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The Mosque as a Social and Educational Institution: Examples From Bosnia and the U.K.

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Abstract

This paper explores the role of the mosque as a social and educational institution. I argue that mosque is a central institution to the formation of Muslim identity and ensures the continuation of religious training. The particular role a mosque might play in society depends on the socio-political and economic factors of the given society as well as the mosque's actual design and the capacity of its congregation. We consider the mosque's roles in two different social and political contexts, that of Bosnia and Herzegovina where Muslims form about 51% of the total population and the UK where Muslims are a small minority, just under 3%. In both contexts, mosques tend to play a key role in bringing about the social cohesion. In addition, mosques take up the important task of providing guidance and counsel to the Muslim youth who are faced with various ills and harms of modern society. Alongside parental upbringing and instructions, the mosques play arguably the most crucial role in encouraging the next generations of Muslims to study the core Islamic sciences at a higher level. Unlike Bosnia, where Imams are natives and locally trained, in the

1*. Imam at Sarajevo Bosnia Mosque.

United Kingdom and elsewhere in Western Europe there is an unhealthy trend of employing Imams from the abroad, who know little or nothing about the local culture and often lack the fluency in the local language.

1. The Mosque Before: Its Diverse Roles

Throughout history, Muslim communities have always been attached, in one form or another, to the mosque (ar. *Masjid*). The *masjid* was not restricted to being a place of worship alone. Instead, it served as a symbol of belonging and identity.In the early period of Islamic era, the building of mosques was a social obligation of rulers as representatives of communities and peoples. As Islam spread, building mosques became a pious work of any capable and wealthy Muslim. According to Islamic law, once built, mosques become permanent endowments (ar. *Awqaf*) and their true owner is God. And, hence the Qur'anic expression "*Baytullah* – the house of Allah (Alfaruqi and Alfaruqi, 1986: 52). Notably, every worshipper is equally entitled to use mosque facilities anywhere in the world. Ibn Khaldun points out that town mosques are of two kinds: "great spacious ones known as *jami'a* mosques used for special prayers, and other smaller ones restricted to one area of the town" (Musallam, 2002: 168). Mosques therefore are to be differentiated by their size; large town mosques used for special community gatherings and prayers, such as *jumu'a* and *'eid*, and smaller mosques used by a subset of the community for daily prayers. According to Oleg Grabar, "the theoretical focus and locus of the Muslim community was the mosque which was in the past and to some extend today the most beautiful and largest monument in the city accessible to all Muslims" (Grabar, 1975: 82).

The functions of the *masjid* encompass more than a place of worship. Throughout Islamic history the *masjid* has played a central role in cultural and social life (See: Abdel-Hady, 2010; Alavi, 2004). Arguably, the *masjid* acted as a focal point of all life activities based on the importance bestowed upon it by the Prophet Muhammad (saws). It served the role of a spiritual, educational, social, administrative, and even preventative institution. For centuries, the *adhan*, for example, was both an indication of the time of prayer and a method of drawing people's attention to the important issues of the day. One could also say that the Prophet's mosque in Madina served as the community centre. All members of the society were encouraged to attend congregational prayers and other mosque activities. For instance, we know that during the

Prophet's life women and children participated in congregational prayers, social events, and educational activities. According to a report, certain women requested from the Prophet that they have a specific day allocated for them for learning Islamic rules. There is a pressing need today to develop a more welcoming and adequate space for women in mosques and to encourage their involvement in mosque related activities and events.

1.1. The Role of the Masjid in Acquiring and Spreading Knowledge

No one would deny the fact that the *masjid* and its often generous endowments have played a major role in producing learned and civilised men. *Masjid* was the first organized collective school for men, women, and children in Arab history. In his *masjid* in Madina, the Prophet himself taught the Qur'an and explained its verses to his Companions. As various reports suggest, the Prophet would sit on the ground surrounded by a circle of people instructing them to recite verses of the Qur'an and read his *hadith* until they had learned them. This was an informal method of teaching, which was ultimately organized in a systematic way. Colleges with permanent teachers and pupils were first housed in mosques, and classes were held between prayers. Colleges later came to occupy independent buildings usually attached to mosques. Unless someone was appointed to head the college, the mosque Imam assumed the responsibility (Abdel-Hady, 2010:8-17).

