

Lessons from the History of Balkans: Islam grants Peace and Security - Nationalism brings Genocide and Destruction

Despite its rather small size, throughout its history the region of the Balkans was the arena of conflicts, brutal wars, and mass migration. Probably there was no other region in the world like this region that became the historical watershed, the rising and perishing point for so many and so various nations, tribes, races, and empires. These soils and its peoples, that witnessed nothing but bloodshed, exploitation and insecurity for centuries, finally came to taste welfare, peace and development for almost 600 years through the arrival of Islam. Islam's unique formula of integration built a colourful, cheerful, lively mosaic of different languages, races, tribes and religions. But when the peoples of the Balkans relapsed into nationalism again and turned their backs on Islam's life formula, then they fell back to unrest, marginalisation, racism, assimilation campaigns, and into the abattoir of bloody wars and genocides. The Bosnian War and in particular the Srebrenica Genocide 25 years ago was not the first genocide after the fall of the Islamic Khilafah State (Caliphate). Even a cursory glance will reveal the losses and pains that we as a Muslim Ummah suffered: The forced assimilation, expulsion and mass killings of Bulgaria's Muslim minorities from 1944-1989, and the ethnic cleansing in 1989... Genocide and forced migration of thousands of Cham Albanians from parts of the Greek region of western Epirus to Albania in 1944-45... The so-called Bloody Christmas in 1963, where 364 unarmed civil Muslims, women and children, were massacred in Cyprus... These are only a few examples of the afflictions we suffered... Alongside the fact that the history of the Balkans holds lessons for us, it is also the success story of the implementation of the Islamic ruling system... Currently the region of the Balkans is described as the area comprising Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Serbia, Kosovo, Slovenia, Albania, Macedonia, Montenegro, Bulgaria, Romania, Greece and Thrace.

The first conquests into the Balkans started through the armies of Sultan Orhan I, who served the Abbasid Khilafah, in 1352, when his armies got hold of the Tzympe (Çimpe) Castle in Bulgaria. From that point on, from 1352 to mid-16th century, the Balkans came under the dominance of Islam through the hands of the Ottoman Rule. However, the Balkans have not been conquered through the sword as generally claimed. The Ottoman armies of the Islamic Khilafah State fought battles against the local feudal powers and the Catholic Church's crusaders, but the conquests of the peoples of the region materialized through the "Istimalet Policy" and not through wars. It is due to this "Istimalet Policy" that the Balkans enjoyed true tranquillity, security, and safety throughout their history. And it was this "Istimalet Policy" that led millions of people, even whole tribes, to embrace Islam voluntarily during the following centuries.

The lexical meaning of "istimalet" is "enchanting, attracting, winning over hearts". In Ottoman chronicles the word was used in the sense of "guarding the people and in particular non-Muslim citizens, showing special tolerance and kindness in dealing with them". The main principles of the Ottoman "istimalet policy" is good treatment, protection of the people of opened regions, defending their lives and wealth against enemies, granting them liberty in their religious affairs, granting ease in tax issues. This policy is in fact the implementation of the Qur'anic statement of "Muellef-i Qulub" قُلُوبُهُمْ وَالْمَوْلَقَةَ in Surah At-Tawbah 60, which means "bringing hearts together [for Islam]"... The openings of the lands of the Balkans was mainly achieved through this warm-hearted policy of the protection of the local Christian people, ensuring their rights, granting them freedom in their religious beliefs, and even exemptions from taxes... As a natural consequence the non-Muslim subjects regarded the Ottomans as their saviour. Thus the "istimalet policy" was one of the major factors that aided Islam in gaining and maintaining authority over the Balkans for centuries.

One of the main characteristics of the history of Bosnia is that under Islamic rule a major part of its population chose to convert to Islam. Also clashes between the various Christian beliefs came to an end under Islamic rule. Moreover, even one of the most radical Christian sects, the Bogomils, converted to Islam, forming a Muslim community of Slavic ethnicity with Serbian-Croatian language.

