

COMMENTARY

Ethnic War in Bosnia?

Cornelia Sorabji

Bosnia is fading from the news, winter has descended to sever its population from the outside world, and military intervention of any significant scale has not occurred. In Britain much of the debate over the desirability of such intervention has revolved around the idea of 'ethnic war'. Given that most wars are waged between members of different ethnic groups, it is not self-evidently clear what would constitute an 'ethnic war' or what are the implications of intervention in such a war. In his numerous television appearances Radovan Karadzic, leader of Bosnia's Serbs, has assured us that it is a conflict fuelled by mutual and age-old ethnic hatreds, and dissuaded the world from intervention. The Islamic world agrees that it is an ethnic/religious war, but sees this as the precise reason for which intervention should have occurred. Croatia agrees that an 'ethnic war' does not call for intervention, but insists that ethnicity has nothing to do with Serbian aggression which is based on calculated economic and territorial ambitions. (On closer examination this view grows more complicated, since greed and barbarity are frequently regarded as essential aspects of Serbian ethnic identity.)

In Britain the idea of 'ethnic war' based on ancient feuds and centuries of spilled blood has had various connotations. In the earlier phases it was endowed with moral implications, suggesting that the violence was an internal matter and therefore none of our business (an analogy with the dubious idea of wife-battering as mere 'domestic dispute' in which outsiders have no place). As public opinion moved on, and the view that all parties were guilty became less tenable, the phrase 'ethnic war' assumed a second charge. In early summer 1992 its implications became less moral than practical and could loosely be summed up thus: military intervention could not do any good because, in an ethnic war, the ethnic groups will fight on and on, incited by overwhelming hatreds, regardless of the options or consequences. A third meaning has been present all along: the idea that since ethnic identities and grudges are self-contained and self-propelling, our involvement to date has not really affected the war's internal logic and we have merely been observers and mediators.

These understandings of ethnicity are as essentialist, if not ferocious, as the nationalisms of ex-Yugoslavia. They suggest that ethnic identities are set in stone and hence immutable, whereas in fact they developed into existence and continue to develop; that they are constructed in isolation without reference to other identities, whereas in fact they are constructed in relation to other identities; and that they are necessarily more important to their bearers than any other identifications, whereas this is not invariably the case.

Far from three pristine ethnic identities meeting each other in

a war, Bosnian identities have been negotiated in the course of the conflict itself, and in the build-up to it. And since war is not just a matter of arms and terrain, but also of motivations and beliefs – What are we fighting for? Who is 'us' and who is 'them'? – these shifting identifications then feed back into the violence itself. Because the idea of European identity has been increasingly central to Serb, Croat and Muslim self-perceptions, and because the EC took Yugoslavia on board as a European problem, it cannot but be implicated in the construction and mutation of identities in ex-Yugoslavia. Europe is not merely an observer or mediator of self-contained ethnic identities and clashes; it is intimately involved in the ethnic dynamics of the region. This involvement is (at least) twofold. Firstly, by lending legitimacy to essentialist conceptions of ethnicity and to nationalist leaders, Europe has contributed to the triumph of ethnic (Muslim/Serb/Croat) categories over all other possible ways of understanding the conflict, and thus to eroding the potential for political solutions not based on ethnic principles. Secondly, it has played and will play a part not only in the shifting relationships *between* Bosnia's three ethnic groups, but also in the process of reconceptualisation of national identity *internal* to each of them. Bosnia's Muslims are the major casualties.

Pre-War Sarajevo

The Bosnian capital – urban, multi-ethnic and proud vis-à-vis the *seljaci*/peasants – cannot be taken as representing Bosnia as a whole, and during the course of its long siege it has become one of the last bastions of multi-ethnic unity and tenacity. Nevertheless, it should not be taken as a place where understandings are totally divorced from the rest of Bosnia: Sarajevo may be unique; but it is not completely alien to its surroundings.

