

# THE EVOLUTION OF IRAN-BOSNIA RELATIONS: FROM WARTIME ALLIANCES TO MODERN-DAY DYNAMICS

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**Abstract.** *The relationship between Iran and Bosnia and Herzegovina has evolved significantly from its origins during the Bosnian War (1992–1995) to the present day, reflecting a complex interplay of historical, religious, and geopolitical factors. Initially, Iran emerged as a crucial ally for the Bosnian Muslims during the war, providing military support, humanitarian aid, and promoting Islamic unity despite sectarian differences. Iran’s post-war influence in Bosnia was marked by the establishment of cultural centers, educational institutions, and efforts to deepen economic ties, particularly in construction, energy, and tourism sectors. However, these efforts faced significant challenges, including international sanctions on Iran, Bosnia’s complex political landscape, and its increasing alignment with Western policies, particularly concerning EU integration and NATO membership. The religious dimension of the relationship continued to play a significant role, with Iran promoting Islamic education and cultural exchange in Bosnia. However, this influence was limited by the predominance of Sunni Islam in Bosnia and competition from other Muslim-majority countries like Saudi Arabia and Turkey.*

*Despite these challenges, Iran and Bosnia maintained diplomatic relations, albeit complicated by broader geopolitical tensions, particularly between Iran and the West. Issues related to extremism and radicalism also influenced the relationship, with Bosnia’s cooperation with Western powers in counterterrorism efforts sometimes straining ties with Iran. Overall, the Iran-Bosnia relationship has demonstrated resilience, adapting to changing circumstances while finding new avenues for cooperation. The future of this relationship remains uncertain, influenced by Bosnia’s European aspirations and Iran’s complex international standing.*

**Keywords:** *Iran, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Islam, Balkans*

## Introduction

The relationship between Iran and Bosnia and Herzegovina offers a profound case study in the complexities of international relations, where religious, historical, and geopolitical factors intersect. From the early 1990s, when the Bosnian War thrust Bosnia onto the world stage, Iran played a crucial role as a supporter of the Bosnian Mus-

lims. This relationship, forged in the crucible of conflict, has since evolved, shaped by the changing geopolitical landscape, cultural exchanges, and the aspirations of both nations. This text explores the multifaceted evolution of Iran-Bosnia relations, providing a detailed analysis from the wartime alliances to the current dynamics that govern their interactions.

### **The Historical Context of Wartime Alliances**

The breakup of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s led to one of the most brutal conflicts in post-World War II Europe. The Bosnian War (1992–1995) was characterized by ethnic cleansing, genocide, and a humanitarian crisis of unprecedented proportions (Karčić, 2010). The predominantly Muslim Bosniaks, one of the war's main targets, found themselves isolated and in dire need of military and humanitarian assistance. The international community, while sympathetic, was slow to respond decisively, leaving the Bosniaks vulnerable to aggression from Bosnian Serb and Croat forces (Maurizi, 2012).

Amidst this backdrop, Iran emerged as one of the few countries willing to provide substantial support to the Bosnian Muslims. Iran's involvement in Bosnia during the war was driven by several factors, including ideological affinity, geopolitical calculations, and a desire to extend its influence into the Balkans. Despite being a Shia-majority country, Iran saw in Bosnia's Sunni Muslim population an opportunity to project itself as a leader of the Islamic world, uniting Muslims across sectarian lines in a common cause.

Iran's support for Bosnia during the war was multifaceted. Militarily – Iran provided weapons, training, and logistical support to the Bosnian government forces. This support was critical, as Bosnia was under a United Nations arms embargo that severely limited its ability to defend itself (Hadžikadunić, 2022). Iranian arms shipments, often coordinated through covert channels and in collaboration with other Muslim-majority countries like Turkey and Saudi Arabia, played a significant role in bolstering the Bosnian defense. The Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) was reportedly involved in training Bosnian fighters, enhancing their capabilities against better-armed Serb and Croat forces (Progonati, 2016).

In addition to military aid, Iran's humanitarian efforts during the war were significant. Iranian charities and governmental organizations provided essential supplies, including food, medicine, and shelter, to the besieged Bosnian population. This humanitarian assistance was crucial in alleviating the suffering of civilians and bolstering the Bosnian government's capacity to maintain order

and provide for its people during the war (Maurizi, 2012). These efforts were not just acts of charity; they were strategic moves to build goodwill and establish a lasting presence in Bosnia.

