



**HAL**  
open science

# Death and the Nationalist. Martyrdom, War Memory and Veteran Identity among Bosnian Muslims

Xavier Bougarel

► **To cite this version:**

Xavier Bougarel. Death and the Nationalist. Martyrdom, War Memory and Veteran Identity among Bosnian Muslims. Xavier Bougarel; Elissa Helms; Ger Duijzings. The New Bosnian Mosaic. Identities, Memories and Moral Claims in a Post-War Society, Ashgate: Aldershot, pp.167-191, 2007. halshs-02610502

**HAL Id: halshs-02610502**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-02610502>**

Submitted on 17 May 2020

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

« **Death and the Nationalist : Martyrdom, War Memory and Veteran Identity among Bosnian Muslims** », in: Xavier Bougarel / Elissa Helms / Ger Duijzings (eds.), *The New Bosnian Mosaic. Identities, Memories and Moral Claims in a Post-War Society*, Ashgate, Aldershot, 2007, pp. 167-191.

**Xavier Bougarel**

Memory issues have played a crucial role in the Yugoslav crisis. In particular, communist narratives of World War II have been replaced by new official ones that rehabilitated the main nationalist forces of that period and denounced as a myth the Titoist insistence on ‘Brotherhood and Unity’ among the South Slavs (e.g. Höpken 1999; Duijzings, Grandits, this volume). In the late 1980s, these new ‘politics of war memory’ (Ashplant, Dawson and Roper 2000) led to the reopening of mass graves (e.g. Bax 1997), to outright competition over the commemoration of real or alleged genocides (e.g. Denich 1994; Hayden 1994), and later to the neglect or destruction of monuments celebrating the Partisans, the erection of new monuments dedicated to local ‘quislings’, and the reburial of some of them – all practices Katherine Verdery terms ‘the political life of dead bodies’ (Verdery 1999).

However, if the political life of the dead bodies from World War II has been explored, the same does not hold true for those related to the more recent wars. This observation applies especially to fallen soldiers. Some social scientists have scrutinized related issues such as the heroic male characters mobilized during the Yugoslav wars (e.g. Čolović 1993; Senjković 2002; Žanić 1998), while others turned their attention to the figure of the victim and its gendered nature (e.g. Spasić 2000; Žarkov 2001; Helms, this volume). But fallen soldiers as such have remained almost unnoticed, despite a few precursory works dealing with Croatia (Rihtman-Augustin 1993; Roćenović 1993). This fact reveals another flaw in the analyses of post-war Bosnia-Herzegovina: in spite of the fact that they constitute about two-thirds of the adult male population in this country, war veterans are rarely taken into account as a new and specific social group produced by the war.<sup>1</sup>

Against this background, I would like to focus on the way in which the memory of fallen soldiers is commemorated by Bosnian Muslims. Such an examination of the rise of a new public cult of *šehidi* (religious martyrs<sup>2</sup>) not only sheds light on the transformations of Muslim national identity, but helps to understand how these changes are related to other issues such as controversies over the meaning of the war (see also Duijzings, Maček, this volume), and the reshuffling of various social divides and normative hierarchies within the Muslim community.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Both Natalija Bašić and Ivana Maček have insisted on the specificity of the war experience of veterans, but their rise as a socially distinct and politically active group remains at the margins of these analyses (see Bašić 2004; Maček 2001, 2005). For a study of veterans as a new social group produced by war, see for example Kriger 2003.

<sup>2</sup> From the Arabic word ‘*shahid*’: witness of the Faith, martyr fallen while fighting on God’s Path. On the cult of *shahids* in the Muslim world, see among others Brown 2003; Adelkhah 1998: 122-7; Mayeur-Jahouen 2002.

