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FROM MEKTEB-I-NUWWAB TO THE FACULTY OF ISLAMIC STUDIES: A SHORT HISTORY OF BOSNIA’S LEADING ISLAMIC EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTION

by Harun Karčić

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Although a number of Balkan countries today and a few West European countries have established their own Islamic theological faculties in recent decades, the Faculty of Islamic Studies of the University of Sarajevo is today the only Islamic theological faculty at state level in Europe. Different sources have referred to it as the ‘Al-Azhar of Europe’ and as the ‘model faculty’ for Islamic studies in Europe. Although different opinions may exist with regard to this suggestion, most will agree that the Faculty of Islamic Studies in Sarajevo is the oldest Islamic institution of higher learning in the Balkans and provides, indeed, a true contribution to Islamic civilization in the region.

Introduction

The Berlin Conference of 1878 gave the Austro-Hungarian monarchy the right to occupy and administer the Ottoman province of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims) who had until then been part of the ruling elite of the Ottoman Empire, were transferred to an inferior status almost overnight. Under the new Austro-Hungarian rulers, Bosniaks (and Islam for that matter) were no longer the dominant religion but merely one of the six recognized religions of the Habsburgs. On the other hand, non-Muslims such as Orthodox Christians and Catholics in Bosnia and Herzegovina, who had enjoyed dhimmi status within the Ottoman Empire and autonomously ran their own religious affairs for centuries, had a natural advantage and experience in running autonomously their own religious affairs and adapted quickly to the new empire.

Bosniaks realized that, being a minority in the new empire, they had to develop their own autonomous religious administration which would closely resemble that of dhimmi peoples of Ottoman Bosnia.

In order to run their own Islamic affairs autonomously after the Austro-Hungarian occupation in 1878, the Bosniak educated elite mounted a struggle which was to end in their favor on the 15th April 1909 when the Habsburg monarch approved the ‘Statute for the autonomous administration of Islamic religious waqf and educational activities’ (Štatut za autonomnu upravu islamskih vjerskih i vakufske-mearifskih poslova) which included four key segments that the Bosniak elite considered as being crucial for them. These included having their religious hierarchy (‘ilmīyye), religious education (maʿarif), endowments (waqf), and Shari’a courts.

In the field of education, Ottoman era Muslim schools (mektebs, medreses, and rushdiye) continued to function but were enriched with the establishment of Austro-Hungarian schools such as gymnasiums, realschulen, public elementary schools, industrial schools, and technical schools. However, in the field of higher education, since Austro-Hungary adopted the Ottoman Law on Shari’a courts of 16 Sefer 1276/ 15 September 1859, there came a need to create a school for higher learning which would produce qualified staff competent in both Shari’a as well as Austro-Hungarian law. The solution to this question came much before the proclamation of the ‘Statute

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1 Fikret Karčić, ‘Administration of Islamic Affairs in Bosnia and Herzegovina’, Islamic Studies, Vol. 38, No.4, p.539.
for the autonomous administration of Islamic religious waqf and educational activities' and took the form of the School for Shari’a judges in Sarajevo, more commonly known as Mekteb-i-Nuwwab.

**The Mekteb-i-Nuwwab**

The State decision to establish the School for Shari’a judges came on the 14th May 1887 with the proclamation of the ‘Statute for the establishment of the School for Shari’a judges in Sarajevo’ (Štatut o ustrojstvu škole za šerijatske suce in Sarajevu).

The duration of studies at the School was to be five years. Admission was contingent upon the students having graduated from a rushdiyya or grammar school (gymnasium). The school’s curriculum mostly focused on traditional Islamic science and included courses such as Arabic grammar, Logic (mantik), Qur’an Interpretation (Meani ve beyan), Dogmatics (Aqaid islamiyye), Shari’a law (ilumi fiqh), History of law and Hadith science (Usul-u-fiqh ve hadis), Inheritance (faraiz), Shari’a Civil Procedure (usuli muhakemat), and Property Law (kavanini erazi ve emlak ve tapu). Most of the textbooks used for these courses were classical Islamic books already in use within the Ottoman cultural zone.

The curriculum also included courses from the secular field of science such as the State Law and Constitution of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, Organizational structures in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Material and Formal criminal law, Bosnian language (later course renamed to Serbo-Croatian language), Mathematics, Geography, History, French, and German.

In the functioning of the school, signs of cooperation between the Austro-Hungarian authorities and the Islamic authorities in Bosnia and Herzegovina were clearly visible. For example, Article 2 of the aforementioned Statute declares that the school is under the control, supervision, and is financed by the State government (Zemaljska Vlada) while the supervision of general activities as well as the teaching of ‘dogmatic’ courses was under the supervision of the Rais-ul-Ulema (‘Grand Mufti’). Another example of the cooperation between the State government and the Rais-ul-Ulama is Article 5 which stated that ‘The State government accepts students to the School for Shari’a Judges on the basis of Rais-ul-Ulema’s recommendation’. The School for Shari’a Judges lasted and functioned in such a form for a total of 50 years, or more precisely from 1887 until 1937.

