

Country Report on Islamisation: Czech Republic
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Ladies and gentleman,

let me say a few words at the beginning of my presentation. I'm coming from a country that was 40 years under communist rule. For 40 years Western Europe meant for us a space of freedom and hope. Now, in the year 2007, in Brussels, the capitol of Europe, a gathering of ordinary, law obeying people has to assemble almost in illegality and ordinary citizens, who never did anything wrong or illegal have to hide their identities. For me that means, that something has just gone wrong. Not everyone has to agree with your ideas, but we should have the right to express them freely, without being afraid of being harassed or even threaten.

That's just a short remark for the beginning; let me now go to the main topic – Muslims in Czech Republic.

1) BRIEF HISTORY

The history of Muslims in former Czechoslovakia is quite interesting in some points. Muslims in Czechoslovakia first organized themselves in 1934 and, from the very beginning, they tried to receive an official government recognition; yet this was not completed at that time due to purely legal and administrative matters. The early leader of the community was a Czech convert, Muhammad Abdullah Brikcius, an independent journalist and traveller. In World War Two, he shared the illusion of many that German Nazis could liberate Muslims from the colonial yoke, especially from the British rule. He therefore published pro-Nazi articles in Czech Muslim and non-Muslim periodicals, and also made friends with Arab Muslim personalities of a similar orientation, such as the notorious mufti of Jerusalem Amin al-Husayni. Czech Muslims consequently had problems after the fall of Nazi Germany (largely due to Brikcius' doubtful reputation), and Muslims in general kept a low profile in Czechoslovakia throughout the Communist rule (1948-1989). They suffered from limitations imposed on their activities (as all religious communities in Communist countries) but were never exposed to a real persecution. This can be explained by two facts: first, Communist officials in Czechoslovakia perceived Muslims as a rather exotic phenomenon that could hardly threaten their power (hinted at by Mohamed Ali Šilhavý in a journal interview in the 1990's); second, communist Czechoslovakia kept close friendly ties to the so-called "progressive" Arab regimes (especially South Yemen, Libya, Syria, and Algeria) and therefore would not risk stirring up international troubles by intimidating local Muslims (confirmed by Mohamed Ali Šilhavý in an interview for the *Dingir* journal). Due to the latter fact, Arab students got scholarships for studying at universities in Czechoslovakia, with fairly many of them marrying Czech or Slovak wives and establishing themselves in the country. In this way, they formed the basic core of the Muslim community in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. (The internal structure of this community reflects the internal social developments of the Arab and Muslim world: the Arab students who came to Czechoslovakia very early, until the 1960's, were largely secularized and non-religious. The Islamic engagement among the students grew quickly from the 1970's on, and the outwardly "more Islamic" Arabs were typically the students of technology and medicine, not humanities.) Thus a Muslim prayer room could be found in almost every university city in former Czechoslovakia.

2) STATISTICS

There are no reliable figures as to how many Muslims really live in the Czech Republic. Mohamed Ali Šilhavý (interviewed by the BBC Czech Service, September 20, 2001)

estimated the numbers at about 20,000 Muslims in the Czech Republic, among whom some 400 could be native Czechs. The number of converts seems to grow, and probably as many as 80% of them are women, which more completely adopt cultural patterns (not only the basic faith as such)..

So far, no celebrity converts to Islam are known in the Czech Republic although it is noteworthy that at least two prominent Czech Orientalists of the Communist era were secret Muslims (a professed Islamic adherence is certain of old-generation Mideast scholars Ivan Hrbek and Jiří Bečka at their young age; Czech Muslim author Petr Pelikán has academic education in Arab and Oriental studies; finally, going back to earlier generations, some speculate that Felix Tauer, who has translated the *Thousand and One Nights* into Czech, may have been a Muslim secretly).

As for the non-Czech Muslims who live in the country, most of them are Arabs (see above), apparently followed by Afghans, sub-Saharan Africans, Pakistanis, refugees from Bosnia-Herzegovina, and people from the Central Asian and Caucasian republics of the former Soviet Union. Turks, Persians, and Kurds are relatively very few in the Czech Republic.