City voices have been heard to claim that, before the war, 'we didn't even know who was Serb or Croat or Muslim, we were all just friends.' This doesn't seem an accurate description of the situation in which, I suggest, people were acutely aware of who was what. Other people's customs and traditions – *Uskrs* and *Vaskrs* (Croatian/Catholic and Serbian/Orthodox) and *Kurban Bajram*, coloured eggs brought to school by Serbian children and Ramazan baklava by Muslim – were all noted and understood as signs of the differences. In spite of the oft-noted number of inter-marriages, most marriages were made within the ethnic group. From this it does not, however, follow that the groups hated each other or had been doing so ever since the Second World War and merely waiting for a chance to get even. For the most part tolerance, good will and a conscious desire for cooperative and

civil relationships filled the joints between the three populations. At the same time, non-ethnic differences, differences of class and status, of rural or urban origin, and of access to resources, were far more salient than much current analysis suggests.

Islam plays a central role in the popular understanding of Muslim identity but its meanings are diverse and differently understood and emphasised at different times, in different contexts and by different people. Islam is no monolith and implies no cast-iron relationships with Serbs, Croats, Albanians, Western Europe, or the Middle East.

The terms *nacija* (loosely – nationality) and *vjera* (faith) are frequently used interchangeably; the answer to ‘what’s your *nacija*?’ being, for example, ‘Protestant’, rather than ‘British’. This does not, of course, mean that all Muslims were devout and clearly individual Muslims and Muslim families greatly vary in their levels of religious observance. There are those who pray regularly, fast Ramazan etc., those who fast token days of Ramazan and participate in some religious rituals, and those who never pray and who drink heavily and openly. In themselves, however, such infringements of Islamic regulations say little about the role of Islam in self-perceptions. The consumption of alcohol no more prevents a Muslim being a Muslim than petty thefts stop a Catholic being a Catholic.

This is an important point for, like the other religions of the region, Islam is not simply a set of clearly definable rules of practice and is not so understood by Muslims. Alongside detailed prescriptions for daily prayer, the annual Hajj, etc., Islam is also understood as a domain of loose moral imperatives – hospitality, cleanliness, generosity, honesty, compassion, courtesy, industry, and so on. This reliance on Islam as a moral system was very evident in the Muslim or Muslim-dominated neighbourhoods above Bascarsija. Here people greeted each other with *Merhaba* or *Aksam Hajrula* in place of the Serbo-Croatian *Dobar dan* or *Dobar vecer* used in the town centre. The neighbourhoods were self-consciously Muslim and Islamic, yet Islam was seen to lie less in ritual or theology than in life values. To have a dirty home, be mean with the guests, or gossip too much were far more pertinent signs of the inadequate Muslim than a failure to pray or fast. Rarely did Muslims evaluate each other’s actions in religious language. It was not *haram* (Arabic: forbidden by God) to slander someone, but *neposteno* or *ne valja* (Serbo-Croatian: dishonest, not good). It was not *sunnet* (Arabic: recommended by the Prophet and pleasing to God) to wash your hands before meals, but *fino/valja* – nice/good. These values form part of a general field of morality which can potentially be seen as overlapping with that of non-Islamic or non-Bosnian Muslim societies.

In socialist Bosnia many self-confessed believers whose families had Party links could easily assert that, after all, Islam and Communism said the same things – work hard, don’t cheat your neighbours, redistribute your wealth, etc. These sorts of accommodations between Islam and Communism have been noted in other parts of the socialist bloc. In part they are born of necessity under unsympathetic or openly oppressive regimes, but they should not be viewed as utterly bogus concessions to the authorities, made through guilty self-delusion or with fingers crossed behind the back. As a moral system Islam is capable of being interpreted as related to other moral systems and this process of interpretation did not end with the end of one-party socialism.