Culturally and ideologically, Iran sought to cultivate strong ties with the Bosniaks by promoting Islamic unity and resistance against aggression. Iranian cultural centers were established in Bosnia, offering religious education and spreading the Iranian model of Islamic governance. These centers aimed to influence the religious and political landscape of Bosnia, promoting a vision of Islam that aligned with Iran's revolutionary ideals (Berkolli, 2021). The Iranian government also sent religious scholars and educators to Bosnia to engage with local religious leaders and communities, fostering a sense of Islamic solidarity that transcended sectarian differences (Berkolli, 2021).

This wartime alliance, however, was not without controversy. The presence of Iranian forces and the influence of Iranian ideology in Bosnia raised concerns among Western powers, particularly the United States, which was wary of Iran's growing influence in a region so close to Europe. These concerns were compounded by reports of Iranian combatants participating in the conflict and the potential for Iran to use Bosnia as a launching pad for further influence in the Balkans. Despite these concerns, the immediate need for support in the face of a brutal conflict meant that the Bosnian leadership, led by Alija Izetbegović, accepted Iranian assistance, understanding that their survival depended on it (Representatives, 1998).

### **Post-War Relations and the Shift in Iran's Influence**

The Dayton Peace Agreement of 1995, which ended the Bosnian War, marked a turning point in Iran-Bosnia relations. With the cessation of hostilities, the nature of Iran's involvement in Bosnia began to shift. The focus moved from military support to cultural, educational, and economic engagement, as Iran sought to maintain and expand its influence in the post-war period (Hadžikadunić, 2022). Especially when keeping in mind the fact that the Dayton Agreement involved the introduction of Western peacekeep-

ing forces which additionally halted any further military cooperation between Iran and Bosnia (Kostov, 2021). However, this transition was not without challenges, as Bosnia's increasing engagement with the West and its aspirations for European integration began to limit Iran's ability to exert influence.

In the immediate aftermath of the war, Iran continued to maintain a presence in Bosnia through its cultural and educational initiatives. Iranian-funded schools, mosques, and cultural centers became a fixture in many Bosnian towns and cities, promoting Iranian culture and religious practices. The Ibn Sina Research Institute and the Mulla Sadra Foundation were among the most prominent Iranian institutions established in Bosnia, offering educational programs that aimed to strengthen ties between the two countries. These institutions also served as vehicles for promoting Shia Islam, although their influence was limited by Bosnia's predominantly Sunni population (Berkolli, 2021).

Iran's post-war strategy in Bosnia also included efforts to deepen economic ties. Several agreements were signed between the two countries aimed at boosting trade and investment, with Iranian companies showing interest in sectors such as construction, energy, and tourism. However, the overall volume of trade between Iran and Bosnia remained relatively modest, constrained by several factors. Chief among these were the international sanctions imposed on Iran, which limited its ability to engage in international trade, and Bosnia's complex political landscape, which made it difficult to navigate the bureaucratic and regulatory hurdles necessary for economic cooperation (Hadžikadunić, 2022).

Diplomatically, Iran sought to maintain strong relations with Bosnia through regular high-level visits and consultations. Iranian officials frequently visited Bosnia, and Bosnian leaders reciprocated with visits to Tehran, signaling a desire on both sides to keep the relationship alive (Karčić, *Iranian Soft Power and Religion in Bosnia: A Diplomacy of Shared Oppression*, 2022). However, the relationship was complicated by Bosnia's desire to integrate more closely with the European Union and NATO, which necessitated a cautious approach to its relations with Iran. Bosnia's alignment with Western policies, particularly on is-

ues related to Iran's nuclear program and human rights, often put it at odds with Tehran, leading to a somewhat strained diplomatic relationship. This is not surprising because the EU and the USA are the main guarantors of the existence of "Dayton Bosnia", as well as the most secure way to economic prosperity (Kostov, 2021).

Bosnia's internal political dynamics also played a significant role in shaping its relationship with Iran. The country is divided into two entities: the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, predominantly inhabited by Bosniaks and Croats, and Republika Srpska, predominantly inhabited by Serbs (Kostov, 2021). The Bosnian Serb entity, Republika Srpska, has often taken a pro-Western and pro-Israel stance, which has sometimes led to tensions with the central government in Sarajevo, particularly on issues related to Iran. This has resulted in a somewhat inconsistent approach to Iran within Bosnia's political establishment, with different factions pursuing different policies (Maurizi, 2012).

### **The Role of Religion in Post-War Iran-Bosnia Relations**

Religion has always played a central role in the relationship between Iran and Bosnia, both during and after the Bosnian War. Iran's support for Bosnian Muslims during the war was rooted in a sense of Islamic solidarity, despite the Sunni-Shia divide. This religious connection continued to influence Iran's post-war strategy in Bosnia, as the country sought to promote Islamic education and cultural exchange through its various institutions.

