

The Role of the Islamic Community in Peacebuilding in Post-War Bosnia and Herzegovina: Case Study of East Bosnia

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ABSTRACT *The main aim of this paper is to prove that religious communities can play a vital role in building peace and trust among conflict-divided societies such as Bosnia and Herzegovina. A special focus has been put on five municipalities in East Bosnia that survived the genocide, ethnic cleansing and mass deportation. Enforcement, peacekeeping, agreement making, and institution and capacity-building are the main elements that have to be taken into consideration in the process of peacebuilding. The peacebuilding process is challenged in East Bosnia due to the lack of desire on the part of the Serbian Orthodox Church to take part and be involved in a joint peacebuilding process with the Islamic Community.*

Introduction

The Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina (ICBH) played an essential role as a contributor to relief and development in many conflict zones during the Bosnian War 1992-1995; beyond that, the ICBH has tried to foster post-war peacebuilding in the country. But the question is, can faith-based or religious organizations, such as the ICBH, be an effective agent of interfaith peacebuilding process in the post-war period in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH)? Can they rise beyond their faith-based identity and try to bring the people in Bosnia and Herzegovina closer to each other? How has the ICBH contributed to the peacebuilding process among the people?

In an attempt to answer these questions, this study assesses how the activities undertaken by the ICBH have influenced peacebuilding between the formerly conflicted parties in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The main aim of this work is to investigate and analyze the role of religion, specifically Islam, in the peacebuilding process in BiH. The peacebuilding process is a long-term project, and it is not easy to determine which of the activities performed by the ICBH has

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In a conflict-divided, multiethnic and multi-religious society such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, the important role of religious communities and religious leaders in fostering the peacebuilding process should not be ignored

contributed the most to it. Therefore, this study discusses the different methods and perspectives used by the ICBH to strengthen the peacebuilding process in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Scholars in international relations have long been concerned with techniques and methods in preventative diplomacy, conflict resolution, reconciliation, and peace-

building. A secular paradigm has dominated these studies, and not many seriously conducted studies have examined and analyzed the role of religious communities in the peacebuilding process. The role of religion as a facilitator in conflict prevention and peacebuilding processes and promoter of *justice*, *tolerance* and *peace* has been very much neglected by the scholars. Yet, justice and peace are fundamental commitments of virtually all religious communities. Moreover, religious communities generally have well-articulated value structures that could potentially provide a basis for collaboration.¹ Therefore, religious interpretations of conflict prevention and post-conflict peacebuilding should be more widely utilized in international relations –especially in societies where religious communities play an important role.

Peacebuilding has been recognized as a necessary component of post-War Bosnia and Herzegovina. The process of peacebuilding in Bosnia and Herzegovina is important to avoid any possible new conflict or violence among the formerly conflicted parties. Specifically, peacebuilding among the three main ethnic groups in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the *Bosniaks* (Bosnians Muslims), *Croats* (Bosnian Catholics) and *Serbs* (Bosnians Orthodox Christians) necessitates constructive faith-based dialogues and debates. If faith-based dialogues and faith-based promotion of peacebuilding in Bosnia and Herzegovina are to provide a model for other countries, the role of religious communities in building and maintaining the peace must be examined.

The goal of this paper is to argue that in a conflict-divided, multiethnic and multi-religious society such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, the important role of religious communities and religious leaders in fostering the peacebuilding process should not be ignored. The geographical concentration of this study includes five East Bosnian and Herzegovinan municipalities (towns), namely Zvornik, Bratunac, Vlasenica, Milići and Srebrenica.

This paper is limited to a focus on the ICBH because of the difficulties involved in meeting the conditions to include other religious communities within this

study. Therefore, this paper focuses only on the ICBH's view of the peacebuilding process in BiH (with a focus on previously mentioned five municipalities), and the difficulties that the ICBH employees and members face while advocating the establishment of peace. It is important to note that the ICBH and Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims), even though they count among the victims of the most recent war events (1992-1995) –including the total destruction of the region's cultural and religious infrastructure and heritage, ethnic cleansing, systematic raping and genocide– still do not give up calling for the establishment of long-lasting and sustainable peace among BiH's different ethno-religious groups.

Peacebuilding

The term peacebuilding was first introduced by UN Secretary General Boutros Ghali in his report to the Security Council in 1992, entitled “An Agenda for Peace.” Since then, peacebuilding has been included in the policies of a plethora of donors, as well as multilateral and regional organizations.² Peacebuilding is a process that facilitates the establishment of lasting peace within societies where conflicts might occur. It tries to prevent the emergence of future conflicts by stressing the root causes of conflict and violence through reconciliation, institutional settings, and economic and political transformation. Peacebuilders work in highly sensitive environments that require long-term approaches to deal with problems and injustices that are not easily solved in the short run. Therefore, peacebuilders must possess creative strategies that will be effective in moments of crisis, but which will also affect lasting changes over the period of social transformation.

Peacebuilding as a process requires the building of new relationships and trust among opposing groups that have experienced conflict and various atrocities. Since both relationships and trust deteriorate during periods of conflict and violence, peacebuilding represents a tremendously hard task that requires long-term devotion. From a general perspective, peacebuilding tends to end the conflict and violence and to support sustainable peace. Key peacebuilding objectives include: preventing countries from lapsing or relapsing into violent conflict, establishing structures and incentives for the peaceful mitigation of conflicts, incentivizing commitment to peace processes among the elite, establishing a framework for political, security and economic transition, and demonstrating peace dividends by meeting the urgent needs of the population.³

Religious beliefs and values, as well as religious leaders themselves, have huge potential for promoting peace all over the world. Religious influence goes far beyond state borders and is able to unite different societies in the international

Four general principles apply to the work of religious peacebuilding: enforcement, peacekeeping, institution and capacity-building, and agreement making

arena. Since religion is a powerful mean of controlling societies worldwide, there is an ongoing discussion among scholars as to whether religion is a cause of, or solution to, conflicts today. Many say that religion as a concept, over the centuries, has been an undeniable instrument for achieving peace. However, it is obvious too that huge numbers of acts of physical violence, including killings, have been perpetrated in the name of religion. Therefore, a clear point should be made that violence and extremism are aberrations executed by those who pervert religion and misunderstand its core principles.