<sup>3</sup> This chapter is based on material I collected during dissertation fieldwork in the 1990s (Bougarel 1999a, 2001b, 2002), and on interviews with veterans and representatives of veteran organizations I conducted in

## Reislamicization, Militarization and the New Cult of *Šehidi*

In the 1990s, Muslim fallen soldiers were referred to with increasing frequency as *šehidi*. This is particularly obvious in the case of official institutions: in 1993, the Party of Democratic Action (SDA) set up *Fatma*, an association dedicated to ‘the care of children of *šehidi* and fallen soldiers’ (Fatma, 2003), and, a year later, the Foundation for the Families of *Šehidi* and War Disabled. In both cases, the honorary president of these SDA-affiliated organizations was party and state President, Alija Izetbegović himself. In March 1994, the Islamic Community (*Islamska zajednica*) turned the second day of the festivities marking the end of Ramadan (*ramazanski bajram*) into the Day of *Šehidi* (*dan šehida*). But this shift was perceptible among the population as well; during the war, the expression ‘*preselio se na ahiret kao šehid*’ (‘went over to the world beyond as a *šehid*’) became more and more frequent in the death notices that were published by local newspapers or pasted to community buildings and trees.

To be sure, the cult of *šehidi* in itself is nothing new in Bosnia-Herzegovina: its origins date back to the Ottoman period (Palavestra 2004: 491-5; Popović 1996). In the late 1980s, Tone Bringa noted that some *šehid* graves were still being venerated in rural central Bosnia (Bringa 1995: 171-7). Such practices, however, were linked to the magical powers of these *turbe* (mausoleums) rather than the heroic military feats of the dead. It is also clear that, at the time of Bringa’s study, a majority of Bosnian Muslims ignored the very concept of *šehid* or considered it obsolete and devoid of any practical importance. Its rapid spread during the war thus does not constitute a mere ‘awakening’ of tradition, but rather one aspect of the nation-building and reislamicization processes initiated by the SDA and the *Islamska zajednica*. The reintroduction of the word ‘*šehid*’ into Bosnian political discourse can in fact be dated to the ceremony organized by the SDA in Foča on 25 August 1990, which commemorated the massacres perpetrated by *četnici* against the local Muslim population in August 1942 (see also Duijzings, this volume).

In order to better understand this new cult of *šehidi*, one has to keep in mind the main features of the reislamicization policies initiated during the war in the Muslim-held territories of Bosnia-Herzegovina. First of all, these were mainly ‘top-down’, authoritarian policies, in which political and religious leaders strove to impose their own conception of Islam and definition of Muslim national identity upon a largely secular population (see also Maček, this volume). At the same time, the SDA tried to take over the role previously played by the League of Communists and to turn Islam into the new ideological criterion for the selection of political and military elites (Bougarel 1999a, 2001b). These policies were not only pursued in war-time circumstances, but rested on a deliberate attempt to islamicize the meaning of the war. For example, the slogan promoting the idea that the Serb and Croat genocidal projects or Western indifference to the plight of the Bosnian Muslims were ‘just because we are Muslims’ (‘*samo zato što smo muslimani*’) was already present in speeches held by political and religious leaders on the eve of the war (Bougarel 1995), and remained one of the key elements of the war rhetoric aimed at the local Muslim population.<sup>4</sup>

---

2001 and 2002 as part of a research project on local level institutions in Bosnia-Herzegovina (World Bank 2002).

<sup>4</sup> At times, SDA leaders even stated that the war had happened ‘only because we are *bad* Muslims’. In October 1994, for example, Alija Izetbegović told the soldiers of the 7<sup>th</sup> Muslim Brigade that ‘we had to endure this inferno to return to the right path, to remember who we are and what we are, to remember that we carry the legacy of faith, the legacy of Islam, and that we have the duty to protect it in these regions’ (Izetbegović 1994).

In April 1992, the *Islamska zajednica* started labelling Bosnian Muslims who had been killed fighting the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA) and Serb paramilitaries 'šehidi', and some imams or local warlords brandished this word in order to stress their religious motivation. It was only in 1993, however, after the last Yugoslav *Reisu-l-ulema*, Jakup Selimoski, had been removed and former officers of the Bosnian Territorial Defence had been marginalized, that the SDA was able to wield extended control over both the religious and the military apparatuses (Bougarel 1999a; Hećimović 1998; Hoare 2004). Despite the resistance put up by some officers and ordinary soldiers, the Army of the Republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina (ARBiH) became the site of various reislamization practices, as illustrated by the almost compulsory character of the ceremonies linked to the main religious holidays, the appointment of imams as assistant officers for morale and religious issues, and the formation of distinct religious units such as the famous 7<sup>th</sup> Muslim Brigade based in Zenica. More and more, Islam began to serve an ideological function similar to that of 'Brotherhood and Unity' in the Yugoslav People's Army. However, in a sort of reversal that appears quite frequently in SDA rhetoric, party leaders cast reislamization practices as simple respect for tradition and justified the use of the army as a place for religious re-socialization with the argument that the army should 'resemble its own nation' (Izetbegović 1995a: 44).