The spread of Iranian influence in Bosnia through religious channels was part of a broader competition for influence in the region. Saudi Arabia and Turkey, both Sunni-majority countries, also sought to expand their presence in Bosnia, promoting their own versions of Islam. Saudi Arabia, in particular, funded the construction of mosques and religious schools, while Turkey leveraged its historical and cultural ties to Bosnia to strengthen its influence (Zhang, 2023). This led to a complex dynamic in which Bosnia became a battleground for influence among different Muslim-majority countries, each seeking to promote its religious and cultural values.

Iran's religious outreach in Bosnia, however, was not without controversy. The promotion of Shia Islam in a predominantly Sunni Muslim country raised concerns among some Bosnian religious leaders and the broader population. There were fears that Iran's influence could lead to sectarian divisions within Bosnia's Muslim community, which has traditionally been characterized by a moderate and tolerant form of Islam. In response to these concerns, Iran often sought to downplay the sectarian aspect of its relationship with Bosnia, emphasizing instead the shared Islamic values and the importance of unity among Muslims (Zhang, 2023).

The role of religion in Iran-Bosnia relations also had implications for Bosnia's relationship with the West. Western powers, particularly the United States, were wary of Iran's religious and ideological influence in Bosnia, fearing that it could contribute to radicalization and instability in the region (Preilevic, 2017). These concerns were compounded by the presence of foreign fighters in Bosnia during the war, some of whom had connections to radical Islamist groups. While Iran was not directly associated with these groups, its support for Bosnia during the war and its continued religious outreach in the post-war period raised concerns about the potential for radicalization (Karčić, *Iranian Soft Power and Religion in Bosnia: A Diplomacy of Shared Oppression*, 2022).

Despite these challenges, Iran's religious and cultural initiatives in Bosnia have persisted, albeit with limited impact. The Iranian model of Islamic governance, which combines religious authority with political power, has not resonated strongly with Bosnia's Muslim population, which has historically favored a more secular and pluralistic approach to governance (Berkolli, 2021). Moreover, the influence of other Muslim-majority countries, particularly Saudi Arabia and Turkey, has often overshadowed Iran's efforts, limiting its ability to shape the religious landscape in Bosnia.

### **Economic Cooperation and Challenges**

Economic relations between Iran and Bosnia have been another important aspect of their post-war relationship, although they have not developed as robustly as either side might have hoped.

The economic ties between the two countries have been constrained by several factors, including international sanctions on Iran, Bosnia's focus on European integration, and the complex political and economic environment in Bosnia.

In the immediate post-war period, there was a strong interest in expanding economic cooperation between Iran and Bosnia. Iranian companies were particularly interested in the construction and energy sectors, seeing opportunities in Bosnia's post-war reconstruction efforts. Several joint ventures were established, and trade agreements were signed, aiming to boost economic ties (Hadžikadunić, 2022). However, the overall volume of trade remained relatively modest, with both sides facing significant challenges in realizing the full potential of their economic relationship.

One of the main obstacles to economic cooperation has been the international sanctions imposed on Iran, particularly those related to its nuclear program. These sanctions have severely limited Iran's ability to engage in international trade and investment, making it difficult for Iranian companies to operate in Bosnia (Courtney, 2019). The sanctions have also created a climate of uncertainty, deterring potential Bosnian investors and businesses from engaging with Iran. As a result, the economic relationship between the two countries has remained underdeveloped, with only sporadic instances of successful cooperation.

Another challenge has been Bosnia's complex political and economic environment. The country is still grappling with the legacy of the war, including high levels of corruption, bureaucratic inefficiency, and political instability (Kostov, 2021). These issues have made it difficult for foreign investors, including those from Iran, to navigate the regulatory landscape and establish a stable presence in the country. Moreover, Bosnia's ongoing efforts to integrate into the European Union have necessitated alignment with European standards and regulations, which have sometimes been at odds with Iran's economic practices (Bishku, 2016).

Despite these challenges, there have been some areas of successful economic cooperation between Iran and Bosnia. In the field of tourism, for example, there has been a growing interest in

promoting cultural and religious tourism between the two countries. Iranian tourists have been drawn to Bosnia's rich Islamic heritage, including its historic mosques, Ottoman-era architecture, and the legacy of the Bosnian War (Hadžikadunić, 2022). Similarly, Bosnian tourists have visited Iran, attracted by its ancient cultural sites and religious landmarks (SarajevoTimes, 2023). While the numbers have been relatively small, these exchanges have helped to strengthen people-to-people ties and foster mutual understanding.