Historic records prove that the non-Turkish and non-Muslim people in the Balkans lived their most peaceful and freest and easy period under Islamic rule. Explaining that the most distinct feature of the Ottoman State system was its "tolerant approach to its subjects"; French historian

Robert Mantran stated in his book, *History of Ottoman Empire*: "Especially in the Christian districts, local languages, religions and even political and social cadres were preserved; agreements were made with churches and clergy, granting them even tax privileges. Alongside putting an end to the disputes/fights among Christians in the region, particularly the Ottoman State's tolerance and approach towards members of Bogomilism, laid the foundations upon which the believers of this religion would later convert to Islam. There has never been an attempt to assimilate the people of the regions upon which they gained dominance, nor did they pursue a policy of Turkification or forced Islamization. If that were not so, it would be impossible to explain how the people of Greek, Bulgarian, Serbian and other languages, Christian sects and local peoples were able to maintain their cultures until our days."

A Western commentator pointed even out that "Slavic" was most likely the third official language in the Ottoman State in 1595. A very prominent Bosnian family, the Sokollu is a prominent Bosnian family of Serbian ethnic origin. Notable members of the family, like for instance Grand Vizier Sokollu Mehmed Pasha, Ferhad Pasha Sokolović, were high state officials in the Ottoman Empire during the 16th century. During the 16th and 17th centuries the Ottoman state had 8 Bosnian Grand Viziers.

When referring to Islam's success, historians frequently emphasize the Ottoman State's organizational structure. Bulgarian historian Maria Todorova, for example, says in her book *Imagining the Balkans*: "There are many factors that contributed to the Ottoman success in establishing peace and tranquillity in the Balkans. [...] more importantly, the Ottoman state has a strong organizational structure. This strong structure was sensed in every area of Ottoman presence. This structure was not oppressive, on the contrary it adopted tolerance and compassion as principle. Therefore the Ottoman state was always respectful towards local values and always regarded the human as valuable."

The factor that shaped and allowed the effective implementation of this policy of tolerance is the state structure based upon Qur'an and Sunnah. It was the loyalty and adherence towards Qur'an and Sunnah that enabled the Ottoman Khilafah to rule conveniently over the Balkans for almost 600 years. In Islam, hearts are conquered through politics. And in order to remove any obstacles that hinder these conquests, Islam orders jihad. Thus the Muslim armies gained glorious victories at the First Battle of Kosovo in 1389, the Crusade of Varna in 1444, the Second Battle of Kosovo in 1448 and countless other victories against the crusaders. And every single one of these are carved into the memory of the world, and they consolidated the dominance of Islam over the Balkans. It was these Jihads that barred the West from rushing aid to Constantinople and that laid the ways to its opening. Christian Europe has not and will not forget these devastating defeats till the end of the world. And this hatred that is engraved into the hearts and minds of the Serbian Kuffar due to these defeats is the underlying reason for the Bosnian War and the Massacre of Srebrenica.

However, the intellectual and ideological decline in the Ottoman Khilafah during the 17th-18th centuries led to systemic deterioration causing social and economic instability. Alongside this, the Battle of Vienna in 1683 ended with the defeat of the Ottoman army, and marked a turning point in the wars between Islam and crusaders. This defeat encouraged the enemies. Already in 1699 the Ottoman State would find itself forced to sign the Treaty of Karlowitz. Signing this treaty with the Holy League of 1684, a coalition of the Holy Roman Empire, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the Republic of Venice, and Russia, it relinquished Hungary to the Habsburg Monarchy. This treaty is regarded as the beginning of its decline period.

As to the crusaders... For them the path was clear and open. The Muslims were very vincible through venomous ideas. So they developed a very simple formula: Spreading nationalism among the Christian minorities, encouraging uprisings against the Ottoman State, and then getting in action and pressuring the Ottoman state to reformations, in which it grants more rights to minorities. These reforms would firstly lead to autonomy, and finally independence movements.

This formula worked out...

