perspective, there are clear indications that a situation is developing which pits moderate Bosnian Muslims against members of the Wahhabi movement. Wahhabism, whilst unquestionably supported by a small minority, has taken root in Bosnia. The sight of men sporting traditional Wahhabi dress (short trousers, beards, vests) is no longer uncommon, especially in central Bosnian towns such as Zenica, Tuzla, Maglaj, even Sarajevo. Simultaneously, young women are increasingly donning the veil, even if their mothers do not.²⁶ An element of this can be blamed on the residual effects of the persecution of Bosnian Muslims during the 1992-5 conflict, much of which, it has been assumed, will fade over the generations. But in the thirteen years since the

end of the war such assumptions do not rest comfortably with the contemporary situation. The Bosnian government's move to deport a number of foreign fighters in 2006 (and again in 2008) appears to have taken some of the sting from the Wahhabi movement, but these developments, whilst necessary, may have come too late. In 2004, the then High Commissioner of Bosnia, Paddy Ashdown, warned - with regard to Islamic extremism in Bosnia - that the international community should be 'on their guard now and in the future'.²⁷ His warning is equally resonant today. The findings of a recently established review commission within the Bosnian government have led to the imposition of a policy which strips a number of individuals who arrived in Bosnia during the war of Bosnian citizenship. Whilst this step may generate protests and short to medium-term problems, it remains a crucial step in the right direction.

The Wahhabi Movement in the Serbian Sandžak

The arrest and trial of a group of Wahhabis from the Serbian Sandžak represents the culmination of recent incidents associated with Wahhabis there. Some years after their emergence in Bosnia, Wahhabis began to appear in the Serbian and Montenegrin Sandžak in 1997. The Sandžak was fertile ground for rigid interpretations of Islam in the sense that Muslims there have traditionally been considerably more conservative than their brethren in Bosnia. But the Sandžak had remained largely peaceful during the Bosnian war, despite significant tensions between the Sandžak's Serbs and Muslims, which manifested themselves in the many human-rights abuses suffered by the latter. But the 1990s was a paradoxical period in the Sandžak. Whilst Yugoslav Army tanks surrounded the town of Novi Pazar, a war psychosis developed among Muslims. Many *Sandžaklija* (Sandžak Muslims) had fought in Bosnia during the 1992 - 95 war, and as a consequence were regarded by Serb (and to a lesser extent Montenegrin) authorities as a potential fifth column.²⁸ Paradoxically, Novi Pazar enjoyed an economic boom during the UN sanctions imposed upon Serbia and Montenegro during the 1990s. But the arrival of tax impositions following the fall of the Milošević regime in October 2000, not to mention the arrival of cheap goods from Turkey and an influx of Chinese traders (an arrival vehemently opposed by locals), has largely put paid to the good times.

Now that the economic boom is over, the town itself has a rather depressing air. The town's skyline is dominated by the once-salubrious Hotel Vrbak, an unusual hybrid of Oriental aesthetic and Socialist modernism - described in the tourist guides as 'a prince amongst such hotels'. A chaotic, raucous feel permeates - the narrow streets in the centre of town jammed by traffic. The economy is now relatively stagnant, even by Serbian standards. Many of the local factories, which produced high-quality counterfeit goods, simply could not survive under the new economic conditions. But counterfeit designer labels were not the only goods traded there during the 1990s. The cigarette, weapons and narcotics trades flourished, and the legacy of this remains. Sadly, the town has a significant drugs problem, with a high per capita rate of heroin addicts, and the problem is relatively visible. Lack of opportunities frequently lead to disaffection among the youth - many of whom turn to crime, drugs and, sometimes, religious extremism.

Wahhabis began to appear in Novi Pazar in the Sandžak in 1997 but became 'active' only after the fall of Milošević in October 2000. Often their activities involved civic initiatives such as cleaning public spaces or offering help to drug addicts. Indeed, there exists a (not always obvious) symbiosis of sorts between the endemic drug

problem and religious extremism and involves individuals and groups outwith the Sandžak region. According to the ICG, a radical Imam called Hafiz-Sulejman Bugari (who preaches at the 'White Mosque' in Vratnik, Sarajevo), was associated with a drug rehabilitation programme in Sarajevo. Many Sandžak drug-addicts would receive treatment but upon their exit from the programme, "almost all [would] sport Wahhabi beards and dress and would appear to adhere to a fundamentalist form of Islam".²⁹ Furthermore, the ICG noted in 2005 that the financial support provided to the Wahhabi movement in Serbia comes from Sarajevo, which in turn receives support from Saudi charities that operate from Vienna, and diaspora Bosniaks in Sweden, Austria and the UK.³⁰ It has become a recurring problem for researchers to garner more accurate information regarding the distribution of funds and the exact source(s).

