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Globalisation and its impact on Bosnian Muslims practices

Ahmet Alibašić,
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Globalization and modernity

I will restrict my presentation to the impact of globalization on a peripheral European Muslim community, that of Bosnian Muslims.

I start with a proposition that the reaction of Bosnian Muslims to globalization has been relatively mild when compared to the reaction of some other Muslim peoples or their own reaction to modernity and modernization a century earlier. This has its reasons.

1. I consider globalization to be a process continuous with modernity; its new phase. Some (Muslim) societies encountered modernity through, or simultaneously with globalization others – including Bosnian Muslims - experienced modernity (and modernization) much earlier. For that reason the impact of globalization was much weaker on Bosnian Muslims than on – let say – some Southeast Asian Muslims.

Bosnian Muslims encountered modernity in the second half of the 19th c. when they were – for all practical purposes - detached from the Ottoman state. The isolation only increased after 1908 and 1924 (Austrian annexation of Bosnia and the end of caliphate respectively) and reached its peak during two decades following WWII. During that period Bosnian Muslims basically settled their accounts with modernity when it comes to living under non-Muslim rule, serving in a non-Muslim army, having independent Islamic administration, attitude towards European culture, etc..., which are questions that some immigrant Muslims in the West still ask themselves. (For more see Fikret Karčić, *The Bosniaks and the Challenges of Modernity: Late Ottoman and Hapsburg Times*, Sarajevo: El-Kalem, 1999). When globalisation arrived in the Balkans in late 1980s Muslim tradition has already been changed under the influence and pressure of very hostile communist ideology. What globalization was supposed to destroy or take from their religious tradition or cultural identity had already been destroyed by communism.

2. As far as pluralism - that globalization usually brings with it - is concerned, Bosnian Muslims have been used to it for centuries. They did rule Bosnia from 1463 to 1878 but they were majority for only about 200 years (17th and 18th century).

3. When it comes to local economy – which is often another reason for backlash against globalization – Bosnian economy was destroyed just at the time when globalization was entering the Balkans in full force in early 1990s. So there was no economy for global capitalists to destroy.

4. In addition, for the last 15 years Bosnian Muslim have been preoccupation with other more immediate problems and processes – one may even say enemies - (transition from the communism, democratisation, ethnic cleansing and genocide, reconciliation, etc.)... which have diverted their attention from the consequences of globalization. (However, this might

change once they - as the other ordinary citizens of B&H - realize that thousands of them will not receive their pensions in full because of IMF policy dictates).

5. There is also an understanding among them that it is largely due to globalisation that they have survived. Forces of globalisation brought their suffering to the attention of the West and East, and intervention of both worlds proved to be crucial for their survival. Had Serbs attempted ethnic cleansing and genocide a hundred years ago hardly any Muslim would survive.

As a result of these and perhaps some other factor, Bosnian Muslims feel that they have little to loose in the process of globalisation: on one hand, their economy, their autonomy, their culture etc. have already been destroyed or their destruction has been attempted either by aggressive neighbours or previous Communist regime, which was also a hegemonic force not very sensitive to their interests. And on the other hand, some (actually the most important) cultural adjustments took place in the late 19th and early 20th century (Which is to say that most of the questions posed under the subtitle of this panel Bosnian Muslims tackled then). Since the WWI the environment for making any adjustments to modernity – which was proceeding along the lines of selective adoption – have been hostile and therefore not conducive to that process. Subsequently those changes were simply imposed and forced upon Muslims especially after WWII.

As a result of that, Muslims – perhaps in the tradition of traditional Muslim ulama – have started to accept certain practices and changes as necessities but never providing religious justification for them. One such case is secularism, which is widely accepted so that there is not significant Muslim group today in Bosnia that advocates establishment of Islamic state or the application of Sharia, but the whole issue is ‘undertheoretized’. In other issues – primarily those of lifestyles – the laxity has being confused for the supposed liberalism of Bosnian Islam.

Globalizing Islam

If globalization did not bring much new to Bosnian Muslims from the West it did from the east. Their dramatic survival – and what went on in the process - has helped to create or intensify their global Muslim awareness, global Muslim solidarity and emotional attachment to the global Muslim community – ummah. Perhaps never before was the emotional belonging of Bosnian Muslims to the Ummah so strong as it is today. (Today the Islamic Community can collect more money for the victims of Bam earthquake, Tsunami, Kosova and Palestine than PBS with its open programs and donor phone lines, Red Cross or any other charitable organization). To paraphrase Jose Casanova, globalization has facilitated the return of Islam or the Ummah as the imagined community (p. 430).

In this regard, during 1990s due to the influx of Islamic money and literature - in Arabic and English - its translation, the arrival of Islamic missionaries and mujahids, as well as the increase in the number of Bosnian students of Islam in the Muslim world, local interpretation of Islam, some Muslim practices and certain aspects of Muslim culture came under the pressure of universal/unitary Islamic ideas and movements.