3) MAINSTREAM MUSLIM ORGANIZATIONS

Ústředí muslimských obcí (*Main Office of Muslim Associations*) – officially registered as a religious community on September 17, 2004, which gives Islam in the Czech Republic an institutional recognition and entitles the community to state subsidies. (To a limited extent, it can also work in Czech prisons with Muslim inmates. However, the community has not fulfilled the general requirements for other activities based on religion, such as teaching Islam in schools or holding marriage ceremonies recognized by government.)

The government-registered *Main Office of Muslim Associations* serves as an umbrella platform of the following organizations:

- 1) Islámská nadace v Praze (*Islamic Foundation in Prague*);
- 2) Islámská nadace v Brně (*Islamic Foundation in Brno* - the second-largest city in the Czech Republic);
- 3) Všeobecný svaz muslimských studentů (*General Union of Muslim Students*, or, the name they use on their website is: the *Muslim Student Union*).

The joint platform can be labelled (at least in administrative terms) as the "mainstream Islam" in the Czech Republic. The president of the *Main Office of Muslim Associations* is Mohamed Ali Šilhavý, a native Czech who is now 90 years old, and a Muslim since he was 20. Also due to his advanced age, the *Main Office* is mostly represented by its two vice-presidents: one of them is Vladimír Sáňka, again a native Czech convert to Islam who leads the *Islamic Foundation in Prague*; the other vice-president is an Iraqi Arab by origin whose name is Munib Hasan al-Rawi (transcriptions used by himself or in the media seem to vary, and probably the most common form is Muneeb Hassan). The latter man represents a typical model of an Arab having come to former Czechoslovakia for university studies, later deciding to remain in the country after he graduated. Mr. al-Rawi leads the *Islamic Foundation in Brno*.

Outside the officially registered platform stand two bodies with a status of civil associations that, however, also pursue religious activities. Yet in terms of media activities, the latter of the organizations is far from marginal:

- 1) Svaz islámských kulturních center v Praze (*Union of Islamic Cultural Centres in Prague*) –

purely Turkish in membership; related to the worldwide network of "Islamic cultural centres" financed from Turkey;

2) *Muslimská unie (Muslim Union)* – officially established on January 20, 2001. Although kept mostly by native Czech converts to Islam, the leader of the Union is one Muhammad Abbas al-Mu'tasim (transcriptions used by himself or in the media seem to vary, and probably the most common forms are Mohamed Abbás and Mohamad Abbás), again an example of an Arab who settled in the Czech Republic after his university graduation here. He comes from the Sudan and is a son of a Sudanese diplomat. The Union is highly active in publications on the internet, where it has also paid an extraordinary attention to the events of September 11, 2001. Mr. Abbas's connection to Third World Relief Agency, notorious jihadist organisation, are well documented. Mr. Abbas applied by the Czech Court for official recognition of TWRA already in 1996.

4) MOSQUE CONFLICTS IN THE CZECH REPUBLICS

1995 and again 2003-2004 – Teplice

1995-1996 – Brno

2003 – Orlová

2003 – downtown Prague (but the Islamic Centre was established on the outskirts of Prague already in 1999 without problems – it had been announced that there would not be any mosque, and the building does not bear characteristic signs of a mosque)

Open days for the public were held in the Brno mosque, apparently impressing the local public and media (April 29-May 3, 2001). Yet the effect of the initiative was shortly after somewhat overshadowed by repercussions of the 9/11 events.

5) MAINSTREAM MUSLIM ORGANIZATIONS AFTER THE EVENTS OF 9/11

a) Immediate reactions

STATEMENT (by the Islamic Foundations in Prague and Brno) on September 13, 2001 (quoted by the Czech Press Agency, the ČTK, on September 15, 2001):

"The Muslim community in the Czech Republic condemns terrorism in all its forms."

"We join the expressions of solidarity with the people of the United States, and we support the offer of the government of the Czech Republic to help all who have been affected."