In addition, for centuries the mosques were the main hubs of intellectual activity and platforms for distribution of books. Public book collections were so widespread that it was impossible to find a *masjid*, or a learning institution of any sort, throughout the Islamic world without a collection of books placed at the disposal of students or readers.[2] Pedersen explains that it was normal for people to give their libraries to mosques: "an entire book collection were being transferred to mosques as a self-contained libraries" (Pederson, 1984: 126). Similarly, it was in the mosques where writers and scholars recounted the results of their studies to audiences of young people, other scholars, and laymen. As many accounts suggest, scholars used to dictate numerous volumes of their works in mosques where the general public gathered to hear them (Maqdisi, 1981; Hatim, 2009: 188-212). Because the cultural basis of the intellectual activity was common to all, anyone and everyone could take part in

[2] Mackensen and Pinto wrote extensively on Islamic libraries of the Middle Ages, highlighting their place and role in Islamic society.

discussions. This intellectual activity spurred the diffusion of books through mosques. According to Sardar and Davies, when a writer wished to publish a book he first made notes and then wrote out an original manuscript (*asl*), which was initially called the "*muswadda*" (draft) (Sardar and Davies, 1990: 97). While such a draft naturally had value, it did not constitute a publication called "*kharraja*". Authors were required to read their works in the mosques were professional *warraqs* copied their dictations down and turned them into books (Sardar and Davies, 1990: 97-98). Put differently, the authors were required to present their work to the public in the mosques through oral reading or dictation as part of the publication process.

2. The Mosque Today: Its Shifting Roles, the Case of the UK and Bosnia-Herzegovina

After addressing all the noteworthy roles that *masjid* had played in the past, today its role has changed and in some contexts severely limited. Thus in countries where Muslims form the outright majority, the role and the function of the *masjid* has become limited since there are separate institutions and establishments that carry out tasks that used to be performed within the boundaries of the *masjid*. For example, in Muslim countries the administrative role of the *masjid* is severely abbreviated in comparison to the past. Similarly, the *masjid* has a diminished educational role since there are separate ministries of education under which universities, colleges, schools, and even religious schools function. The social role of the *masjid* is also reduced since there are separate ministries and various community organizations that deal with general welfare of citizens. On the other hand, in countries where Muslims are the minority, the *masjid* tends to take up a more comprehensive role. Namely, besides being the place for religious rituals (*'ibadat*), many European mosques have developed into public centres offering a complete range of cultural and social activities. In other words, mosques in Western societies have more impetus to act as multi-functional meeting places when compared to mosques in Muslim majority countries. For example, there are many mosques in the West that serve as community centres. Moreover, recent research demonstrates that mosques form an important and necessary element in the social network of Muslims. In general, mosques in the West tend to have a positive influence on the socialisation and integration of Muslims into the wider society. But according to the general view of the Western media, Muslims are yet to integrate into the wider

society. In fact, for much of European history the concept of "us" and "them" dominated the scene. There is an underlying discursive structure whose principle has been described by Edward Said as an ideological construction of culture as a source of identity geared to "differentiate 'us' from 'them', almost always with some degree of xenophobia (Said, 1994: xiii). As many sociologists point out, until quite recently Muslims in Europe were perceived as transient immigrants, refugees, or negligible ethnic minorities, rather than part of communities deserving their own places of worship and cultural institutions (Pauly, 2004; Cesari, 2005; Monshipouri, 2009: 217-242). There is a strong sentiment that Muslims, as a monolith community, and Islam as a religion are unfairly targeted in the West in general. This creates a sense of alienation, which undermines a common aim of creating a united and strong society. But, quite contrary to the popular representation that there is a "lack of integration", a recent independent enquiry carried out in the United Kingdom affirmed that there is a wealth of positive community work by British Muslims at a local level, across ethnic and religious lines (Citizens UK, 32-61).