Even if we find evidence from different conflict zones stressing that religion contains an inclination for conflict under certain conditions, it is a fact that the connection between religion and violence is very complicated. Individuals and groups that rigorously follow the bona fide and pristine teachings of Judaism, Islam, Christianity, or other traditions will invariably become instruments of peace and harmony, rather than of chaos and destruction.⁴ As it has been already noted, any connection between acts of violence and religion is an example of degraded religion and its principles.

Four general principles apply to the work of religious peacebuilding: enforcement, peacekeeping, institution and capacity-building, and agreement making. The first two concepts rely on third party forces in order to cease the conflict and monitor peace settlements and agreements that guarantee at least a minimum of stability. When it comes to the third principle in religious peacemaking, 'institution and capacity building,' a great example is the Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina (ICBH). The ICBH is an institution that acts independently from the state apparatus and represents the unique community of Muslims in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

One role of the Islamic Community, like that of other religious communities in the process of peacebuilding in Bosnia and Herzegovina, is explained by the *Raisu-l-Ulama* (Grand Mufti, the highest religious authority), Husein Kavazović, in one of his interviews, where he stated:

[The] responsibility of all religious communities to help in the process of reconciliation and building of our society can be efficient if religious communities and people inside religious communities decide to be dedicated to the principles of 'good,' and if they observe a human as God's creation, not as a member of a certain religious or national group. In the essence of all religions there is a



principle called ‘repentance.’ If we do not teach people to repent we will not be able to face each other, and religious communities need to enliven this institution. In our region we see that war criminals are being glorified, war crimes are being negated, and unfortunately it is a sign that soul is still sick, and even that religious communities in this area are sick.⁵

Methodology

This study has been undertaken in two phases. The first phase includes a review of the academic and program literature to examine the existing evidence of the role of religious communities in peacebuilding processes, and to identify gaps in the literature. The second phase includes in-country data collection derived from a number of city case studies to understand where and how the Islamic Community has played a role as an important contributor to peacebuilding, and where it has missed an opportunity to foster peacebuilding among the formerly conflicted parties.

The research of the documents and literature was carried out in three levels: (i) academic research on peacebuilding in a general context; (ii) academic research and programming literature on the role of religious communities in the peacebuilding process; and (iii) academic research and programming literature on the role of the ICBH in the peacebuilding process. The findings from the review of the academic and programming literature related to the religious

French troops serving for the UN peacekeeping mission patrol in front of the mosque of Ahinici destroyed by the Croatian and Serbian forces during the Bosnian War.

AFP PHOTO / PASCAL GUYOT

communities' role in the peacebuilding process help the study to examine the gap in the existing literature. In addition, the collected literature supported this study in building the theoretical background on peacebuilding, both religious and secular.

The collection of data and interviews were based on five East Bosnian and Herzegovinian municipalities: Zvornik, Bratunac, Vlasenica Milići, and Srebrenica. The study focuses on these municipalities because of the large number of human lives and capital lost during the last Bosnian War, but also because these municipalities have received less attention in examining and analyzing the role of religious communities in the peacebuilding process during the post-war period.

Semi-structured interviews were used in this study. The conducted interviews helped the study in exploring the issue of the religious communities' role in the peacebuilding process, and fostering an understanding of the experience, beliefs and motives of the ICBH in the peacebuilding process in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The data and interviews collected focus primarily on the perspectives of *imams* (religious leaders), particularly concerning how well the ICBH contributes to generating the peacebuilding process, and what circumstances and rationales affected the pro-peacebuilding attitude of the ICBH. The interviews were collected between December 2016 and January 2017.

Literature Review

Human history is characterized by deadly wars and conflicts, which have inflicted grave costs for human society in terms of killings, ethnic cleansing, intimidation, displacement, and the destruction of livelihood. In the context of Bosnia and Herzegovina, it is important to address the causes of the Bosnian conflict in such a way that will preclude a future return to violence. Frequently, the post-conflict peacebuilding strategies for Bosnia and Herzegovina have concentrated on short-term political and economic stabilization, leaving out the historical components of the state recovery for a later stage of the process.

During the process of the breakup of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY), war commenced in Bosnia and Herzegovina, one of the constituent republics in the federation, following a declaration of independence in 1992.⁶ The independence of BiH could be understood for better or for worse, depending on which ethnic group one belongs to. Throughout an analysis of some United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions, we could determine the nature of the conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Among the earliest UNSC resolutions, resolution 47/121 (issued on December 18, 1992) regarding the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina “strongly condemns Serbia and Mon-

tenegro and their surrogates in the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina for their continued non-compliance with all relevant United Nations resolutions” (para. 7).⁷ Also, through the same resolution, the UNSC demanded that “Serbia and Montenegro and Serbian forces in the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina immediately cease their aggressive acts and hostility and comply fully and unconditionally...

[with all other UNSC resolutions].”⁸ This is a clear indication that the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina cannot be viewed only through internal parameters, although much literature refers to the Bosnian War as “ethnic” or “civil” wars. The Bosnian war ended with the Dayton Peace Agreement in 1995, which resulted in a cessation of hostilities, and provided a framework for new political arrangements for the country. Although the war in Bosnia ended twenty two years ago, the processes of reconciliation and peacebuilding in Bosnia and Herzegovina has not come to an end. “The challenge of rebuilding societies after war is much more complex and difficult than the task of putting an end to fighting.”⁹

An effective peacebuilding process reduces the potentiality for the outbreak of new conflicts and bloodshed worldwide. Therefore, different actors influence the peacebuilding process within a given society. It is well-known that Bosnia and Herzegovina is one of the countries that survived war atrocities, ethnic conflicts, and changes in the demographic structure of the country. Taking into consideration the high status of religious communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the complexity of building a peace, we should emphasize that very few authors have studied the role of religious communities in the peace-building process in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Silvestri and Mayall¹⁰ argue that religion played a pivotal role in the identity of three ethnic groups in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but that religion itself was not an origin of the outbreak of war atrocities in 1992-1995. Rather, the concept of religion was misused by politicians who did nothing but create tension and hatred among the religiously diversified population. The authors emphasize the three dimensions of the conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina that need to be addressed for a sustainable peacebuilding process: identity, grievance, and power sharing. However, the leaders of all religious groups in the country failed to grasp opportunities provided by peace-oriented religions, or to ask one another for mutual forgiveness. According to the authors there can be no peace among the nations without peace among the religions.