Even the loose Islamic revival movement of the mid-1980s, largely composed of young people in their teens and twenties, relied heavily on Islam’s nature as a system of values. Many of those who could be seen to fall within the domain of the revival were (or had been) students at Sarajevo’s *medresas* or Islamic

Theological Faculty. Of these some were urbanites and some from rural backgrounds, the latter’s secondary or higher education made possible by the stipends and accommodation which religious academies could offer in a way that secular ones could not. Others were studying at the University or working as professionals – lawyers, doctors, architects, engineers, etc. All were religiously observant and keen on acquiring or improving their knowledge of Arabic, the Quran, the hadiths and the Islamic world. Some, but by no means all, of the young women had adopted headscarves and long dresses. But what largely dominated their conversation and behaviour was not religious prescriptions for specific action, but broader moral questions of modesty and respect. It was on this axis that they stressed their association with the wider Islamic world outside Yugoslavia. Turkish boys, for example, were deemed adept Quran reciters because proper family relations of obedience and respect provided them with an appropriate environment for learning.

In the same vein, the fairly widespread anti-Albanian feeling of the mid-1980s was supported by accusations that their Kosovan co-religionists were lazy, ungrateful, undisciplined and therefore somehow not properly Muslim. In this case too the loose field of morality was the idiom through which Bosnian Muslims constructed their relationships with non-Bosnian Muslims.

The late 1980s on

With the decline of one-party socialism and Serbia’s increasing self-assertion, particularly over Kosovo, Muslim understandings began to change. Where the Albanians were concerned, images of nobility under oppression began to replace those of idle ingratitude, as Kosovo came to stand less for a threat to Yugoslav unity, than a Serbian threat which might soon redirect itself towards Bosnia. At the same time, Muslims’ identity as Europeans began to receive greater stress. In emphasising their Europeaness, Muslims did not deny their Islamic identity. On the contrary, Islam was precisely understood as one of the things linking Bosnian Muslims to Europe.

The end of the Cold War witnessed religious revivals within all three of Bosnia’s religious communities. In Sarajevo 1990 and 1991 saw Muslims celebrating Ramazan and participating in religious rituals in greatly increased numbers. The old Islamic revival of the mid-1980s now appeared to be joined by new enthusiasts. The meeting of the two was sometimes the cause of conflicts and misunderstandings over motives and meanings. But what is important is that the majority of those enjoying the new freedom of religious expression saw their activities as intimately related to their new European future. Whilst increased Islamic religious activity provided ammunition to those Serbian (and, to a lesser extent, Croatian) propagandists warning of the Muslims’ desire for a fundamentalist state, for Muslims themselves the freedom to worship openly was one strongly associated with the values of the West. Moreover, the demise of Communism and the one-party regime which had inhibited religious activity were greeted as the opening of a door to freedoms and democracy intimately associated with ideas of that West and with eventual EC membership.

The restructuring of the Islamic Religious Establishment echoed this feeling. In its 1990 Constitution the *Islamska Zajednica* adopted Arabic names for various of its organs – *Mesihats* and *Rijasets* replaced the Serbo-Croatian *Staresinstvos* – and thus legitimated itself vis-à-vis the wider Islamic world. The restructuring of the *Zajednica* and the election of the first non-Bosnian *Reis-ul-Ulema* supported its new supra-national, all-Yugoslav

tone and aims. Above all, however, the new Constitution foregrounded the concept of democracy and of giving voice to Muslims at the lower levels of the establishment. Given the popular association of democracy specifically with the new Europe, this move stressed the Islamic community's relationship with the Western rather than the Eastern world.

The association of Muslim identity with European values was also evident in attitudes to the possibility of war. In summer 1990, when Belgrade-registered cars were reported vandalized on the Adriatic coast and Serbs feared to venture there, Sarajevans felt free to take their seaside holidays (and happy to enjoy the reduced prices). As war loomed and then began between Serbia and Croatia in 1991, many Sarajevan Muslims held fast to the belief that, while Serbs and Croats might fight, Muslims were too rational and civilised for such hostility and would remain calm and reasonable in the face of it all. (In retrospect many now construe their reasonableness as plain naivety.) This rational and peaceful stance was one deemed entirely in keeping with the Europe which they wrongly believed would protect Bosnia's integrity, *as well as in accord with an Islam seen as the religion of tolerance and justice.*

With war approaching Bosnia itself, the idea of European-style civil values was interpreted by many Sarajevan Muslims as pertaining to Bosnians en masse, rather than Muslims in particular. When the shelling of Sarajevo commenced a third interpretation began to emerge. Rather than Muslim civility versus non-Muslim aggression, or Bosnian civility versus non-Bosnian aggression, this was a conflict between urban civility and rural aggression and the attackers were described as 'the peasants/criminals/hooligans' or just 'them' – but not as 'the Serbs'.

