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Religious Manipulation and Ethnic Conflict: An Investigation of Genocide in Bosnia

Introduction

This paper examines the manipulation of religious discourse in Bosnia and Afghanistan into a tool of division and aggression. The first section focuses on the Bosnian genocide and the manner in which religious ideology became intermingled with ethnic intolerance. I then explore the complicity of foreign powers in permitting and exacerbating the terror in Bosnia, focusing primarily on the Western powers’ dismissal of ethnic cleansing in former Yugoslavia and the Afghan Mujahideen’s exploitation of ethno-religious tensions in Bosnia to advance their goal of global jihad.

Understanding Pre-War Yugoslavia

The Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, existing from 1945 to 1992, was characterized by long-term leader Josip Broz Tito’s efforts to unify its various ethnicities and distance cultural identity from religion. Within Yugoslavia, Bosnia exhibited a secularity rarely found in the Muslim world; Islam functioned primarily as an ethnic marker. Bosnian Muslims, or Bosniaks, frequently ate pork, drank alcohol, dressed in western styles, celebrated Christian holidays, and promoted mixed marriage with other ethnic groups. Such practices, however, would eventually cease upon the appearance of the Mujahideen.¹ Although the Yugoslav exercise in ethnic unity was largely successful for a time, it could not permanently heal the fissures that had erupted as recently as World War II, during which various ethnicities formed the Communist Partisans, the ultranationalist Serbian Chetniks, and the fascist Croatian Ustashe.² These associations would not be forgotten as nationalism re-emerged decades later, reinforced by

¹ See Moses, 25–30.
² See Ramet, 203.
claims of anti-Serb crime at the hands of the Catholic-sponsored Ustashe during and after World War II. Following Tito’s death in 1980, republics like Slovenia and territories like Kosovo began vying for greater representation and, as a consequence of competing interests, the Yugoslav government effectively entered political gridlock. Sensing an opportunity for action, Serbian communist leader Slobodan Milošević capitalized on this period of national chaos to advance his goal of Serbian dominance; with communism falling in Eastern Europe and with Croatia and Bosnia seeking independence and secession from Yugoslavia, Milošević called upon the Serbian population throughout the federation to reclaim its ancestral homeland.

**Religious Manipulation of Ethnic Identity: Bosnia**

In contrast to what was once an experiment in ethnic unity, the Yugoslav conflict of 1991 erupted as a cry for ethnic independence. Throughout the following year, tensions in Bosnia emerged on three fronts: territorial, ethnic, and religious. The once-secular nation was mired in an ethno-religious conflict in which divisive categories, though artificially established, ultimately determined the parties to which one was loyal: Orthodox Serb, Croatian Catholic, or Bosnian Muslim.

This conflict did not arise instantaneously but was, rather, a culmination of decades of tension between nations who felt that substantial territories of Yugoslavia were theirs by divine right. This sentiment was expressed most vehemently in Serbian and Croatian ethnic ideologies, both of which claimed that the Bosniak community was composed of individuals who were truly Serbs or Croats converted during periods of Turkish rule and who would ultimately degrade Slavic culture and history. Serbian forces referenced archaic religious doctrine in an effort to

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3 See ibid., 98.
4 See Johnston and Eastvold, 220–21.
5 See Powers, 231; Ramet, 118.
justify ethnic cleansing; ancient Orthodox texts were interpreted to more clearly define enemies according to religion, reinforcing the belief that Islamic culture is inherently ideologically opposed to Christianity. This helped legitimize hardline opposition against Bosnian Muslims among both the Serbian military and civilians. Conversely, Croatian religious texts did not offer such transparent claims of religious or cultural supremacy, stating only that Catholicism should be the doctrine by which communities are governed. The growing Islamization of Bosnia, however, was not driven by territorial desire or native extremism but was a byproduct of the vilification of Bosniaks for their religious affiliation. The spectrum of aggression in the Balkans thus ranged from Bosnia’s largely defensive—if not reactive—attitude, to Croatia’s goals of separatism, to Serbia’s thirst for hegemonic conquest. Claiming that the Islamic community was orchestrating an effort to outpopulate the South Slavic peoples, Serbian forces stressed the need to divide Bosnia among its rightful owners; this goal of actualized Slavic purity was underscored by Croatian officials’ talks with their Serbian counterparts regarding the eventual division of Bosnia along ethnic lines.

