Muslim Minorities in the Czech Republic

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Tragic events including the New York, London and Madrid terrorist attacks, interethnic tensions in France and Netherlands and debate on Turkeys future accession to the European Union have dramatically changed the way Central Europeans perceive issues related to Islam and Muslims. The lecture is dealing with the Muslim community in the Czech Republic, its history, organizations and activities. In relation to population in many other countries of the European Union, the Muslim community in the Czech Republic is relatively tiny, nevertheless Czech public debate on Muslims reflects typical „Western“ tendencies and attitudes, including establishment of „anti-Islam camp“ and „struggle for the mosques“.

Never in the past Islam has been so discussed in Czech society as in the present times. We can easily find numerous evidences of such continuous interest practically everywhere, on the bookshop counters, on the pages of newspapers or journals, in virtual realm of Internet and with ever-growing tendency in various intellectual or political discussions. In brief, Islam indisputably has become trendy and much-sought-for theme and for many “engaged intellectuals” has become also springboard and pretence in the same time to far-reaching philosophical or ideological self-presentation which has often nothing to do with the teaching of Islam itself or with the presence of Muslims in the West.

Thanks to their geographical position, Czech lands in the past have never directly encountered “world of Islam” and probably this is the reason why Islam was traditionally regarded as something for us distant and exotic. Therefore after the Velvet revolution in the year 1989 many Czechs were quite surprised that even in “the heard of Europe” small but active Muslim community lives and makes an effort to realize religious needs of its followers. In the end of ninetieth of the last century Czech media widely reflected so called “struggle for the mosques” and just this theme reminded most of population the existence of religious community that was so truthfully named by Martina Křížková, an author of analysis of medial presentation of Czech Muslims written for the Multicultural Institute of Prague, as “invisible minority”. Indeed, it is remarkable since history of Czech Muslim community reaches the years of the First Czechoslovak Republic, it means the interwar period.

A law of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire issued in 1912 recognized Islam as a “state religion” and probably allowed its presence in the region. The first “official” community named Moslimské náboženské obce pro Československo (Muslim Religious Communities in Czechoslovakia) was officially established in the year 1934. In the year 1949 previous registration from the time of the Protectorate Bohemia and Moravia was abolished and leading personality of Czech Muslims journalist and traveler Abdallah (originally Bohdan) Brikcius was accused of collaboration with fascists. An attempt to set up new community during Prague spring in the year 1968 failed. After the Velvet revolution in the year 1991 Ústředí muslimských náboženských obcí (The Center of Muslim Religious Communities) was established as an umbrella organization and finally in the year 2004 Islam was officially registered by Czech Ministry of Culture.

Official statistics including number of Muslims in the Czech Republic do not exist. Nevertheless two different figures usually appear in this context: 10 000 or 20 000 people. Dr. Vladimír Sáňka, representative of the Center of Muslim Religious Communities and director of the Islamic Centre in Prague, estimates the whole number of Muslims in the Czech
Republic at 10 000 persons, but as he stressed no way how to verify this number is available, since Czech population census does not demands to state religion. According this optional piece of information there is more then “official” 3 600 Muslims, holder of Czech citizenship, living in the country. On top of that most of Czech Muslims do not participate at all in activities of Islamic Centers in Prague or Brno and that is why the number of “active” Muslims is estimated only at 2 000 persons.

The above mentioned number (10 000 or 20 000) includes three sorts of people. First of them are ethnical Czechs but their number is relatively tiny (Dr. Sáňka’s estimation is some 400 converts, typically Czech wives of Muslims - foreigners). The second group consists of foreign holders of Czech citizenship that have come to former Czechoslovak Socialist Republic from so called “progressive regimes of the Third World” mainly during seventieth and eightieth of the last century. Upon the official framework of support of these left orientated countries they studied at Czech and Moravian Universities and High Schools (mainly “practical specializations” like medicine, civil engineering, Army Academy and so on) and after graduation they made decision to settle here. The third and beyond controversy the most numerous group encompasses foreigners, holders of permanent or long-term residence permission, that includes mainly students, men of business and their wives and seems to be incomparably various as for their ethnic origin.