The citizens of Novi Pazar became acutely aware of the Wahhabis only in the autumn of 2002 when a small group distributed leaflets in front of the University building urging Muslims not to extend Christmas greetings to their Christian neighbours and to reject participation in Christian religious festivals - Allah's curse would befall those Muslims who ignored this advice.³¹ Their activities included breaking-up a concert in Novi Pazar given by the popular Belgrade band Balkanika, whom they claimed were carrying out 'Satan's work', disrupting post-prayer lectures (known as Ders) in local mosques, and forcing the closure of an OSCE-sponsored AIDS awareness and sexual health promotion project, which the Wahhabis argued was teaching immorality.³² Whilst these incidents caused some disquiet, they amounted (at this stage) to little more than an inconvenience.

Developments took a more serious turn in February 2006, however, when a number of Wahhabis staged a vigorous protest (similar to protests throughout Europe) over the publication of cartoons depicting the Prophet Mohammed in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*. Flags of both Israel and Denmark were burned in the centre of Novi Pazar. In November, clashes broke out in the Arap mosque in Novi Pazar, during which Izet Fijuljanin, a supporter of the local mufti Maumer Zukorlić fired shots at two Wahhabis.³³ These incidents highlighted both the growing strength of the Wahhabis and the dissatisfaction their presence had caused within the wider Muslim community, and more specifically, was indicative of the chasm which had emerged between supporters of the Sandžak Mufti, Maumer Zukorlić, and the Wahhabis.

The discovery of a 'terrorist training camp' in the village of Zabren, near Sjenica, approximately 30 kilometres from Novi Pazar, further exacerbated these pre-existing tensions.³⁴ Serbian police apprehended four suspects who, it was alleged, were in possession of a quantity of weapons, food rations and other equipment.³⁵ Serbian Interior Minister Dragan Jocić stated that the Serbian police considered the activities of Wahhabis, including the harassment of the Islamic community, the gathering of weapons and the establishment of training camps as "an act of aggression against Serbia and all of its citizens".³⁶ A month later, Serbian police, in an attempt to arrest those responsible, killed Ismail Prentić, the alleged leader of the Wahhabis, and arrested Safet Becović and Senad Ramović, all of whom were accused of establishing the camp and plotting to assassinate selected leaders of the Islamic community and moderate Muslim politicians in Novi Pazar.³⁷ According to the Serbian police, they were set upon by attack dogs, followed by gunfire and the throwing of a grenade as they approached the residence of Ismail Prentić. As a consequence, police opened fire, killing Prentić and injuring Ramović. Since these events, the Wahhabi movement has attracted a significant amount of attention from Serbian politicians, media and foreign diplomats, and as a consequence, there have been no further incidents.

The Wahhabis have subsequently kept a low profile, but it is unlikely that the threat has diminished. It is not clear exactly what their alleged targets were, but it may have been the assassination of Mufti Zukorlić, whom the Wahhabis have accused of ‘abandoning the faith’. The trial of fifteen Wahhabis connected with the incidents in the Sandžak, which began in Belgrade on January 14th 2008, should shed some light upon these ambiguities. The main defendant, Nenad Ramović, claimed that the indictment against them was based on “hatred of Islam and Muslims” and that he and his fellow Wahhabis were simply “Muslims devoted to Allah.”³⁸ The target of their invective seemed to be Zukorlić and his supporters rather than the West. The trial is likely to reveal the extent of their alleged activities.