The war and the build-up to it have thus not been understood along the simple Muslim/Serb/Croat ethnic lines that the much-repeated phrase 'ethnic war' implies. Bosnian identity and rural versus urban identity are not ethnic identities. At the same time the interpretative emphasis placed on the ethnic identities by their bearers have changed over time.

Europe

Through its insistence on an essentialist treatment of ethnicity, in which Serbs, Croats and Muslims have immutable identities, Europe has played a part in legitimating nationalist leaders, highlighting the ethnic boundaries, and creating the sort of ethnic war (one based on mutual and compelling hatred and fear) which, so it claims, had been there all along. The EC's role in endless 'peace' talks, its pre-war acceptance of ethnic 'cantonisation', and its wartime negotiations with leaders whose precise aim is ethnic division and purity achieved through slaughter and exile – these have all contributed to a situation in which, the killing and destruction having lasted so long, poison rather than good will and tolerance now fills the joints between Bosnia's populations.

Simultaneously, Europe's stance has inevitably affected the internal 'content' of the ethnic identities. The flexibility of such identities, and the way in which they reach out to incorporate or legitimate themselves in reference to other identities, makes them vulnerable. In the Muslim case I have suggested an increased pre-war emphasis on Muslim identity as European identity. This is also true of Serb and Croat identity in different ways. In the recent past both Croats and Serbs have seen themselves as reclaiming a European birthright of which either Communism or Tito himself had deprived them. The nature and bases of the claims vary – one drawing on the Austro-Hungarian legacy, Catholicism and anti-Communism, the other more on ancient battles with the Ottoman



Turks. But both see and stress themselves as essentially European. And in their different ways both deny the Muslims' claim to such status – Serbia emphatically damning the Muslims' supposedly deep-rooted Middle Eastern militancy, while Croatia mourns their allegedly ineluctable transformation into Mujahedin.

In the context of such Europhilia, the EC's apparent acceptance or rejection of competing claims to European identity matters. Given the current *de facto* partition of Bosnia-Herzegovina, the Muslims' enclosure into a small central area of it, and Europe's continued passivity, it seems that the Muslim bid has been rejected. Accordingly, a renegotiation of Muslims' understanding of themselves in relation to Islam and to Europe is more or less inevitable. Contrary to popular opinion in Croatia and Serbia, this does not necessarily mean abandonment of the whole (read: 'skin-deep') idea of European identity and an espousal of Middle Eastern style fundamentalism. But, since the notion of Islam and Europe as joined by civic values, peace, rationality, etc., has been shattered by the perception of Europe's failure to reciprocate, a path is paved for Muslims to reconstrue the nature of 'Europe' in less positive terms and the meaning of their own Europeanness in more radical terms.

In whatever direction Muslim (and Serb and Croat) self-perceptions have moved or will move, the process is not dictated merely by some pure, internal ethnic logic. It is because ethnic identities do not exist in isolation but are always constructed in relation to other identities – and in this case particularly by the idea of European identity – that the EC's stance cannot but be implicated in the shifting relationships and identifications of ex-Yugoslavia. (Should the Islamic world's future support rest solely on the idea of Islam oppressed by Europe, then it too will be implicated in Muslims' changing self-perception.) In this light the view that avoiding significant military intervention has in itself kept our hands clean (an idea shared by those on the Left who damn intervention as imperialism) appears in all its question-begging shabbiness. The merits and demerits of such intervention can be and have been rightly debated at length. But the notion that inaction equals distance from the dynamics of ethnicity and war holds as little water as Sarajevo's pipelines.