The Bosnian Young Muslims, a reformist Islamic movement that emerged in Sarajevo in 1939 and officially ceased to exist ten years later, is even today subject to various approaches in which the majority of scholars are depicted as pan-islamist terrorists whose activities aimed at the overthrow of the Yugoslavian state and establishing of an Islamic order, to sympathetic views in which it is presented as a basically non-violent movement established on Islamic humanitarian principles that tried to resist the dictatorial communitarian regime of post-war Yugoslavia.

The history of the Young Muslim organization and its impact on the self-conceptions of Islam in Bosnia can be examined through different stages of development (1939–1943, 1943–1946, 1946–1949, and 1970s–1991). These stages can be defined in terms of several interdependent factors, of which the organizational forms of the movement and its ideological aims can be regarded as the most important ones.

The Young Muslim organization emerged in Sarajevo in 1939. The time of foundation, the name, and even some ideological postulates suggest that its foundation was related to the more or less simultaneous emergence of similar pan-Islamist movements in other parts of the Islamic world, particularly in Egypt and Indonesia. There are, however, no indications of a direct influence of such movements on the Young Muslims, especially bearing in mind their education and age groups. Despite the above-mentioned limitations, the ideas that had been developed and transmitted through the early stages of the Young Muslim movement continued to this day and are an important factor in the politics of Bosnia, especially in the course of the ongoing leadership debates.

The Young Muslim movement emerged around a group of students (Husni Bakiragić and Emin Granov, Esad Karadžović, and Tarik Muftić), who initiated a common forum for discussions and debates on Islamic subjects. The first Young Muslims were mainly students from universities and high schools aged between 16 and 26 years. Their activities were caused by the presence of a network that had established itself on the basis of private contacts and informal meetings. During the latter, some activists presented specific subjects connected to Islam, whereupon the group had to discuss the arguments presented.

Despite the lack of hierarchies or organizational structures, this period was decisive for the later development of the Young Muslim organization. It was during this period that their network, which was to spread across all major Bosnian and even some other Yugoslavian cities during the years to follow, was initiated. Furthermore, their main ideological and programmatic guidelines were formulated. Islamic decedence, the relationship between Islam and science as well as between Islam and other religions and ideologies, the status of Islam and Muslims in Europe and particularly in Yugoslavia, the necessity of a social renaissance of Muslim peoples and the decisive role of Islamic education in it, all these topics were already present in the early Young Muslim agenda and were to run through the members' writings and the group's activities until the 1990s, in more or less elaborated ways.

The foundation as an organization took place in Sarajevo in March 1941. However, the outbreak of the Second World War obviated an official entry into the Yugoslav register of associations. In order to avoid complete dissolution, the Young Muslims were compelled to join the ulama association El-Hidaje, despite their critical attitude towards the Bosnian religious official. The protests of some activists like Alija Izetbegović and Nedžad Sarabić against the linkage to the much-criticized clergy. In 1943, after almost two years of organizational abeyance, the Young Muslims were officially proclaimed the youth section of the ulama association. This status had significant impact on both their organizational structures and ideology. Informal networks became substituted by officially recognized association structures. El-Hidaje officials, especially the association’s president Mehmed Handžić and his vice-president Kusim Dobračić, helped to ‘domesticate’ the radical, to a certain extent politically deterred demands, such as those postulated by the founding members Esad Karadžović and Tarik Muftić. Now, the religious ethnocentric dimension of Islam was emphasized, this new direction fitted more in the frame of traditional Islamic subjects rather than in the avant-garde discourse on Islam they had originally tried to establish. During this period, i.e. between 1943 and 1945, the number of members significantly increased and the organization expanded into the Bosnian language, and even some Yugoslav cities.

Underground and abroad
In 1945, El-Hidaje was officially dissolved, and the Young Muslim organization went underground. They formed a parallel network that influenced both young urban intellectuals and much of the young rural population. Initially tolerated by the new regime, they both kept in touch with the communists as early as 1946, especially when they protested against the militantly secularist policies of the new Yugoslav government. In 1946, several members were arrested and sent to prison. The final crushing of the organization took place during the Sarajevo trial in August 1949. Four leading members were condemned to death; many others were arrested and sentenced to imprisonment. A precise number of arrested, persecuted, and/or executed members, though repeatedly confirmed during the political elections in Bosnia, cannot be definitely specified.

After their release from prison, some of the Young Muslims emigrated to West European countries. Those who remained in Bosnia and confined themselves to private contacts with each other officially retreated from further engagements in the Young Muslim ‘cause’. Nonetheless, it was the kind of private contact that enabled them to keep in touch under the vigilant eyes of the Yugoslav Secret Service and to take active part in the Islamic revival in Bosnia that was made possible due to the liberalization of policy with respect to religion in 1970s Yugoslavia. However, they not only had been participating in this awakening of religious life in Yugoslavia, and especially in Bosnia, to a considerable extent; they also gave this movement their fresh impetus by launching newspapers and magazines on Islamic subjects and by publishing their writings under pseudonyms, either in the official organs of the Islamic Vjetrenska Javnost (Islamic Religious Community) or as separate, autonomous works.

Finally, by initializing discussion and education circles, the former Young Muslim members succeeded in creating a new network, which consisted of some former Young Muslims and a number of Bosnian Muslim intellectuals of the younger generation. Both secular intellectuals and young ulama from the Faculty of Islamic Theology, actively took part in the discussions. This led to the establishment of the Islamic Declaration, which defined the pattern established by the Young Muslims, though in a modified way. The new works, like Alija Izetbegović’s Islamic Declaration and Islam between the East and West, to name but these two as the best known ones, reflected the new age structure, but also the acquaintance of their authors with various contemporary ideological thoughts, and the influences that resulted thereof.

In August 1983, in a second wave of persecution, some activists of the network were tried for ‘separatism’ and ‘Islamic fundamentalism’ and sent to prison with sentences of up to nine years. Among those were the former Young Muslims Alija Izetbegović, Omer Bahman, Sahib Bahman, Elrefi Ćampaši, and Ismeta Kasumagić, as well as the younger intellectuals Željko Lušić, Edhem Babić, Hassan Cengić, Huso Šehić, and Mustafa Spahić. Izetbegović was accused of having organized a ‘group’ whose aims were to conduct ‘contra-revolutionary actions’ in Yugoslavia and to establish an Islamic state in Yugoslavia. The indictment, however, was more an expressively coloured description of regime critics rather than an accusation based upon real proof.

The two lines that now constituted the network – the ‘old’ Young Muslims and the members of the younger generation – became the core of the Stranka Demokratske Akcije (SDA), a political party founded in 1991 and since regarded as the only ‘true’ political representative of Muslim population in Bosnia – a presumptuous self-description, though repeatedly confirmed during the political elections in Bosnia.

The ideas that had been developed at the early stages of the Young Muslim movement continued to this day and are an important factor in the politics of Bosnia, especially in the course of the ongoing leadership debates. The ideas that had been developed at the early stages of the Young Muslim movement continued to this day and are an important factor in the politics of Bosnia, especially in the course of the ongoing leadership debates.

Notes
1 Alija Izetbegović, Islam umrada. Hronika / Zepida (Sarajevo, 1984) and Islamološke delovanja (Beograd, 2001).
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