The Islamic Community of Bosnia and Herzegovina is the sole and unique community of Muslims living in Bosnia and Herzegovina, of Bosniaks living outside their homeland, and of other Muslims who accept this community as their own

Andrejc and Brkic¹¹ studied the role of religion in the trust building process, and local interactions among the residents of thirteen different cities in Bosnia and Herzegovina. They put special emphasis on the relation between different indicators of religiosity among the subjects of their research, as well as their attitudes towards the process of peacebuilding. The authors found out that subjects who identified as “less religious” or “unreligious” were less optimistic about the reconciliation and trust building process, while the opposite sentiment prevailed among members of the population who regarded themselves as more religious. Research also showed that persons who are less active in their mosques or churches are generally less satisfied with life in Bosnia and Herzegovina than those who visit a mosque or church on a regular basis. The authors argue that religiously oriented people consider that a special treatment for, and protection of returnees is of crucial importance for the peacebuilding process in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Furthermore, they believe political leaders need to apologize for crimes committed in the past in order to interact more with the members of other religious groups and to come to agreement about historical facts.

Siljak¹² claims that religion itself was completely marginalized in public life during socialist Yugoslavia, but religious revivalism during the 1980s brought hope for free expression and the practice of religion without being considered backward. Studies in last decades have shown that religion in the Balkan regions has been politicized and nationalized in such a way that certain groups believe that God loves and prefers one nation over others. Some religious authorities went so far in the 1990s as to bless war activities that included killings, mass deportations, and many silent crimes. One of the reasons why many high religious authorities have made such a small contribution to the peacebuilding process, she claims, is the lack of an open and honest approach to suffering and victimhood. Another reason why religious authorities did not contribute more to the peacebuilding process lies in a lack of human resources in religious communities and institutions, but also in a lack of understanding regarding the processes of peacebuilding and reconciliation as concepts in general.

Puhalo¹³ argues that the future of Bosnia and Herzegovina depends on the process of reconciliation. Bosnian society today is based on the coexistence of different ethnic groups, but not on true reconciliation values. However, because the concept of reconciliation and trust building is an ongoing process, the current coexistence has to be improved in the coming years. According to Puhalo, religion can be a very powerful instrument in the process of reconciliation and trust building. Both Islam and Christianity are religions that promote universal values such as love, justice, forgiveness; therefore, religious authorities should do more to promote these values.

Most of the above authors studied the role of all of the religious communities in the peacebuilding process in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but none put

their focus particularly on the role of the Islamic Community in building peace and trust among people. During the Bosnian war the Bosnian Muslims suffered the most,¹⁴ and therefore, the study of how the Islamic Community looks at the post-war peacebuilding and reconciliation, and how it preaches about this to the followers is of a great importance. With this in mind, our study focuses on the role of the Islamic Community in the peacebuilding process in five different municipalities in East Bosnia: Zvornik, Bratunac, Vlasenica, Milići and Srebrenica.

As for reconciliation, the ICBH is putting great effort into the peacebuilding process of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which is essential to maintain peace in the country, and to prevent any new conflict from taking place

The Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina

As previously mentioned, the main purpose of this study is to examine and analyze the role of the Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina (ICBH) in the peacebuilding process with a special focus on five different municipalities in East Bosnia. Therefore, a general overview is needed about the institutions of the ICBH and the municipalities, or *Tuzla muftiluk* (mufti district) to which they belong.

The Islamic Community of Bosnia and Herzegovina is the sole and unique community of Muslims living in Bosnia and Herzegovina, of Bosniaks living outside their homeland, and of other Muslims who accept this community as their own.¹⁵ It is considered one of the most organized Islamic administrations in Europe, being independent from the state apparatus, self-financed, led by an elected leader and enjoying an elected assembly. The ICBH is financed by *waqfs* (inalienable charitable endowments), membership fees, *zakah* (a form of alms-giving treated in Islam as a religious obligation), *sadaqat al-fitr* (a form of alms-giving to the poor during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan), gifts, and revenue from its profit-generating agencies and funds.

As an autonomous organization, the ICBH regulates its own activities independently from state institutions. Its existence and activities are based on the legality of religious institutions pertaining to Bosnian Muslims since the period of Ottoman rule in Bosnia; as such it is an inseparable part of the *Ummah* (global community of Muslims). The ICBH and its activities are derived from the *Holy Qur'an* and the *Sunnah* (the path of the Prophet Muhammed), the Islamic traditions of Bosniaks and the requirements of the time. The ICBH is independent in regulating its activities (rituals, Islamic education, management

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of Islamic endowments, publishing, charity, etc.) and the management of its property. In the interpretation and performance of Islamic religious rituals, the *Hanafi madhhab*¹⁶ is to be applied.

The aim of the ICBH is that all of its members should live in conformity with Islamic norms. The ICBH protects the authenticity of Islamic norms and assures their interpretation and application. The ICBH is supposed to take care of the religious rights of Muslims and ensure

to its members the necessary conditions for performing their Islamic religious obligations. In the author's opinion, the ICBH should also organize and support activities which improve the social and financial living conditions of Muslims. In addition, according to its constitutional provision, the ICBH establishes and maintains contact and cooperation with Islamic communities, institutions and organizations worldwide, and cooperates with other religious communities and organizations in promoting peace, justice and good will among all people.¹⁷

Following these principles, the ICBH has undertaken many steps in fostering the processes of reconciliation, tolerance, and peacebuilding in post-conflict Bosnia and Herzegovina. The ICBH advocates religious freedom and its expression on an equal basis throughout the country. It welcomes inter-religious dialogue with all monotheistic religious communities and churches in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The ICBH considers that every religious community or church must condemn and sanction individuals or groups in their midst who spread hatred and incite intolerance and hostility toward members of other religions or beliefs.¹⁸

In its relations with other religious communities and churches, the ICBH is inspired with the Qur'anic teachings on living in peace, justice and kindness with good willing people:

Allah does not forbid you respecting those who have not made war against you on account of (your) religion, and have not driven you forth from your homes, that you show them kindness and deal with them justly; surely Allah loves doers of justice. (60:8)

Guided by this Qur'anic teaching, the ICBH is ready and open for any kind of dialogue and cooperation with other religious communities/churches.