In the area of education, Iran has offered scholarships to Bosnian students to study in Iran, particularly in fields such as Islamic studies, medicine, and engineering. These scholarships have provided opportunities for young Bosnians to gain education and experience in Iran, helping to build a cadre of individuals with strong ties to both countries (Berkolli, 2021). However, the impact of these educational exchanges has been somewhat limited, as the number of students involved remains relatively small (Barbora Chrzová, 2019), and the overall influence of Iranian education in Bosnia is constrained by the country's focus on European and Western educational models.

### **Political and Diplomatic Relations in the Contemporary Era**

In the contemporary era, the political and diplomatic relations between Iran and Bosnia have been shaped by broader geopolitical trends, including the tensions between Iran and the West. Bosnia's aspirations for European integration and its alignment with Western policies have often put it at odds with Iran, particularly on issues related to Iran's nuclear program, human rights, and regional influence.

Bosnia has generally sought to maintain a neutral stance in its foreign policy, balancing its relationships with both Iran and the West. However, this balancing act has become increasingly difficult as Bosnia has moved closer to European Union and NATO membership. The EU and NATO, both of which have a strong presence in Bosnia, have pressured the country to align its policies with Western standards (Commission, 2024), including those related to Iran.

Despite these challenges, Iran has continued to maintain a diplomatic presence in Bosnia, seeking to preserve its relationship with the country. High-level visits between Iranian and Bosnian officials have continued, with both sides expressing a desire to strengthen bilateral ties (TehranTimes, 2022). However, these efforts have been complicated by the broader geopolitical environment, including the ongoing tensions between Iran and the United States, which have had a ripple effect on Iran's relationships with other countries, including Bosnia.

The issue of radicalism and extremism has also been a significant challenge in Iran-Bosnia relations. During the Bosnian War, various foreign fighters, including those linked to radical Islamist groups, entered Bosnia to fight alongside the Bosniaks (Karčić, Iranian Soft Power and Religion in Bosnia: A Diplomacy of Shared Oppression, 2022). Some of these fighters had connections to Iran, either directly or indirectly (Progonati, 2016). In the post-war period, the presence of radical elements in Bosnia has been a source of concern for both the Bosnian government and the international community. Iran's perceived association with these elements has complicated its relationship with Bosnia, particularly in the context of global counterterrorism efforts.

Bosnia's efforts to combat radicalization and extremism have often involved cooperation with Western powers, particularly the United States and the European Union. This has sometimes put Bosnia at odds with Iran, particularly when Western policies have targeted Iranian entities or individuals suspected of involvement in radical activities (Preilevic, 2017). While Bosnia has generally sought to maintain a neutral stance, its alignment with Western counterterrorism policies has sometimes created tensions in its relationship with Iran.

### **Conclusion**

The evolution of Iran-Bosnia relations from wartime alliances to modern-day dynamics is a complex and multifaceted story. What began as a pragmatic alliance forged in the crucible of war has evolved into a relationship shaped by a wide range of factors, including geopolitical shifts, religious affiliations, economic interests, and cultural exchanges.

In the immediate post-war period, Iran played a crucial role in supporting Bosnia's recovery, providing military, humanitarian, and cultural assistance. However, as Bosnia has moved closer to European integration and the global geopolitical environment has shifted, the nature of the Iran-Bosnia relationship has changed. Today, the relationship is characterized by a delicate balancing act, as both countries navigate the challenges and opportunities presented by the evolving international landscape.

Despite the challenges, the relationship between Iran and Bosnia has shown resilience, adapting to changing circumstances and finding new avenues for cooperation. Whether in the fields of education, culture, or economic exchange, the ties between these two countries continue to evolve, shaped by the legacies of the past and the dynamics of the present.

As Bosnia continues on its path toward European integration and as Iran navigates its complex relationship with the West, the future of Iran-Bosnia relations remains uncertain. However, the foundations laid during the Bosnian War and the subsequent years suggest that this relationship will continue to play a significant role in both countries' foreign policies for the foreseeable future.

In conclusion, the Iran-Bosnia relationship serves as a unique example of how historical alliances can evolve into complex and enduring partnerships, influenced by a wide range of factors, including geopolitical shifts, religious affiliations, and cultural exchanges. As such, it offers valuable insights into the broader dynamics of international relations, particularly in regions marked by conflict and diversity. The evolution of Iran-Bosnia relations is a testament to the enduring impact of history on contemporary international relations and highlights the importance of understanding the past to navigate the complexities of the present and future.

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