STATEMENT (by the Islamic Foundations in Prague and Brno) on September 16, 2001 (quoted by the Czech Press Agency, the ČTK, on September 17, 2001):

This statement protested the frequent media use of the phrase "Islamic terrorism", and also was filed as an official complaint to the RRTV (*Radio and Television Broadcasting Council* – a public body monitoring the fairness of the media; it grants broadcasting licenses and is authorized to order financial sanctions to punish especially grave cases of media ethics' violations). (The protest has been confirmed by Mohamed Ali Šilhavý in an interview with the BBC Czech Service, September 20, 2001).

Text of the statement reads: "Regardless of who committed [the attacks in the U.S.], the accusation cannot be generalized to include a whole nation or even all followers of a certain faith. This is just because the very perpetration of this act makes the culprits stand outside religion, if they had ever claimed allegiance to any."

The Právo daily reported on October 4, 2001 that some Muslims protested against some formulations of a declaration made by the then Czech prime minister (Miloš Zeman), in which

he supported the war on terror. The protest statement (expressing the feeling that some of the formulations might stir up hate against Muslims) was issued by one *Islamic Emergency Committee* (Islámský výbor pro mimořádné situace) based in Ostrava, the third-largest city of the Czech Republic. But this organization has otherwise never been heard of, neither before nor after this statement, and the mainstream Muslim organizations in the Czech Republic *in principle* supported the prime minister's declaration (with certain reservations against the wording used).

b) Subsequent reactions in audiovisual media

Vladimír Sáňka (Na rovinu, Czech Service of the Radio Free Europe, September 23, 2001) Radio interview in a programme, significantly called in Czech *Na rovinu*, which can be possibly translated as a Frank Talk. The programme hosted Mr. Sáňka, two young Arab Muslim men who were students at Czech universities, and a Czech Christian theologian who has been prominently active in the ecumenical dialogue (Ivan Odilo Štampach). The programme was peculiar with the fact that all of its Muslim guests openly challenged the claim that Muslims could be behind the 9/11 attacks. One of the Arab Muslim students in the studio said he doubted that Usama Bin Ladin would be "technically so advanced to be able to perform such a thing", meaning the New York and Washington attacks. Then came the official Czech Muslim representative, Mr. Sáňka, who said: "I think it is very important to ask to whom the [attacks] could bring any benefit. Even in the Czech press last Monday [i.e. September 17] I read an opinion that Israel is behind that, because Israel is the only country in the world that can benefit from that. And, of course, there is another opinion I heard on the TV yesterday that various lobbies from the arms industry could be behind that."

It seems what Mr. Sáňka meant was a quotation of no one else than Ahmad Yasin, the spiritual leader of the Hamas movement (indeed brought in the *Právo* daily in that day within an article on 9/11).

Vladimír Sáňka (Radiožurnál, October 3, 2001)

Live interview on the Czech National Radio, with a very-well prepared and resourceful moderator (Petr Schwarz).

Sáňka: "From the beginning, we have been condemning the 9/11 attacks and saying they had absolutely nothing in common with Islam."

Moderator: "It has already become obvious now that the suicide attacks were conducted by fanatics linked to some radical Muslim organizations." As the Czech Muslim representative attempted again to question the identity of the 9/11 hijackers, the moderator brought a reminder that the FBI had already identified each of them under several aliases and fake documents used during their lifetime, and Mr. Sáňka seemed to admit this explanation. He insisted, however, that the evidence found by the FBI should better be published. Consequently, the moderator mentioned one part of the evidence: that Bin Ladin allegedly telephoned his mother on September 10, 2001 and told her that they would be out of contact for some time. But, Mr. Sáňka countered that Usama Bin Ladin insisted on his innocence.

The moderator then asked directly: "At least as far as the FBI has announced, the evidence cannot be published now for intelligence security reasons. However, leading [Czech] politicians have seen the evidence and believe that it is sufficient for them. Do you rather believe Usama than the politicians?"

At which the Czech Muslim representative replied: "I do not want to say which party I prefer."