Notably lacking the presence of a representative of the Serbian Orthodox Church, Bosnian political leaders and the Grand Mufti of BiH watch as trucks carrying coffins of newly identified victims of the Srebrenica massacre arrive in Sarajevo, on July 09, 2015.

AA PHOTO /
KEMAL ZORLAK

Reconciliation, peacebuilding, dialogue and coexistence have no alternative in multicultural and multi-religious Bosnia and Herzegovina,¹⁹ and the role of religious communities is crucially important in the peacebuilding process. Promoting dialogue and coexistence is not a tactic of the ICBH, but more of a strategic orientation without which the country cannot survive.²⁰ As for reconciliation, the ICBH is putting great effort into the peacebuilding process of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which is essential to maintain peace in the country, and to prevent any new conflict from taking place.

The Islamic Community in East Bosnia and the Process of Peacebuilding

Zvornik, Bratunac, Vlasenica, Milići and Srebrenica are municipalities located in Easternmost Bosnia and Herzegovina close to the Republic of Serbia. Throughout history, these towns were known for their multicultural, multi-religious and multiethnic co-habitation. Various religions were tolerated, and a large number of cultural heritage sites and religious buildings such as churches and mosques existed in harmony. People of different religious backgrounds (predominately Muslims and Orthodox Christians) lived next to each other without any difficulties and with full understanding, tolerance, and mutual support.

Nevertheless, from time to time this peaceful coexistence was threatened by the Serbian territorial ambitions aiming in uniting all Serbs in one state (a

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design which included the ethnic cleansing of non-Serbs). This aim can be clearly detected through four strategic documents written by prestigious Serbian leaders/institutions: (i) *Načertanije* (1844) by Ilija Garašanin, (ii) *Serbs All and Everywhere* (1849) by Vuk Karadžić, (iii) *Homogeneous Serbia* (1941) by Stevan Moljević, and (iv) *Memorandum* (1986) by the Serbian Acad-

emy of Arts and Sciences (SANU). All of these works proposed blueprints for spreading Serbian influence, mainly by propaganda efforts and via a network of pro-Serbian rebels –in order to achieve an optimal situation in terms of Serbian national interests. However, there were periods when the mutual understanding, tolerance and help among the peoples prevailed over Serbian nationalism, and one of them was from 1945 (the creation of Tito's Yugoslavia) to 1980 (Tito's death).

With the death of longtime Yugoslav leader Josip Broz Tito in 1980, growing nationalism among the six republics of Yugoslavia threatened to split the union apart. This process intensified after the mid-1980s with the rise of Serbian nationalism under the leadership of Slobodan Milošević, president of the Socialist Republic of Serbia, who fueled Serb nationalism to gain political support.²¹ Milošević used nationalist feelings to his advantage, making changes to the constitution favoring Serbs, creating a military that was 90 percent Serbian, and extending his power over the country's financial, media, and security structures. With the help of Serbian separatists in Bosnia and Croatia, Milošević stoked ethnic tensions by convincing Serbian populations that other ethnic groups posed a threat to their rights.²² Therefore, in 1991, Slovenia, Croatia and Macedonia declared their independence from Yugoslavia. Following the disintegration of Yugoslavia, the majority of people in Bosnia and Herzegovina voted in favor of independence in a 1992 referendum. It should be noted that many of the Bosnian Serbs boycotted the referendum and independence.

War emerged in Bosnia and Herzegovina soon after the referendum, and the ethnic nationalists in the country tried to take control of territories they claimed as their own. Ethnic cleansing, systematic raping and genocide in some parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina were committed between 1992-1995, which led to hundreds of thousands of deaths and more than two million people displaced. One of the largest ethnic cleansing and genocide projects undertaken by the Serb Army during the Bosnian War took place in the Eastern Bosnian towns.²³ It could be argued that the Eastern Bosnian towns were off the radar for many Western travelers, researchers, officials, and countries until

the last Bosnian War when genocide, massacres and ethnic cleansing erupted there. These events drastically changed the demographic components of the towns in Eastern Bosnia, which can be seen through population census data. In order to show this, a comparative discussion and analysis based on censuses from 1991 and 2013 for five the municipalities of Podrinje region²⁴ will find a place in this study.

A census from 1991 showed that the five municipalities which are subject of this study had a multi-ethnic background, but it is worth emphasizing that all of them were populated predominately by Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims) before the aggression on Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1992-1995. Results of the 1991 census in Srebrenica showed that the total population numbered 36,666. Bosniaks numbered 27,572, Serbs 8,315, and Croats 38.²⁵ However, due to the war crimes perpetrated there, which included ethnic cleansing and genocide, the demographic structure of Srebrenica drastically changed.

In the final year of aggression on the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Srebrenica fell to the hands of Bosnian Serbs, whose army in 1995 committed the worst massacres on European soil in modern history. Supported by forces from the Republic of Serbia, the Army of Bosnian Serbs committed genocide against Bosniaks by killing eight thousand people –mainly civilians, within a short time. When entering Srebrenica on July 11, 1995, a chief commander of Serbian army, Ratko Mladić, underlined that Srebrenica was a Serbian possession now, and that the time had come to take revenge on the “Turks”²⁶ occupation” of this area.²⁷ Judge Fouad Riad at the International Criminal Tribunal for Yugoslavia (ICTY) described the Srebrenica genocide in the following way: “True scenes from hell, described on the darkest pages of human history.”²⁸

In the wake of this massacre, the demographic picture of Srebrenica dramatically changed, as was the case with all towns in East Bosnia due to the genocide committed against Bosniaks there. The results of a census from 2013 showed that the total population of Srebrenica had fallen to 13,409, less than half of its population prior to the war. The number of Bosniaks had declined from 27,572 in 1991 to 7,248 in 2013.²⁹ Bosnian Serbs consisted of 6,028, while the number of Croats had dropped to 16.³⁰ The decline of the Bosniak population of Srebrenica was caused by numerous factors, among them genocide, ethnic cleansing, and forced migration.