Generally speaking most of “Czech Muslims” are of Arab origin (above all from Syria, Iraq, Egypt, Palestine, Lebanon, Libya and Algeria) but also another nationalities are present here: mainly from Balkan (Bosnians, Macedonians, Albanians), Caucasus (Chechnians, Dagestani etc.), Turkey, Pakistan and former Soviet Central Asia. The preceding account does not include asylum seekers although their number and importance will continuously grow in the future. According last years official report of the Department of Immigration Policy of the Ministry of Interior there are 3 016 asylum seekers in the Czech Republic and among them several hundreds immigrants from Muslim countries. Surprisingly the second highest number of asylum seekers comes from Egypt (422 persons), it means from the country which is generally considered to be relatively democratic within the framework of Arab countries regimes. In the top of the list of asylum seekers statistics we can find great number of predominantly Muslim countries, for example Kazakhstan, Nigeria, Kyrgyzstan, Iraq, Turkey, Algeria, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Somalia, Bangladesh, Syria and Sudan.

Although official umbrella organization of all Czech Muslims named The Center of Muslim Communities (Ústředí muslimských obcí – UMO) was found after several unsuccessful attempts in the year 1991, until the year 2004 when Islam in the Czech Republic has been officially registered Muslims pursued their activities under the headings of several institution that were registered according Czech law mainly as cultural and social communities. Among them General Federation of Muslim Students in the Czech Republic (Všeobecný svaz muslimských studentů v České republice) seems to be one of the most active. Its affiliates are above all in Czech and Moravian university cities (for example Prague, Brno, Plzeň or Olomouc). Federation focuses their activities in education in particular, regularly organizes international student conferences and during more than fifteen years of its existence Federation also published a number of advertising books, booklets and brochures.

Islamic Foundation in Prague (Islámská nadace v Praze) was found in the beginnings of ninetieth of the last century when small community of Prague Muslims started to gather for collective Friday prayers (salat al-jum’a) at the beginning in rooms of former school at the Embassy of Egypt or in various student dormitories. Since 1992 Muslims permanently rented rooms in the street U Michelského lesa in Krč, a quarter of Prague, at first by the name of General Federation of Muslims Students in the Czech Republic that was found before legal registration of Prague Foundation. In Krč Muslims adapted rented rooms into large (112 m²)
house of worship which was administered by new-coined Foundation for Establishment and Operation of the Islamic Center in Prague (Nadace pro zřízení a provoz islámského centra v Praze). In 1996 Foundation bought piece of land with old building in Prague quarter Kyje and after an extensive reconstruction new Islamic center was festively opened 7th May 1999 here. The Center (sometimes called briefly as “Prague mosque”) consists of three floors: there are lecture room, kitchen and prayer-room for women at the first floor, main prayer-room and the office of the Center at the second floor and Islamic library, second prayer-room, office of General Federation of the Muslim Students and the flat of the imam of the mosque at the third floor. As in the mosque of Brno there is no minaret there. Since the year 2003 Prague Foundation operates small information office with modest prayer-hall in the center of Prague (Politických vězňů street) where courses of modern written Arabic also take places. These courses are kept mainly by graduates of the Institute of Middle Eastern and African Studies of the Charles University and they are financially supported by the Foundation.

The second important player on Czech Muslim scene, Islamic Foundation in Brno (Islámská nadace v Brně), was found in the year 1994 as a charitable corporation for the establishment of the Islamic center with the mosque in Brno. Foundation has fulfilled its goal in the year 1998 when Brno Islamic Center was festively opened as first regular mosque in the territory of the Czech Republic. Mosque is open not only for believers but also for non-Muslims. Muslim community in Brno achieved many successes in promotion of Islam and struggle with various lies dealing with this religion.