A case of local Islamic thought might be interesting to explore. During the socialist period, Bosnian Muslims developed their own – though modest - Islamic thought and original answers and solutions. An apologetic work, *Islam between East and West* written by the late president Alija Izetbegović (locally trained lawyer) during 1970s is a good example. Whatever its shortcomings, until today it remains the most authentic piece of Islamic thinking produced in Bosnia (and the Balkans). One cannot deny its originality in approach and argumentation. And until today that is practically the only text written by a Bosnian Muslim that is cited by Muslims in the central Muslim lands. That is a characteristic book in the sense that the author had very few references at his hand about Islam and therefore had to formulate original responses to the challenges that socialism posed to Islamic Message based on the Qur'an and works of western philosophers and other authors.

At the almost same time another locally very influential Bosnian Muslim scholar (this time Al-Azhar graduate and a member of Al-Azhar Islamic research council) issued a number of unusual fatawa including the fatwa that Zakat al-Fitr (alms giving for poor at the end of Ramadan) could be paid to the Islamic educational institutions in ex-Yugoslavia. His fatwa was widely accepted and unquestioned until recently.

However, no such book or fatwa are imaginable today for since late 1980s Bosnia has been swept by Islamic ideas from – mainly - central Muslim lands. And since globalisation favours big players local Islamic thought has been stifled although the number of Islamic scholars has increased as well as the quality of Islamic education. The production of Islamic literature has increased several times and so have mushroomed Islamic organizations. The number of Bosnian students of Islam in the Muslim lands also dramatically increased. But practically all that Islamic literature published today in Bosnia has been a direct (translation) or indirect echo of ideas that could be found in the other Muslim lands. One recent survey that my Norwegian colleague and I conducted revealed that practically every Islamic group in Bosnia formed during last 15 years, with exception of the IC and perhaps Young Muslims, – and there are many - is an extension of the similar group in the Muslim world elsewhere. As a result we today in Bosnia have almost every Islamic group (and religious practice associated with them) represented from the followers of Nursi to salafis, to revivalists, and even Abu Hamza's group, at least on the internet.

So, to paraphrase Jose Casanova once again, there has been remarkable increase in transnational networks and exchanges of all kinds. We are witnessing the coming (back) of transnational Islam to Bosnia: ideas, resources, movements, Islamic centres, networks, schools, and even cadres. (In Bosnia today there is at least one imam born and brought up in Mecca serving in a mosque in a Central Bosnia village. At the same time young Bosnian Muslims teach at Islamic universities in Malaysia and Pakistan). With this coming (back) of transnational Islam we again find mosques and other Islamic institutions (re)built by foreign Muslims, which has not been the case for over a century. Today Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Indonesia, etc. have mosques after their names in Sarajevo and other Bosnian cities. Qatar and UAE assisted the (re)construction of the buildings of the Faculty of Islamic studies and the Gazi Husrev-bey's Library, etc...

One of the consequences of all this is fragmentation / polarization of previously quite uniform Islam that developed during socialism under the control of the Islamic Community in B&H. Three decades ago a visitor from Saudi Arabia upon seeing Bosnian Muslims at prayer thought of them as soldiers (everybody was following imam and *muadhdhin* without exception). Today he observes that we have ‘dissidents’ in our mosques. Its only symbolic of the changes in other realms of Islamic life. Due to the ‘deterritorialization’ effect, the IC in B&H today is forced to compete with new Islamic organizations for the position of the exclusive interpreter of Islam which it enjoyed for last six decades. Many do not feel easy about it and have requested (unsuccessfully) that the state do not license any entity with word ‘Islamic’ in its name.

So one can say that we are witnessing uniformization or unification of Islamic ideas and practices globally. This should not be overstated, but on certain issues ‘Bosnian Islam’ is giving in to the unitary or more universal Islam. Some aspects of local Islamic practices, however, proved to be superior, like the Islamic affairs administration and Muslim representation which has survived change of several states and seems to be surviving war on terror as well, unlike some other Islamic organization in the Balkans.

There is also no doubt that the coming of transnational Islam has assisted the resurgence of private and public religiosity in Bosnia and thus contributed to the polarization of the society into more religious and already fundamentalistically atheistic sectors of the society, which is trying to present itself as liberal one.

Bosnian Muslims encountered modernization by about a century before they experienced globalisation. This meant that globalisation primarily had the effect of integrating them into global Muslim community (loosing in the process some of their Islamic peculiarity) and heavy transfer of Islamic ideas and practices from the central Muslim lands through the presence of Mujahids, missionaries, students and literature. Initially this meant reversal from Islamic modernism (combined with traditionalism) that predominated in Bosnia during the socialist period to Islamic reformism.

However, since globalization is said to be simultaneously reasserting and increasing relevance of the local and global we still have to see what the final outcome of the local resistance to more global Islamic ideas would be. (On several occasions advocates of local Islamic tradition used violence against ‘Salafis’ in Bosnian mosques or simply prevented them from entering mosques). As of this moment it seems that local Muslim practice was affected and altered in some respects in order to comply with more universal Islamic ideas and practices but that on an overall basis it has won. After all, the IC – and the practice of traditional, some would say national Islam that is related to it – is today much stronger than it was a decade and a half ago and there is no reason to believe that it will loose that position in the near future.