The war crimes committed by Bosnian Serbs in Srebrenica included not only killings, but the destruction of all religious and cultural heritages there. According to Imam Damir Paštalić,³¹ twenty one³² out of twenty two mosques in the municipality of Srebrenica were completely destroyed and mined. This clearly depicts that the mosques around Bosnia and Herzegovina were intentionally destroyed. The remaining mosques were seriously damaged.

The destruction of religious and cultural heritage represented an attempt to remove the link between Bosniaks and the territory of origin –in this case the municipalities of Vlasenica and Milići

Ten out of Srebrenica's twenty imams were killed. Paštalić notes that eighteen out of twenty two mosques have been renovated and six of them are actively functioning today.³³ It is very interesting, Paštalić says, that in his position as the chief imam of the Srebrenica municipality, he did not experience any kind of insult from Serbs after the war. Also, he continues,

there was no any attack on mosques after the war in Srebrenica. This indicates the enduring will to coexist on the part of the remaining residents. Also, this might be a result of the municipality's specifics –the 1995 genocide. A provocative act in Srebrenica would insult many people in Bosnia and Herzegovina and would trigger the international community to act more proactive.

When it comes to the Zvornik municipality, a census from 1991 showed that the total population was 81,295. The Bosniak population consisted of 48,102, Serbs 30,863, and Croats 122.³⁴ As was the case with Srebrenica, the demographic structure of Zvornik changed dramatically. By 2013, census data showed a total population of 58,856. The number of Bosniaks had declined to 19,855, while the number of Serbs increased to 38,579.

The Zvornik municipality consists of thirty one *jamaats* with the same number of mosques. Twenty one mosques are in the territory of the entity Republic of Srpska, while ten mosques are settled on the territory of the Federation of BiH. Haris Mustajbašić argues that being an imam in the territory of the Republic of Srpska is far more challenging than working in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. As a religious leader, but also as a Bosniak, he said that he is more challenged in Republika Srpska because the children face many forms of discriminations in schools (e.g. children do not study about Srebrenica genocide and ethnic cleansing in Bosnia and Herzegovina, language course issues etc.), and because there is no fair-share presence among the ethno-religious groups in state institutions.

Mustajbašić said that reconciliation and peacebuilding do not have limits, and that many things have to be done to make both of them working. Sacrifice, understanding, and tolerance must be presented. He gave as an example two of imams who are working under his *Majlis*: one of the imams lost thirty three family members during the Bosnian war, while another lost eighteen family members. All of them were civilians killed by Serb forces during the conflict. Both imams are actively working as religious leaders in the territory of Zvornik

municipality. Those imams are sacrificing themselves, Mustajbašić continues, because they are ready to work on the same ground where their loved ones were killed some twenty years ago.³⁵ Also, it should be noted that twenty two mosques were destroyed in the Zvornik municipality, while the remaining ones were damaged.

The Bratunac municipality is also a significant example of a dramatic change in the demographic structure of a population. According to a 1991 census, the total population of Bratunac was 33,619. Bosniaks numbered 21,535, Serbs 11,475, and Croats 40. Due to the acts of genocide and ethnic cleansing committed against the Bosnian Muslims, Bosnian Serbs became the dominant ethnic group in this municipality. Results of 2013 census showed that the number of Serbs had increased to 12,350, while the number of Bosniaks had decreased by almost two thirds to 7,803. The difference in the Bosniak population is created out of: ethnic cleansing, displacement during the war, and migration of people in the post-war period because of difficulties to meet basic needs for life. Elvir Hodžić³⁶ says that many mosques were seriously damaged or destroyed. However, Hodžić continues, 85-95 percent of the infrastructure of the Islamic Community property has been renovated today in the Bratunac municipality.³⁷ The Bosniaks recognize the importance of the Islamic Community for their existence in Eastern Bosnian towns.

Because of insignificant number of Bosniak population, as well as the size of the municipalities, both Vlasenica and Milići became one *Majlis*. In addition, Milići municipality belonged to Vlasenica municipality until 1992, and since then, it was formed as a separate municipality with a self-local government. Because of this, it is hard to compare the population of these two municipalities separately –before the war (1991 census) and after the war (2013 census). In other words, the 1991 census looks at these two today's units (municipalities) as one; while the 2013 census looks at them as two separate units. Therefore, in order to draw a comparative picture, this study looks at these two municipalities 'jointly' –not as two separate municipalities. The number of Bosniaks in these two municipalities decreased from 18,727 (out of total 33,942 population)³⁸ in 1991 to 7,962 (out of total 22,908 population –11,441 in Milići and 11,467 in Vlasenica)³⁹ in the 2013 census.⁴⁰ A myriad of reasons affected the changes in the demography, among which are: ethnic cleansing, displacement during the war, migration of people in the post-war period, etc. In addition to this, Nurdin Grahić, chief imam of *Majlis* Vlasenica and Milići, claims that twenty five religious objects (mosques and other *waqfs*) were demolished by the Serbian Army in the area of *Majlis* Vlasenica during the last Bosnian war.⁴¹ The destruction of cultural and religious heritage was deliberate. In other words, the destruction of religious and cultural heritage represented an attempt to remove the link between Bosniaks and the territory of origin –in this case the municipalities of Vlasenica and Milići.

A Bosnian woman mourns near a relative's grave, at the Srebrenica Genocide Memorial in Potocari, Bosnia and Herzegovina.

AA PHOTO / KEMAL ZORLAK

The Dayton Peace Agreement (DPA) stopped the Bosnian war in 1995. It allowed the safe return of all refugees to their pre-war homes. Annex seven of the DPA states that:

All refugees and displaced persons have the right freely to return to their homes of origin. They shall have the right to have restored to them property of which they were deprived in the course of hostilities since 1991 and to be compensated for any property that cannot be restored to them.