Montenegro and Macedonia: The Islamic Community Prevails

Montenegrin authorities have also turned their attention toward the issue of Wahhabism in their part of the Sandžak. Since the late 1990s Wahhabis have emerged in the predominantly Muslim towns of Plav, Rožaje and Bijelo Polje. Police and the EU Monitoring Mission have stated that they were aware of their presence and that their activities were being monitored closely.³⁹ Whilst their activities have attracted less public attention than those of their fellow adherents in Novi Pazar, there exists discomfort among Montenegro’s Muslim community and the ruling authorities. But the Montenegrin context is quite different from that which exists in the Serbian Sandžak. Even in the darkest days of the early 1990s, attacks upon the Muslim minority were more limited than in Serbia. There were limited attacks on Montenegrin Muslims during the early 1990s (Pljevlja and Štrpcí among the most high-profile) as well as the arrest and subsequent trials (known as the Bijelo Polje trials) of the leadership of the Montenegrin SDA (Party of Democratic Action), but relations between Muslims and the ruling authorities have remained relatively stable.⁴⁰ Following Milo Djukanović’s split with Milošević and within the ruling Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) in 1997, he sought to build an anti-Milošević coalition that would oppose the Serbian president. The Muslim and Albanian communities, instead of being marginalised, became a crucial political factor. Djukanović offered an olive branch to the minority communities, offering, as part of a broader programme of electoral reform, representation in the Montenegrin parliament in accordance with the proportion of their electoral support.⁴¹ Muslims in the Montenegrin Sandžak overwhelmingly backed Djukanović’s DPS in the parliamentary elections of 1997, bringing Montenegro’s Muslims (or Bosniaks) back into the political mainstream.⁴² Their loyalty was rewarded with inclusion in the post-1997 Montenegrin government. Furthermore, the majority of Montenegro’s Muslims supported independence, a goal which was realised following a referendum in May 2006.

As a consequence of the realignment of Montenegrin politics in 1997, the Muslim community and the IZ have generally enjoyed good relations with the Montenegrin authorities. This has been demonstrated by the attitude that the IZ (although they are weaker and less influential in comparison to the IZ in Serbia and the Mesihat of Novi Pazar) has taken toward Wahhabism. Instead of issuing ambiguous statements, representatives and leaders of the Montenegrin IZ have been quick to condemn their activities. Indeed, in the wake of the discovery of the Wahhabi training camp in March 2007, Rifat effendi Fejzić, reis of the Islamic Community in Montenegro, publicly stated that those who were gathering arms were, “people who do not understand Islam as a religion”, and that there existed no support within the Muslim community for their aims.⁴³ Despite the isolation of the Wahhabis by the community, the Montenegrin daily *Vijesti* reported in April 2007 that the number of

Wahhabis had increased in the town of Rožaje and that the impact of the events in Novi Pazar could be felt among the Muslim community there.⁴⁴ A report by the Montenegrin National Security Agency (NSA), presented to the Montenegrin parliament in July 2007, estimated that there were around 100 Wahhabis in Montenegro, and whilst this was not a significant number, the authorities needed to remain cautious regarding the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina where, it was stated, “the Dayton Agreement never managed to take root” and that “strong elements of influence of the Islamic component”, whilst not immediately worrying, are spreading.⁴⁵ It was also reported that whilst Wahhabis existed in Montenegro their efforts to recruit followers were limited by the role of the Islamic community, who distanced themselves from, and by extension isolated, the movement.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, the NSA confirmed in December that they were monitoring a meeting of ‘Islamic extremists’ in the Montenegrin Sandžak believed to be attended by individuals from Serbia, Montenegro and Bosnia & Herzegovina.⁴⁷

The picture, however, is less clear in Macedonia, which has a significant Muslim population and a recent history of armed conflict. Macedonian-language media have, since 2001, consistently reported that Islamic extremists have been active in Macedonia, even alleging that the ANA (Albanian National Army; not to be confused with the armed forces of the republic of Albania) possessed concrete links with Osama bin Laden and Mujahedin. In December 2007, the Macedonian daily *Vecer* increased fear within the non-Muslim majority by asserting that three Islamic extremist groups - Tarikat, Red Rose, and the Wahhabis - were currently “operating on Macedonian territory”, and that “several dozens of Wahhabis, who are believed to be controlled by Al Qa'ida, are studying and training in Macedonia”.⁴⁸ Assessments of the numbers of extremists in Macedonia vary wildly depending on the source, but their presence has exacerbated existing tensions within Macedonian society.⁴⁹

In November 2007, armed clashes took place between Macedonian police and former ethnic Albanian guerrilla fighters in the village of Brodec, near Tetovo. One of the group’s leaders, Ramadan Shiti, had been previously linked with the expanding Wahhabi movement, and had allegedly been active in western Macedonia, Albania, Kosovo, Sandžak and Bosnia.