The interview continued in the same spirit until the moderator said he had the impression that

his guest wanted to take the part with Muslims just at any price. After this, there were call-ins from listeners, some of whom were equally apalled by the stance of Mr. Sáníka.

Vladimír Sáníka (his own opinion article in *Mladá fronta Dnes*, the broadest-circulation Czech broadsheet daily, on October 9, 2001)

He stressed that both Muslims in the Czech Republic and Islamic spiritual authorities in general "have unambiguously rejected terrorism in any form". However, he did not fail to add that "Muslims throughout the world have lost a lot after September 11. It could even seem that the attacks were perpetrated by an enemy of Islam."

Vladimír Sáníka (Na hraně, ČT, October 9, 2001)

Public discussion (talk show) on the Czech National TV, aired on October 9, 2001 but shot earlier, probably in the last days of September 2001.

"World media has brought some information ... that rather infirms the lists of the hijackers, saying in fact that immediately ... after the attacks, some lists of Arab names have been published ..., yet now we already know that many of the names were not genuine, that the persons are still alive, and that there are documents proving this."

Munib Hasan al-Rawi (Nedělní partie, Prima, October 14, 2001)

Talk show on a Czech private TV.

It was Munib Hasan al-Rawi here who repeated the argument that "no evidence has been presented that [Usama bin Ladin] was guilty".

Muhammad Abbas al-Mu'tasim in an on-line interview with the readers of iDnes, an internet version of the Czech largest-circulation broadsheet (September 19, 2006).

Writing on 9/11:

"Regarding what happened in New York, I do not believe the videos that come out just any time when George Bush needs them."

Writing on terror attacks in general:

"There have been many attacks that are dubious. Some of them have been executed by intelligence services, armament companies, or people who have an interest in inciting a war. It has mostly come out that no Muslim would be legitimately sentenced for any of the huge medialized terrorist acts. The opposite is true: the more time passess, the more discrepancies become apparent, whether it was in London, Madrid, or Beslan."

The mention of London is especially interesting because the union condemned the London attacks of July 2005 on its website. This website, called the *Muslim Times* (Muslimské listy), has already received quite a prominent position in the Czech-language cyberspace as a forum of articles that question any Muslim involvement in the 9/11 attacks, or of reports that praise the so-called "Iraqi resistance" or the Taliban movement in Afghanistan. Mr. Abbas who is the chief editor of the server defends this editorial policy by pointing out that "most" of the materials he publishes comes from Western media, such as The Independent and Ha'aretz dailies.

However weird this reputation may be, Mr. Abbas has become likewise known beyond the internet. On December 1, 2004, he was invited to an international inter-religious dialogue event in Prague , and has taken part in other public activities.

WHATEVER IT BE, THE CONTRADICTORY SELF-PRESENTATION OF THE CZECH MUSLIM COMMUNITY TOWARD THE 9/11 ATTACKS HAS APPARENTLY RUN WITHOUT ANY ATTENTION FROM CZECH AUTHORITIES. ON THE OTHER HAND CZECH AUTHORITIES ARE MAINLY STRONGLY SUPPORTING THE WAR ON TERROR, ARE GENERALLY ANTI-IMMIGRANT AND ARE NOT HESITATING TO GIVE OFFICIAL COVER TO CONFERENCES ON RADICAL ISLAM LIKE THE 2006 „ISLAM AND THE WEST“ IN THE FOREIGN MINISTRY (VERY BLUNT SPEECH WAS GIVEN BY FOREIGN MINISTER ALEXANDR VONDRA, CAN BE FOUND IN MIDDLE EAST QUARTERLY FROM SUMMER 2007), WHERE DANIEL PIPES, HANS WERDMÖLDER OR URBAIN VERMEULEN TOOK PART. GENERALLY THE ATMOSPHERE IN CZECH REPUBLIC IS MUCH MORE RELAXING THAN IN THE WEST AND PEOPLE DON'T FEAR TO EXPRESS THEIR OPINION REGARDLESS OF HOW MUCH IT IS POLITICALLY INCORRECT.