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NEWSLETTER

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In this issue

In this issue of the Atlantic Initiative Newsletter, we present a series of current analyses and opinions on the political situation in the Western Balkans, with a special focus on the recent crisis in Bosnia and Herzegovina caused by the systemic blockade of its state institutions.

Instead of an editorial, we publish a text by **Vesna Pusić**, who writes about contemporary obstacles to the European transformation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and other Western Balkan countries. Pusić focusses on unblocking the progression of Euro-Atlantic processes, and how the EU must find a new *modus vivendi* with Russia in order to expedite change. Also, in the context of recent crises, Croatian journalist **Boris Pavelić** writes about relations between Sarajevo and Zagreb. Pavelić pays special attention to the friction between the recent policies of the President of Croatia, Zoran Milanović, and the President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, and how their opposing political rhetorics serve to strengthen destructive nationalisms in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The latest tensions in the Western Balkans are analyzed by culturologist and publicist Srđan Šušnica, an expert on Russian politics and its malignant influence in the region, especially in Serbia. Šušnica argues that stability and peace in the Balkans region depend on the determination of the European Union and the United States to prevent disruptive policies in Serbia and the BiH entity of RS (as well as Montenegro and northern Kosovo), through military, economic and political sanctions.

For this issue of the Newsletter, the Atlantic Initiative interviewed the eminent Turkish writer and journalist **Mustafa Akyol**, who addresses religion and politics in the Muslim world. **Amila Buturović** spoke with Akyol about his book *The Reopening of Muslim Minds*, which will soon be published in a Bosnian edition. His book has aroused global attention and great interest, especially because of its call for reform and enlightenment within Islam as a way to solve problems within Muslim societies.

Vlado Azinović writes about the recent release from prison of Husein Bilal Bosnić, who was sentenced by the Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina to seven years in prison for recruiting for and inciting terrorist activities, and organizing terrorist groups. As an expert witness in the Prosecutor's Office of BiH in the trial, Azinović looks back at the trial itself and the accusations for which Bosnić was convicted, and also provides an analysis of his ideology and possible future activities.

In this issue, we also feature two timely texts on the new situation in Afghanistan after the return to power of the Taliban. **Afiya Shehrbano Zia** writes about the resistance and struggle of Afghan women against oppression in the context of global feminist debates and criticism of Western interventions in Afghanistan, while also looking at how non-Western feminists have engaged with the situation. **Jenifer Heath** and **Ashraf Zahedi** contribute a joint article on the prospects for women in Afghanistan - around education, rights, work and daily life - as Taliban rule recommences after 20 years of US occupation and the recent withdrawals.

VIEWS Vesna Pusić, former Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Croatia, writes for the Atlantic Initiative

The Unblocking of BiH and the Western Balkans

In parallel with defining membership requirements and criteria, the EU must find a new *modus vivendi* with Russia - thereby taking the wind out of the sails of those local disruptors who have proved to be such an effective obstacle to the European transformation of BiH and other Western Balkan countries



VESNA PUSIĆ: DANGERS OF TURNING THE WESTERN BALKANS INTO A NO MAN'S LAND AND A GEOPOLITICAL TUSSLE BETWEEN RUSSIA AND THE EU

(PHOTO: RADIO SARAJEVO)

Author: Prof. Dr Vesna Pusić *

The "Western Balkans" is an awkward term; it is neither geographically nor politically adequate, but it has become the common name for the countries of the former Yugoslavia that are not members of the European Union (EU), plus Albania. As such I will use it below as an abbreviation for this territory.

The situation in the Western Balkans, and relations within it, are worse and more unstable today than they have been at any point since the end of the "Balkan wars" of the 1990s. Montenegro is torn

apart by debates within the ruling coalition itself as to whether the state should exist at all. Serbia is gathering troops on the border with Kosovo, and Serbian aircraft are flying over the border.

North Macedonia and Albania are in a state of freeze, waiting for some positive move from the EU, while scepticism and disappointment in those societies is understandably growing. And finally there is Bosnia and Herzegovina, blocked from the inside by internal disruptors preventing any progress, and from the outside by fatigue, along with a lack of political will and ideas about what to do.

There are many reasons behind this: missed opportunities and moments for political action, such as during Zoran Đinđić's era in Serbia; betrayed promises, like after the Prespa Agreement and the judicial review in North Macedonia and Albania; the global setback which has seen liberal democracies in retreat from aggressive populism. Meanwhile the pandemic has intensified fear and uncertainty in societies and opened up space for "firm hand" politics, and we are seeing examples of nationalist populists successfully holding onto power in nominal democracies within the EU as well.

THE WESTERN BALKANS DOESN'T BELONG ANYWHERE?!

But the biggest impact is coming from a general atmosphere and the feeling that the Western Balkans belongs nowhere. During their six-month EU presidencies, one member state after another has organised summits with leaders of the Western Balkan countries. One after another they have borne no result. Countries are assured that their European future is guaranteed; the methodology of membership negotiations changes occasionally; but there is no progress. Montenegro began its membership negotiations more than nine years ago, in the early summer of 2012.

It has been eight years since Serbia opened membership negotiations, the last one of this group that succeeded in doing this. But neither Montenegro nor Serbia has progressed much in these negotiations since. It is now six years since Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) submitted its EU membership application. Meanwhile there has been no settled status quo in the Western Balkans, and the situation has been systematically deteriorating.

Bosnia and Herzegovina is the most obvious and most dramatic example - which is common in this region. Not necessarily because it has the longest path to membership ahead. In fact quite the opposite: with a little political will and some changes on the wider political scene, BiH could become a candidate country that can seriously negotiate for membership.

However while BiH is the crucial country for the stability of Southeast Europe, it is also the country with the largest number of internal and external disruptors operating at the same time. I use this somewhat

awkward notion of a *disruptor* to describe political actors who continuously destabilise BiH in various ways: by questioning its institutions, creating internal conflicts and deadlocks, or destructively interfering in the country's internal policy and functioning from the outside. There is no doubt that the pro-European forces in BiH are more pessimistic today than they were at the beginning of 2016, when the membership application was submitted. Young, educated people increasingly choose emigration over engagement.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

It can't be said there have been no ideas how to overcome this deadlock in the meantime. Talks have taken place about the possibility of BiH and other countries in the region being admitted to the European common market as a matter of urgency, i.e., to clearly define the market integration criteria and leave other membership aspects for a later time.

Enabling this would encourage pro-European forces in those countries and represent a real and important step forward on the path to membership. It would also provoke less resistance among sceptical EU member states who insist on the rule of law, a functional judiciary and a decrease in corruption as mandatory conditions, driven by previous bad experiences. Another option would be to adapt and apply the method used during the accession of the Baltic States in 2004. Back then, Denmark, Sweden and Finland took on a partnership with Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia and served as their mentors and guides in their adjustment and accession to the EU. At the same time, they became their advocates within the Union.

Another idea was presented recently: a four-stage EU accession model. The initial stage would include minimum requirements and reduced Cohesion Fund financial assistance. As it advances towards accession, the country would gradually gain greater rights to participate in EU institutions and decision-making, but only in the fourth and final stage would it become a full participant in decision-making, with the fulfilment of all requirements and full membership.

In principle, each of these ideas is better than the current deadlock and, while being implemented, would awaken the dormant optimism in BiH society - essential for the success of the European project.

The problem is that there is nobody who could implement any of these or other ideas. BiH's internal disruptors have set themselves the primary task of blocking their own country on its Euro-Atlantic pathway. In his public speeches and even through concrete political moves, Milorad Dodik, the leader of the Republika Srpska (one of the two Entities in BiH, and currently a member of the BiH Presidency) does everything he can to prove that BiH is not, and never will be, ready for the EU.

He tries to dismantle even the minimal progress already achieved in the organisation of the state, and maintains an atmosphere of uncertainty and temporariness that would discourage even a more determined European Union than exists today. Dragan Čović, the president of the HDZ BiH - the strongest political party of Bosnian Croats -, increasingly treats Dodik as his political role model and joins him in his role as internal disruptor.

Nominally his party supports BiH in its Euro-Atlantic integration, but practically it does everything to prevent any positive progress. Official Bosniak politics displays little Euro-enthusiasm either. When a crisis hits, it is much more willing to turn to Turkey than the EU and, with its Serb and Croat partners at the top of the BiH government, it is more inclined to the prey-sharing model than building a functional state.

Two neighbouring countries, Serbia and Croatia, act as external disruptors. Both of them are signatories to the Dayton Peace Agreement, which ended the war but did not introduce genuine peace. Over time, Serbia and Croatia have tried to redefine their role and position themselves as guardians and guarantors of Dayton - which was certainly not the role the Agreement conceived for them. The USA and France, and even the EU to some extent, are the witnesses and guarantors of the Dayton Agreement. Serbia and Croatia, as well as Bosnia and Herzegovina, signed it as countries involved in the conflict, as it was the only way to end the war.

However, all of these internal and external disruptors draw their political power and influence from the competition and conflicts that take place 'far above their heads'. Some Western Balkan countries imagine they could take on the role that Yugoslavia played with its non-aligned policy some sixty years ago.

THE ROAD TO 'NO MAN'S LAND'

Different times and different players! Nowadays such behaviour does not bring political influence, but instead turns the Western Balkans into a no man's land. And a geopolitical tussle between Russia and the EU is taking place on this 'no man's land'.

Without this conflict, local disruptors would have no power or importance. That is why the problem should be solved in its entirety, instead of bothering about the consequences and closing one's eyes to its essence. Relations between the EU and Russia have become truly antagonistic since 2014 and the conflict over Ukraine.

Meanwhile, this tension has resulted in many political disasters, including the radicalisation of Dodik's position, and subsequently the views of other BiH and Balkan disruptors. There is no doubt that BiH and other Western Balkan countries are in Europe and that their future is in the EU. It is hardly a matter of anyone's choice, but simply a geopolitical fact. They are not a 'no man's land'; they are European land.

But one of the important factors in completing that work is the normalisation of relations between the EU and Russia. There are many openly acknowledged and difficult issues in that relationship. The fate of BiH and the Western Balkans is not the most difficult one, but in a situation of political conflict and competition, it is the one most practically likely to cause continuous destabilisation.

Therefore, in parallel with the defining of membership requirements and criteria, the EU must find a new *modus vivendi* with Russia - thereby taking the wind out of the sails of those local disruptors who have proved to be such an effective obstacle to the European transformation of BiH and other Western Balkan countries in this political interspace. ■

***Vesna Pusić** is Croatian sociologist and politician who served as Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign and European Affairs from 2011 to 2016. An outspoken liberal and advocate of EU integration, anti-fascism and human rights, Pusić also served as Croatian MP from 2000 to 2016 and chaired the parliamentary committee for tracking the progress of Croatia's accession to EU.

REGION Boris Pavelić, a renowned Croatian journalist writes about Sarajevo – Zagreb relations

The Croatian President and the State of BiH: A friend who does more harm than good

If Milanović's policy is - as he claims - one of neighbourliness, reconciliation and rationality, then the region of the former Yugoslavia is ill-fated



MILANOVIĆ AND DODIK: PARA-STATE RECOGNITION OF THE REPUBLIKA SRPSKA IN ZAGREB

Author: Boris Pavelić *

“Belgrade and Zagreb have 90 percent of their positions on BiH agreed.”

This statement by Serbian President **Aleksandar Vučić** is, for Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), probably the most significant message coming out of the informal EU-Western Balkans summit which was held on Wednesday, October 6 at Brdo near Kranj in Slovenia.