A turning point in this instrumentalization process occurred in January 1994 at a seminar dedicated to the role of Islam as the 'spiritual force of the defence' (Press Centar ARBiH 1994), which brought together high-ranking officers and *ulemas* (religious scholars). On this occasion, Fikret Muslimović, recently appointed as the new head of the Department of Morale (*Uprava za moral*), criticized the outdated anticlerical attitudes of some officers, as well as the illusory desire to depoliticize the Bosnian Army, stating:

It is desirable that commanders, and especially those holding key responsibilities, adapt their behaviour to the religious tradition of their own nation during events expressing patriotic feelings, and that they support the main objectives of the liberation struggle (at official gatherings), or when tribute is paid to the *šehidi* (at burials, for example). In such circumstances, in which respect for the victims of genocide is expressed with strong emotion, officers should show that they are aware of the fact that the genocide against our nation is conducted *precisely with the purpose of eliminating our religious traditions*. (Muslimović 1994: 93-4; emphasis added)

Of course, the term 'šehid' is not the only one that gives meaning to the struggle and death of Bosnian Army soldiers. In poems and songs written during the war, living and fallen soldiers alike are described as 'knights' ('*vitezovi*') and 'heroes' ('*junaci*'), bound to the epic tradition of the Ottoman Empire ('*gazije*') and the Partisan movement ('*heroji*') (Žanić 1998). This image of a male hero defending his nation and his family is often complemented by that of the passive and powerless female victim (*žrtva*) (see Helms, this volume), and therefore represents a typical example of gendered nationalism (e.g. Goldstein 2001; Moser and Clark 2001; Yuval-Davis 1997). However, in Bosnian Muslim wartime art and poetry, the figure of the *šehid* remains by far the most important, since it joins together heroic behaviour, religious motivation, and ultimate sacrifice. Muharem Omerdić, author of the first *fatwa* (legal advice) labelling Muslim fallen soldiers *šehidi*, issued on 28 April 1992 (Hodžić 2003: 19-21), emphasizes that *šehidi* are chosen by Allah among the best believers, that they occupy a privileged place in Heaven and, therefore, should not be considered dead (Omerdić 1997).

In official speeches and documents, the most frequent expression is '*šehidi i poginuli borci*' ('*šehidi* and fallen soldiers'), the second term referring to non-Muslims and non-

believers who fought in the Bosnian Army. In both cases, however, the latter term remains secondary, or even derogatory, in comparison to the first one. In November 1998, on the sixth anniversary of the 7<sup>th</sup> Muslim Brigade, Alija Izetbegović addressed its soldiers in the following terms: ‘I came to recite with you the *fatiha* [the first surat of the Qur’an] for the *šehidi* of the Seventh, for all the fallen soldiers [*pali borci*] and for all the innocent victims [*nevine žrtve*] of the recent war’ (Izetbegović 1999b: 146). In this sentence, *šehidi*, fallen soldiers and civilian victims form three distinct, concentric and hierarchic circles. What is more, the idea that the *fatiha* can be recited for ‘all the innocent victims’ of the war suggests that, in Bosnia-Herzegovina, all of them are Muslims.

In wartime circumstances, Islam was expected to bolster the fighting spirit of the Bosnian Army and to broaden the primarily local motivation of its soldiers. According to Muharem Omerdić, ‘the day when the ideal of religious martyrdom was awakened in the hearts of Bosnian boys and girls, victories over the enemy started to accumulate’ (Omerdić 1997: 5-6). After the war, the cult of *šehidi* has remained a central element in the commemorative practices of the SDA and the *Islamska zajednica*, its main function being to cultivate the remembrance of fallen soldiers and to influence the character of nascent war memory:

The *šehid* cemeteries that have spread all over Bosnia, across its devastated cities and villages, are the guarantee of our future and a testimony to Bosniac invincibility. They are the roots out of which an even stronger Nation, Faith, and State are growing. ... The *šehid* cemeteries are and should remain at the centre of the memories of all Bosniacs, and not only of the families [of the *šehidi*]. (Omerdić 1997: 5-6)