The early return of refugees and displaced persons is an important objective of the settlement of the conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Refugees and displaced persons are ensured a permission to return in safety, without risk of harassment, intimidation, persecution, or discrimination, particularly on account of their ethnic origin, religious belief, or political opinion...⁴² In order to achieve this, the following confidence building measures had to be undertaken:

- a. the repeal of domestic legislation and administrative practices with discriminatory intent or effect;
- b. the prevention and prompt suppression of any written or verbal incitement, through media or otherwise, of ethnic or religious hostility or hatred;
- c. the dissemination, through the media, of warnings against, and the prompt suppression of, acts of retribution by military, paramilitary, and police services, and by other public officials or private individuals;
- d. the protection of ethnic and/or minority populations wherever they are found and the provision of immediate access to these populations by international humanitarian organizations and monitors;
- e. the prosecution, dismissal or transfer, as appropriate, of persons in military, paramilitary, and police forces, and other public servants, responsible for serious violations of the basic rights of persons belonging to ethnic or minority groups.⁴³

The first return of refugees to Eastern Bosnian towns started soon after the war. However, the first wave of a larger number of Muslims going back to their



The religious communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina can be the best peacebuilding contributors because the people listen to religious leaders, imams or priests, respectively

homes of origin begin in 2000. It was at this time that the Islamic Community started to take an active role in the process of return. The post-war reconstruction, which included the reconstruction of mosques and *waqfs* demanded great dedication and recourses. The imams were among the first returnees in many parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina, while the Islamic Community committed itself to the establishment of the congregation and organized religious activities to this end.⁴⁴ The return of imams to the Eastern Bosnian towns had a significant psychological effect and boosted the return of Bosniaks to the ruins of war and their devastated properties.

However, the elementary policy of the Islamic Community was not only to bring back the remaining Bosniaks who had survived the genocide and ethnic cleansing that had taken place on the territory from which they had been expelled by Serbian forces; rather, the focus of the Islamic Community in the Eastern Bosnian towns and other parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina included reconciliation and peacebuilding. The Islamic Community is one of the few religious communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina which in the post-war period adopted a “Platform for Dialogue” committed to peacebuilding, reconciliation, cooperation with other religious communities. The Platform for Dialogue was defined in 2009, and stands for tolerance and respectfulness among ethnic and religious groups in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This document clearly stands for a dialogue with all religious representatives of all monotheistic religions: Christianity (Christian denominations: Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant) and Judaism. In addition, it says that the Islamic Community is not ready to have a dialogue with communities and individuals who insult and disparage Islamic learning.⁴⁵ Also, its instatement shows the sincerity and openness of the Islamic Community for the peacebuilding process, which is an important factor for long-term peace and stability in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The importance of religious communities for reconciliation and peacebuilding in Bosnia and Herzegovina has been recognized by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Nurdin Grahić notes that the OSCE encourages inter-religious dialogue between the Islamic Community and the Serbian Orthodox Church; the OSCE has often requested and required public gathering of imams and Orthodox priests. These efforts aimed to crystallize

the importance of inter-religious and inter-ethnic peacebuilding. In addition, according to Damir Paštalić, the religious communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina can be the best peacebuilding contributors because the people listen to religious leaders, imams or priests, respectively. Therefore, the readiness of the religious leaders and communities to advocate peacebuilding is important for long-term peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina.⁴⁶ Unfortunately, the project was doomed to failure because the Serbian Orthodox Church, to date, has not shown sympathy for this kind of cooperation.⁴⁷

The Islamic Community of Zvornik, Bratunac, Vlasenica, Milići and Srebrenica had tried several times to get in touch with the representatives of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Republika Srpska in order to facilitate and promote the process of coexistence and peacebuilding in a democratic way.⁴⁸ This included invitations to attend religious feasts such as *Bayram* celebrations, openings of the rebuilt mosques, common condemnation of attacks on the religious buildings, etc. However, the religious authorities of the Serbian Orthodox Church have always been reluctant to accept such offers, and have never replied to the calls coming from the Islamic Community.

As a result, the Islamic Community has stopped extending direct invitations of religious leaders from Orthodox Church in East Bosnia. Somehow, contacts among the religious leaders at the lowest levels do exist, however, these contacts are merely formal and without any motive or concrete results. Nevertheless, there is a form of cooperation at the top level among the monotheistic religions in Bosnia and Herzegovina –Islamic, Judaism, Roman Catholicism, and Orthodox Christianity– through the Inter-Religious Council of Bosnia and Herzegovina.⁴⁹ The idea of this council was to “engage people in shared listening and in-depth conversations and reflection on the values of their own traditions and to help them find common.”⁵⁰ In addition, people from all monotheistic religions through this council have a chance to articulate a shared vision for peace and build relationships across ethno-religious lines. The primary purpose of the Inter-Religious Council of Bosnia and Herzegovina is to pursue reconciliation at an institutional level between the religious communities. In 2017, the Inter-religious Council in Bosnia and Herzegovina celebrates its 20th anniversary of dedicated work and persistence in building and sharing their joint vision of tolerance. Unfortunately, even after 20 years of its existence, the values that the Inter-religious Council in Bosnia and Herzegovina stands for are challenged at the local level by religious leaders. This study has shown that the priests from the Serbian Orthodox Church have always been reluctant to accept cooperation with the Islamic Community at the local level.