That's because the statement will remind many of the (undeclared but fatal) 1990s alliance of **Slobodan Milošević** and **Franjo Tuđman**. That resulted in the

1992 Graz agreement between **Radovan Karadžić** and **Mate Boban**, the Serbian and Croatian leaders in BiH, and in the devastating 1993-1994 war between the HVO and the Army of BiH.

It is noteworthy that in 2017 the Hague Tribunal declared this war a “joint criminal enterprise” for the ethnic cleansing of Bosniaks in parts of BiH, led by Franjo Tuđman, and sentenced six HVO civilian and military commanders to a total of 111 years in prison.

Irrespective of the extent to which today's political leaders in Serbia and Croatia claim they have definitively rejected the division of BiH as a political

goal, the politics pursued today by Zagreb and Belgrade seem to many analysts a variation – peaceful so far, fortunately – of what the armies directed by Milošević and Tuđman tried to achieve in the 1990s using war and crime.

THE NATIONALISTS ARE RUINING BIH

Such an assessment was made in the German *Tagesszeitung* by journalist Eric Rathfelder during the recent Brdo summit. Rathfelder is highly knowledgeable about Southeast European relations and has been reporting from the former Yugoslavia for decades. In his article, he stated that Serbian and Croatian nationalists are working together to break up BiH – an argument based on analysis of current political processes in BiH, Serbia and Croatia.

The similarity with the 1990s of today's politics in Serbia and Croatia towards BiH is emphasised by a paradox, which is also irresistibly reminiscent of that era: just as Serbia and Croatia were enemies and allies at the same time – fighting against each other in Croatia and, in BiH, both against Bosniaks – today **Aleksandar Vučić** states that “they have 90 per cent of their positions on BiH agreed”; meanwhile the Committee for Standardisation of the Serbian Language of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts (SANU) claims in Serbian school textbooks that “the Croatian language” is just another name for – Serbian!

Without a doubt Croatian President Zoran Milanović would resolutely reject the claim that current Croatian politics towards BiH represents a continuation of Tuđman's. Milanović considers Croatia an anchor of stability in the region, and doesn't fail to emphasise advocacy for an indivisible BiH as a continuity of Croatian politics.

On a recent visit to New York for the annual session of the UN General Assembly, Milanović met with American Croats on September 19 and commented on the current situation in the region: “Fortunately” he said, “it is not 1990; there is no danger of a serious conflict. However, we have to look at what is happening in our immediate environment, and there people act as if there had been no war and as if they had not learned a lesson from the 1990s.”

He added: “And in all this we – Croatia and this Government, and I as President, and my predecessor – are the most peaceful, the most conciliatory, the most rational. It is our responsibility to keep this region calm, safe, and to live orderly and safely in Croatia. Croatia is a very safe country.”

It is certainly true that Croatia does not show any open pretensions towards its neighbours, not even BiH. This is in contrast to events in Montenegro and Kosovo, where Serbia's political leaders seek in various ways to implement the phrase “Serbian World”, and as such support political destabilisation in Serbia's favour.

And yet, three days after he boasted to American Croats about the rationality and conciliation of politics in his country, the Croatian president said the following in New York:

“I am the president of Croatian citizens – Croats, and, in a way, those Croats who live in BiH. That is my duty and obligation, even an emotional one.” Surprised by such a claim, the journalist asked Milanović if he had said that he was the president of the Croats in BiH, to which he replied: “To the extent that the Constitution stipulates that we should take care of the status of Croats outside Croatia, yes, but with due respect to other countries.”

The journalist insisted: how can he be the president of the Croats in BiH, when he is the president of the Republic of Croatia?

“Croats in BiH and in New York City have the right to vote. I have often problematised this and tried to reduce it to reasonable levels, so that the neighbouring state does not get compromised and that its space is not breached. All BiH citizens of Croatian nationality have Croatian citizenship. Am I their president? I think I am. It is a policy that I did not pursue, but it is a fact today. These are political and legal facts, but also emotional,” Milanović said.

Milanović's statement was immediately interpreted by almost all media in the region – but also in Croatia – as further proof that Milanović deviates, at the least, from the policy pursued invariably by all Croatian governments since 2000: that of

non-interference in the affairs of BiH. This has been the case despite the fact that Croats in BiH were left with the right to dual Bosnian-Herzegovinian and Croatian citizenship – a remnant from the time of Tuđman's pretensions towards the neighbouring country.

In its more dramatic and bizarre interpretations, such as that of Serbian Prime Minister **Ana Brnabić**, Milanović's statement signalled what has long been suspected: that the Croatian President's statements about BiH often do more harm for the way in which they are uttered than for their content.

MILANOVIĆ VS. BRNABIĆ

The Serbian Prime Minister commented on Milanović's statement fifteen days after it was made, during her visit to Mostar:

"Milanović's statement was unbelievable to me and it was unbelievable that there were no reactions, not even from the European Union" Brnabić said, while rejecting any comparison of her visit to Mostar with Zoran Milanović's statement.

"I am the Prime Minister of Serbia and there is a counterpart to my position in BiH. I feel like a guest here, I have no other pretensions. I am also surprised by Milanović's statements," she pointed out.

For sure, someone who does not know the history of Serbia and BiH in the last thirty years would have to conclude that the Serbian Prime Minister is a model of respect for the principle of inviolability of borders in the Balkans, especially BiH – unlike Croatian President Milanović.

Thus Zoran Milanović has unfortunately, and probably against his will, become a politician to whom the Prime Minister of Serbia can – and not entirely without cause – present lessons on how to respect the immutability of BiH's borders.

This hasn't all been because of a single statement. Unfortunately from the very beginning of his presidential term Zoran Milanović has conspicuously demonstrated political negligence towards BiH - a country for whom everyone agrees Croatia, by the

nature of their geographical and historical relations, is its most important neighbour and a precondition for its stability.

It will be remembered, for example, that Milanović was the first Croatian president (not counting Franjo Tuđman) to violate the unwritten but habitual rule of making the first presidential visit to Sarajevo and Bosnia and Herzegovina – Milanović instead went to Slovenia.

This was followed by a series of actions and statements that resonated extremely badly in Sarajevo, but also among a general public in Croatia dedicated to preserving the integrity of their neighbouring country and establishing a post-war justice and political agreement in BiH. This includes even the Croatian Prime Minister Andrej Plenković.

Plenković is conspicuously reserved towards Milanović's verbal and occasional political impudence towards Sarajevo - which to some extent calls into question the widespread belief in Croatia that their attitude towards BiH is perhaps the only political issue on which Milanović and Plenković agree without exception.

In September last year the shocking news broke that the Croatian president invited the Serb member of the BiH Presidency **Milorad Dodik** to Zagreb without any prior announcement or preparation, and on 16 June 2020 received him in the back room of his official residence in Pantovčak. This had never happened before.

In Croatian politics Dodik had been treated appropriately: as the representative of an Entity that does not have, nor can it have, the status of a state. Milanović's reception for Dodik in Zagreb was interpreted by Croatian political commentators as a step towards a kind of para-state recognition of the Republika Srpska and its political leader, who never misses an opportunity to deny the genocide in Srebrenica and who openly insults Bosniaks from time to time.

At the same time, Milanović was arguing with the president of the Party of Democratic Action (SDA) **Bakir Izetbegović** through the media, and even

in person. Less than a month after he had hosted Dodik in Pantovčak, Milanović commented on relations in BiH on HTV:

“Croats should be given what Dayton intended for them, and this is where any need for a meaningful debate ends” he said, adding: “A prominent member of the BiH Presidency from the SDA has recently used the expressions “criminal enterprise”, “enemies of BiH”, and equates this with Croatia and Serbia. Izetbegović approves of it, as it is his man. Is this a contribution to our relations? Could I have shown a greater understanding of the suffering of Bosniaks during the war? I naively believed that some people were well-intended, but I have realised who I am dealing with. You know, when some people came to Zagreb to complete a medical residency programme back in the nineties, like Mr. Izetbegović’s wife... she completed it at the “Sveti Duh” hospital... Why didn’t she go to Vienna, Istanbul? We used to be friends, we trusted one another... What now? You want a civic BiH? To reconcile the ethnic and the civic? Soap and Chanel? Deal, let’s focus on the ethnic first. Because the civic part, that is Chanel, or Fahrenheit, as these expensive perfumes were once called. It’s not for everyone. Croatia is also having a hard time coping with that.”

All these events – the reception for Dodik and the verbal confrontations with Bosniak politics and politicians – took place after Milanović awarded a medal to **Zlatan Mijo Jelić**, a man suspected of committing war crimes in Mostar. The decoration was for his war unit, the Herceg-Bosna Special Police, for their contribution to the “Oluja” operation, and was awarded on 4 August 2020 on the 25th anniversary of this Croatian military operation, at the Knin Fortress – a symbolic place in the Croatian war victory. In April this year the Croatian president had taken steps in this political direction, denying the Hague Tribunal’s verdict against six military and civilian leaders of Herceg-Bosna, and saying that **Milivoj Petković** - one of the six convicts and a former HVO commander - “is not a war criminal”, and that the verdict against him was “political”.

“I will receive him as well when he comes out of prison,” Milanović announced.

MILANOVIĆ’S GOOD NEIGHBOURLINESS

Something unusual happened recently however: in early September the Croatian media reported that Milivoj Petković had sent a personal, handwritten letter to the president of The Hague Tribunal, accepting his guilt and responsibility for the war crimes he had been convicted of.

“Today, eight years after the first-instance verdict and four years after the final verdict, I feel the need to tell you and everyone else that I accept the verdict and personal responsibility for my actions or omissions that resulted in the perpetration of crimes for which I was convicted” Petković wrote, among other things. “I have also accepted the sentence I am serving. There is no justification or excuse for the committed crimes. I feel sincere remorse and I would like to express my deep condolences to all the victims, members of the Bosniak people, their relatives and friends. As a human, I need to say this, although I know that my regrets and condolences are a poor consolation to all those who lost their loved ones.”

The Croatian media asked the Government and the President of the Republic for comments; neither responded.

The fact that Petković’s acceptance of guilt did not resonate in BiH either is unusual. **Senad Pećanin**, the founder and former editor-in-chief of the Sarajevo weekly magazine Dani, and currently a lawyer in Sarajevo, recently explained why to the Croatian media.

“It is no surprise” Pećanin told the Nacional Weekly portal, “considering that a lot more attention is paid to frequent insults and untruths shared by Milanović about Bosniaks and Bosnia and Herzegovina.”

“His attitude is abundant with feelings of ethnic, religious and state superiority over Bosniaks and BiH. It is sad to observe such attitudes and behaviour, which is far from elementary decency, let alone that which befits a state leader.” Pećanin was one of the most prominent journalists in the region during his journalistic career.

If a strategic determinant can be discerned in Milanović's verbally detached relationship with BiH, it lies in demonstratively ignoring the legally elected BiH Presidency member **Željko Komšić**, and at the same time in demanding that BiH change its Election Law so that Croats elect their own representative in the Presidency. The same request is made to the neighbouring country by Plenković's government, but also by **Dragan Čović's** HDZ BiH - and to that extent Milanović's position does not deviate from the current Croatian policy in both Croatia and BiH.

Milanović's problem lies elsewhere however: in his manner and style, which often do more harm than what he says. One of the most prominent Croatian columnists, **Jelena Lovrić**, a veteran journalist who has been following the political processes in the region for three and a half decades, recently wrote about this in the Croatian media. Milanović's "provocative statements" Lovrić wrote, "quite understandably create tension between Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia. Logically, Sarajevo will not understand them as an expression of friendship, but as an attempt to destabilise the whole country."