For example: The agricultural problems in Bosnia, which occurred due to improper and even non-Islamic practices in agricultural relations between landlords and peasants, were one of the issues that eased the sowing of nationalist seeds among the people of Bosnia. This problem was then solved through the intervention of the Khalifah's Kanunname (decree) in 1859. However,

ethnic Serbs who still were not content with the conditions led a number of peasant uprisings against the Ottoman Empire. Especially the Herzegovina Uprising in 1875 was strongly politically motivated and led to the intervention of foreign powers. Thus in the Treaty of Berlin in 1878, Bosnia and Herzegovina were handed over to Austria-Hungary. Despite the resistance of the Muslims of Bosnia, Austria-Hungary annihilated Bosnia in 1878. Thus the Ottoman rule over Bosnia-Herzegovina came officially to an end, declaring Bosnia officially Austria-Hungary territory in 1908.

With the support of the West, more and more non-Muslim communities under the protection of the Ottoman Khilafah began to riot, accusing the state of repressions, unequal treatment, and demanding new rights. Finally from 1839-1876, the Ottoman State introduced the Tanzimat reformations alongside other reformations. These reformations granted the non-Muslim subjects of the state new, equal rights as the Muslims, to become government officials, enrolment in military schools, same taxes as Muslims and the lifting of the Jizyah.

As planned, following these reformations the West enhanced the independence movements. Finally in 1832, Greece was recognized as an independent state, 1859 Moldavia and Wallachia declared themselves independent Romanian United Principalities. Following the Russo-Turkish War in 1877-78, the Treaty of Berlin ripped off the majority of the Ottoman territories. With the support of Russia, whose aim was to establish Pan-Slavism across the Balkans, finally Serbia declared its independence in 1878, followed by Bulgaria in 1908. 1908 is also the annihilation of Bosnia-Herzegovina through Austria-Hungary legitimated on the Treaty of Berlin. The Balkan Wars starting in 1912, followed by the Conference of London in 1921, the Islamic Khilafah's authority and hegemony over the Balkans came to a total end.

From that point on, once again the Balkans returned to the feudalist oppressions of pre-14th century. Once again the Balkans were subjugated to the wars of interest between empires and kingdoms... From that point on they witnessed oppression under the racist, anti-religious, socialist, communist and other man-made ideologies of nation states... The Balkan people ones again were robbed of their land, language, religions, lives, properties and dignity. The communist oppressions and persecution in Romania, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria hit people of all religions and nations. Alongside the Muslims, also Jews, Christians and other believers in the Balkans were subjugated to genocides, displacement, exploitation, torture and imprisonment under various ideologies. After eliminating the uniting hegemony of Islam, no other ideology, regime, or international organisation or institution, provided ever again peace, unity, solidarity, protection, safety, development and welfare to the peoples of the Balkans. On the contrary, it was at the end of the 20th century, during a period where the West boasted itself with being on the top of civilisation, and declared itself as the guardian of human, women's and children's rights, and the patron of freedom of belief and religion that one of the most vicious genocides of human history was carried out... Carried out in the heart of Europe.

Yes, we Muslims went through and continue to witness all of these atrocities ... Yet, as stated at the beginning of this article: The history of the Balkans is a major lesson for us. In addition to these experienced lessons, we possess the revelation to Rasulallah (saw). Those who held tight to this revelation enjoyed success throughout history.

Islam does not force anyone to become Muslim. Islam does not regard anyone superior or inferior related to his race, ethnicity, or wealth. Islam's offer and promise to humankind is clear and definitive: Firstly; felicity in worldly life to every single human who seeks refuge under the umbrella of the Islamic system... Secondly; carrying the felicity of worldly life to endless felicity in the hereafter through embracing Islam freely and based on rational evidence... These are not the offers and promises of Muslims. No, they are the promise of Allah the Almighty and a glad tiding of His Messenger (saw). Allah (swt) never breaks His promise, and the glad tidings of Rasulallah (saw) continue to come true one by one...

Written for the Central Media Office of Hizb ut Tahrir by

Zehra Malik

Member of the Central Media Office of Hizb ut Tahrir