

Mosques in the Balkans

by Said Zulficar

In addition to the human damage brought about by the last 10 years of war in Balkans, the recent conflicts in Bosnia and Kosovo have been devastating to their historical and architectural heritages.

This destruction was not the accidental consequence of military hostilities, but the expression of a systematic policy to eradicate the physical heritages of these two countries since they symbolize the non-Serb identity of the communities subjected to Serb aggression.

During the few weeks preceding their departure from Kosovo in the summer of 1999, the Serb army and paramilitaries damaged or destroyed by fire, dynamite or artillery more than one-third of Kosovo's mosques—219 out of a total of 607, mostly built between the 14th and 19th centuries; three out of the four historic city centers—Peje (Pec), Gjakova, and Vushtrii; 90 percent, or 450 out of 500, of the traditional, fortified stone farm dwellings known as kullas; and a very large number of individual residences from the Ottoman period.



The 17th-century Bula Zade Mosque in Peje (pictured here) was demolished to make room for a reinforced concrete structure

Many of these structures are now being restored and rebuilt, but a new and unexpected danger has come to threaten their integrity and at times their very existence: the financial generosity of charitable organizations from Saudi Arabia and, to a lesser extent, the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

These aid agencies, after having provided emergency food and medical assistance to the beleaguered Albanian population of Kosovo, now propose to finance the renovation and reconstruction of Muslim religious edifices.

However, this rehabilitation program is not as altruistic as it appears at first sight, since it is generated principally by a missionary sentiment and a narrow sectarian zeal which aims at purifying the Balkan version of Islam from what these Saudi patrons consider unorthodox and impure to the true faith.

In Gjakova in western Kosovo, the historic city center was seriously damaged by willful burning. Its most prestigious landmark, the Hadum Mosque, built in 1594, miraculously survived after a grenade-missile shot off the upper third of its minaret. The richly decorated interior of the building remained intact. The nearby library, built in 1733, contained a priceless collection of ancient manuscripts that were set on fire, but the superstructure was still standing and in a restorable condition. The adjacent theological school (madrasa) also suffered damage, while the cemetery containing numerous 17th- and 18th-century funerary gravestones suffered minor damages.

In May 2000, the Saudi Joint Relief Committee for the People of Kosovo and Chechnya proposed to the municipal authorities in Gjakova to finance the restoration of the Hadum Mosque complex. The required authorization to start works was granted soon after by the local conservator of historical

monuments and by the municipality, and a local construction firm, having no experience of restoration of historical structures, was entrusted with the implementation of the project.

The Hadum Mosque complex: the madrasa (right) has already been demolished, and the mosque (left) is still under threat

But far from restoring the damaged buildings to their original state, as of 28 July 2000, the works consisted of bulldozing the cemetery, the library, and the madrasa, the objective being to open up a vast empty space on which the Saudi Committee intends to erect a large concrete Islamic Center, according to the agency itself. As for the mosque, the avowed intention is to efface all the mural frescoes and ornaments dating from the 18th and 19th centuries, to demolish the timber gallery of the same period, which is reserved as a praying space for women, and to whitewash the walls with plaster. The works were temporarily halted by the Cultural Department of the United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK), but following pressure exerted by the Saudi committee, resumed in September.

This type of heritage vandalism is unfortunately not exceptional in Kosovo. The Saudi aid agency in question was also responsible for the demolition of the 17th-century Bula-Zade Mosque in Peje (Pec) and the construction of a reinforced concrete mosque historically inappropriate to the region. The 17th-century mosque in Rogovo was also demolished soon after and rebuilt in a simplistic style.

Last September, the Kater Lule Mosque in Prishtina, also dating from the same period, which had suffered no war damage at all, was similarly demolished by the Saudi committee without any authorization. When alerted by local inhabitants, the UN police declined to intervene. In the historic center of Vushtrii in northern Kosovo, a charitable organization from the UAE has made the continuation of its humanitarian aid conditional on the demolition of the 15th-century graveyard located between the Gazi Ali Beg and Karamanli Mosques, which it proposes to rebuild "twice as big and twice as Islamic." Over 100 gravestones were subsequently destroyed, and the two historical mosques remain under threat.

The same Saudi agency now at work in Kosovo distinguished itself in Bosnia some years ago, having undertaken the "rehabilitation" of around 150 religious edifices of the Ottoman period. These were mostly demolished and replaced by new box-like concrete structures devoid of any ornaments and having no historical relevance to the 600-year-old Balkan architectural tradition.

Salient examples of this iconoclastic trend are evident in Sarajevo, where the Saudi aid agency undertook the renovation of two major 16th-century historical monuments, the Careva Mosque and the Gazi-Husrev Beg Mosque, both of which were seriously harmed by inappropriate "restorations." The Gazi-Husrev Mosque, for example, which was undamaged, was stripped of virtually all of its decoration, including original Ottoman ceramic tiles and rich and detailed mural frescoes that covered the interior of the mosque. A thick white plaster replaced them. The same has been applied to the exteriors of the mosque, obliterating the original decorations.

In Kosovo, one of the most important landmarks in the historic center of Orahovac (Rahovec), the 17th-century Carshi Mosque, which is totally undamaged by war, is being seriously threatened by the Saudi committee, who have proposed to demolish it in order to build a much larger edifice. If

realized, the new building would dwarf the historical buildings of this ancient town and transform the harmonious urban landscape. The Saudi committee is also exerting pressure on the local authorities in Prizren to allow it to renovate the historic mosques in that town, although there is no war damage to these buildings which would justify any interventions.



The Hadum Mosque complex: the madrasa (right) has already been demolished, and the mosque (left) is still under threat

Rather than preserving the Balkan heritage, the Saudi-sponsored construction program is in fact openly antagonistic to this heritage, imposing instead certain tenets of Saudi Arabian Islam. This includes such taboos such as marking graves with ornamental stones or mausolea, and covering mosque walls with inscriptions and decorations and other ornamental details.

By attempting to subject Bosnia and Kosovo to their rigid sectarian hegemony and applying their iconoclastic vision to the historical heritage, the Saudi state, through its philanthropic organizations, is undermining the eminently tolerant Bosnian and Kosovar traditions. But perhaps more significantly, it is unconsciously and inadvertently contributing towards the achievement of Greater Serbia's ultimate political goal in the region: the eradication of the cultural and national identities of Bosnia and Kosovo.

©Cairo Times