Bosniaks found themselves in a position from which any move would prove devastating. Far more ethnically heterogeneous than Croatia or Serbia, Bosnia was comprised of 43.77 percent ethnic Muslims, 31.46 percent Serbs, and 17.34 percent Croats; only 32 of the 109 districts in Bosnia had an ethnic majority of 70 percent or higher. Once violence erupted in the 1990s, however, Bosnia’s social landscape transformed from one of conscious unity to one of microcosmic struggle, marked by arbitrary and often exaggerated links to heritage and identity that mirrored the tensions fueling the larger Yugoslav conflict. Bosniaks were left with two

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6 See Powers, 232–33.
8 See Ramet, 206.
9 Ibid., 204.
choices: maintain the established intercommunal relationships and have the land ripped to shreds by invading forces, partitioning Bosnia among surrounding nations, or resist the invaders, thereby reaffirming the Serbian media’s claims that the war was a religious struggle between so-called “fundamentalist” Islam and the Christian West.\textsuperscript{10} According to foreign policy specialist Gerard Powers:

\begin{quote}
\ldots[I]n Bosnia, Muslim is both a religious and national identity. The hundreds of churches and mosques that have been intentionally destroyed, the ubiquitous appeals to religion in official propaganda, and the use of religious symbols in torture are just some of the ways the conflict has been defined according to a complex relationship between national and religious identity.\textsuperscript{11}
\end{quote}

This “complex relationship” has made it both increasingly difficult for Bosnians to establish a non-religious identity and easier for their opponents to portray Bosnian nationhood as a visceral threat to Slavic culture and Western society at large.

For Serbs and Croats, Christian symbolism dominated expressions of nationalism, most poignantly evidenced by the appropriation of the ancient Orthodox cross with an S in each of its corners (written as a C in the Cyrillic alphabet) to stand for \textit{Samo Sloga Srbina Spašava} (Only Unity Saves the Serbs).\textsuperscript{12} Displayed prominently at Milošević’s rallies, this recontextualized religious imagery permeated everyday life as well as conflict zones. “On the streets of Zagreb,” in turn, “stickers were displayed on most store windows in center city stating \textit{Bog čuva Hrvat} (God Protects Croats). On TV one could see Serb tanks with a similar graffiti, \textit{Bog čuva Srbe} (God Protects Serbs).”\textsuperscript{13}

Given the similarities shared by Bosnians, Serbs, and Croats—they look the same, dress the same, eat the same food, and share a common tongue—the aggressors of each party chose to

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., 207.
\textsuperscript{11} Powers, 222.
\textsuperscript{12} See Sells, \textit{The Bridge Betrayed}, 86–87.
\textsuperscript{13} Mojzes, 145.
demarcate the region’s population according to religion, thereby manufacturing boundaries between themselves and those they established as the “Other.” Individuals were pressured to “identify themselves as Muslim, Orthodox, and Catholic even though they [did] not profess or practice any religions. Yet, given the insane logic of ethnic cleansing, their life might depend on whether they [were] Muslim atheists, Orthodox atheists, or Catholic atheists.”

Each nation thus became linked to an ideological framework characterized by religious associations with which its population was largely unfamiliar.

The subsumption of religion into collective memory provided easily differentiable identities and created new divisions; religious appeal legitimized the terror that resulted from nationalist politics. Furthermore, the politicization of religious identity paved the way for what Croatian sociologist Srdjan Vrcan calls the “Satanization” of hostile enemies, stripping former neighbors of their once-held reality and replacing it with a violent caricature of what their enemies think them to be.

This codependence between religion and politics increased the influence of the clergy in military activities—whether on the front lines or from the altar—resulting in popular support for political parties aligned with the national religion.

The resurgence of religious identity was followed by a severely oppressive, multifaceted, and systematic annihilation of the human element on several fronts: the linguistic, the cultural, and the corporeal. Gaps between one group and the “Other” were most effectively established through language, with Bosnian Croats being referred to as “Ustashe” and Muslims as “Turks” or “Balije,” a pejorative of questionable origin used specifically to target Bosniaks. A perverse evolution of this phenomenon—the shifting of linguistic destruction from secular space into

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14 Powers, 225.
15 Ibid., 224.
16 Sells, *The Bridge Betrayed*, 75.
sacred—is exemplified by Sušica camp commandant Dragan Nikolić’s proclamation to prisoners and rape victims, “I am your god and you have no other god but me,” a bastardization of the Islamic declaration “There is no god but God.”

