

Development Policy Forum



MAY 2017

ISLAM AND EUROPEAN MUSLIMS

REPORT

#CONVERSATIONWITH

HUSEIN KAVAZOVIĆ

**GRAND MUFTI
OF BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA**



This event is part of our Development Policy Forum (DPF), which brings together a number of crucial development actors, including the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), the Agence Française de Développement (AFD), the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), the European Investment Bank (EIB), the United Nations and the World Bank to contribute to the global and European conversation on development. Through its activities and publications, the DPF reflects the rapidly-changing global debate on growth and development and seeks to encourage fresh, up-to-date thinking on the multiple challenges facing the development community.

EXAMPLE FOR EUROPE: BOSNIA'S OPEN, TOLERANT ISLAM

The long-established Balkan Muslims can demonstrate to Europe that there is nothing inevitable about links between Islam and extremism, the Grand Mufti of Bosnia and Herzegovina told a Friends of Europe “Conversation with” debate on 4 May.

Rhetoric on Islam’s place in Europe has become increasingly security-focused, as far-right populists play up the recent ISIS-inspired terrorist attacks to intensify their anti-Islam diatribes. The attacks have also been used to stoke fears surrounding the arrival of mostly-Muslim refugees and migrants from Asia, Africa and the Middle East.

However, Muslims have lived in the Balkans for centuries, co-existing peacefully with Christians and Jews for much of that time. While some of Europe’s 44 million or so Muslims have been attracted to extremist doctrines and actions, the vast majority are law-abiding, tax-paying citizens who are active in politics, business, education and the arts.

Bosnia and Herzegovina’s version of Islam within a secular state could be a useful example to the rest of Europe, as the country applies to join the EU, according to Grand Mufti **Husein Kavazović**. “In Europe, there are two Islams,” said Kavazović, who has held his position since 2012, and heads a religious community of more than 4 million people around the world. “There is traditional Islam with roots in its home turf, and people who came to Europe later. I think Bosnian Muslims could help the European Union. Europe needs the Balkans and its Islam.”

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DEEP ROOTS

Islam arrived in the Balkans in medieval times, and it became closely linked with institutions of higher learning, Kavazović said. Over the centuries Bosnian Muslims have taken up traditions from Christianity and Judaism and has learned to co-exist with other religions. “It is not incompatible to adopt certain forms from Christianity and Judaism,” he said. “Bosnia Herzegovina is a meeting point.”

The old roots and openness of Balkan Islam are one reason that the region has produced relatively few Islamist fighters. State and religious authorities recognised that causes are often economic – and that these have pushed Bosnian Serbs to fight in Ukrainian war zones, as well as Muslims to go to the Middle East. “Poverty is the most fertile ground for radicalisation, and fighters go to foreign war zones,” he said. “This is not just about Muslims.”

After the rise of ISIS led some Muslims to go to Iraq and Syria, the country’s Muslim leaders launched projects to discourage this. “Chaos is a force that attracts people of different beliefs,” he said. “People go to try to achieve something within that chaos. Society needs to recognise this problem, and I think that is something Bosnia Herzegovina has done. The Islamic Community has produced its own programme against people going to fight in wars. The state participated too. All Bosnian officials and leaders signed a statement against people going to these places. For the past 18 months, we have not had anyone going to war zones. That is a success.”

Bosnian Islam’s long history also means it has not adopted the practices of some branches of Islam, such as polygamy, that are incompatible with European society. “Bosnian Muslims and some other parts of the Islamic tradition have not adopted polygamy, as was the case in other areas,” Kavazović said.

“Muslim women also have responsibility. They have to raise their voices”

AN ACTIVE ROLE FOR WOMEN

Bosnian Islam is also far from the versions in some parts of the Middle East that restrict women's role in society. Women in Bosnia Herzegovina have equal rights to education and participation in society. “Men and woman are absolutely equal in terms of their rights and responsibilities towards God and society,” Kavazović said. “There are different interpretations of the Koran. Further east, that could provide different views. But we think that our interpretation of the Koran is authentic and based on what our religion is.”