On the other side, the Islamic Community and the imams in Zvornik, Bratunac, Vlasenica, Milići and Srebrenica continue to call Muslims to support

the peacebuilding process in these towns. Nurdin Grahić says that he and all other imams recount the importance of peacebuilding and reconciliation during *Jumu'ah* (Friday) prayers.⁵¹ In addition, Haris Mustajbašić advocates that the religious peacebuilding and reconciliation from Bosnia and Herzegovina can serve as an example all around the world. He supports his arguments by noting that two imams from his *Majlis* lost many close relatives during the Bosnian War, but still advocate peacebuilding and reconciliation among ethno-religious groups in Bosnia and Herzegovina. One of these imams in the Zvornik area, Senajid Alić, lost thirty three family members in the last Bosnian war, while the second imam, Zijad Hasanović, lost eighteen family members. All of them were killed as civilians by Serb forces during the conflict. This did not lead them to seek revenge or advocate hostility toward Serbs during their speeches; rather, both of them are among the biggest advocates for peacebuilding and reconciliation among ethnic groups.⁵²

Another great example is Nurdin Grahić himself. He claims that he was three times (2006, 2014 and 2016) insulted by Serbs during his tenure as the Chief Imam of Vlasenica and Milići municipalities: once in the cafe (a public space), in the mosques before prayer (a religious space) and the last time in March 2016 while he was with his family resting at home (a private space). According to his report, the last attack on his home was the worst one of all, because the assaulters insulted his wife and three-year-old daughters. According to Grahić, the last message of the attackers was that he and his family are not safe even at home. However, when asked why he advocates peacebuilding and reconciliation with the Serbs, he says that Islam teaches so, and that he as a Muslim must stand for this.⁵³ Damir Paštalić says that peace has no alternative, so that it is a must to advocate peacebuilding and reconciliation among the people.⁵⁴ All of these examples are clear indicators of the readiness of the Islamic Community and the imams to advocate peacebuilding and reconciliation in the country regardless of all obstacles to this process. The Islamic Community sees Bosnia and Herzegovina as a multi-ethnic and multi-religious state, and peace among different groups is a prerequisite for any further developments.

The Islamic Community has recognized the need for an active peacebuilding process in the country. Damir Paštalić says that the peacebuilding process could be more productive if the Serbian Orthodox Church showed readiness to coop-



A significant obstacle that psychologically affects Bosniaks and the Islamic Community in BiH is the fact that the Serbian Orthodox Church has never distanced itself from the ethnic cleansing and genocide which were committed during the Bosnian War

The peacebuilding process requires the full inclusion of all sides that were involved in the Bosnian war, and the role of religious communities and their representatives have to be taken seriously into consideration due to the very strong role played by religion in recent times

is potential for effective peacebuilding, if and when the Serbian Orthodox Church accepts the invitation to cooperate with other religious communities, in this case the Islamic Community.

Despite its overtures in the interest of peace, it should be noted that a significant obstacle that psychologically affects Bosniaks and the Islamic Community in BiH is the fact that the Serbian Orthodox Church has never distanced itself from the ethnic cleansing and genocide which were committed during the Bosnian War. On the contrary, during the unconstitutional⁵⁶ celebration of Republika Srpska Day on January 9, 2017, Irinej Vučićević, the Patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church stated: “Republika Srpska is God’s creation to preserve the Serbian people.”⁵⁷ This statement can be understood as religious justification of the ethnic cleansing and genocide during the Bosnian war. Damir Paštalić argues that the war crimes must be recognized and condemned by the Serbian Orthodox Church, which has not occurred to date; such a step would make possible the growth of a new generation, where Muslims and Christians could work jointly for a better tomorrow. Denial of war crimes does not benefit anyone.⁵⁸

Conclusion

Throughout history, the municipalities of Zvornik, Bratunac, Vlasenica, Milići and Srebrenica have been known for their multi-ethnic and multi-religious character. During the last Bosnian War, the demographic composition of all five municipalities drastically changed, as the majority of the non-Serb population was either killed or expelled from the towns. All the buildings that belonged to or even resembled Islamic heritage in all five municipalities were totally destroyed or seriously devastated.

erate.⁵⁵ All of the four Chief Imams of the municipalities of Zvornik, Bratunac, Vlasenica, Milići and Srebrenica, and the Islamic Community of Bosnia and Herzegovina in general, have showed interest and sincere intentions to cooperate with the Serbian Orthodox Church and other monotheistic religions in any project that could bring the people closer to each other. The Serbian Orthodox Church has never offered any project in Eastern Bosnia, and has ignored the ones suggested by the Islamic Community. There

The key findings of this study are: (i) religious organizations in BiH have a place in the peace building process, but they need to have determination and courage to take their place actively, (ii) the imams of the Islamic Community, working from the basis of their Platform for Dialogue, actively engage in promoting and fostering reconciliation between Muslim returnees and the Orthodox population, (iii) the Serbian Orthodox Church has not shown any serious interest in participating in the process of peacebuilding at the local level, and (iv) in order to be successful, the peacebuilding process requires the full engagement of all religious communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

As noted above, the peacebuilding process requires the full inclusion of all sides that were involved in the Bosnian war, and the role of religious communities and their representatives have to be taken seriously into consideration due to the very strong role played by religion in recent times. The Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina is trying its best to contribute to the processes of return, co-existence, reconciliation and peacebuilding. However, the study clearly shows that in the cases of Zvornik, Bratunac, Vlasenica, Milići and Srebrenica, there has been no will coming from the Serbian Orthodox Church to take part in the peacebuilding process. Regardless of this, the Islamic Community continues to preach among its followers about peacebuilding, tolerance and co-existence as the only solution. Obviously, peace has no alternative for the Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Additionally, the institutions of the Islamic Community in Republika Srpska are of crucial importance, because the Bosniaks there are often neglected by the Bosniak political elites from Sarajevo, who concentrate only on the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Many Bosniaks see the Islamic Community as the only factor that is capable of bringing them all together and agitating for the interests of Bosniaks in the municipalities of Zvornik, Bratunac, Vlasenica, Milići and Srebrenica. ■

Endnotes

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4. Little David (ed.), *Peacemaker in Action: Profiles of Religion in Conflict Resolution*, (NY: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
5. Senada Tahirovic, "Interview of *Raisu-I-Ulama*: The Islamic Community Has a Constitutional Duty to Preserve Islamic Tradition of Bosniaks," (2014).
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8. Resolutions: 752 (1992) of May 15, 1992; 757 (1992) of May 30, 1992; 770 (1992) and 771 (1992) of August 13, 1992; 781 (1992) of October 9, 1992; and 787 (1992) of November 16, 1992; General Assembly Resolution 46/242 and the London Peace Accords of August 1992.