Bosnian culture was also subject to erasure, which, at the order of Serb and Croat nationalists Ratko Mladić and Mate Boban, included the deliberate destruction of “the National Library, the Oriental Institute, and the National Museum, all in Sarajevo; the archives of Herzegovina; music schools, local museums; graveyards; covered marketplaces.” Additionally, “between June and August 1992, about 430 mosques […] were dynamited.” Serbian forces traveling through Bosnian territories assaulted the returning refugees and international agents present at the consecration of Banja Luka’s reconstructed sixteenth-century Ferhadija mosque. Similarly, in the Bosnian city of Foča, the Aladža mosque, “considered to be the jewel of Balkan Islamic architecture, and all other mosques and Muslim-identified structures” were destroyed.

The aggressors would go to harrowing lengths to ensure human suffering and humiliation. In the case of Arkan’s Tigers, led by Serb militia leader Željko Ražnatović (known as Arkan), soldiers donned black ski masks before targeting Muslims, many of whom reported that even though they could not see their attackers’ faces, they recognized the voices as those of their neighbors.

The use of rape as a weapon was devastatingly common throughout the genocide—not only a “deliberate attack on women as childbearers” but “a form of desecration, closely related to the desecration of the sacred spaces symbolized by mosques.”

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17 Ibid., 23. But see also the first two of the Judeo-Christian Ten Commandments.
18 Ibid., 149.
19 Mojzes, 173.
22 Ibid., 22.
torture of approximately twelve thousand women,\textsuperscript{23} later described by the accused as direct orders from Serbian Army officers, militia leaders, and politicians, was a means of ideological conquest fueled by “the notion of collective revenge—both for what may have happened recently, including World War II, and in the more mytho-historical sense, that the conquering Ottoman Turkish Muslims raped or forcibly married Serbian Christian women.”\textsuperscript{24} This attempt at divine retribution, a symbolically-charged desecration of the personal occurring in public—in front of mothers, fathers, and children—was “meant to destroy the potential of women as mothers. The statements attributed to many rapists that the victim would bear ‘Serb seed’ are the flip side of this ideology: forced impregnation of Serb nationhood, a bizarre mixture of religion and biology that can only be understood against the underlying religious mythology.”\textsuperscript{25}

The role played by religious authorities was not merely one of passive nationalist support but rather one of active alignment. Bishops and Franciscans openly accused one another of supporting terrorist activities, falsifying religious claims, and even committing acts of sexual depravity and perversion.\textsuperscript{26} These tactics were intended to delegitimize and discredit the religious and moral authority of opposing forces; a party’s claim of divine right could therefore be dismissed by its enemies as heretical. Although they decried violence and plead for tolerance, men of the Church were instrumental in paving the way for ethnic cleansing. The most vivid example of this hypocrisy occurred in Bosnia in the ethnically Croat town of Međugorje. A popular pilgrimage site for Catholics visiting Križevac (Christ Hill), where the Virgin Mary is believed to have appeared; by 1992 it was also the location of prisoner camps where both Serbs and Bosnians were beaten, starved, sexually tortured, and murdered. Rows of Serbian

\textsuperscript{23} See Mojzes, 187.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 185.
\textsuperscript{25} Sells, \textit{The Bridge Betrayed}, 22.
\textsuperscript{26} See Sells, “Crosses of Blood,” 320.
and Bosnian homes were burned to the ground while only homes of Catholic Croats remained intact among the ruins.\textsuperscript{27} The Serbian Orthodox Church, for its part, offered an official denial after the discovery of similar death camps in Sarajevo: “The Church’s government body, the Holy Episcopal Synod, stated: ‘In the name of God’s truth […] we declare, taking full moral responsibility, that such camps neither have existed nor exist in the Serbian Republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina.’”\textsuperscript{28}

An attempt to rebuild the Čaršija mosque in Bosnia in 2001 was vocally opposed by a local bishop and parish priest who claimed, with no clear evidence, that the mosque may have been built upon the remains of an ancient Christian church and argued instead for an archaeological excavation.\textsuperscript{29} By insisting that the reconstruction of the mosque would be as much a crime as its destruction, the Catholic Church continued to alienate Bosnian Muslims, denying their claims to a homeland and treating them like an invasive foreign presence.