Speaking about Czech Muslim scene we should not forget to name Muslim Union (Muslimská unie) founded by Muhammad Abbas al-Mu‘tasim, former Sudanese student of architecture and present editor of Muslim News (Muslimské listy) on-line. Union cooperates with Islamic Foundation in Prague and General Foundation of Muslim Students and prepared for print a number of Islamic texts translated into Czech language.

The Center of Muslim Communities in the Czech Republic was originally found, as we already mentioned, as an umbrella organization. Now its authority is respected practically by all Czech Muslim institutions and societies. In Statutes of religious community the Center describes its mission in following articles: a) to help all Czech Muslims in accordance with possibility of the Center, to establish and maintain schools and charitable organizations, b) to support friendly relations and contacts of Czech Muslims with their brothers in faith abroad, c) to support friendly relations between the Czech republic and Muslim countries, d) to afford an objective information about Islam and its teaching, e) to deepen dialog among various religious communities and achieve mutual respect and understanding, f) to establish houses of prayer everywhere it would be needful, g) to gather financial contributions from believers to realize activities of the Center, h) to defend Muslims against all manifestations of racism, xenophobia, islamophobia and any discrimination, i) to keep list of members for internal purposes, j) to help to arrange burials of Muslims according Islamic principles, k) to publish Islamic texts and promote teaching of this religion.

The executive board of the Center consists of at least five members which are elected for the period of four years. Contemporary chairman of the Center is Muhammad Ali Šilhavý, former secondary-school professor of mathematics and physics, who converted to Islam before the World War II. Even during the period of atheistic socialist regime he did not hide his faith and openly declared his creed in spite of hazard of job loss. Professor Šilhavý is generally respected among Czech Muslims for his moral integrity and he is regarded as informal doyen of the movement. Statutes of the religious community also states two deputy chairmen of the Center: Dr. Vladimír Sáňka, Czech convert who holds an appointment of the speaker in the name of the Center, and Ing. Muneeb Alrawi, Iraqi who represents leading personality of Islamic foundation of Brno. Official seat of the Center is Prague mosque.
The Center of Muslim Communities played a crucial role in official registration of Islam in the Czech Republic. Although the Czech Constitution guarantees full freedom of religions and religious associations, Czech legislation does not provide for a full separation of church (or mosque) and state. To be eligible for state subsidies, religious associations must be registered, and in order to be registered, they must gather petitions from more than 10,000 members. Until the year 2002 Ministry of Culture demanded for the act of registration not only at least 10,000 signatures of followers of the community, but also their personal data and such an attitude was observed by the Center somewhat disquietly. Representatives of the Center were apprehended a misuse of these documents. The mentioned condition seemed to be unrealizable for Czech Muslims even in the horizon of decades because only a fragment of them take a part in various activities of Czech Muslim organizations and institutions. The practical implementation of these rules was highly discriminatory, since most recognized organizations (for example, as Muslims frequently stressed, Jewish Federation) have fewer members than required, while Czech Muslim community was unable to complete a petition list and that is why remained a mere citizens’ association.

Fortunately new churches act from the year 2002 prescribed more moderate conditions for acceptance of new religious communities as corporations but without so-called special privileges. These privileges that seems to be of utmost importance for Czech Muslim community include (according paragraph VII) among others possibility to teach religion in public schools, delegate imams to armed forces, be financed from the state budget, arrange marriages according own religious manners or establish religious schools and charitable foundations. Presently earning of these privileges is considered among the representatives of the Center as a highest priority for Czech Muslims.

Dealing with Islam in the Czech Republic we should briefly mention also three spiritual streams that have come up from Islamic spawn although they are, in the first and the second case, regarded by the majority of Muslims as heretical movements, and the last of them represents such a version of Islam that has been since Middle Ages a subject of never-ending controversy. Here we keep in mind Bahaism (or Baha’i faith, as its followers would say), Ahmadiya movement and Sufism (Islamic mysticism, tasawwuf in Arabic).