There are still restrictions on women leading prayers, though this has been a subject of debate. “It is not true that a woman cannot lead prayers,” he said. “In that part of the tradition, women have the same rights as men. What remains problematic is whether a woman may lead a prayer for men. This is a minority tradition but it does exist. The question is whether the Bosnian tradition will change in that direction. We are victims of this perception that this is solely the right of men.” Still, he added, if women want to alter such practices, they need to take action themselves. “Muslim women also have responsibility. They have to raise their voices.”

Kavazović pointed out that Roman Catholicism does not allow women to be priests, but acknowledged that Islam has work to do on women's role in society and religion. “Muslims have to do more in this regard,” he said. “I am fully aware of this. We remember the problem of the relationships between men and women is something we need to work on. Can women become part of the clergy? When we talk about Muslims, we forget that there are many different traditions. We are victims of a tradition that wants to impose itself from Indonesia to the Maghreb to Morocco.”

QUESTIONS OVER STABILITY IN THE BALKANS

The European identity of Bosnian Muslims has not, of course, saved them from violence. “Religious societies are vulnerable and sensitive,” he said. The result can be severe misfortune and pain inflicted on their societies, as happened during the Bosnian War from 1992 to 1995, when around 100,000 people were killed and more than 2 million displaced. “This is what happened in the 1990s, when Bosnia Herzegovina was falling apart, and nationalism took over.” Now, however, “The Muslims of Bosnia Herzegovina have the strength and capacity to build a tolerant society. We can continue building a society of tolerance, and we are doing it.”

Once again, instability is threatening Bosnia Herzegovina. The war ended with a compromise that divided the country in two, with Bosnian Serbs giving up their fight for independence and union with Serbia and instead governing their Republika Srpska. However, the Serbs held a referendum last year in which they voted to secede. Through the vote was declared illegal, it damaged the authority of the Bosnian state. “The western Balkans are climbing high up the European agenda, not always for good reasons,” said moderator **Shada Islam**, Director of Europe and Geopolitics at Friends of Europe. “Ethnic tensions in the region are rising.”

A BOSNIAN CONTRIBUTION TO EUROPE

Still, the long presence of Islam in Bosnia Herzegovina means the country can help Europe deal with Islamist extremism. “I am not happy with what is happening with other Muslims now,” Kavazović said. “But Bosnian Islam is traditional Islam, and we need to help others. We have to help them find themselves, so that they can discover Europe. Balkan and Bosnian Muslims could set a good example and help Europe.”

Bosnia and Herzegovina became a “potential candidate country” for accession to the EU in 2003, and formally applied for membership in February 2016. “We live in hope that the doors to the EU will open,” he said. “We are at the border with the European Union.” However, if the EU takes too long to grant membership, relations might sour. “If you give people hope but nothing specific, nothing concrete, they could feel rejected and turn to someone else,” he said. “We have to be patient, but the EU should not allow that to happen.” Accession to the EU would not bring about major change – as it has not in Romania or Bulgaria, he said. Still, a high percentage of Bosnians want to join. “We think that we have no other path,” Kavazović said. “We want Europeans to see the concern in our faces about this.”

He also called on the EU to ensure that the region did not once again become the stage for international strife. “In the past, the Balkans was a chessboard for different forces in Europe,” he said. “We think that Europe should play a proactive role and help us to organise ourselves so that this is a European space and not a space that someone is going to use for their own interests. We Europeans should take care of our own yard, and the Balkans is one of the foundation stones of Europe.”

However, Kavazović said his position gives him limited say in the day-to-day running of his country. “We have to be realistic,” he said. “Politicians are running the world, and they should not shift responsibility onto religious leaders. We don’t have armies or police forces. Politicians have this daily bread that they are bringing closer to people or further away from people. Politicians have to do their jobs and make temporal life easy for people.”

Meanwhile Kavazović will focus on his religious work. “All of us have a mission, and I have my own mission as a human being,” he said. “This mission seems to be easy at first glance, but there are always difficulties. In Bosnia Herzegovina, my mission is based on a universal message of faith, to divert people from evil. This message speaks about us and what we are, so that life on this planet can go on from one generation to the other. However, sometimes doing good has a more difficult path than evil. Sometimes evil finds it easier to organise itself. So, we are trying to do good, based on common love, tolerance and reconciliation.”

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