2.1. Mosques in Europe: Examples From the UK and Bosnia

Muslims make up about 14% of Europe's population of 730 million, including Russia but excluding Turkey (European Muslim Population, 2016). It should be underlined here that Islam is the fastest-growing religion in Europe and in the world. Until recently, mosques in Western Europe were for the most part invisible and hidden away in basement apartments, garages, old schools, and abandoned factories and warehouses, with small rooms and without signage indicating the presence of a mosque. These places of worship fulfilled two main functions: they provided space for praying, and the place where immigrant communities were able to restructure and organise themselves socially. However, at present there seem to be a consensus and a good political will that Muslims should be able to practice their faith in mosques and Islamic centres that are built with local funding and led by Imams certified and educated with knowledge of both Islamic teachings and European history and culture. The problem that naturally follows is the question of funding mosques through public money. Despite the perception that most countries in Europe are secular, privileges have been given to churches for centuries, including public funding for religious schools, maintenance of churches, clerical salaries and even training of clergy. As none of these are available to Muslims, this one-sided policy becomes noticeable only with the

increased visibility of other immigrant religions and their customs. To make the overall picture somewhat clearer below is a table that shows an estimate number of mosques in four European countries and the USA.[3]

Country	Estimated Number of Mosques	Ratio of Muslim Population to Mosques
Germany	2, 300	1, 304
UK	1, 697	951
France	1, 685	2, 463
USA	1, 250	2, 400
Bosnia-Herzegovina	2, 822* (*exact number)	687

For observant Muslims, the mosque remains a key hub for community life. Unlike Bosnia where the exact number of mosques is known, there is no definitive figure for how many mosques there are in the UK today. Arguably, the best estimate is in the region of 1,600-1,700. Of these, approximately 200 are purpose-built, the rest being either converted houses or other non-residential conversions. Notably, there is approximately the same number of prayer spaces in Britain as in France, and though they serve a much smaller community, they are larger and better established. The obvious reason for this is the rigorous French law of 1905 on the separation of church (religion) and state. The number of mosques in Bosnia is far greater than anywhere else in Europe.[4] In proportion to the size of its community, Bosnian Muslims are far better served than their coreligionists anywhere else in Europe, including the other two European Muslim majority countries – Albania and Kosova. In Bosnian towns and cities, the mosque is at the heart of the community. A mosque site usually includes a high-tech meeting room, common room, education and sport facilities, coffee and teashop, bookshop, perfume shop, *halal* food store, and so on. Youth associations and women's associations affiliated with mosques often meet at a local mosque premises to organize sporting events and other social activities.

In the United Kingdom, Muslims make up about one in twenty of the

[3] The reason for including the USA in this survey is to demonstrate the growing number of mosques in what promises to become the largest concentration of Muslim populations living in the West in general.

[4] According to the latest Census from 2013, in Bosnia Muslims form 50.70% of the total population.

total population. But, it is the largest and fastest-growing faith minority in the UK. The 2011 census records 2.71 million Muslims in England and Wales. This is a rise from the 1.55 million in the 2001 census. Around 95% of Muslims in the UK live in England, concentrated in urban areas, with three-quarters living in Greater London, the West Midlands, the North West, or Yorkshire and Humberside. Just under half of Muslims in the UK in 2011 were British-born (46%). Although most Muslims in the UK are British citizens, just under a million of the Muslims resident in the UK in 2011 were born in Asia or the Middle East (36%), 10% in Africa, and 6% in other European countries (Citizens UK, 32-61).

According to a report by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, a 2005 survey found that about 80% of Muslims in London say they attend mosque regularly. In a 2004 ICM poll of 500 British Muslims, 51% said that they pray every day. Yet, the needs of British Muslims have been poorly resourced from the public purse. As the Forum Against Islamophobia and Racism (FAIR) states, 'the building and maintaining of mosques, Islamic schools, Muslim community centres and facilities and the wide range of Muslim institutions that help to cater for British Muslim needs, preserve Muslim identities and keep the Muslim community together, are essentially an achievement of Muslims themselves with little support from mainstream funding sources' (Abdel-Hady, 2007: 21-23). A connecting thread to places of birth for Muslim immigrants to the UK in the twentieth century was the establishment of mosques, which helped preserve religious and cultural traditions, and provided a means of social support within the community.