Bahaism arose from Shiite Iran in the middle of the 19th century but early exceeded the limits of Islam and on the present its teaching is considered to be an absolutely independent religion which expanded over the world with more than ten million believers. Bahaism regards itself as universal religion and crucial axis of its teaching presents principle of unity of God and mankind. In this context the message of Bahaullah (1817-1892), founder of the religion, opened a new era of the prophecy expressing the essence of preceding revelations and bringing solution for all problems of the modern world.

According official Bahai web pages the first follower of this movement was Miloš Svatopluk Wurm who in the year 1910 translated and published book under the title Mírové hnutí na Východě (Peace Movement in the East), delivered lectures on Bahai faith and arranged exhibitions of Bahai literature. In the time of the First Czechoslovak Republic President T.G. Masaryk and the minister of foreign affairs Edward Beneš discussed with American missionary and journalist Martha Ruth who made them acquainted with Bahai ethical principles and global vision of unity of mankind. In this context the message of Bahaullah (1817-1892), founder of the religion, opened a new era of the prophecy expressing the essence of preceding revelations and bringing solution for all problems of the modern world.

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The second spiritual stream, Ahmadiya, gained a lot of followers not only in the region of its origin (India and Pakistan), but above all in the Western Europe and the USA. Teaching of Ahmadiya contains a number of reform interpretations of Islamic law and its founder Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (1835-1908) from Punjab declared himself to be mujaddid (the Reformer) of the 14th century of hijra (the century of Muslim era). In the middle of nineteenth of the last century Ahmadiya missionaries from Germany undertook several attempts to spread their faith in the Czech Republic. They have even published Czech translation of Koran (from English) including an extensive theological explanation (tafsir) of each Koran chapters (sura) but their effort met only with lukewarm response. Traces of their activities in the Czech Republic disappear in the end of the nineteenth of the last century.

As for the last stream, sufism (Islamic mysticism, tasawwuf) is regarded by some Muslims as spiritual kernel of Islam, and by another as a danger heresy. Heterogeneous opinions on this phenomenon were reflected also among Czech Muslims, namely in the controversy between Muhammad Ali Šilhavý, the chairman of the Center of Muslim Communities in the Czech Republic, and Vladimír Sálim Voldán, the founder of Islamic Union and the most visible representative of “Czech sufism”. Official attitude of the Center was clearly expressed in the statement of its chairman who declared that he had nothing against sympathy of individual Muslims towards sufism but such interpretation of Islam can not be presented as an official standpoint of whole Czech Muslim community.

Sufism plays fundamental role in Islamic mission in the West, either in form of “classical” Sufi orders (for example meleviya, bektashiya etc.) or several streams of “neosufism” based on teaching of Hazrat Inayat Khan, Indian teacher and musician living most of his life in the USA, Great Britain and France. Especially the second category for its inclination to syncretism and using music, dances and poetry enjoys popularity among Western “seekers of the Truth” who can be in the same time skeptical in their attitudes towards Islam in its orthodox Sunni interpretation. There are even a lot of examples of followers of teaching of universal Sufism which regard themselves in the same time Christians, Buddhists etc, what is in “classical” Sufism impossible and even unimaginable. In the past (mainly in the middle of the nineteenth of the last century) western Sufis undertook here some promotion activities, lectures, performances of Sufi dances and music or reading Persian mystical poetry nevertheless without perceptible success.

The Center of Muslim Religious Communities concentrates its activities above all to three main directions. Primarily the Center makes an effort to satisfy religious needs of Czech Muslims. On present there are two mosques in the Czech Republic, in Brno and in Prague, both of them including libraries and offices of their Foundations. In addition to them, Czech Muslim organizations (mainly the General Federation of Muslim Students in the Czech Republic) provide functioning of several small prayer-houses, especially in Czech and Moravian university cities (in student dormitories in Prague, Brno, Liberec and Olomouc) or in several spas frequently visited by Arab visitors (Teplice, Dubí or Lázně Darkov). Prague and Brno mosques are open also for non-Muslims and this fact clearly reflects second direction of the Centers activities, it means cultural and edifying efforts, or as Muslims would say, jihad bil’lisan (jihad of the mouths). Among activities oriented for deepening religious education of Muslims we can mention regular Saturdays lectures on Koranic exegesis, the teaching of hadith (sayings and doings of the Prophet) or shari’a (Islamic jurisprudence), annual several-days meetings arranged by the General Federation of Muslim students or Saturdays religious school for Muslim children.