Lovrić concludes that "official Croatian politics certainly shows a lack of respect for the institutions of the neighbouring state," and notes that "Milanović in a way shares Tuđman's belief that he has the right to interfere in its internal relations." During his recent visit to BiH, instead of going to Sarajevo, he sent "harsh, nationalistically sharpened, inflammatory, sometimes even threatening messages" from Mostar, he "exploited the story of discrimination against Croats", and claimed that their right to legitimate national representation had been "stolen from their eyes" and was "heroized for saying that he would not allow it anymore, inciting anti-Bosniak sentiments".

All of this comes from the president of an EU member state who considers his country "the most peaceful, most conciliatory and most rational" in the region of the former Yugoslavia, which is now once again torn apart by disturbing neighbourly and ethnic disagreements. He is talking about a neighbouring country which is completely blocked institutionally and politically, with its progress towards the EU and NATO halted indefinitely, and which

is threatened by strong disintegrating political forces from both inside and out. Thus if Zoran Milanović's policy is - as he claims - one of neighbourliness, reconciliation and rationality, then the region of the former Yugoslavia is ill-fated. ■

***Boris Pavelić** is Croatian journalist and author of several books. He worked for the Croatian news agency Hina and the Rijeka daily *Novi list*. He is currently a journalist for the weekly magazine *Nacional* in Zagreb. He wrote for numerous Croatian, regional and foreign media outlets.

ANALYSIS Srđan Šušnica writes for the Atlantic Initiative about tensions in the Western Balkans

Kosovo Gambit: Potential for Serbian military escalation of crisis

The central regional actor in the current crisis is the official state and party apparatus in Belgrade, and its face is Aleksandar Vučić



SERBIAN ARMOURD VEHICLES ON THE BORDER WITH KOSOVO

(PHOTO: SCREENSHOTS, RTS)

Author: Srđan Šušnica *

Over a few short months in 2021, the post-Yugoslav territory was shaken by several major and minor political and security incidents.

It began with the Slovenian “non-paper” in the Spring, which openly advocated for the division of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and Kosovo, and for

changes to interstate borders according to ethno-national principles.

This was followed by the Croatian “non-paper”, which insinuated at the disintegration of BiH’s single state sovereignty into three ethno-territorial (para)state corps: initially through the introduction of ethno-religious exclusivism in the electoral process, then the ethno-territorial grounding and



SERBIAN ARMED FORCES: SERBIA IS THE MOST HEAVILY ARMED IN THE REGION

(PHOTO: MINISTRY OF DEFENCE, SERBIA)

federalisation of such electoral “rights”, and finally through the principle of self-determination.

It continued with the July law from the Assembly of BiH’s Republika Srpska (RS) entity on non-application of the state law banning genocide denial issued by the High Representative in BiH. This escalated into political blackmail and the blockade of state bodies, directed by both the ruling and opposition Bosnian Serb political leadership in BiH.

The beginning of September brought the culmination of a campaign to undermine the independence and sovereignty of Montenegro and seek the cultural and political subordination of Montenegrins. The President of Serbia ordered, and helped, the Montenegrin Prime Minister to enthrone - using illegal violence and the police and army - the local Metropolitan of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC). This took place in the symbolic and actual centre of Montenegrin sovereignty and statehood, Cetinje, which is the cultural and political metonymy of Montenegrin identity, language and historical continuity as a nation.

The end of September brought a military escalation of tensions, with Serbia reacting to one of numerous “technical” issues and disagreements with and in connection to Kosovo via a demonstration of military power and the open threat of armed force - clearly emphasising the factor of Russian involvement.

Even the most uninformed observer cannot escape the impression of Belgrade’s central role and involvement in all the aforementioned events; seasoned observers certainly cannot deny it.

“SERBIAN WORLD” AND ESCALATION OF TENSIONS

Images of police repression, helicopter landings, the patriarch and clergy of the Serbian Orthodox Church under armed escort, Serbian paramilitary groups disguised in the Cetinje Monastery - all with the support of and accompanying propaganda offensive from Belgrade and Banja Luka. Images of Serbian military helicopters and jets performing threatening flyovers above Kosovo special police and the street barricades of Kosovo Serbs, plus a column of Serbian tanks and armoured vehicles piling up on



ALEKSANDAR VUČIĆ: THE FACE OF THE “SERBIAN WORLD”

(PHOTO: NI)

the border with Kosovo. These images are a *deja vu* from the early years of the 1990s wars.

But what do they tell us about the context of the Balkans in 2021?

Since the dissolution of socialist Yugoslavia there has been one central crisis in the post-Yugoslav territories, the continuity of which can be traced from the mid-1980s to today. It is a (post)Yugoslav crisis of long duration, with ideological and cultural, as well as state, political, personnel, military and security dimensions. At its centre are the great aspirations of Serbia: a state which had not reconciled itself with a federal Yugoslavia nor faced up to the balance of wars of conquest and the crimes committed in the name of (pan)Serbhood and a great Serbia on the ruins of Yugoslavia.

From the point of view of the history of ideas, this ‘second crisis’ has its roots in key events in the history of Yugoslavia during the first half of the 20th century, imbued as they were with multiple delimiting and overlapping potentials of the Balkans as *limes* and *ponos*.

Furthermore, there is only one key source of this crisis, only one central actor, whose face changes with the generations. Its origin is the unpacified, non-catharised state of Serbia, with its controversial ethno-political and conflict legacies of the 1990s: the RS entity in BiH, the SOC in Montenegro, and the pseudo-autonomy of municipalities with a majority Serb population in northern Kosovo. The central regional actor in the crisis is the official state and party apparatus in Belgrade, and its current face is Aleksandar Vučić.

Over the last decade of turbulent transformations of global power paradigms, Serbia has managed to (re) create a whole series of inherited and new conflicts, crises and political fronts on which to build its position as leader and key disruptor in the region. Between two important events for Serbia – Russia’s aggression towards Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea in 2014, and the US withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 – tensions and antagonisms over the “(great) Serbian issue” in the region grew exponentially, as did the confidence and military potential of Serbia. Also taking into account the understanding and tolerance of the European Union (EU) and individual European countries (especially Germany).

To enumerate all the local and regional incidents, provocations, campaigns of violence, intimidation, and demonstrations of force and great state aspirations - as well as the “benign” political, economic, and cultural projects of official Belgrade or the RS - would require hundreds of pages. The point of maintaining these constant tensions is to preserve the unreformed presence and influence of Serbia in the post-Yugoslav states, limiting others’ sovereignty and controlling political and military escalations in the region.

Can the presence of official Belgrade in the region be “benign” and if so, how?

What Serbia’s neighbours are witnessing is far from benign, striving as it does for the blockade and disintegration of key security and political institutions of neighbouring countries, and the subordination of their identities, state apparatuses, and sovereignty to the interests of Serbia.

HYBRID CAMPAIGNS AND BLOCKADES

Since the 2018 general elections Milorad Dodik, a member of the BiH Presidency who has the support of opposition political actors in the RS and the mentoring of Moscow officials, has orchestrated three blockades of state institutions’ activities. The latest - motivated by the criminal sanctioning of genocide denial in Srebrenica - has already developed into a kind of autocracy of entity institutions, similar to the referendum in 2016 during which the RS institutions adopted decisions outside of the state legal system, and practiced *de facto* self-determination.

The current blockade of state bodies is supported by the decisions of the entity assembly to declare the law of the state null and void, even though it was passed with full constitutional legitimacy and a mandate to do so. This is a usurpation of the legislative powers of the state, and an enactment of entity regulations beyond the legal system of the state by a lower, non-state level of government.

This blockade has the potential to escalate either into a new, far more serious referendum crisis - or into a process of exiting the BiH legal system by unilaterally severing all or some of the entity’s constitutional

and legal ties (judiciary, defence, foreign affairs, currency, etc.) via a single political and legal order of the state. Both scenarios could lead the crisis towards a change in the situation on the ground: secession, a new reality for which no one inside or outside BiH can guarantee the consequences.

For an exit from the BiH legal system to be successful, it would have to be accompanied by adequate military potential and escalations that could ensure the application of new laws (the establishment of new armed forces, a new currency, border and crossing controls, etc.), and that could deter or block state institutions and international actors from restoring the order and integrity of the state. And here we are already talking about an armed rebellion.

Precisely because of this, the recent cancellation or postponement of military exercises by the Armed Forces of BiH and the Serbian Armed Forces can be seen as a preventative measure. Under the circumstances, any presence of Serbian armed forces and security structures on the territory of BiH could, being seen to undermine the state apparatus, turn into a military provocation, escalation and rebellion under the umbrella of which secession will take place.

The hybrid activities of the Moscow-Belgrade-Banja Luka axis did not abate even during the pandemic.

In April 2020, under the guise of humanitarian aid to fight the pandemic, a plane from Russia flying via Belgrade landed in Banja Luka, transporting a Russian military medical formation with disinfection equipment. The flight had permits from the ministries of foreign affairs and security, but not defence - because the competent institutions did not know about the military nature of the cargo, which was announced only after landing.

Immediately before the outbreak of the pandemic, the official Belgrade apparatus, the Serbian Orthodox Church, and the unionist political forces loyal to them in Montenegro (with the support of the Kremlin), initiated and successfully managed the escalation of tensions triggered by the adoption of the new Law on Freedom of Religion in December 2019.

The Serbian Orthodox Church and Belgrade organised pro-Serbian protests throughout Montenegro which, with short interruptions, did not subside until the August elections. A full-scale anti-Montenegrin and anti-independence propaganda war was orchestrated, involving more than 50 Serbian national and local pro-government and SOC-controlled media.

This gross interference of Serbia in the election process of a NATO member state resulted in the election victory of parties with pro-Serbian, pro-Russian and anti-NATO agendas, as well as complete control by Serbian state intelligence and personnel over the Montenegrin government and military-security apparatus. Even more absurd, the protests were either openly supported as anti-corruption, or ignored as a security challenge, by the entire Western diplomatic corps in Podgorica.

This quick sketch of the destabilising efforts of the “Serbian World” indicates the indisputable and enviable potential and appetite of the state of Serbia, and its ethno-political creations, to design and manage escalations and hybrid operations. These are no isolated or accidental incidents.

For the most (and crucial) part, these are not spontaneous grassroots or socio-political movements. The main ideological process was imported and controlled by Serbia and Russia, either using intimidation and pressure on the functioning of the state; or as a means of taking indirect control over the state apparatus and resources of neighbours; or as a way of blocking, undermining, disabling or disintegrating institutions; or with a view to discrediting states and their institutions on the regional and international scene.

“SERBIAN WORLD” AUDACITY AND POTENTIAL FOR MILITARY ESCALATION

A recent demonstration of military force in northern Kosovo and Cetinje indicates that official Belgrade has for some time had the potential and appetite to conduct not only political but also military (and security) escalations, as a way to pressure and destabilise neighbouring countries.

Increasingly massive and complex military exercises (especially with the Russian armed forces), and the almost exclusive foreign policy and military-technical reliance on Russia, were already being used before as a means of demonstrating Serbia’s military supremacy in the region. But recent events in northern Kosovo – raising the combat readiness of the army, accumulating troops for rapid action near the border, provocative raids by military aircraft, and all involving contact with UN and NATO missions in Kosovo – does, whatever we might think, raise the bar and speak to a new self-confidence on the part of official Belgrade.