**Jihad: The Mujahideen in Bosnia**

Arguably the most significant external factor affecting the Bosnian War was the version of Islam promoted by the Middle Eastern Mujahideen, who were able to exert powerful influence as a result of Western powers’ dismissive attitude towards the occurring genocide. What was disguised as a sacred effort to protect an ethnic group in need was actually the exploitation of a quickly deteriorating nation in order to spread terror more widely. The Mujahideen’s appearance in Bosnia highlighted the stark contrast between the ideologies of two global communities and resulted in the appropriation and destruction of local identity in a larger religious context.

\textsuperscript{27} See ibid., 318–320.  
\textsuperscript{28} Sells, *The Bridge Betrayed*, 84.  
\textsuperscript{29} See Sells, “Crosses of Blood,” 322–23.
Origins of the Mujahideen

The communist government of Afghanistan that came to power in 1978 functioned as a puppet state for the Soviet Union, letting the consequences of social and land reforms fall upon the shoulders of peasants and tribal leaders. As Soviet aggression spread throughout Central Asia in the 1980s, invaded tribes re-adopted Islamic ideology as a response to the growing secularization of society and disestablishment of internal institutions. From this tension in Pakistan and Afghanistan emerged the Mujahideen, championed as the primary force of Islamic cultural re-establishment. In 1979, thirty thousand Soviet troops marched into Afghanistan in response to numerous uprisings and growing insurgencies. Although the Soviets were much more heavily armed than the rebels, the Mujahideen successfully countered Soviet air strikes by using anti-aircraft missiles supplied by the United States. Fighting continued until 1988, when the Soviet Union, the United States, Afghanistan, and Pakistan signed an agreement to begin the process of Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan.30

In an effort to gain support—and future soldiers—from surrounding communities, the Mujahideen established religious schools (madrasas) that would provide military and ideological training to orphaned children, teaching them the divine imperative to purify society and avenge their murdered families.31 By glorifying martyrdom and jihad, the rigid socialization and puritanical education of these schools upheld the Mujahideen’s extreme worldview, in which everything that does not adhere to Islamic doctrine is considered immoral and profane.32 Consequently, in a region where politics and religion went hand in hand, political resistance was tantamount to resistance to Islam.

30 See Kakar, 257.
31 See Nojumi, 98–99.
Balkanism and a Negligent West

Masquerading as non-interventionism, what would ultimately provide the Mujahideen with evidence to support their claims of the West’s aversion to Islam was the dismissive attitude with which US officials responded to the Bosnian genocide—a byproduct of Balkanism, the “distorted depiction of the people of Southeastern Europe as barbaric with the implication that violence, even genocide, is inevitable there and part of the local culture.” As former US Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger stated after the July 1995 massacre of eight thousand men in Srebrenica, “They have been killing each other with a certain amount of glee in that part of the world for some time now.” Implicitly, this sentiment exemplifies anti-Eastern, anti-Balkan, and anti-Islamic rhetoric—a product of Western hegemony having established a hierarchical chasm between itself and a vague, distant “Other.” Explicitly, however, it reduces the severity of ethnic cleansing—the deaths of 25,000 to 329,000 Bosnians and the displacement of approximately 2.7 million others, according to the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia—to an inevitability, rendering the victims of violent bloodshed historically and culturally deserving of the horrors they have endured.

Even more devastating than the trivialization of tragedy was the decision to include Bosnia, at the request of Milošević, in the UN arms embargo. This advantaged Serbian militias loyal to Republika Srpska President Radovan Karadžić, allowing the Serb-dominated Yugoslav Army to traffic light weaponry, tanks, and heavy artillery to them. While Bosnian Muslims received weapons from Islamic states, these black market operations were authorized with

33 Sells, The Bridge Betrayed, 125.
34 Ibid., 124.
35 See Mojzes, 187.
Croatian complicity, allowing Croats to seize a majority of the armaments, including heavy weaponry, for themselves.36

**Clash of Ethnoreligious Identity**

Although the Yugoslav Wars began in 1991, the full force of the Mujahideen presence—due in part to a faulty immigration system that allowed terrorist organizations to acquire boxes of blank Bosnian passports, which they then counterfeited—was felt in 1992, when approximately “4,000 volunteers from throughout Northern Africa, the Middle East, and Europe came to Bosnia to fight Serbian and Croatian nationalists on behalf of fellow Muslims.”37 Isolated and largely unarmed, Bosnia had little choice but to seek outside aid. Bosnian President Alija Izetbegović appealed to the Middle East for help, forging partnerships with such figures as Osama bin Laden, who would later visit him in Sarajevo and sponsor fighters from Arab countries to fight for the Bosniaks.38 Though Bosnia did benefit from foreign powers, who provided them with much-needed arms and monetary support, with this aid came the alarming realization that their ethno-religious struggle was leading Bosniaks down the path of jihad: the Mujahideen, further distorting the tragedy of the Bosnian genocide to justify the spread of terror into Western Europe, intended to portray the plight of Bosniaks as a global war against Islam.