The importance attached to the cult of *šehidi* is not only reflected in official speeches, popular songs and death notices. Many streets and squares have been named after prominent *šehidi*, and the public space has been increasingly occupied by *šehid* cemeteries (beginning with the most famous one at Kovači in Sarajevo – see Figure 7.2), by monuments and fountains dedicated to local *šehidi*, and by commemorative plaques affixed to school and university buildings, public service offices and workplaces.<sup>5</sup> Since 1994, the Day of *šehidi*, at the end of Ramadan, has been devoted to visits to the graves of *šehidi* and to *šehid* families.<sup>6</sup> The memory of the *šehidi* has been evoked on many other occasions, such as the reburial of war victims excavated from mass graves, anniversaries of the founding of military units, celebrations of important battles, and the inauguration of rebuilt or brand new mosques. In this way, the cult of *šehidi* structures both space and time for the Muslim community, closely following the extent of its territory, emphasizing the imprint of war on its recovering social life, drawing new boundaries between profane space and sacred space, Islamic time and secular time.<sup>7</sup>

### **Polysemy and Paradox Surrounding the Cult of *Šehidi***

<sup>5</sup> By the early 2000s, there were 154 *šehid* cemeteries in the Sarajevo Canton (Fond kantona Sarajeva 2001: 6) and, in the municipality of Sarajevo Centar alone, 779 plaques have been put in place to celebrate the memory of soldiers killed during the siege of the city (Općina Centar 2003).

<sup>6</sup> Visiting cemeteries during the festivities at the end of Ramadan (*ramazanski bajram*) is a tradition predating the war, but these visits have been transformed from a private ceremony into a patriotic gathering attended by politicians, army officers and delegations of veteran associations. Moreover, the institution of the Day of *Šehidi* is also aimed at commemorating the beginning of the war on 6 April 1992, which was the second day of *ramazanski bajram* in 1992.

<sup>7</sup> On similar ‘politics of war memory’ in Serb- and Croat-held territories, see Duijzings, Grandits, this volume.

The purpose of the seminar organized by the Department of Morale in January 1994 was not only to make reislamization activities in the Bosnian Army official, but also to gain firmer control over them. Participants deplored the anarchic use of religious symbols, which ‘ranges from mere kitsch or bad taste to the crude and improper use of religion’ (Muminović 1994: 84), and in particular attacked units ‘in which the ostentatious display of religious symbols is used for concealing criminal greed and activities’ (Muslimović 1994: 92). At the same time, however, they had difficulties in defining the exact content of their own reislamization policies. The issue of *džihad* (*ihad*, holy war) is probably the best illustration of their dilemmas. Enes Karić, professor at the Faculty of Islamic Sciences in Sarajevo, asserted, for example, that the Bosnian Army was waging a *džihad*, since it was fighting to ‘safeguard the free expression of Islam, to protect goods, life, honour, and dignity’ (Karić 1994: 75). According to him, ‘if Muslims need a state in order to defend these values, then the building of this state represents – from a religious point of view – a *džihad* par excellence!’ (Karić 1994: 76). Nonetheless, he recommended careful thought about ‘which rhetoric to choose for internal or external purposes, in the short or the long run’ (Karić 1994: 77), since the resort to *džihad* could be used by Serb and Croat propaganda to stir up ‘European islamophobia’ and could also give rise to strong resistance within the Bosnian Army itself:

Some soldiers [are fighting] out of patriotism, others out of patriotism and religious inspiration, still others out of courage and heroism, or to protect their family and property, etc. For this reason, it would not be advisable to crush the diversity of these motivations that make up the mosaic of the heroic Bosniac resistance put up by the Bosniacs, and especially not by imposing something that could be unfavourably received by soldiers, or at least by some groups of them. (Karić 1994: 77)

Throughout the war, references to *džihad* made by Bosnian *ulemas* have most often remained implicit, as for example through the enumeration of the main motives that can justify resorting to *džihad*. Outside the religious institutions, only foreign volunteers coming from the Muslim world and local soldiers belonging to the religious units defined the ongoing war as a *džihad*. Suljeman Kurtanović, an imam fighting with the 7<sup>th</sup> Muslim Brigade, for example, declared that the transformation of Bosnian Muslims into a ‘nation of *mudžahidi* [*mujaheddins*]’ had freed them from their political immaturity, from their feeling of cultural inferiority:

