

Imported Islamists? Wahhabi Group Launches Conversion Campaign In Bosnia

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SARAJEVO — During the past week, an international Wahhabi organization has launched a campaign in Bosnia-Herzegovina calling on non-Muslims to convert to Islam.

The organization, which calls itself “Poziv u Raj” (Invitation To Heaven), has been putting up slick billboards and posters and distributing leaflets in Sarajevo, Bihac, Sanski Most, Maglaj, Zenica, Travnik, Tuzla, and Tesanj.

The group also has been organizing public lectures in Bosnian cities and towns by a Greek man and a German man who recently converted to Islam.

Those recent converts have repeated the group’s call for non-Muslims to convert to Islam. They have also been criticizing traditionally liberal Bosnian Muslims, claiming that many Bosniaks are not practicing true Islam.

At one recent lecture, Greek convert Efstatiou Tsionis, claimed that 60 percent of Bosniaks do not pray, 70 percent of the women do not “cover themselves,” and 90 percent of Bosniaks drink alcohol.

The campaign raised concerns among non-Muslims in the overwhelmingly Muslim town of Maglaj when leaflets urging conversion to Islam were placed at the Roman Catholic church.

Local Catholics in Maglaj have complained about the leaflets to Mayor Mehmed, scheduling a meeting with Mustabasic and with representatives of the Serbian Orthodox Church to discuss the issue.

Members of the Wahhabi group have also personally handed leaflets to three Roman Catholic nuns in Maglaj. Such incidents have caused widespread indignation among ethnic Croats in the town — some of whom say they feel intimidated by the group’s strict Islamic rhetoric.

Imported Islamists?

A parish priest, Jakov Filipovic, tells RFE/RL’s Balkan Service that the incidents have raised the awareness of Bosnian officials about the growth of Islamic fundamentalism in parts of the country.

“Maybe it is good that the media have spoken out in the sense that we are not fooling

ourselves,” Filipovic says. “Some people say such things are not happening here. But this will draw attention to what is really going on here. This should be resolved by [public officials] who are responsible so that such things do not happen again.”

A local Serbian Orthodox priest, Dalibor Djekic, says that he found one of the Wahhabi leaflets posted on the door of his church. “This is an ugly message to me as a representative of my people and to my people,” he says. “I am aware that ordinary [Bosniaks], who have lived together for centuries with Serbs and Orthodox believers in these parts of the country, are not behind this. Even they — my acquaintances and neighbors who heard about this — are appalled.”

Mustabasic, the town’s mayor, says that he knew nothing about the leaflets or the rallies.

RFE/RL has confirmed that one Islamic Community imam, Mustafa Efendi Spahic, hosted a lecture in Sanski Most during the past week by the Wahhabi group.

But Ekrem Tucakovic, a spokesman for the Islamic Community of Bosnia, denied there is any link between his organization and the Wahhabi campaign — saying the Islamic Community learned of the lecture from local newspaper reports.

“We don’t know what kind of lecture it was, who participated, or whether that imam took part in any capacity,” Tucakovic says.

‘Marginal Threat’

It remains unclear who is funding the organization’s campaign in Bosnia or paying for the expensively printed leaflets and posters. Staff at the Wahhabi group’s offices in Tuzla have refused to comment to RFE/RL about the campaign.

A professor at the Faculty of Islamic Sciences in Sarajevo, Enes Ljevakovic, considers the group to be amateurish and marginal. “I don’t think this is a serious threat,” Ljevakovic says. “We are talking about marginal groups. Can it eventually be something more? Nothing can be ruled out. Anything can happen.”

The Wahhabi movement, a conservative school of Islam that originated in Saudi Arabia some 200 years ago, has been growing in strength in Bosnia since the end of the 1992-95 war.

Hundreds of Islamic fighters who are adherents to the Wahhabi tradition, and who fought alongside Bosnian Muslim forces during the war, remained in the country — with many marrying local women and establishing Islamic organizations.

In February, Bosnian police [raided a Wahhabi community](#) at the village of Gornja Maoca in northern Bosnia — arresting several leaders there amid concerns that militant members of community were becoming a security threat.

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