One cannot deny a dose of theatricality and irrationality in Serbia’s reactions to seemingly benign issues, nor that this military spectacle could have a positive impact on the election rating of Vučić’s SNS; but that is only a surface impression. These days, the danger of further military escalation, armed incidents and human casualties is real and great. The readiness of official Belgrade to take that risk without much fear of consequences or sanctions shows that Serbia under Vučić has gained a serious appetite for risk-taking and become more resistant.

The readiness to take risks in their relations with NATO and the United States also shows that Serbia, under Vučić, has finally chosen a side. Even before the incidents in the north of Kosovo, no one seriously considered the proclaimed “neutrality” of Serbia to be a credible concept.

In a recent interview, Professor Edward Joseph stated that Serbia has never made it clear whether it is in the West or the East, and that, rather than being non-aligned, it is sitting on two chairs: the Russian and the Chinese. He accurately isolated the well-known problem for the region: “in the Western Balkans, only one country does not accept the Western order. It is Serbia and its trustees in the Republika Srpska, the Serb List in Kosovo and so on”.¹

In a recent text Professor Daniel Serwer called on Washington and Brussels to wake up, emphasising that Serbia, without a real democratic alternative and opposition, is “lost to the liberal democratic world so long as this Vučić is president”.²

Serbia and Russia will not shy away from new military escalations and sabre-rattling - nor from the orchestration of border incidents, rebel activities and secession in neighbouring countries - in order to prevent constitutional reforms, or BiH's entry into NATO, or the loss of control over the Montenegrin government, or the establishment of state sovereignty by Kosovo in four municipalities in the north.

With its "Serbian World", Serbia has positioned itself as a key Russian-Chinese platform in the strategically important area of the Black Sea basin hinterland. In this regard, it should be noted that Serbia is increasingly incorporating and adapting Russia's approach to its environs in its foreign policy relationships with the region.

Like Russia over post-Soviet territory, Serbia has not given up its influence over the post-Yugoslav states. The brutality with which Russia treats the former Soviet republics - which it considers its exclusive zone - reminds one of the ferocity with which Serbia has been dealing with post-Yugoslav countries for the last 30 years, with whose independence it has never reconciled and parts of which it considers its extraterritorial territory.

GROWTH IN ARMAMENTS AND SELF-CONFIDENCE

It is a fact that Serbia is increasingly relying on the projection of force in regional relations, and that today it has the most modern and massive armament of all post-Yugoslav states.

In the past four years a modest and over-indebted economy, in one of the poorest countries on the European periphery, has spent more than \$5 billion on arming and modernising the military and police, and on military exercises. This year alone its total defence spending is estimated at \$ 1.5 billion.³ Serbia is the leader in the region in terms of the frequency and scale of military and tactical demonstration exercises, parades and public display of weapons.⁴ The personality cult of President Vučić is for the most part built on the identification of his character with the strengthening of the defence and military potential of Serbia.

In a short time, and especially during the two pandemic years, Serbia has built up a decent degree of

military inviolability. Key to this have been the deliveries of a Russian Pantsir S1E air defence system and a Chinese medium-range FK-3 missile defence system.

The link between Serbia's growing self-confidence in the region and its new military arsenal cannot be denied or ignored. That arsenal has significantly raised the threshold of Serbia and the "Serbian World's" tolerance of risk. Together with Russian belligerence in the Black Sea basin, this gives official Belgrade more room to take risks, including in the threat of military force and blackmail in international relations.

In contrast to the strengthening of its military, elsewhere across Serbia has been seen an increase in poverty, an increasingly oligarchic economy, and a demographic exodus of the young and educated. Along with the absence of a capable liberal and cathartic political alternative, and opposition parties who compete in their clericalism, radicalism and pro-Russian sentiment with the ruling party. Plus oppressive media control, apathy, and the abstinence of a substantive part of the electorate in Serbia.

Both sides of Serbia's growing self-confidence involve the brutal and ideologically comprehensive radicalisation of Serbian society - but also of Bosnian, Montenegrin and Kosovo Serbs. The regime generates dominant public opinion about Kosovo as a "false state", BiH as an "impossible state", and Montenegro as a "Serbian Sparta". It drums up notions about the alleged "threat" against Serbs and the SOC in the region, about "crimes being prepared against Serbs", "the overthrow of the RS entity", and even the "likely military invasion by Kosovo" against Serbia.

The public is thus being antagonised and prepped to readily agree to the use of new weapons to "defend" Serbs in the neighbourhood. For the first time since the wars of the 1990s a high degree of political and social unity has been achieved in Serbia, and the institutions have been extracted and merged into a party-private oligarchic chimera. Sooner or later, the monolithic state-church-party-personality cult may start to sink deeper into a spiral of irrationality, paranoia and mythomania. It's a situation which could lead to tragically wrong assessments and the absence

of any rational use of Serbia's military arsenal. Serbia is not the Russia of the Balkans, and it does not have the conditions and capacity to rationally and thoroughly calculate the chances of success and possible consequences of political or military escalations before making a move. This could be a recipe for armed conflict.

Western actors are left with very few levers of influence or pressure on Serbia, and these are slowly being reduced by inertia towards the country's geopolitical destiny, towards the military option, and by Serbia's economic isolation.

In his interview, the aforementioned professor Joseph mentions three things that could serve as levers of influence and pressure on Serbia: the geopolitical impossibility of Serbia becoming the Belarus of the Balkans; the impossibility of Serbia categorically rejecting EU membership and partnership with NATO; and the abolition by the EU of economic and political benefits for Serbia.⁵

Stability and peace in the Balkans will depend on the EU and the US being wise, united and focused enough in the next two years to apply decisive military deterrence, and to broaden economic and political sanctions against Serbia, the RS and certain actors in Montenegro and northern Kosovo. ■

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I am afraid of dead ends that keep “closing Muslim minds”

Mustafa Akyol is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, focusing on Islam and modernity. Since 2013 he is also a regular contributing opinion writer for The New York Times, covering religion and politics in the Muslim world. Earlier this year Prospect Magazine listed him among the world's top 50 thinkers. His most recent books, *Reopening Muslim Minds: A Return to Reason, Freedom and Tolerance* (St. Martin's Press, New York, 2021) and *Why, as a Muslim, I Defend Liberty* (Cato Institute, Washington, D.C., 2021), received noteworthy reviews globally from scholars of contemporary relations between Islam and the West

Amila Buturović *

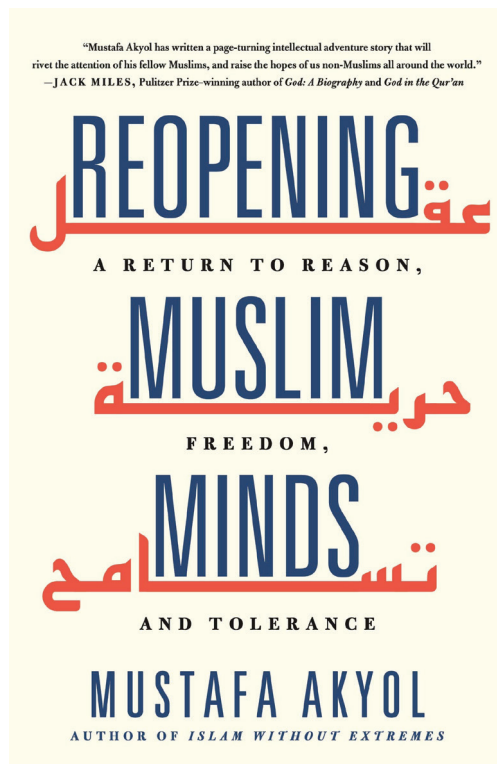
Atlantic Initiative: Your recent book *Reopening Muslim Minds* has been hailed for offering a chance for Muslims to re-examine their historical tradition and integrate it into their current worldview. What motivated you to write on this topic, and who did you have in mind as your target audience?

Mustafa Akyol: Thank you. What motivated me to write on this topic? I can say that it is my love for, and my belonging to, Islam - combined with growing disillusionment with the state of affairs in the contemporary Muslim world. Since my college years I have been involved in what you can broadly call the Islamic movement: passionate study of the Qur'an and the broader Islamic tradition, initially with a very apologetic motivation. But then as a journalist and opinion writer, I have also observed authoritarian regimes, militant groups, or hypocritical leaders doing truly unethical things in the name of my religion. The result has been many years of soul searching and intellectual questioning, which finally brought me to write *Reopening Muslim Minds*. I have also learned a lot from contemporary



MUSTAFA AKYOL

(PHOTO: COURTESY OF AUTHOR)



THE COVER OF AKYOL'S NEW BOOK PUBLISHED BY ST. MARTIN'S PRESS; COURTESY OF ST. MARTIN'S PRESS

Muslim academics who ponder the same issues, making some of their key insights accessible to a lay audience. My target audience? Fellow Muslims of course, especially those struggling to make sense of their religious tradition in the modern world. But non-Muslims who want to get a fair sense of Islamic thought and all its nuances are also welcome.

DISTINCTIONS BETWEEN THE "RELIGIOUS" AND "HISTORICAL" IN ISLAM?

AI: Your title suggests an effort to return to something that once was but is no longer available - that is, an open mind. This has been a common trope when describing the alleged crisis of the Muslim world in modern times, but it has been criticized as reinforcing the author's position rather than responding to general attitudes and realities. How would you respond to such criticism?

Akyol: Well if that common trope is the one that suggests that Muslims of the past, at some point, had all the answers that we need for our questions today - then that is really not what I am arguing. But I do argue that there was a more "universalist" era in Islamic thought. Just take a look at 9th

century Baghdad and you will see Muslims, with great intellectual curiosity, studying Aristotle, Plato or Galen and not condemning these Greek philosophers as *kuffar*, or "unbelievers", whose ideas are worthless. But today, try suggesting that Muslims might take some ideas from John Locke or Karl Popper, and you will not get very warm responses from strict circles. No wonder they see the earlier engagement with Greek philosophy as a deviation that was luckily suppressed.

As I argue in my book, an insular worldview gradually dominated Islamic thinking after the 11th century as Muslims began to believe that all the wisdom we need is contained in our religious texts: the Qur'an, the hadith, the Islamic tradition. Whereas those very texts, especially the Qur'an, encourage us to engage with the intellectual accomplishments of all humanity - as Ibn Rushd, arguably the last universal thinker in medieval Islam, was trying to tell us. But Ibn Rushd himself was condemned for heresy, and his philosophical writings were publicly burnt in Cordoba. So it is quite telling that today we read some of his writings thanks to their translation from Latin and Hebrew - which proved quite influential among Christians and Jews - while the Arabic originals are lost.

AI: You rightfully point out that the Islamic tradition had a strong, vertical sense of hierarchy. From the perspective of diversity, how can such a long-standing organization be reconfigured for contemporary needs?

Akyol: The key point on this matter and many others is to distinguish 'the religious' from 'the historical'. Yes, as you rightly point out, medieval Islamic society was hierarchical: men were above women; Muslims were above non-Muslims; free people were above slaves. But in my view this hierarchy was not the result of Islam as a divine revelation, but Islamic civilization as a largely human enterprise which included many pre-existing cultures and norms. Medieval Christian civilization didn't have a sense of equal rights for all human beings either. In fact the medieval Christian civilization was even less tolerant than Islam, and that is why Jews kept fleeing from Europe to the lands of Islam, such as the Ottoman Empire.

Slavery in particular is an eye-opening theme in this story, which I discuss in my book. Today most Muslims can't associate this oppressive and unjust institution with Islam. But until the 19th century, slavery was justified on the basis of Islamic law - the Sharia - and it was prevalent in the Muslim world. Concubines, captured during raids, were sold in the slave markets of Istanbul or Cairo. Was this 'religious' or 'historical'? I believe the latter. And I believe that if we Muslims have been able to eradicate slavery, despite its justifications in our tradition, we can take the same step to eradicate other oppressive interpretations of the Sharia - about women, minorities, and those deemed "heretics."