Publication activities of Czech Muslims play a fundamental role not only for education of Czech converts but also as a mean of struggle with anti-Islam tendencies and spreading misinterpretations on Islam. In this point we should mention firstly the journal as-Sawt (Hlas,
The Voice) found by leading personality of interwar period Abdallah Brikcius. After the end of the World War II when Brikcius was arrested and accused from collaboration with fascists The Voice was abolished. Renewal of The Voice was associated with the personality of Muhammad Ali Šilhavý who opened the first issue of reestablished journal symbolically by Brikcius’ fiery visionary proclamation under the eloquent title Kupředu! (Forwards!). On the present The Voice is published quarterly and the board of edition consisting of four members resides at Prague mosque.

However, publication activities of Czech Muslims can not be limited only to this periodical. The most ambitious achievement of their mission consists of parallel edition of Arabic text of Koran and its Czech translation, or as Muslims would say, with “translation of meanings of the Holy Book” (tarjamat al-ma’ani), alongside with an extensive commentary (tafsir) written by Abdullah Yousuf Ali and translated from English. The translator of Koran into Czech was Dr. Ivan Hrbek, an outstanding personality of Czech Oriental studies, and specialist in Islamic and African studies. In his youth he converted to Islam and after arrest of Abdallah Brikcius he became a leading representative of persecuted community. But later he inclined to scholar attitude to Islam and therefore for many of his brothers in faith Hrbek became an apostate. His translation of the Holy Book was firstly published in early seventieth of the last century and in world criterion indisputably belongs among the best translation of Koran. Despite of the fact that Czech Muslims many times expressed their critical attitude towards many passages in Hrbek’s translation and especially towards his commentary, they accept that his work is certainly the best one from four existing Czech translations.

Unfortunately, there is no place in this lecture to mention in detail complete publication list of Czech Muslims. We can briefly conclude that there are among them traditional biography of the Prophet called as-Sira, collection of hadith (sayings and doings of the Prophet), popular introduction into Islamic law (shari’a) written by influential sheikh Yousuf al-Qaradawi, well-known speaker of al-Jazira TV station, two fundamental essays of prominent Bosnian intellectual and politician Aliya Izetbegowitch (Islamic Declaration and Islam between East and West) and of course a number of advertising brochures and booklets. We have also overpass various internet presentation of Czech Muslim organizations. Some of them (for example that of the Muslim Union) include also unpublished translations of Islamic texts into Czech language. Official web pages of the Center can be found at: www.islamweb.cz.

The message of the Center is also to coordinate various charitable activities of individual Muslim communities. Islamic foundations collect two kinds of financial contribution, contribution for the functioning of the Islamic center and zaqát (religious tax) or sadaqa (voluntary alms). The second contributions are especially determined for charitable purposes. The Center supports Muslim seekers for Czech asylum or arrested Muslims. Prague Foundation established co-operation with Czech custodial authority and even constructed a small prayer-room in Praha – Ruzyně prison. Leading members of Prague or Brno foundations also help with organization of Muslim funerals. On the present there are only two small Muslim cemeteries in the Czech Republic, in Třebíč and in Prague – Olšany.

Dealing with Czech public debate on various issues related to Islam and Muslims we should stress that the primary source of information on these controversies is the internet and numerous discussion groups. Such a way out forms in principle the character of discussion and most of contributions, they are obviously prejudiced, polarized, often aggressive or emotionally loaded and generally poorly informed. Anonymity of internet often attracts obscure participants as has been so clearly displayed in the case of Islam.