It has also been alleged by Macedonian media that a number of Wahhabis participated in the 2001 Macedonian conflict that officially ended with the signing of the Ohrid Agreement, and the local media in recent years have speculated vigorously on their continued activities. The Kumanovo-Lipkovo area and the areas of Gostivar and Tetovo in 2005 were alleged to host ‘well-organized, strong, and established Wahhabi groups, while in other parts of the country they are beginning to crystallise’.⁵⁰ The Wahhabis in Macedonia are alleged to enjoy the support of their own militarised faction known as ‘The Protectors of Islam’.⁵¹

Certainly, since 2005, tensions within the Islamic Religious Community (IRC) in Macedonia have increased, resulting from an on-going struggle between two Islamic factions - pro-Arabic radical Islam and the more traditional Sufism. The muftis within the IRC practise so-called secular or traditional Islam. A faction represented by Skopje-based Mufti Zenun Berisha allegedly aimed to strengthen the position of radical Islam, fostered by the Wahhabi movement.

According to the daily *Gazeta Sqiptare* Skopje and Tirana have exchanged information regarding the existence of Islamists in Kondovo, where there have been a number of incidents.⁵² A group of Wahhabis obstructed a meeting of the Assembly of the IRC, and later physically assaulted a number of imams belonging to it. These events have caused tensions between locals and the Wahhabis.

Conclusion

Whilst policy-makers should be firmly focused upon finding solutions to issues such as the political deadlock in Bosnia (mainly on the issue of police reform) and 'resolving' the problem of Kosovo's status, they would be ill-advised to ignore the phenomenon of Wahhabism in the region. That said, they should respond proportionately. The Wahhabi movement throughout the region is small in number and does not presently represent an immediate threat to regional security. There is nothing unique about a Wahhabi presence in this corner of Europe - Wahhabi groups are present and active in every European country. Furthermore, there also exists little risk that Muslims across the region would support the ideology and objectives of Islamic extremists; after all, the culture of Wahhabism sits in stark contradiction to the traditional forms of Balkan Muslim observance, not to mention that the political orientation of the vast majority of Muslims in the region is predominantly Western.

That said, the growing influence of the Wahhabi movement over the last ten years cannot and should not be ignored. However numerically insignificant, it is not their *real* but *imagined* threat that is key. In the fragile ethnic balance which characterises the Sandžak, for example, perception itself could be a destabilising factor. In a small community where everybody knows who everyone is and their family history is known to all, rumour and myth often take on a life of their own. Disproportional or otherwise, the recognition by both Serbian and Montenegrin security services that the Wahhabis represent a clear and present danger could turn the issue from a merely political to a security issue. Its continuing growth and proliferation of influence (particularly among the young) should be closely observed. The Wahhabi claim, that they oppose nationalism, usury, prostitution and the consumption of alcohol and recognise only the authority of Allah, is a powerful and attractive message to the Muslim youth, jaded by what they perceive as the corruption of their politicians.

The most significant threat is the influence that Wahhabism could garner over coming generations. The moderate character of Balkan Islam will continue to be challenged by the narrowness of the Wahhabi doctrine, threatening stable intra-Muslim relations. Moderate imams are viewed by Wahhabis as corrupted and guilty of proliferating a version of Islam that is not true to their interpretation of the Koran. As a consequence, tensions have risen significantly between moderate imams in Bosnia, Serbia and Montenegro and the Wahhabis who are active in those states. Those arrested in Novi Pazar, for example, were apparently concerned primarily with the liquidation of moderate imams and local politicians rather than Western targets. Such a localised strategy does not represent a threat to the wider region directly, but primarily to the domestic Islamic communities. Within these communities the dominant strain is moderate, and it is crucial that this moderation is nurtured where possible. The region's economic progress will, to a significant extent, determine the level of social cohesion and stability. Where there are pockets of religious extremism there often exists social dislocation, lack of employment opportunities and related problems. Addressing the root causes of why young people are attracted to religious extremism may lead to a very different social environment.