DEAD ENDS AND DARK AGES

AI: Muslims often complain that they are asked to address their current condition through the prism of Western experiences. The calls for an Islamic Reformation have been challenged - including by you, a few years ago. How can the appeal to Enlightenment you are making in this book avoid such reactions? What will convince Muslims that they are not once again being asked to live up to Western heritage?

Akyol: Thanks for reminding me of that article of mine in *The Atlantic*, where I indeed said "Islam does not need a Reformation" - a Reformation like Protestantism, that targeted Catholic hegemony within Christianity, and which is a problem we never had in Islam.

Yet in the same article I said, Islam does need an Enlightenment. ("Not a Luther, but a John Locke"). Because the key problem that the early Enlightenment thinkers in Europe challenged was violence, coercion, and bigotry in the name of Christianity - which are the exact same problems we have today in some interpretations of Islam.

But why are we discussing "Western experiences"? Well, why are we discussing democracy? That also came to us from the West. Even the abolition of slavery, which I just mentioned, is an idea that came to us from the West. This does not mean the West is a wonderful place full of gracious people. Nazism, fascism, and communism were also Western ideas, and the colonialism and imperialism of Western

powers have deserved all condemnation. But it is a fact of history that some of the ideas and norms that advanced humanity in the past few centuries - universal human rights, constitutional government, freedom of speech, freedom of religion - flourished in the West. This was obvious to the great Ottoman/Islamic liberals of the 19th century (such as Namik Kemal or Khayreddin al-Tunisi) who admired Western freedoms and sought to reconcile them with Islam. The reactionary waves that came later - "Islamism" broadly speaking, and even latter-day cultural relativism - are dead ends, I am afraid, that keep "closing Muslim minds".

AI: You recently commented that Muslims are in a "dark age that they themselves must outgrow." However many Muslims would dissociate themselves from this statement on the grounds that they are modern and progressive, and others on the grounds that they have returned to true Islam, free of external influences. Like you they also look at the past, but from a different angle. How would you reconcile such conundrums?

Akyol: By the term 'dark age' I didn't mean to define every Muslim individual - or even every Muslim-majority society - but the overall situation in the Islamic world. Today, to be honest, we are the only major religion whose authoritative leaders may justify the persecution or even execution of people merely for their beliefs and ideas - for being "apostates" or "heretics". We are also the only major religion with 'religious police' that enforce piety, or dictators who get justification from clerics who preach "obedience to the ruler".

If you look at Christianity's dark age, such as the 16th century, you would see similar troubles there only more viciously. For decades and decades Catholics and Protestants killed each other in sectarian wars. They beheaded "heretics" or even burnt them alive, and absolute monarchs ruled by claiming the "divine right of kings." Things began to change for the better only when some Christians began admitting there were problems in the existing religious doctrines and articulated new ideas of freedom and tolerance.

UNIVERSAL ETHICAL VALUES AND ISLAM

AI: Aziz al-Azmeh once stated that there is no one Islamic *umma* but as many *ummas* as there are circumstances to sustain them. He has radically challenged any idea of uniformity and unity, implying that there is - and should be - something for everyone. How would you situate your book when it comes to issues of unity and diversity?

Akyol: I would agree that there are many *ummas* within the *umma* - this is a historical fact. But is this historical fact appreciated by our religious doctrines? That is the question I probe in the last chapter of my book, 'The Theology of Tolerance', where I show that there are roots of both tolerance and intolerance in the Islamic tradition. The latter is reflected in the myth that the *umma* will be divided into 73 sects and only one will be saved - while every sect is self-righteously claiming to be that unique "saved sect." (This is based on a reported hadith, which I find very doubtful because it goes against the ecumenism of the Qur'an, which promises salvation even to Jews and Christians).

The tolerant strain, on the other hand, is best represented by the early theology of the Murjia - the 'Postponers'. They were so called because they "postponed" judgement on fellow Muslims to the afterlife, to be given by God. Imam Abu Hanifa, founder of the Hanafi school, shared many of their views and brought them into mainstream Sunni Islam. Hanafis also developed the beautiful term *Ahl al-Qibla* - "People who pray towards Mecca" - as a universal umbrella term for all Muslims, without condemning any of them. Those bases for intra-Muslim tolerance, which I explore in my book, are precious and need to be revived today.

AI: Returning to the issue of Enlightenment: Islamic theological and intellectual tradition emphasizes the different degrees of intellect from very early on - from those who can comprehend material truths to those who can engage in immaterial, invisible, and higher truths. This is arguably rather different from how Enlightenment posits Reason as the driving principle of science, knowledge, and modernity. So how can the term Enlightenment be applied to Islam if it derives from different associations?

Akyol: Just as there is no single Islam, there is no single Enlightenment. There was a strain within it - most powerful in France - that almost deified human reason, and turned suspicious if not hostile towards religion. That certainly is *not* the kind of Enlightenment I admire. I admire what historian David Sorkin calls "the Religious Enlightenment," which reconciled Protestant, Jewish and Catholic doctrines with freedom and tolerance.

As for the meaning of reason, here is what I mean: even the most hardcore Salafi will tell you that Islam appreciates reason, because you need *fahm*, or "comprehension", to read and understand religious texts. But the deeper question is: can human reason, even without religious texts, discern moral values and build ethical systems? I believe yes, and that is because God gave humanity its *taqwa* or conscience, as the Qur'an tells us. Therefore we can accept that there are universal ethical values we Muslims can share with all humanity, rather than thinking there is no ethical truth outside of Islam.

THE TALIBAN AND COERCIVE INTERPRETATIONS OF ISLAM

AI: The importance of freedom dominates the second part of your book. How can Muslims today reconcile the teachings and traditional concepts of Islam with the values of human rights, emancipation of women, rights of minorities both in terms of ethnicity and sexual orientation, freedom of religious choice etc.?

Akyol: Well in answer to that question I have to say: please do read my book. But here is what I can say in a nutshell: I believe all these values have their roots in the Qur'an. It was the Qur'an which declared "there is no compulsion in religion," or "to you your religion, to me mine"; or protected women, repeatedly, from the patriarchal traditions of 7th-century Arab society. But these 'roots' were not developed to maturity by the Islamic tradition; instead, they were often disregarded. It is quite remarkable that mainstream Sunni jurisprudence considered Quranic verses about religious freedom as "abrogated" by the later verses that commanded war against the polytheists - disregarding that this war was caused by the polytheists' oppression and aggression in the first place.

So I believe we can reconcile Islam and human rights today by reviving the spirit of the "abrogated" verses

of the Qur'an - by reading the Qur'an and Sunna of the Prophet in their historical context, viewing the tradition with a respectful but also critical point of view, and also being open to the ethical achievement of all humanity.

AI: Have the latest developments in Afghanistan prompted you to reassess your grievance about the “closure” of Muslim minds? Is it possible to speak of this “closure” without referring to the western contributions to it?

Akyol: The latest developments in Afghanistan - that is, the second coming of the Taliban to power - made me only more convinced about the need for an effort to “reopen Muslim minds”. Because the Taliban is a perfect example of the “coercive” interpretation of Islam that I criticize, and Afghanistan will now have yet another experiment in it.

Has the West made “contributions” to this problem? Of course. First with the colonialism of European powers, and then the militarism of the United States - the unjustified occupation of Iraq being the prime example. Such aggressions have made the Muslim world understandably more defensive, which only fuelled the militant interpretations of Islam. That is why I have been calling for a more restrained U.S. foreign policy (with some exceptions, such as the American military involvement in the Balkans in the 90s against Serbian aggression, which I see as justified). Meanwhile I also believe that Muslim societies have internal problems caused by Western colonialism, and that cannot be overcome by a merely anti-colonial posture.

AI: After their takeover of Afghanistan, the Taliban are making everyone nervous about the possibility of reinstating Sharia. Is the concern about the Sharia itself, or the Taliban’s interpretation of it? What should we expect, as analysts and as concerned outsiders?

Akyol: Of course the worry is about the Taliban’s interpretation of the Sharia - but, to be honest, it is also not too far from mainstream Sunni interpretations of the Sharia. After all, the Taliban are an offshoot of the Deobandi tradition in Indo-Pakistan, which itself represents a strict version of Hanafi jurisprudence. That is why some of the things the Taliban are likely to do - imposing the veil on women,

establishing religious police to discipline society, corporal punishments, an ‘emirate’ with no room for democratic opposition - can be easily grounded in the traditional texts of Sunni jurisprudence. And that is why Muslims need to discuss not just the Taliban, but the broader problem that it represents.

AI: How do you see your work in relation to other Muslim writers on such topics, and their non-Muslim counterparts? Who inspires you (and who frustrates you) as a writer?

Akyol: Who inspires me? 19th century Islamic liberals such as Namik Kemal, Khayreddin al-Tunisi, or Muhammad Abduh. As well as 20th-century giants such as Fazlurrahman Malik or Alija Izetbegović. Also contemporary scholars such as Khaled Abou Fadl, Ebrahim Moosa, Asma Afsaruddin, Asma Barlas. In contrast, those who frustrate me are the bigoted voices in our umma who condemn every new interpretation of Islam as ignorance, heresy, or treachery. They may genuinely believe that they are serving our faith, while I think they are only harming it by preventing much-needed conversations that we can have only with open minds. ■

Amila Buturovic is Associate Professor of Humanities and Religious Studies at York University, Toronto, Canada. Her research interests span the intersections of religion, culture, and identity, primarily in the context of Islamic societies. She is interested in the theories and practices of translation and polyglossia and has written on that subject in relation to Arabo-Islamic Spain and the Ottoman Balkans. Her publications include many articles and essays on these varied subjects. Of books, she authored *Stone Speaker: Medieval Tombstones, Landscape, and Bosnian Identity in the Poetry of Mak Dizdar* (2002), co-edited, with Irvin C Schick, of *Women in the Ottoman Balkans: Gender, Culture and History* (2007), and edited a special issue of *Canadian Literary Journal Descant* under the title *Bosnia and Herzegovina: Loss and Recovery*. Her latest book, *Carved in Stone, Etched in Memory: Death, Tombstones and Commemoration in Bosnian Islam* (Ashgate, 2015) concerns the spaces and culture of death in Bosnia, specifically the questions of continuity and discontinuity in the eschatological sensibilities, epigraphic texts, and commemorative practices. She has also written several essays and articles on the subject of death in Islamic cultural and intellectual history. Professor Buturovic's current research examines the culture of health and medical market in Ottoman Bosnia, focusing on the interconfessional transmission of medical knowledge and manuals, amulets and talismanic practices, and herbalism.

Professor Vlado Azinović from the Faculty of Political Sciences, University of Sarajevo, and expert witness of Prosecutor Office of Bosnia and Herzegovina writes about Husein Bilal Bosnić who was recently released after serving seven years prison sentence for inciting and recruiting followers to join foreign military groups and commit terrorist activities

Husein Bilal Bosnić: time, and the man



(PHOTO: BIRN BIH)

Vlado Azinović *

At the beginning of September 2021 an informal leader of the Salafist community in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Hussein Bilal Bosnić (b.1972), was released from State prison in Sarajevo having served a seven-year jail term. Bosnić was arrested in the fall of 2014 in a police operation codenamed "Damascus", along with several people who were suspected of belonging to a network recruiting and sending citizens from Bosnia and Herzegovina to foreign battlefields in Syria and Iraq, and who afterwards joined militant Salafist factions involved in the conflicts there. Those groups and formations (Al-Qaeda, Islamic State in Iraq and Syria – ISIS, and Al-Nusra Front) have been designated terrorist organizations by special resolution of the United Nations Security Council.