The first significant mosque in Britain was built in Cardiff in 1860, followed by a famous Woking mosque. Today, one will find around 1,700 mosques in UK inner cities, towns, and suburbs expressing a wide variety of architectural styles, often housing schools and recreational areas. Islamic schools, which are often connected to mosques, serve as a place where Muslim children construct their Muslim identity. Most mosques feature some kind of weekend religious educational program, especially on Saturdays.[5] While there has been considerable evolution, many mosques remain wanting in respect to standards of governance and many are not welcoming to women's participation at any serious level. Mosque management

[5] Notably, there are over 200 full-time primary and secondary Muslim schools operating in the United Kingdom.

committees, which carry out a mosque's affairs such as building maintenance, financial management, media relations, education and other public services, are not yet doing enough to meet accountability standards and better meet the need of all mosque attendees, including women and young people. Similarly, there is a need for mosques to implement modern methods in terms of internal governance, service provision and regulatory adherence, as well as conformance to legal requirements such as accounting, health and safety, and so on. Recruiting young Muslim professionals to mosque management committees should help address such needs, as many of these individuals possess a great deal of expertise in these fields and are already employed for such roles in their everyday jobs. One of the UK's role model mosques established a 'trainee management' scheme, which allowed young professionals to be paired with a community elder, allowing the mosque to benefit from their professional qualifications whilst also benefiting from the experience of those who had been managing the mosque for years. This then paved the way for the second generation to serve as mosque trustees and developed a cycle designed to ensure that there was a constant development of new leadership. There are other noticeable examples in adequate mosque management, such as Leeds Makkah mosque, East London and West Hendon mosques in London.

An example of a unique initiative is the new mosque project in the city of Cambridge. Namely, it is a landmark building, sustainable, safe, secure and respectful of the neighbourhood. The new Cambridge mosque represents a cultural bridge fostering greater understanding between diverse communities with a strong educational component. Its rich facilities and unique design provide an architectural focus attracting visitors of all backgrounds and strata. The overall design for the site has been developed from the concept of a calm 'oasis', with the 'trees' set out on a generous 7.8 x 7.8 metre grid forming the main mosque structure. In addition to the Mosque's dedicated areas (prayer hall, ablution rooms, seminar room, children's area, morgue) there will be a café and two gardens for use by the local Muslim and non-Muslim communities. Upon entering the mosque, visitors walk through a permeable green edge created by an enlargement of the existing community garden. Furthermore, reflecting Islam's contribution to contemporary debates over sustainability, the mosque incorporates significant design features which minimise carbon emission and emphasise the role of faith in promoting responsible management of the earth's resources.

2.2. The Status of İmams in Europe: the Case of Bosnia and the UK

In theory and practice the mosque Imams are leaders of local Muslim communities and have an important role to play in society. In a conference paper, Martin van Bruinessen has argued that Imams officiating in the mosques are the most visible Muslim authorities in Western Europe. However, the respect that Imams enjoy in their own communities vary and seem contradictory (Bruinessen, 2003). Complains of the ignorance of Imams and the irrelevance of their lectures to the lives of Muslims in Europe are quite common in social media. The demand for better education of Imams in Europe has been the key to social and cultural integration of Muslim communities into wider society. As various reports suggest, the status of Imams in Europe is far from ideal (EPC, 2005). For example, many of the Imams and community leaders who work on a voluntary basis receive little or no compensation for their work and services. When we compare the financial situation of mosques and Imams to other religious groups across the EU, attitudes vary immensely in different European countries. Germany, Austria, Belgium and Luxembourg provide state grants for recognized religious groups, although Imams do not qualify for funding. Other European states seldom provide any funding for Muslim religious establishments.

Another major factor that affects the very status of Imams in Europe is related to formal education and training of European Imams. While some of them are graduates of prominent European universities and colleges, and may have completed even postgraduate degrees, most have not received any type of formal Islamic education or training (EPC, 2005). Speakers at "The Status of Imams in Europe" dialogue held by the European Policy Centre and its strategic partners agreed that the situation regarding the training of Imams was inadequate in most European countries. This was particularly important when it came to languages, as many Imams did not speak local European languages, which hindered greater integration and complicated inter-faith dialogue. Arguably, the only exceptions are Albania, Bosnia and Kosova.