The time is gone, inch’Allah, when my people were ‘[nationally] undetermined’, or ‘Serbs of Islamic faith’, or ‘Croats of Islamic faith’, ‘*poturice*’ [‘half-Turks’, derogatory term for Muslims], traitors to the faith of their ancestors. ... The time has come when we have proven that we really have sound foundations, that all of us, or at least a large majority of us, are *mudžahidi*, that *džihad* is our path and our choice, our destiny, the creator of our destiny. ... No child will believe any more in the toy called ‘Brotherhood and Unity’, in a community shared with perpetrators and murders. The young generations have seen and understood who our open or covert enemies are. The lesson of *četnici* and *ustaše* has been taught to them by the tenacity of the *mudžahidi* and the graves of the *šehidi*. (Kurtanović 1993)

Within the general Bosnian Muslim population, however, it was rare to find anyone who considered the war a *džihad*, or who saw a clear link between the concepts of *šehidi* and *mudžahidi*. In the media and in everyday conversations, the term ‘*mudžahid*’ referred first of all to foreign volunteers from the Muslim world, and often carried a negative connotation (see

also Maček, Stefansson, this volume).<sup>8</sup> In contrast, the most frequent terms used for labelling the war – ‘resistance to aggression’, ‘struggle against fascism’ – originated in international law or Titoist rhetoric. As for the Bosnian authorities, they defined the war as external aggression, rejecting any interpretation that would frame it as a civil or religious war. In this case as well, the rare hints at *džihad* were only meant for a selected audience. In March 1994, Alija Izetbegović urged the SDA Convention to prepare for peace and, following the Prophet’s example, to switch ‘from a small to a big battle’ (Izetbegović 1995b: 78). This phrasing alluded to the distinction existing in Islam between the small, worldly and military *jihad*, and the big, inner and spiritual *jihad*.

This de-linking of the related concepts of *mudžahidi* and *šehidi*, *džihad* and *šehadet*<sup>9</sup> helps to explain why, at the same time as the term ‘*šehid*’ has been gaining currency, it has also partly lost its religious meaning, to the point where it has begun to encompass all defenders of the national cause. This nationalist dimension is perceptible even among the *ulemas*, as shown by the writings of Sulejman Kurtanović. It is even more obvious among other segments of the Bosnian Muslim population, where references to *šehidi* can appear against a completely secular backdrop and are sometimes more reminiscent of the Titoist epic tradition than of the Ottoman or early Islamic ones.<sup>10</sup> A clear sign that the term ‘*šehid*’ has been undergoing a process of secularisation are the graves marked ‘*Bosanski šehid*’ (‘Bosnian *Šehid*’) that can be found in parks and other public places (see Figure 7.3). In this case, the title ‘*šehid*’ is given to an unknown person whose personal beliefs and motivations, and possibly even religious identity, remain a mystery.

More generally, as the term ‘*šehid*’ has become widespread, there has been a growing fluctuation in both its definition and uses. During the war, SDA leaders endeavoured to apply this term to all Muslim war victims. In his opening speech of the first *Bošnjački sabor* (Bosniac Assembly) in September 1993, for example, the writer Alija Isaković defined as *šehidi* all those ‘who went over to the world beyond as soldiers or as civilians, from the children in the incubators of our maternity hospitals to the centenarians in our old people’s homes’, for ‘all have borne witness to the truth with their lives and in this way have earned God’s blessing’ (Isaković 1994: 378). A similar use of the term ‘*šehid*’ was apparent after the war, especially during religious ceremonies dedicated to the victims of wartime massacres. When used in such a comprehensive way, the concept of *šehid* not only loses its religious meaning, but also its role in the building of new boundaries and hierarchies between soldiers and civilians, men and women, heroic martyrdom and passive victimhood (see also Helms, Delpla, this volume).