THE LONGEST SENTENCE OF ITS KIND

The Prosecutor's Office of Bosnia and Herzegovina charged Husein Bosnić with inciting and recruiting his followers to commit terrorist activities through his public appearances and posts on YouTube in 2013 and 2014, and with organizing a terrorist group. In 2015, after due proceedings, the Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina found him guilty on the counts of the indictment and sentenced him to seven years in prison. In the subsequent appeal process in 2016, the Court dismissed the objections of his defence and upheld its earlier verdict in a final decision. Bosnich served most of his sentence in Zenica Penitentiary, spending the final year in the State Prison in Vojkovich, a suburb of Sarajevo.¹

Bilal Bosnić received the longest sentence processed by the Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina for criminal offenses related to departures to fight in foreign wars since 2015. In general the average sentence imposed in Bosnia and Herzegovina - for about two dozen people so far convicted on this basis - is 26 months, and is the lowest in Europe.² Unlike most of those convicted in these cases, Bosnić himself did not leave for Syria during the conflict, nor did he stay in that country.

The release of Bilal Bosnić from prison sparked anticipated but short-lived media interest which focused largely on speculations about his plans and whereabouts after the release, and how it would impact the security situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Of course, at this moment only Bilal Bosnić knows for sure what he really intends to do and how he will continue his life as a free man. But before any consideration of his future role, it seems useful to recall some of the details of this case, as well as some lesser-known peculiarities about him.

Husein Bilal Bosnić is usually referred to as the informal leader of the Salafist community in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This perception particularly emerged following the departure of Nusret Imamović, who was until then considered the undisputed leader of this group (which was mainly based in the village of Gornja Maoča, in the northern part of Bosnia³). The belief in Bosnić's leadership role was strengthened not only in the community to which he belonged, but also in the wider public sphere in Bosnia and Herzegovina - where he was presented as such and granted, especially during 2013, primetime coverage on TV stations and in the most watched programmes.⁴ At that time Bosnić was a frequent guest at gatherings and social events among the Bosnian diaspora, especially in German-speaking countries but also in Italy and Slovenia. Publicly available recordings from those events confirm that, although having poor formal and religious education, Husein Bosnić was gifted with exceptional social intelligence and unusual communication skills, in addition to being witty and entertaining. He attracted the attention of the audience wherever he performed and found loyal followers.

DEADLY INTERPRETATIONS AND UNCONDITIONAL LOYALTY

Putting aside the entertaining component of Bosnić's public appearances, a more serious analysis of the content of his performances available on YouTube indicates that, almost without exception, these speeches are in essence one-sided, distorted, unfounded or deliberately manipulated interpretations of international and domestic issues (past and present). They typically, and a priori, portray Muslims (both globally and in Bosnia and Herzegovina) as victims of constant humiliation, conspiracies, sufferings and predicaments that are inflicted on them by other religious and ethnic communities (such as Shia, Jews, Christians, Serbs, Croats, Americans, etc.) simply for being Muslims. Such interpretations are strengthened by selective - often out of context - citations from the Qur'an and Sunnah (hadith), in an attempt to create the illusion of theological grounding. Husein Bosnić's performances are often marked by open hatred towards individuals and groups who think, feel, write and believe differently, or who identify with different cultural, civilizational, moral and ethical values. Of such individuals and communities Husein Bosnić has publicly used derogatory terms - including monkeys, pigs, bastards, traitors, etc.

In his lectures and Friday sermons Bosnić had been establishing an idealized, value-based and cognitively restricted model of an unconditionally loyal and true believer with whom God is pleased only if he ends his life dying on so-called "God's path." He imposed this reductive model as the one to which his followers should aspire. He did this through a series of quotations and interpretations of Qur'anic verses and hadith traditions, giving his listeners the impression of a theological imperative to the unquestioned individual and collective pursuit of such a role model. In that context, a series of his interpretations of early battles in Islam - with which he usually closed most of his Friday sermons - are immensely important. In it Bosnić suggests that "death on God's path" is actually the only genuine proof of true faith:

"What makes the Lord of slaves, Allah, most joyous is when his slave, in such a manner, without any armour, rushes among the unbelievers and fights until he is

*killed... He took only a sword, rolled up his sleeves and entered the infidel army to kill and was killed... To kill and to be killed – so end those who helped this faith and those who passed on this faith to us and with such faith we should be proud until the Day of Judgement. I ask Allah, Subhanahu wa Ta'aala, that the (Battle of) Badr and messages from Badr, and the lessons of Rasulallah, Sallallahu Alaihi wa Sallam, be our strategy and our manhaj (the way of understanding) to know that it is ibadah (worship) of Allah, Subhanahu wa Ta'ala..."*⁵

A significant proportion of Bosnić's public appearances during 2013 and 2014, at the time when he appeared as a guest star on popular Bosnian talk-shows, was dedicated to the promotion of an ideal of "true *Mujahideen*" and their sacrifice, i.e. their death on "God's path":

"... There is no man who has not heard of Mujahideen. It is sad that we are not with them, so we ask Allah, s.w.t., to resurrect us as Shuhada," Bosnić preached.⁶ "Young men in their best years are fighting [in Syria]. A brother from Sarajevo has just fallen as shahid, and not as a coward. He sacrificed his life on Allah's path because Islam mobilizes."

*"What makes us especially happy is that our brother [Muaz Šabić] died [in Syria] facing the unbelievers, uttering the greatest words of truth, that there is no god but Allah, Subhanahu wa Ta'ala, and that Muhammad, Sallallahu Alaihi wa Sallam, is His slave and Messenger... I ask Allah, Subhanahu wa Ta'ala, that we take great ibrah (lesson) from this example of our brother and to pray for our death to be on shahadah (martyrdom)... to die while being faced towards unbelievers. Bosnia needs such sons and the Ummah of Muhammad, Alaihis Salam, needs such sons..."*⁸

Through the continuous affirmation in his speeches of this desired model of ideal believer, Husein Bosnić was acting very persuasively upon some of the groups and individuals whom he addressed. In his community he was not just a *dai'* (a missionary who preaches Islam, practicing and teaching others about the faith), or an interpreter of God's and Prophets' orders and will - but also an authority with almost universal prerogatives: someone to also be obeyed and followed in other life situations; someone who is absolutely trusted - so much so that people often entrusted their lives and health to him. In his multifaceted roles

Bosnić "introduced" his followers "into Islam", but also "treated" people with mental health problems, "helped" addicts to overcome drug and alcohol problems, "married and divorced", and offered care and custody to women who left their husbands.⁹

MANIPULATION OF THE MENTALLY VULNERABLE

A retrospective insight into the composition of the congregations to whom Bosnić preached in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the diaspora indicates an above-average presence of mentally vulnerable, unstable and pliable people among his audience, especially adolescents. Among them were drug addicts, returnees to crime, and intellectually inferior, disoriented and disappointed younger people who were stigmatized in their own families.¹⁰ Some early research on a still insufficiently relevant, but indicative, sample indicates the possibility of a frequent presence of passive dependent personality disorder (DPD) among these groups. In short, many followers of Bosnić had needed a mentor to get them out of the condition which they alone were unable to find a solution for. Most of them did not consider possible mental health issues, but rather some kind of alleged possession (by jinns, devils, spells and black magic) for which the cure was sought not from qualified medical experts but from "healers" like Husein Bosnić. Such "treatments" were more intimate and discreet, and in the case of Bosnić they were further imbued with the conviction of God's presence.

Using one of the main propaganda tools of ISIS, he had been assuring his followers that it was not important how they lived and what they were before; the only thing that mattered was how would they die:

*"The deeds are measured upon competition. If you end up as a Muslim, everything will be accounted for you. If you end up as an unbeliever, everything will be annulled for you. A man works for Islam, lives according to Islam and falls as shahid (martyr). We ask Allah to make our death martyrdom. It is the best way of dying. Those who died on Allah's path are alive and they are only now rejoicing," Bosnić preached.*¹¹

Obedience to authority is rooted in most people through upbringing and adopted through different experiences in the family, school, workplace, community and elsewhere.¹² A whole series of

experiments in social psychology has shown that even mentally healthy people tend to follow guidance and orders from authority, even if it results in the injury or death of a completely unknown and innocent person. Therefore, the potential for deliberate and targeted manipulation of mentally vulnerable, marginalized, alienated, poorly educated or illiterate people - especially minors - is almost unlimited. It is quite certain that with his role, reputation and authority, and through public appearances and personalized contacts, Husein Bosnić could have significantly and even decisively influenced the making of key life decisions by his followers, including departing to fight in wars in Syria and Iraq. Dozens of such people have ended up in Syria after one or more interactions with Husein Bosnić. Some have died, and some are still in prisons or refugee camps in the north-eastern part of Syria, awaiting deportation to Bosnia and Herzegovina.

BOSNIĆ AND SALAFIST MISSIONARY PROSELYTISM

The defence of Hussein Bosnić tried to portray the court proceedings in his case as a trial of its client's religious beliefs. Objectively, that was not the case. Bosnić was sentenced to seven years in prison for, among other things, openly and publicly inciting others to join terrorist groups and commit violence. This is important to note because of the relativism, and apology for the crimes he was charged with, on the part of the public. They were not based on objective facts, but were typical constructs from a victimized narrative of which Bosnić was a prominent advocate.¹³

During his prison term Husein Bosnić was cooperative and he obediently carried out all that was required of him. He did not cause problems, and he even gained a respectable number of admirers, both among the convicts he came in contact with and among the prison staff members. It is quite possible that upon his release from prison Bilal Bosnić will be seen within the microcosm of his followers as a proven leader who was even imprisoned for his beliefs.¹⁴

However, the scene that Bilal Bosnić dominated with his narratives and communication skills has changed significantly in the past seven years while he was in jail. The structures to which Bosnić also belonged, and which until recently produced and

encouraged militant narratives, have rejected the aspects of mobilization that encouraged violence. The prevailing belief within those circles seems to be that the dynamics of population and political processes in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the long run favour the transformation of a significant part of the society according to their desired social and value models, without the need to resort to violence (as elsewhere). That is one of the major reasons why, in the last five to six years - while the world has been shaken by ISIS-motivated or incited terrorist attacks - Bosnia and Herzegovina did not witness a single one. This transformative social effort has obviously become a long term task for several generations to come. But in this context, the time factor is almost irrelevant when compared with the importance of the goal to be achieved. The essence of this approach is best portrayed in a dialogue that took place twenty years ago between a Canadian general and a Taliban commander. While discussing different visions the two sides had about the future of Afghanistan, and staring at the watch on the general's hand, the Taliban member said: "You have the watches, but we have the time." At the time of writing this text, in the late summer of 2021, it is needless to say whose approach in Afghanistan eventually prevailed.

One of the key levers of this gradual social engineering in Bosnia and Herzegovina is proactive Salafist missionary proselytism. Its most prominent protagonists are younger, charismatic leaders who attract tens of thousands of followers on social networks and in live performances. Most of these new preachers - who often imitate Bosnić's entertaining populism in their interactions with congregations - welcomed his release from prison in a silent and abstained manner. There is no doubt that many see him as a possible challenge to their own authority and the dominance they have acquired during Bosnić's seven-year absence, as unwanted competition. Especially with regards to the financial and other incentives that could now be redirected as rewards for the most successful actors in that arena.