Unwittingly, Bosnia offered a place for the foreign jihadists—who, in the words of al-Qaida recruiter Abu Hamza al-Masri, were emboldened by a newfound yearning to “[struggle against] something that is indisputable, which is non-Muslims raping, killing, and maiming Muslims”39—to intermingle with the local community and recruit untrained soldiers willing to fight for what was framed as a unifying cause. According to al-Qaida Commander Abu Abdel

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36 See Ramet, 204–207.
37 Pyes, Meyer, and Rempel, 2.
38 See Attanassoff, 5–7.
39 Kohlmann, 27.
Aziz: “Allah has opened the way of jihad, we should not waste it […]. This is a great opportunity now to make Islam enter Europe via jihad. This can only be accomplished through jihad. If we stop the jihad now, we will have lost this opportunity.”

By declaring the Bosnian War a global attack on the Islamic world, the Mujahideen were able justify a post-conflict spread of terror into Germany and Italy, recruiting individuals who were banned from their home countries for criminal activity. The Mujahideen sowed further discord by disregarding Bosnia’s unique strain of Islam, resulting in what Sufi journalist Stephen Schwartz called a “very acute clash within Islamic civilization.” The Wahhabi Mujahideen, who supported the ultraconservative Sunni branch of Islam, staunchly opposed Bosnian Islam, which is historically linked with cultural and religious traditions of the Ottoman Empire and, in turn, the ethnic heterogeneity of Bosnia. Obsessed with actualizing Islamic purity, the Mujahideen prioritized efforts to destabilize the region’s cultural institutions and establish in their place a puritanical base for jihad over the prevention of further Bosnian genocide. According to Schwartz:

[The] expulsion of Muslims from mixed territories by the Serbs and Croats caused them little concern. Some Bosnians told me they believed that the Arabs favor reduction of Muslim Bosnia to its most narrow ethnic territory (a strip from Mostar to Tuzla, including Sarajevo) if this would advance a separatist, supremacist, Wahhabi agenda.

This desire for physical, territorial, and theological domination would inevitably render the Mujahideen a threat as severe to Bosnians as the Serbian forces.

By framing the conflict as a global crusade rather than as the unique display of ethnic enmity that it was, the Mujahideen were able to not only establish a discourse of legitimacy but

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40 Ibid., 2.
41 See Ibid., 3–12.
42 Schwartz, 47.
43 Ibid., 48.
also manipulate the language with which the conflict was described in order to gain support from the greater Islamic community. It was this appeal to religious persecution—perpetuating the image of an oppressed Islam and advocating violence as a means of achieving freedom—that advanced the belief in war throughout the Balkans as imperative.

**Conclusion**

Bosnia was the victim of a grave, discursive rearrangement of religious identity used to justify ethnic genocide, a chess match described by Michael Sells as follows:

> [T]hose carrying out the killings acted with the blessing and support of Christian church leaders; the violence was grounded in a religious mythology that characterized the targeted people as race traitors and the extermination of them as a sacred act; and the perpetrators of the violence were protected by…a Western world that is culturally dominated by Christianity.\(^{44}\)

The aggressors of the Bosnian war paired religious rhetoric with nationalist politics in an effort to legitimize ethnic genocide under the guise of theological necessity. Conversely, local opposition to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan illustrated that for the Mujahideen Islam was synonymous with cultural identity, forming the roots of legal, historical, and political institutions. By establishing Islam as the righteous center and the West as its heretical opposition, the Mujahideen were able to establish a Manichean discourse of good versus evil; it was this linguistic and ideological dualism that, coupled with the West’s inaction, allowed the Mujahideen to exploit an already wavering ideological alignment. Framing conflict in religious terms allowed political extremists, regardless of ethnic identity, to rationalize not only cruelty against former neighbors but also the systematic destruction of an entire culture as the means to an unjust end.

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\(^{44}\) Sells, *The Bridge Betrayed*, 144.
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