Thus it is crucial to nurture, and not to isolate, the majority of moderate Muslims in the region. Even within the Wahhabi groups, not all are committed to political activism, and being a follower of the Wahhabi doctrine does not by definition mean

being involved in potentially destabilising activities. On the contrary, many are deeply religious individuals with little or no involvement in politics. Defining Wahhabis bluntly as ‘terrorists’ in populist media reportage and rhetoric is likely to create a sense of paranoia, drive the movement underground and ultimately prove to be counter-productive, weakening the moderate majority and serving only to bolster extremists. Additionally, it would strengthen the Bosnian Serb argument that Muslims are ‘closet fundamentalists’ with whom they cannot truly share power; or the Serbian nationalist arguments that the Sandžak Muslims are a potential fifth column and that Kosovo could become an Islamic fundamentalist state. Threats exist, but clearly defining them and creating strategies to deal with them should be the immediate imperative. With these subtleties clearly defined and understood, it should be possible to weaken and root out malignant forces, whilst bolstering the forces of moderation. Stability for future generations in the Balkans could depend upon the attainment of this objective.

Endnotes

¹ See Djilas & Gace, *The Bosniak*, Hurst & Co., London, 1997.

² Contemporary Sandžak straddles the border area between Serbia and Montenegro, and is, since the Montenegrin declaration of independence in May 2006, divided by an international border. There are six Sandžak municipalities in Serbia (Priboj, Prijepolje, Nova Varoš, Sjenica, Novi Pazar and Tutin), and five Sandžak municipalities in Montenegro (Bijelo Polje, Berane, Plav, Pljevlja, and Rožaje).

³ BIRN, *Wahhabism Fuels Novi Pazar Religious Tensions*, 7 December 2006.

⁴ According to Natana J. Delong-Bas, Abdul al-Wahab’s teachings have, to some extent, been misinterpreted by both modern adherents of Wahhabism and scholars of the doctrine. See Natana J. Delong-Bas, *Wahhabi Islam: From Revival and Reform to Global Jihad*, I.B. Tauris, London, 2004.

⁵ Gilles Kepel, *The War for Muslim Minds*, Harvard University Press, 2004, p.164.

⁶ Balkan Insight, 21 March 2007, p.1.

⁷ International Crisis Group, *Bin Laden and the Balkans*, ICG Balkans Report 119, 9 November 2001, p.11.

⁸ For an excellent analysis of the character of Bosnian Islam see, Tone Bringa, *Being Muslim the Bosnian Way*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1995.

⁹ Fawaz A. Gerges, *Journey of the Jihadist: Inside Muslim Militancy*, Harcourt Press, New York, 2007, pp.100-101.

¹⁰ Interview with Abu-Jandal in Fawaz A. Gerges, *Journey of the Jihadist: Inside Muslim Militancy*, Harcourt Press, New York, 2007, p.101.

¹¹ Balkan Insight Investigation, 21 March 2007, p.3

¹² Author’s interviews with citizens of Zenica, September 2007.

¹³ International Crisis Group, *Bin Laden and the Balkans: The Politics of Anti-Terrorism*, ICG Balkans Report, No.119, 9 November 2001, p.11.

¹⁴ Der Spiegel Online, 9 November 2007.

¹⁵ BBC News Online, 23 July 2000.

¹⁶ Balkan Insight, 21 March 2007, p.3.

¹⁷ Der Spiegel Online, 9 November 2007.

¹⁸ RFE/RL Balkan Report, Vol. 9. No. 9, 26 March 2005.

¹⁹ Wall Street Journal, 3 August 2004, p.6.

²⁰ The King Fahd Mosque has remained, since its construction, a popular meeting place for Wahhabis in Sarajevo.

²¹ According to Michael Sells, the mosque had been shelled during the Bosnian war by Serbs, but despite this its interior had survived; yet the interior was ‘fully gutted’ during Saudi-sponsored work during the mid-1990s. See Michael Sells, *Erasing Culture: Wahhabism, Buddhism, Balkan Mosques*. H<http://www.haverford.edu/relg/sells/reports/wahhabismbuddhasbegova.htm>H

²² RFE/ RL Balkan Report, Vol. 9, No. 9, 26 March 2005.