A few weeks after Bosnić's release from prison, there are still no visible signs of the potential role he might assume. However it is certain that, whatever he decides to do as a free man - with or without a watch at his wrist - Husein Bilal Bosnić will also be among those who believe that time is on their side. ■

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BILJEŠKE

- For more, see: "Predmet Tužilaštva Bosne i Hercegovine protiv optuženog Bosnić Huseina – prvostupanjska presuda i drugostupanjska presuda." Available at: <http://www.sudbih.gov.ba/pretraga/odluke?odluke=1&godina=0&odjel=0&vrsta=0&keyword=Bosni%C4%87> (Accessed, September, 20 2021).
- For more, see: *Balkan States Find Prosecuting Terrorism a Challenge*, BIRN, available at <https://detektor.ba/2020/07/06/analiza-birn-a-nejednako-procesuiranje-terorizma-u-sest-zemalja-zapadnog-balkana/?lang=en> (Accessed, September, 18 2021).
- Bosnia and Herzegovina security agencies believe that Imamović left the country in late 2013 or early 2014 with forged documents, after previously selling or transferring all his property. It is believed that his transfer to Syria was assisted by Muradif Hamzabegović from Živinice, who was sentenced to five years in prison before the Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina earlier in 2012 for human trafficking, but who fled the country and joined the network transferring foreign fighters to Syria. Imamović’s wife along with four children was transferred first to Austria then flew on a commercial flight to Turkey, from where she moved to Syria. Although during 2019 some media outlets in Bosnia and Herzegovina persistently claimed that Nusret Imamović was in Libya, reliable sources claim that he is still in Syria. He resides in Idlib province near the border with Turkey under the “kunja” (nom de guerre) Abdulaj Mumin Bosni, but he allegedly lost all his relevance and authority among former followers and has since started a private business in catering.
- Some of the TV shows ebroadcast during the period when Bilal Bosnić was most intensively recruiting and encouraging followers to depart for the battlefields of Syria are still available on YouTube. For example, see: “Šejh Bilal Bosnić u emisiji Face to Face”, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F-58nrviV0T8&t=105s> i “Intervju za AlfaTV - Bilal Bosnić”, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qfwVYkJebTc> (Accessed: September, 15 2021).
- From his Friday sermon: “Uspavani Bošnjaci”.
- From his Friday sermon: “Druženje s braćom u Konjicu”.
- From his Friday sermon: “Koga je Allah prokleo”.
- From his Friday sermon: “Bosanski širkijet, reakcija na pogibiju Muaza Šabića”.
- When Husein Bosnić was detained in the autumn of 2014, police officers expected to find his four wives and sixteen children in the house. However, in one of the rooms they found a dozen people who were sleeping on the floor on dirty sheets. After short conversations with them it was soon established that they were waiting for “treatment”. Most of them were visibly mentally impaired.
- “Rukja – Liječenje Kur’anom – istjerivanje džinna/šejtana, Bilal Bosnić,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SW1-rXWfnuo> (Accessed April, 2 2016). This content has since been removed from YouTube.
- From his Friday sermon: “Opasnost medija, medijske laži i obmane.”
- For the detailed description of this process, see: Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority; An Experimental View*, Harper Collins, (1974.) and Jerry M Burger, “Replicating Milgram: Would People Still Obey Today?” *American Psychologist* (2008).
- For more details about the support Bosnić publicly received from some religious and educational officials, members of police agencies, and even Armed forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina, see: Nermina Kuloglija, “Bilal Bosnić je na slobodi. U kakvo okruženje se vratio?”, *Detektor*, 10. 9. 2021., <https://detektor.ba/2021/09/10/bilal-bosnic-je-na-slobodi-u-kakvo-okruzenje-se-vratio/> (Accessed, September, 22 2021).
- History has many examples of former prisoners who strengthened their leadership positions due to their perception by the public as a proven victim for their ideas. Some became presidents and some even won the Nobel Peace Prize.

Pakistani feminist scholar Afiya Shehrbano Zia writes about the struggle of women in Afghanistan against oppression

Resistance: Women's rights and religion in Afghanistan

Instead of repeating an anthropological inquiry as to whether they need to be saved or not, feminists around the world should trust the feminist movement and human rights community in Afghanistan. Regional support to human rights networks and women's collectives should be strengthened in order to monitor and oversee refugee security, mitigate the risks of women being trafficked, prevent the practice of forced marriages in the crisis period, and expand health facilities while facilitating political rights. Moral and ideological grand lectures are of no help



(PHOTO: TWITTER)

AUTHOR AFIYA SHEHRBANO ZIA WITH PAKISTANI WOMEN FROM THE PROVINCE OF KHYBER PAKHTUNKHWA AND FORMER TRIBAL AREAS DURING ONE OF WORKSHOPS IN PAKISTAN

Afiya Shehrbano Zia *

The withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan in August 2021 and the Taliban's return after two decades leaves the country's fate hanging in post-colonial limbo. It marks the continuing legacy of colonial adventurism, imperialist hubris and Islamic patriarchal conceit. Amidst the appalling death toll of the poor and young, political and military fatigue, and debris of a country that prides itself as

the graveyard of empires, there's absolutely nothing to celebrate. And yet, the strident claims of victory or defeat that echo from diverse ideological perches are deafening.

POST 9/11

As the US prepared to invade Afghanistan to avenge the events of 9/11, some global North feminists afforded moral cover to the occupation by arguing

that these Muslim women were exceptionally vulnerable and needed to be saved. This was challenged by Muslim feminists and critics who argued that the premise of the entire project was wholly imperialist and Muslim women did not need saving. This opened up a new schism within feminist politics.

Such polarizing arguments influenced policy decisions around the question of what culturally appropriate gender order should replace the Taliban's rule of gender apartheid – universalist rights, or faith-based 'Muslim rights'? UN agencies, European and US donor agencies, thinktanks, research organisations and even western academia and publishing houses pandered to the counter-intuitive plan of promoting culturally and religiously appropriate projects for Afghan civil society. Many of these initiatives were, in effect, far removed from the collective developmental, political or activist paradigms of the country. In particular, the British and American aid agencies invested heavily in Afghan women's empowerment by resorting to religion/Islam, and first established then relied entirely upon faith-based organizations and programmes as a point of entry for development initiatives¹. This trend reinforced the communitarian logic of religion for Muslims and had serious implications for narrowing and essentializing women's rights in many Muslim contexts in the post 9/11 period². As summarized by a Pakistani Islamic scholar, Dr. Khalid Masud, this was a process that politicized both religion *and* development.

The notion of 'sharia' as a moral framing that is appropriate for the 'unwashed' poor Muslim masses is also profoundly defeatist and usually patronized by elite Muslims who themselves embrace secular politics, liberal lifestyles, and aspire to or hold ambitions for western careers. The burden of finding redeeming elements, survival strategies and happiness within unequal power relations and unjust laws, while compensated by her virtue-seeking agency, seems to be the exclusive and exceptional privilege of (poor) Muslim women. This resonates with other similar patronizing proclamations about how domestic workers are at least well taken care of in the sanctuaries of elite households, disenfranchised migrant labour in Gulf countries at least earn foreign currency, madrassa children at least get fed, how "the poor are at least happy in their poverty" etc ...The recuperation of male-defined dogma - religious or

secular - in the interest of empowering Muslim women qua Muslim women, is as misplaced as the imperial adventures that pretend to rescue them.

After the 2001 invasion, between western donor sponsorship of gender rights programmes and the conservatives who blocked progressive legislation in Afghanistan's *Wolesi Jirga*, along with the Islamic scholars in the Supreme Court, there emerged multi-layered gender rights regimes that existed in parallel and also contradicted each other. These became evident in, for example, the hurried ratification of the UN Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW); the Presidential decree that passed the draft bill for the Elimination of Violence Against Women but which was not ratified as law by the Afghan Parliament; and initiatives such as women's shelters that were run on the efforts of individual women rather than through government policy. As Wimpelmann (2019) observes, by 2014 this limited and contrarian approach to gender rights improved under Ashraf Ghani's government, expanding towards autonomous rights and even challenging taboo issues while addressing the ignored topic of sexual harassment at universities. At the same time, a new generation of extremists - IS-inspired young radicals - had gained a foothold in the country and were targeting "corrupted", secularised women as key agents of Western aggression and moral degradation"³.

NEO-TALIBAN IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM?

The metaphorical query about whether Muslim women needed rescuing⁴ soon became redundant, not only because the restrictions and targeting of Muslim women turned murderous in Afghanistan (and Pakistan); but also because a new generation of women activists had fought for and influenced a rights-based politics with some success in both countries, and their expectations were not limited to some cultural or religious specificities.

A rising, dynamic and experienced cohort of feminists in Afghanistan object strongly to the lazy criticism of some non-Afghan feminists, who insist that the US policies and NGO interventions of the past two decades have imposed some foreign liberalism and feminism on the Afghan people and that's why these have 'failed'. Such simplistic quantifications of

success and failure borrow male lenses. As the women's rights activist Huria Samira Hamidi (Amnesty, South Asia) argues, "The idea that feminism was imposed on us via development aid and training is the most disingenuous false narrative that I hear today. Why wouldn't Afghan women use tools and assistance and benefit from these? We were imprisoned in our houses and we used any opportunity to speak out and organise our rights and exercised our voice and agency to challenge both sources of patriarchal oppression – international and the Taliban. Please, don't take away what we have achieved by these ill-informed analyses as if there was no local feminist consciousness that needed support and revival"⁵.

A second facile criticism that is often directed at feminist activism in underdeveloped countries is that attention to individual victims/survivors reinforces the neoliberal paradigm of individualism. Such objections stem from an obliviousness about the critical relevance of individual women of courage, whose single acts of defiance or survival threaten multiple layers of patriarchy at once, be it community, religious, military or state. These feed into, strengthen, and are supported by women's collectives. One Mukhtara Mai, Asma Jahangir, both the Afghan and Pakistani Malalas, and a Fawzia Koofi can galvanize resistance that threatens the entire male-dominant socio-sexual and political fabric of these societies and inspires and motivates women's movements.

The notion that all NGOs and international aid are imperialist and impose human and women's rights is also factually misplaced anxiety. Western aid agencies are hardly sponsors of feminist politics; they simply add a palatable dash of reformist women's empowerment, a pinch of gender training here and there, and are always deferring to respect for 'local cultural practices' - which is code for some mild reform but not radically upsetting the domestic gendered or sexual orders and norms. As Wimpelmann (2019) observes, women's rights in Afghanistan have been marked by "discreet tactics, parallel domains and personal accommodations" but also "direct religious and ideological confrontation". This is the same for any global context.

A third critique is that the US invasion delegitimized some pre-existing Afghan feminism or killed off a potential that was apparently nascent under

the Taliban government. While it's quite obvious that you can't win the hearts and minds of people while raining bombs on them or hunting them down by drones, to imply there was some thriving feminist movement under the Taliban is to mislead: resistance by the Revolutionary Afghan Women's Association was inspirational, but they were already underground and discredited precisely because they were challenging domestic patriarchies. Feminism in South Asia and MENA regions has always been demonized as western and colonial, and the objection to NGOs and foreign funds is a male anxiety mainly because these promote gender equality and disrupt local patriarchies. As Samira Hamidi observes, "Despite our many differences within women's groups, on the issue of women's equalities even liberal men have Taliban mentalities. Only women collectively fight for gender equality."