According the study of Jiří Schneider under the title Muslim Minorities and Czech Society published recently as a part of monograph Islam and Policy in Central Europe by
Open Society Institute in Budapest, the anti-Islam camp in the Czech Republic consists of Euro-skeptics of all sorts, evangelical Christian fundamentalists, secular liberal feminists, Roman-Catholic traditionalists, opponents of Turkish European Union membership, proponents of the separation of church and state who view Islam as a religion of governance and so on. Schneider accounts common arguments of critics of Islam as follows: Islamic centers might become hotbeds of terrorism, providing foundations for its financing and logistics. Center pulpits would be misused to instigate religious intolerance and violent jihad. Islam is a synonym for the subordination of women and gender inequality. Any concession to the comprehensive aspiration of Islam or giving up general secular jurisdiction would create a parallel Muslim society. Turkish membership in the European Union would enable “Islamization” of Europe.

During last five years Czech translations of several fundamental anti-Islam books appeared in our book market. To analyze in detail standpoints of their authors exceeds range of this brief lecture. Here we can only remind some model examples and the major points of their critics of Islam. The most famous of them is Samuel Huntington’s “The Clash of Civilizations”. The book was widely discussed and is so well-known that no remarks seem to be useful here. The second famous model example under the title “Why I am not a Muslim?” was written by an author hidden under the pseudonym Ibn Warraq. He states that problems of Islam do not consist in its misinterpretation by extremists like Usama bin Ladin, but they are firmly rooted in the spiritual kernel of Islam itself. By another words nothing god can grow up if the roots are corrupted. Ibn Warraq’s critic is very emotional and his book early became cult reading of anti-Islam activists of all sorts.

Another, but much deeper, attack on Islam was written by Robert Spencer under the title “Islam without Veil”. The author incline to an opinion that the West has lost self-confidence and faith in its own spiritual values and that is why has become defenceless face to face the most rapidly growing religion. Spencer’s standpoints are in broader sense similar to that of Ibn Warraq; he also views danger of Islam not in its extremist interpretation and misuse, but right in the basement of its teaching, the Koran along with the examples of the Prophet. Fear of Islam can have much more practical reasons proceeding from demographical speculations. Muslim minorities in many western countries has become an important player in politics and some thinkers are afraid of early naissance of so called “Eurabia”. A model example of this attitude presents a book of Walter Laqueure written under an eloquent title “The Last Days of Europe: The Changing Face of a Continent”. Laqueure predicts that inexorable demographical indexes will condemn “original” Europeans to the role of passive minority enforced to respect religious and ethical principles of Islam. Czech reader can not even open Laqueure´s book to realize what are authors chances of future; the cover page itself speaks so clearly: magnificent contours of Taj Mahall shine behind broken Eiffel tower.

The future of Islam in the Czech Republic stays an open question. What seems to be sure that number of his followers in Czech lands will increase although there is no rational reason to expect that in perspective of decades will reach such percentages comparable with France, Belgium, Netherlands or Germany. Czech debate on Islam is no longer domain of scholars of various relevant specializations, religionists, historians or experts in social and political sciences. Its frequency and influence will undoubtedly increase although till now there is no implication that Czech Muslim community constitutes any real danger for society. On the contrary, in a lot of concrete situations their leading representatives showed very tolerant and liberal face. Let us remember the cause of caricatures of the Prophet or the lecture of the Pope Benedict XVI for example. Czech Muslims as they many times openly reflected in media make an effort to be appreciated part of the society afterwards they were legally registered and accepted by the state.
Jiří Schneider in his analysis also concludes fundamental problems of mutual relations between Muslims and major society: *One of the key dilemmas for any liberal society is how to conduct a fair and open discourse on critical issues without being labeled as politically incorrect or even extremist, targeted by accusations, harassed or threatened with violence. For a healthy debate to take place, those participating must be assured that their freedom of expression will be safeguarded by state authority (politicians, law enforcement and judiciary) in the face of threats.* Despite the fact that history of Muslim presence in Czech lands is so long and intricate serious debate in this respect has not started yet.