The secularisation and polysemy surrounding the cult of *šehidi* also explain why certain rituals attached to the burial and veneration of *šehidi* have not always been followed. According to Islamic teachings, *šehidi* must be buried in the clothes they wore when they died and without being washed, since they have already been purified by their own blood (Omerdić 1997: 10). However, the journalist Šefko Hodžić notes in his diary that ‘the first *šehidi* [of Sarajevo] were not buried at Kovači in a common grave, as had initially been planned, but in individual *mezars* [graves] that had been dug for each of them. This [was] because it had been

---

<sup>8</sup> During the seminar held in January 1994 on Islam as the ‘spiritual force of the defence’, Fikret Muslimović himself denounced the ‘[foreign] emissaries who endeavour to modify the traditional religious and ethical values of our nation, ... contributing in this way to sowing the seed of new divisions’ and, ‘at the international level, to providing our enemies with arguments [against us]’ (Muslimović 1994: 92).

<sup>9</sup> From the Arabic word ‘*shahada*’: testimony, martyrdom (Brown 2003).

<sup>10</sup> See for example the countless books and brochures published with the support of municipal authorities and other local sponsors, which contain hagiographies, poems, and other materials dedicated to local *šehidi*.

insisted upon by the families, and because some prominent Sarajevans were also hostile to [the idea of] a common grave. It is also important to note that the first *šehidi* were washed and that their blood was thus removed. The director of [the funeral service] *Bakije*, Fuad Šehbajraktarević, says that they started to bury the *šehidi* without washing them or changing their clothes only after they got the *fatwa* issued by Muharem ef. Omerdić [on 28 April 1992]' (Hodžić 2003: 20).

Later, the adherence to Islamic rules regarding the burial of *šehidi* was relatively quickly and smoothly ensured, as this was a task taken on by funeral services and by the army itself. Such was not the case with funeral monuments. According to early Islamic traditions and to fundamentalist interpretations of Islam, the graves of *šehidi* should not be indicated by any sign, their very imperceptibility stressing the unselfishness and modesty of *šehidi*. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, however, graves of *šehidi* dating back from the Ottoman period display various markers of prestige (double gravestones, turbans on top of the headstones, specific epitaphs and symbols) and are often surrounded by a fence or turned into a *turbe* (mausoleum) (Bringa 1995; Popović 1996). During and after the war, many of the *nišani* (gravestones) placed over *šehid* graves have followed still different styles: many families of the dead have chosen *nišani* with pictures of the deceased and other non-Islamic symbols, or in the shape of a stylized lily, the Bosnian national symbol. These practices reflect the adoption of Christian or atheist death rituals, a phenomenon that predates the war and has been a source of anxiety for the *ulemas* since their appearance during the communist period.<sup>11</sup>

Political and military leaders of the Muslim community have themselves expressed ambiguous attitudes on this issue. During the war, they encouraged giving greater visibility to the graves of *šehidi*. During the SDA Convention held in March 1994, for example, Alija Izetbegović declared:

We will not allow these mounds [of earth] to be flattened, to disappear rapidly. They have to be seen. Of course, we will not put expansive monuments on them, but we have to erect *nišani*. All of Bosnia-Herzegovina is dotted with these mounds of earth, with these mounds of fresh earth. ... We will slightly change the tradition and erect *nišani*, so that we remember and so that, when children visit them during future *bajram*, they will recite the *fatiha* and remember these people and events. They must not be forgotten. (Izetbegović 1995b: 74-5)

It therefore appears that the cult of *šehidi* has been simultaneously diffused and transformed through the manifold ways in which people have accommodated it to their own beliefs and needs. Against this background, the official promoters of the concept of *šehid* have been compelled again and again to delineate its boundaries and regulate its uses, to rank its beneficiaries and symbolic retributions. Especially after the war, Bosnian *ulemas* have insisted that there are several categories of *šehidi*, and that the only ones that can be considered 'first-rank *šehidi*' are the soldiers who died in battle and whose motivation was purely religious. Those who died defending their family, their honour or their property, as well as all the people who died a violent death in non-combatant roles (including hostages and

---

<sup>11</sup> A booklet dealing with Islamic death rituals that was first published in the early 1990s and reprinted in 2001 deplores the fact that, 'in this domain as well, Islamic traditions and customs have largely ceased to be respected, which has led to the present situation where cemeteries are to a great extent a display of bad taste, kitsch, neglect and – what is the most unfortunate – a place for obviously non-Islamic epitaphs and symbols. ... Today our *nišani* are often very expansive, excessively luxurious, with pictures and all kinds of personal designations, which is contrary to Islamic rules that call for extreme modesty and simplicity' (Bevrnja and Strik 2001: 68-9).