If the US and northern feminists betrayed Afghan women and minorities out of colonial benevolence, what exactly have the rest of the world's feminist movements and leaders done other than criticize this debacle while negotiating book deals, launching careers as confessional conscientious objectors, and claiming radical credentials as critics of imperialist adventures on Twitter? Beyond ivory tower 'critiques', was there no responsibility on global feminisms to have developed an alternative vision and strategy that assisted Afghan women over the past 20 years? Has this been a lost opportunity for third-world or transnational feminism to displace the western footprint and offer a manifesto for a pragmatic alternative beyond expecting imperialist capitalist politics to simply wither away through criticism and slogans? Is our failure a comment on how we have run out of ideas, or become so driven by the low hanging fruit of issuing scathing angry condemnations on behalf of Muslim women but offering no alternative visions or strategies except faith-based ones?

The Afghan women's ministry has been converted into the office for public morality; Kabul's female public officials/municipal workers have been ordered to stay home; girls' schools have not reopened; the Afghan women's cricket team is banned; moral policing is escalating. Most insidious, a former activist of the RAWA reports that while some are protesting bravely, many women are censoring and self-policing



AFGHANISTAN: ALL THE INSTITUTIONAL MEMORIES OF THE TALIBAN YEARS ARE SURGING BACK

(PHOTO: TWITTER)

– unsure if they should venture out in public without a mahram (male companion), or how to negotiate with the Taliban. All the institutional memories of the Taliban years are surging back.

On the 20 year anniversary marking the 9/11 attacks, US thinktanks are debating the failure of its invasion and humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan. These include the veracity of proclaimed advances in the decline in maternal mortality, increases in women's life expectancy, girls' enrolments in primary schools and universities, and the percentage of women in the civil services. However, any gender assessment testifies that the counter-terror responses of the NATO forces after 2001 focused on deals with warlords and promoting *jirgas* (male headed community tribunals), and reinforced patriarchal institutions as stabilizing forces. In clear contrast, women went to work, negotiated anti-violence legislation and worked in the health sector to reduce maternal mortality. These were never simply Western efforts, but very much Afghan women's efforts to rebuild their society in the midst of continuing war and occupation. To now undermine this success with some vague convoluted logic is unhelpful for strategic thinking ahead.

During the war on terror decade that took 80,000 Pakistani lives, women activists listed some early warning signs of the conditions that facilitate a climate of conflict/extremism. These included the shutting down of women's shelters; banning women from working or mobility in public spaces; wall chalkings/graffiti with conservative and restrictive messages; vice and virtue policing; preventing access to health workers who provide door to door health services and contraception; bans on media, music, arts and the erasure of women's images from public spaces; and the surveillance, persecution and murders of women working in NGOs, public services or government.

As a recent statement by Feminist Dissent⁶ observes, feminists in Muslim contexts have historically been deeply opposed to the idea that a truly sovereign state can be built through foreign intervention, but "the defeat of humanitarian intervention is no cause for celebration when it has simply been replaced with an older model of indirect rule". The statement notes that, "In this case, it is the marriage of puritanical religious fundamentalism with the neo-liberal thievery of the kleptocratic state. The chief beneficiaries of this new

settlement, apart from the Pakistani state, are likely to be China, Russia and Iran.’

THE WAY AHEAD

Samira Hamidi recommends that we “stop wondering if the Taliban has changed or not...the Taliban’s offer of amnesty to activists and journalists is an eye-wash. What crimes have these citizens committed to be awarded amnesty? And the Taliban have lists and are conducting house-to-house searches for the activists and intimidating journalists already. They are the same as they were in the 1990s.” Hamidi is correct. Patriarchies don’t change, they simply pivot and reassert their power and privilege.

Instead of repeating an anthropological inquiry as to whether they need to be saved or not, feminists around the world should trust the feminist movement and human rights community in Afghanistan. Regional support to human rights networks and women’s collectives should be strengthened in order to monitor and oversee refugee security, mitigate the risks of women being trafficked, prevent the practice of forced marriages in the crisis period, and expand health facilities while facilitating political rights. Moral and ideological grand lectures are of no help.

Basic services represent critical survival tools. These include women’s access to mobile phones (for their safety) and bank accounts, as well as quotas in public offices, and property rights. Women’s rights movements in neighbouring countries need support too, in order to extend regional collectivism - not by throwing money at contractors and middlemen, but in services and technology that increase women’s autonomy and empower them to further their struggle against domestic patriarchies. Most of all, the world needs to respect Afghan women’s critique of the imperialist adventures, invasions and deal-makings with religious patriarchy that have conveniently compromised on the woman question. That betrayal is the biggest failure of the past 20 years. ■

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Authors and activists Jenifer Heath and Ashraf Zahedi write about state and perspectives of women's rights in Afghanistan after Taliban's return to power

Women of Afghanistan: Peace and Security?

There is no security or peace for Afghan women - particularly those who could not make it out of the country during the limited airlift evacuations by the US and its allies or who are still, for numerous reasons, unable to cross borders into neighboring countries. Civil war, which has been going on for more than forty years, is likely to continue and worsen, making the lives of women and children all the more precarious



FEW ARE NOT FAMILIAR WITH THE EARLIER CRUELITIES OF THE TALIBAN, PRIMARILY TOWARD WOMEN, AND THERE ARE FEW WHO NOW BELIEVE - DESPITE THE TALIBAN'S PROTESTATIONS AND PRETENSES - THAT THEY HAVE CHANGED

(PHOTO: TWITTER)

Jennifer Heath and Ashraf Zahedi *

Afghanistan, sadly, has gone back to the future. The return of the Taliban - this time in greater force (and sophistication¹) than in the 1990s - presents massive, tragic challenges for men, women, children, and the disabled. An estimated 14 to 18 million people are trapped in a vast humanitarian crisis. This crisis has endured and deepened for decades, even before the

panic caused by the Taliban's victory on August 15, 2021. Malnutrition, food insecurity, COVID, drought, internal displacement, absolute poverty, lack of shelter, and sparse clothing (with winter coming) can also be attributed to years of fighting,² to the former Afghan government's neglect and corruption, and to the awkward obliviousness - then betrayal - of the United States.³ Of those in deepest need, 80 percent are women and children.⁴ Women,

who comprise more than half the population, will likely now - as before - suffer in extremis thanks to the tyranny, venality, and profound misogyny of their new/once-again rulers.⁵

BACK IN HIDING?

This essay could expand far beyond the scope required here, but we will briefly outline some of the provisions of the Afghan National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security (NAP)⁶ embedded in the Afghan Constitution,⁷ as they relate to the current situation. Although it is early days, the Taliban have already displayed the same brutality as during their "rookie" or "boyhood" days before the US invaded Afghanistan following the al-Qaeda attack of September 11, 2001. Few are not familiar with the earlier cruelties of the Taliban, primarily toward women, and there are few who now believe - despite the Taliban's protestations and pretenses - that they have changed. Women are back in hiding, sequestered again at home and under the *burqa*,⁸ or fleeing to uncertain futures. Taliban claims that they will be treated equitably are eroded daily. They ignore NAP and the Constitution, but rule according to their own interpretation of Sharia law.⁹ Recent announcements by Taliban leaders that women will be allowed to participate in the country's economy are contradicted by a declaration that they have disbanded the Ministry of Women's Affairs and that women will no longer be included in government leadership, despite their vital involvement across the past two decades.¹⁰ This is another violation of NAP, which pledged participation of women in decision-making at executive levels of Parliament, the civil service, and in national and provincial elections.

It is true that most of the progress women have achieved since the US-led invasion took place largely in cities, primarily Kabul (often misleadingly regarded as representing "Afghanistan" as a whole, despite the country's wide cultural diversity). Meanwhile many rural areas — 70 percent of the country — remain much as they have for millennia.¹¹

NAP also guaranteed all women access to an effective, accountable justice system. But recent reports document, for instance, how the safehouses where women sheltered from their abusers across fourteen provinces have closed or gone silent underground.

These were places which sought to protect girls and women from honor killings, child marriages, bride prices, forced prostitution, and the practice of *baad* — trading women to pay off debts, and which also often took their cases to court. Now their directors, staff, and clients live in terror as the Taliban release abusers from prison, allowing them to find and punish their victims.¹² Obviously this goes against NAP's assurances of health and psychological support for survivors of sexual and domestic violence.

HEALTH CARE AND EDUCATION?

Healthcare alone is a desperate concern: Afghanistan has the highest maternal mortality rate in the world and a reputation as the worst place on Earth to be a child. Women and girls have little access to medical services and treatment. Hospitals and clinics in rural areas are rare to non-existent. As Sima Samar, former chair of the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission, has written: health care should be, "along with sufficient good food and a healthy environment...a social service to which every human being is entitled. ...Without proper health care, especially for women, human security and peace are unattainable."¹³ Afghanistan's health crisis is so drastic, the Taliban have at least acknowledged women doctors and public health workers may remain in their jobs.¹⁴

NAP also speaks to women's right to education. Approximately 70 percent of Afghan women are nonliterate. Across the twenty-year US occupation (and during the Soviet era, 1979-1989¹⁵), there was a push toward universal schooling. Now the Taliban have banned girls from attending secondary schools.¹⁶ While higher education institutions have been continuously challenged, according to Wahid Omar - an education consultant actively working in-country until May 2021 - nonetheless, "Afghanistan's higher education system has slowly improved access for women...Yet [women] make up only 22.8 percent of enrollment and only 5 percent are successful, actively participating students. Up to 90 percent experience harassment of all sorts and discrimination both in in-person and online learning. The implementation of legal frameworks to support gender equality, intended to improve living/working conditions for women, are elusive."¹⁷ The Taliban claim women will be allowed to continue

their university educations, separated from men and uniformed in black *abayas* and *niqab*.¹⁸ This dictum also creates extra hardship on the schools themselves to hire enough qualified women instructors and build additional classrooms.

Many believe that Taliban concessions are merely lip-service in order to persuade nations such as the US, France, and Germany to release funds. But those states and others (with the probable exceptions of Pakistan, China, and Russia) maintain that money will not be forthcoming until trust can be established that the Taliban are no longer a terrorist group¹⁹ and that they will take human, especially women's rights, seriously.²⁰

UNCONQUERABLE WOMEN?

At the time of writing, there is no security or peace for Afghan women - particularly those who did not make it out of the country during the painfully limited, disorganized airlift evacuations by the US and its allies, or who are still - for numerous reasons - unable to cross borders into neighboring countries. Civil war, which has been going on for more than forty years, is likely to continue and worsen, making the lives of women and children all the more precarious.²¹

Afghanistan has, throughout its long history, acquired many monikers: "Roof of the World", "Land of Lilacs", or "Land of the Unconquerable" - the title of our 2011 volume about the lives of contemporary Afghan women, who are among the strongest, most courageous, and persistent in the world. Recently, for example, women (and men) have appeared in their hundreds on the streets of Herat, Kabul, and Faizabad to boldly protest the return of the Taliban and the threat of regression they represent, only to be ferociously and bloodily beaten back.²² Two were shot dead in Herat. More is expected.

"We have a strong women's movement," pediatrician and former presidential candidate Massouda Jalal has said. "[We]...will not allow the gains of the past...to go down the drain even if it may cost [our] lives."²³ Indeed, the Taliban might have miscalculated their ability to bully and oppress. This time, women know their rights.

Despite our fears for them and their future, we believe that - with the sincere, stalwart, and wholehearted support of the rest of the world - the women of Afghanistan will indeed be unconquerable and, in the end, triumph.

"I personally am not afraid of them [the Taliban]," said 23-year-old educator Pashtana Durrani. "It's as much my country as it is theirs."²⁴ ■

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