²³ Balkan Insight, 21 March 2007.

²⁴ See ISN Security Watch, *Wahhabism: From Vienna to Bosnia*, 6 April 2007.

²⁵ Dnevni Azav, Sarajevo, 11 March 2007, p.4.

²⁶ Author’s interviews with citizens of Sarajevo, September 2007.

²⁷ Interview with Lord Paddy Ashdown, BBC World, September 2004.

²⁸ High profile *Sandžaklija* included member of the Bosnian Presidency Ejup Ganić; the first commander of the Bosnian Army Sefer Halilović; the first commander of the Bosnian Fifth Corps General Ramiz Dreković; and the commander of the ‘Zulfikar’ Brigade in Sarajevo, Zulfikar Ališpago (known as ‘Zuka’). The term ‘Sandžaklija’ refers to Sandžak Muslims, but has become a pejorative term among Muslims in Bosnia – many of whom regard Sandžak Muslims as poor country cousins.

²⁹ International Crisis Group, *Serbia’s Sandžak: Still Forgotten*, Crisis Group Europe Report No.162, 8 April 2005, p.24.

³⁰ Ibid, p.25.

³¹ Vreme, Belgrade, 22 March 2007, p.23.

³² International Crisis Group, *Serbia’s Sandžak: Still Forgotten*, Crisis Group Europe Report No.162, 8 April 2005, p.24. See also Southeast European Times, 26 April 2006.

³³ BIRN, *Wahhabism Fuels Novi Pazar Religious Tensions*, 7 December 2006.

³⁴ Dan, Podgorica, 19 March 2007, p.11.

³⁵ BIRN, *Raid on Wahhabi Camp Raises Tensions in Sandžak*, 22 March 2007.

³⁶ BIRN, *Raid on Wahhabi Camp Raises Tensions in Sandžak*, 22 March 2007.

³⁷ Southeast European Times, 26 April 2007.

³⁸ B92, Belgrade, 14 January 2008.

³⁹ Author’s interview with EU Monitoring Mission staff in Bijelo Polje, April 2004.

⁴⁰ See Milan Andrijevich, *Sandžak: A Perspective on Serb – Muslim Relations*, Hurst & Co., London, 1997, p.188. See also Humanitarian Law Center, *Spotlight on Human Rights Violations in Times of Armed Conflict*, Belgrade, 1995, p.22.

⁴¹ Robert Thomas, *Serbia under Milošević*, Hurst & Co., London, p.380.

⁴² Montenegro’s Muslims are divided between those who define themselves as ‘Bosniaks’ and those who continue to define themselves as ‘Muslimani’ (Muslim). See Bodhana Dimitrovova, *Bosniak or Muslim? Dilemma of one Nation with two Names*, in ‘Southeast European Politics’, October 2001, Vol.II, No.2, p.94.

⁴³ Vijesti, Podgorica, 22 March 2007, p.5.

⁴⁴ Vijesti, Podgorica, 21 April 2007, p.12.

⁴⁵ Vijesti, Podgorica, 15 July 2007, p.3.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 15 July 2007, p.3.

⁴⁷ RTCG, 24 December 2007, 18:00pm.

⁴⁸ Vecer, Skopje, 22 December 2007, p.10.

⁴⁹ According to Vecer, Slav Muslims (dubbed ‘White Devils’) are particularly useful for Al Qaida operations because as “fair haired Europeans” they can be used for effective infiltration and operations in Europe. See Vecer, Skopje, 22 December 2007, p.10.

⁵⁰ Vreme’ 6 July 2005, p.12

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Dnevnik, Skopje, March 18, 2006, p.6

Want to Know More ...?

See:

Natana J. Delong-Bas, *Wahhabi Islam: From Revival and Reform to Global Jihad*, I.B. Tauris, London, 2004

Fawaz A. Gerges, *Journey of the Jihadist: Inside Muslim Militancy*, Harcourt Press, New York, 2007

Kenneth Morrison, *Wahhabism in the Balkans*, Jane's Journal of Islamic Affairs, 11 January 2008

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