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14. "The Platform of the ICBH on Dialogue [Nacrt platforme Islamske zajednice u BiH za dijalog]," *Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina*, (2009), retrieved December 25, 2016, from http://www.islamskazajednica.ba/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=5756:nacrt-platforme-islamske-zajednice-u-bih-za-dijalog&catid=262:nacrt-platforme-islamske-zajednice-u-bih&Itemid=76.

15. "The Islamic Community: Sentinel and Principles," *Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina*, (2012), retrieved December 29, 2016 from <http://english.islamskazajednica.ba/the-islamic-community/modules-menu/the-islamic-community-sentinel-and-principles>. The organizational structure of the ICBH is composed of eight *muftiluks* (a district level organizational unit of the Islamic Community, which typically includes more than 15 *majlises*): Bihać, Banja Luka, Tuzla, Travnik, Zenica, Goražde, Sarajevo and Mostar. *Muftiluks* are further divided into *Majlises* (a local organizational unit of the Islamic Community, which typically includes at least seven *jamaats* that form a whole) which are composed of small units called *jamaats* (represents the basic and smallest organizational unit, typically organized on a level of settlement). The upper body of the ICBH incorporates the *Riyasat* (main executive body of the ICBH), the *Raisu-l-Ulama* (the President of the Riyasat and the Grand Mufti or supreme authority in the ICBH), the *Assembly of the ICBH* and the Constitutional Court of the ICBH. See: "Structural Organization of the Islamic Community," *Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina*, (2012), retrieved December 29, 2016 from at: <http://english.islamskazajednica.ba/the-islamic-community/modules-menu/the-structural-organisation-of-the-islamic-community>.

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17. "The Constitution of the Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina [Ustav Islamske zajednice u Bosni i Hercegovini]," retrieved from http://www.izb.se/files/Ustav_IZ-e_precisceni_tekst_2014.pdf.

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23. For instance, the Srebrenica massacre was recognized as genocide by both the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in Appeals Judgment, Prosecutor v. Radislav Krstić, Case No.: IT-99-33 of April 19, 2004, and the International Court of Justice in the Case Concerning Application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (Bosnia and Herzegovina v. Serbia and Montenegro) of February 27, 2007, p. 127, §297 (ICJ). See: "European Parliament Resolution of July 9, 2015 on the Srebrenica Commemoration," *European Parliament*, (2015), retrieved from <https://europa.ba/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/European-Parliament-resolution-of-9-July-2015-on-the-Srebrenica-Commemoration-.pdf>.
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25. "Census 1991: Data on Population according to the National Identity in Municipalities," *Federal Bureau for Statistics*.
26. Their use of the term "Turks" refers to all Muslims regardless of ethnic or national origin.
27. Memorial Center Srebrenica – Potočari: Details on 11.7.1995.
28. Judge Fouad Riad, International Criminal Tribunal for ex-Yugoslavia (ICTY).
29. "Census 2013: Population according to the Ethnic Identity at Municipality Level," *Agency for Statistics of Bosnia and Herzegovina*, retrieved February 1, 2017 from <http://www.popis2013.ba/popis2013/doc/Popis2013prvolzdanje.pdf>.
30. "Census 2013: Population according to the Ethnic Identity at Municipality Level."
31. Damir Paštalić is imam in Srebrenica municipality since 2003.
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33. Personal Interview with Damir Paštalić, Chief Imam of *Majlis* Srebrenica, conducted on January 31, 2017.
34. "Census 1991: Data on Population according to the National Identity in Municipalities [Stanovništvo prema starosti i spolu po naseljenim mjestima]," *Federal Bureau for Statistics*, retrieved February 1, 2017 from <http://fzs.ba/index.php/popis-stanovnistva/popis-stanovnistva-1991-i-stariji/>.
35. Personal Interview with Haris Mustajbašić, Chief Imam of *Majlis* Zvornik, conducted on January 23, 2017.
36. Elvir Hodžić is imam in Srebrenica municipality since 2003.
37. Personal Interview with Elvir Hodžić, Chief Imam of *Majlis* Bratunac, conducted on January 23, 2017.
38. "Census 1991: Data on Population according to the National Identity in Municipalities."
39. "Census 2013: Population according to the Ethnic Identity at Municipality Level."
40. According to the 2013 census, the Bosniak population in Milići municipality were 4,199, while in Vlasenica were 3,763. The total Bosniak population of these two municipalities is 7,962.
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45. "The Platform of the ICBH on Dialogue."
46. Personal Interview with Damir Paštalić, Chief Imam of *Majlis Srebrenica*.
47. Personal Interview with Nurdin Grahić, Chief Imam of *Majlis Vlasenica*.
48. Personal Interview with Haris Mustajbašić, Chief Imam of *Majlis Žvornik*.
49. The Interreligious Council of Bosnia and Herzegovina [Međureligijsko vijeće u Bosni i Hercegovini] was founded in 1997 with the support from World Conference of Religions for Peace (WCRP) from New York City, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) from Washington D.C. and Mercy Corps International. They jointly have decided to develop a strategy and initiate programs for peace-making among the religions. Its founding members in Bosnia and Herzegovina are Grand Mufti Mustafa Cerić, Metropolitan Nikolaj of Dabar-Bosnia, Cardinal and Archbishop of Vrhbosna Vinko Puljić, and Jakob Finci of Jewish Community of Bosnia and Herzegovina. See: "History of the Interreligious Council of Bosnia & Herzegovina," *WSCF Europe*, (February 3, 2015), retrieved July 12, 2017 from wscf-europe.org/news/history-of-the-interreligious-council-of-bosnia-and-herzegovina/.
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53. Personal Interview with Nurdin Grahić, Chief Imam of *Majlis Vlasenica*.
54. Personal Interview with Damir Paštalić, Chief Imam of *Majlis Srebrenica*.
55. Personal Interview with Damir Paštalić, Chief Imam of *Majlis Srebrenica*.
56. Bosnian Serbs' annual celebration, the Day of Republika Srpska, is unconstitutional because it discriminates against non-Serbs living there. It is also an Orthodox Christian holiday.
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