Without a shadow of a doubt, improved training structures for Imams would help integrate Muslim communities in Europe. As M. Özdemir and others have argued, 'since so many Muslims were citizens in European countries the state should provide funding and infrastructure to educate Imams' (EPC, 2005). In Germany the training of Imams was recognized in cooperation with institutes and universities, similar to the situation in Sweden (EPC, 2005).

A report shows that currently no training is available in the UK despite numerous requests from the British Muslim community to establish institutions for religious training. There are some Muslim colleges in the UK, both Sunni and Shi'i, that provide advanced courses in Islamic Studies. None of them though offer a typical or acceptable religious training. A kind of religious training is affiliated with some mainstream British universities, but is inadequate.

In Bosnia-Herzegovina, on the other hand, the training for Imams has undergone several reforms and adaptations since mid-19th century and by now seems to be a well-structured and robust program (FIN, 2017). Arguably the hardest period in recent times was during the communist Yugoslavia when religious training was of a poor standard due to the lack of interest in religious training. In 1960s, for example, graduates of the famous Gazi Husrev-bey *madrasa* (Islamic seminary) in Sarajevo simply did not desire to serve as Imams. Other professions were more appealing to them. Hence, unlearned pious individuals from the Yugoslav Muslim community stepped in to fill the vacant posts of Imams and preachers (Mekić, 2016: 56-58). This trend begun to change in 1970s when several religious bans were lifted by the state and religious schools became once again popular and Imams respected individuals in the society as a whole. Today, the situation is very different from the communist times. For example, unlike in socialist Yugoslavia when very few and mainly elderly people attended mosques, most mosque congregations in Bosnia's cities and towns consist of highly educated people and successful entrepreneurs. Secondly, unlike before, to secure a post of Imam in Bosnia has become a challenging task. Namely, since 2004 a basic qualification for becoming an Imam -even for mosques in remote villages- is to have completed an Islamic high school (4 years) followed by a BA in Islamic Studies. For mosques in towns and cities one would usually need to have 5 years of working experience, possess a BA qualification, and have a beautiful voice. Moreover, in recent years there seem to be a surplus of Shari'a graduates and a limited number of mosque jobs. In short, the job requirements are quite lofty and expectations quite high. For example, in the capital city of Sarajevo it is quite normal for Imams to have a vast working experience, hold at least an MA qualification, have memorised the entire Qur'an (be a *hafiz*), have a melodic voice, and be fluent in Arabic or English.[6].

[6] Imam positions are advertised in the Islamic Community's official fortnightly newspaper *Preporod*, with a standard wording and standard conditions. For more details, one may consult any issue of *Preporod* from 2004 until now.

This is especially true with some historic and large city mosques, such as Begova and Careva in Sarajevo. Perhaps it should be noted here that during the Ottoman reignthe basic requirements for the post of Imam at the Grand Blue Mosque in Istanbul included the following: full knowledge of Islamic teachings, full memorisation of the Qur'an, memorisation of the major Hadith collections, good knowledge of *fiqh*, an area of expertise in pure science, the ability to speak five different languages, and the ability to mount a horse. Today, it is really up to a particular Muslim community to define the profile of an Imam's functions as well as the actual conditions for the job.

In Bosnia, all Imams are natives and locally or home trained. On the contrary, most mosque Imams in the UK are born and educated overseas. Whilst this was necessary to cater for the needs of first-generation immigrant Muslims in the UK, it is also true to say that second and third generation of UK Muslims benefit less from a non-native speaker who may not appreciate the subtlety of the English language and sometimes cultural sensitivities, too. An independent inquiry, published in 2017 and chaired by the former attorney general Dominic Grieve, calls for mosques to review their management structures and appointment of Imams (Citizens UK, 41). According to the Report, 'mosques in the UK need to invest in British-born Imams who are to be paid a decent living wage and equipped with pastoral skills so they are able to deal with the challenges facing British Muslims' (The Guardian, 2017). To achieve this, it is recommend that British mainstream universities consider pairing with Islamic seminaries so that educational schemes for Imams become accredited, meaning that Imams would receive an educational qualification as well as a religious qualification. Furthermore, the appointment of Imams and other assistants who engage in the teaching of youngsters at mosques needs to comply with legal requirements, and should be a transparent process undertaken in conjunction with the community (The Guardian, 2017).