**The Higher School for Islamic Shari’a and Theology**

However, following the end of the first world war in 1918 the idea of creating an independent faculty-level Islamic institution came about. Although the idea came to be realized in 1935, the first batch of students started their education under the new curriculum two years later, in 1937, after exactly 50 years of the functioning of the School for Shari’a Judges (1887-1937). The new school was established by a decree of the Ministry of Education of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia published on the 31st March 1937 and came to be known as the Viša Islamska Šeriatsko Teološka Škola (‘Higher School for Islamic Shari’a and Theology’). The aim of the school, according to the government decree, was to ‘preserve the Islamic theological and Shari’a science’ (Article 1) and ‘to prepare candidates for state, self-governing and religious duties, for which the Higher Islamic Shari’a-Theological qualification was required’ (Article 2). The curriculum as well as the duration of studies at Higher School for Islamic Shari’a and

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5. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
Theology was modified. The curriculum now included, in addition to legal subjects, theological subjects as well. Included in the curriculum were subjects such as Islamic rules for worship (‘ibadat), Islamic Law and Jurisprudence (Fiqh, Usul, Tashri), secular law, jurisprudence, Roman Law, private law, history of Slavic Laws, constitutional law, administrative law and canon law, dogmatics (‘aqaid and ‘Ilm al-Kalam), Islamic ethics, history of Islam with history of religions and sociology of Muslim peoples, Islamic philosophy, interpretation of Qur’an (Tafsir), tradition (Hadith), rhetoric (Wa’z), psychology, logic and methodology of religious education, and Eastern languages (Arabic, Turkish, Persian).

From the above we can see a shift compared to the earlier period in the sense of new secular law courses being introduced (such as Roman law, and branches of the Yugoslav legal system) as well as courses such as the History of Slavic Laws.

The duration of studies was shortened from 5 years to 8 semesters, or 4 years, equivalent to the duration of an undergraduate study program today. The new school produced not only Shari’a judges but also a number of top caliber Muslim intellectuals. It continued to function throughout the Second World War but came to an abrupt end with the communist takeover in 1945 which led to the closure of the school in the same year and to the abolishment of Shari’a courts the following year. During the period spanning from 1945 till 1977 there was no Islamic institution of higher learning (i.e. university level) in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The Faculty of Islamic Theology

Perhaps the harshest period of Yugoslav rule lasted until the late 1960s and gradually came to an end with the removal of Aleksandar Ranković as head of the UDBA (the Yugoslav internal security service). His removal led to a gradual liberalization of the Yugoslav regime which also resulted in a slightly more liberal attitude towards religion. A more prosperous Yugoslavia and a significant number of Bosniaks living and working abroad as Gastarbeiter resulted in the (re)construction of mosques, publication of Islamic books, establishment of Islamic organizations, and, more significantly, in the establishment of the Islamski teološki fakultet (‘Faculty of Islamic Theology’) in 1977.

The aim of the new institution of Islamic higher learning, housed in the same building as the previous two, was to educate imams and khatibs, but logically – as Shari’a courts were abolished – so was the need to educate Shari’a judges (qadis). This also explains the removal of a significant portion of Shari’a courses in the new curriculum of the faculty.

Following the collapse of Yugoslavia and the independence of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the faculty renamed itself to Fakultet islamskih nauka (‘Faculty of Islamic Studies’). Apart from the program on Islamic Theology, a new program on religious pedagogy was introduced in the academic year 1992/93. This was to cater for the needs of Bosnian public schools after the introduction of religious education in public schools following the collapse of communism. The Faculty also started its post-graduate program in the academic year 1994/95.

Faculty of Islamic Studies Today

The Faculty of Islamic Studies today has three departments. These are the theological,
pedagogical, and an imam training department.\textsuperscript{14} In 2006 the \textit{Imam, Khatib, and Muallim} training program was set up to cater for the needs of the Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina and produce qualified imams, preachers, and religious instructors.

The faculty employs some 40 teaching staff (17 PhD and 10 MA holders) – all Bosnian nationals but among the staff there is also a visiting professor for Arabic language. It is estimated that some 580 male and female students and some 15 masters and 15 PhD students have graduated from this Faculty since 1977.\textsuperscript{15} The Faculty underwent a comprehensive structural reform in 2003 in order to bring it closer in line with the ‘Bologna’ standards. These reforms resulted in the Faculty becoming an associated member of the University of Sarajevo in 2004.

In addition to this, a new program was started in 2006 called the Diploma in Islamic Studies (DIS), a 3 month non-degree course, held both in Bosnian and English, aimed at people who might want to broaden their introductory knowledge on issues such as Islamic doctrine, law, history, and culture with a particular emphasis on Islam in Bosnia and the Balkans. The English version of the program is especially popular among the diplomatic corps and foreign nationals residing in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

\section*{Conclusion}

The history of higher Islamic education starting with the \textit{Mekteb-i-Nuwwab} to the Faculty of Islamic Studies is quite telling of how such an educational institution had to adapt itself to the changing political and social realities. Starting as an institution for educating Shari’a judges as was required by the time, it taught mainly Islamic legal courses with some European continental law as well. This was to produce Bosnian Muslim \textit{qadis}, living in a Christian empire, who would be well versed in both traditional Islamic legal science as well as in the Austro-Hungarian legal system in which they lived and applied the Shari’a. Most of the courses focused on Islamic family law, inheritance, and property law (as Shari’a applied only in the private sphere).

Then from 1937 onwards there was an introduction of more theological courses in the curriculum. This was to produce, in addition to \textit{qadis}, Muslim intellectuals who would be able lead the Islamic discourse within the non-Muslim empire and provide theological solutions to pressing issues for Bosnian Muslims.

The communist abolishment of the Higher School for Islamic Shari’a and Theology in 1945 and their abolishment of Shari’a courts in 1946 put an end to the application of Shari’a in Yugoslavia.

The revival of Islam in the 1970s resulted in the reopening of an Islamic higher education institution, known as the Faculty of Islamic Theology. Since Shari’a Law no longer applied, there was an accentuation on \textit{aqaid} and only a few basic courses on Shari’a were taught. The aim of the new Faculty was to cater for imams, preachers, and teachers – which it continued to do till today.


\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., p.3.