Perhaps it should be underlined here that the grassroots British Islamic scholarship is beginning to take off. For example, the Cambridge Muslim College -established in 2009- is laying the groundwork to tackle the social and theological problems facing Muslims in modern Britain. The College recruits graduates of UK's *Dar al-'Ulums* (traditional seminaries) and Imams who have trained abroad providing them with relevant skills and knowledge necessary in modern British society. Instead of preaching yet another dogmatic world view, the College has an ethos of dialogue, free

thought, and rationality, in keeping with classical Islamic scholarship. The mission of the College, as stated in its constitutional document, is to develop Muslim faith leadership through world-class education, training and research based on a dialogue between the Islamic intellectual tradition and the ideas and circumstances of the modern world. Among the strategic aims of the College in the furtherance of its mission is to "develop accredited courses which meet the education and training needs of those working or intending to work in Muslim faith leadership in the context of modern British society" (Cambridge Muslim College, 2018).

Indeed, it is of great importance that British-born Imams who have a good understanding of British culture and who fluently speak English are appointed in preference to overseas alternatives. But there is a serious obstacle that must be overcome before we see 'natives' and 'highly intellectual individuals' applying for Imams jobs. Namely, as noted above, Imams in Europe, including the UK and Bosnia, are financially instable. In fact, it is one of the worst-paid professions in Europe, with an average monthly salary of just €750.[7] Although Islam had been recognized in some European countries as state religion, Imams are yet to be given state grants or pensions. This indeed is a stern challenge that needs to be addressed and solved rather promptly by the Muslim communities of Europe together with the relevant local and national authorities.

3. Concluding remarks

This is an introductory work into a vast and significant topic that needs to be fully researched and which can only be achieved through collective international teamwork. It is an extremely difficult task to give an overview of the current status of mosques, as it seems impossible to establish general statements. This is due to the fact that what can apply to one country could very well differ in another. Even within one country there are still noticeable variations. Nevertheless, there are a number of outstanding mosques that can act as a model to be followed.

In general, mosques need to be equipped with enough resources and manpower in order to function more actively within society. More

[7] Even in the Muslim majority countries, being an Imam is one of the least regarded professions. In Egypt, for example, becoming an Imam was the only means of higher education for those pupils with bad exam results.

crucially, there is a vital need to empower the Imams with full knowledge and awareness of their surroundings, and to provide them with the training and education needed to undertake their influential roles within society. Alongside appropriate Islamic parenting, mosque is arguably the most central institution to the formation of Muslim identity. For most Muslims mosque is a symbol of belonging and of their religious identity.

Youth, as an important demographic in any society, need to have an attachment to the mosque. Mosques need to attract, or at least welcome, youth and children, to make them feel at ease to participate, learn, and enjoy the environment of the mosque, and to teach them proper conduct with one another, and respect for their elders. Likewise, mosques must accommodate and care for their needs and provide activities for them within mosque premises. Mosque Imams can play an exceptional role in confronting extremism and terrorism by educating youth, filling their spare time with useful activities, dealing with their concerns, attending to their needs, and having their queries answered by learned and skilled Imams.

But, as we noted above, the status of Imams in Europe is far from ideal. It is therefore incumbent on the mosque committees or managers to ensure that Imams are paid in line with other equivalent positions in Europe so that high calibre individuals are attracted to the profession. Furthermore, mosque managers and local authorities need to invest in providing training programmes in pastoral skills for Imams to ensure that they can adequately deal with social issues.Arguably, there is a significant difference in religious/ Imam training in Bosnia and elsewhere in Europe. While Imams in Bosnia receive formal training of at least seven years, decree of appointment and an average wage of school teachers, in the UK most Imams are not formally trained or certified by any authority and their wages in most cases are below the national legal minimum wage. Perhaps Bosnia's practices could be used in creating a workable model for Europe and other secular states where a significant number of Muslims reside. So far, one could say that the Cambridge Muslim College is a positive example in what direction to go.

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