prisoners of war who were executed), are ‘second-rank *šehidi*’. Only those in the first category should be buried in the clothes they wore when they died and without being washed; only they are absolved of all sins and will be fully rewarded in the world beyond.<sup>12</sup> In making this distinction, the *ulemas* are also reinforcing hierarchies, between soldiers and civilians, heroes and victims, men and women, that had sometimes threatened to break down in the course of the war, as illustrated by the case of Srebrenica (see also Duijzings, this volume).<sup>13</sup>

Of course, the *ulemas* admit that it is impossible to know with certainty the inner motives of the soldiers, and that only Allah can recognize the true *šehid*. The insistence on the religious motivation of ‘first-rank *šehidi*’, however, bolsters their own attempt to reinforce the ranking power of the status of *šehid*, as well as their own monopoly over the awarding of this status. A similar insistence on the normative dimensions of the cult of *šehidi* can be found at the level of ritual: since 1997, state institutions have embarked on a project to replace the makeshift wartime *nišani* with more permanent, standard marble *nišani* so that all are properly aligned and have the same form all over Bosnia-Herzegovina.<sup>14</sup> This standardization policy has enabled many destitute families to provide their relatives with a permanent grave marker, but it has also met with some resistance: in the Sarajevo Canton, for example, between 5 and 10 percent of the families have expressed a desire to keep or put up a *nišan* that is different from the official one. In such cases, according to its president, the Fund in charge of the maintenance of military cemeteries paid the families a lump sum equivalent to the price of the standard *nišan*.<sup>15</sup>

Tensions that pit the relatives of *šehidi* against political or religious authorities have taken many other shapes. They were bluntly expressed when, in the immediate aftermath of the war, the father of a young fallen soldier addressed an open letter to Alija Izetbegović, in which he denied Izetbegović the right to talk about his son as a *šehid*:

Why are you associating the religious term ‘*šehid*’ with the first name of my son and of so many other courageous fighters for the Bosnian cause? My son is not a *šehid* and I do not allow anybody to refer to him this way. In my language there are a thousand non-religious and non-partisan words to describe his sacrifice for Bosnia. ... Why are you reciting the *fatiha* for those who have been killed? I am not reproaching you for doing it as a private person, as a believer. But you are the official representative of a state and, moreover, of a multinational Bosnia [*multinacionalna Bosna*]. As for my son, I would request you to remain silent. It is better not to say anything than to use a language that neither he nor I understand. (Tica 1996)

---

<sup>12</sup> This distinction between various categories of *šehidi* was already present in the *fatwa* issued in April 1992 by Muharem Omerdić (Hodžić 2003: 20-21) but gained importance after the war (Omerdić 1997: 19-23).

<sup>13</sup> Most of the men slaughtered by the Bosnian Serb Army after the fall of Srebrenica on 11 July 1995 were Bosnian Army soldiers. However, the term most frequently used in public commemorations is ‘victims’ (*žrtve*). In 1996, the Bosnian authorities designated 11 July as the Day of Remembrance of Civilian Victims of the Fascist Aggression (*Dan sjećanja na civilne žrtve fašističke agresije*), thus implicitly classifying the men of Srebrenica as civilians, and enshrining their deaths into Western time (11 July), whereas the sacrifice of the *šehidi* is related to Islamic time (2 sevvál). This semantic shift underscores the fact that the men of Srebrenica were slaughtered after their surrender and facilitates the presentation of the massacre as part of a genocidal project comparable to the Holocaust.

<sup>14</sup> The only information inscribed on these *nišani* is the name, year of birth and year of death of the *šehid*, as well as the Qur’anic verse ‘And do not say about those who died on God’s Path: “They are dead”. No, they are alive, but you do not feel it’ (Qur’an, 2:154) and a lily, the symbol of Bosnia-Herzegovina (see also Figure 7.3).

<sup>15</sup> Interview with Emir Zlatar in *Preporod*, 1<sup>st</sup> September 2001.

Most often, however, these tensions have remained implicit. Such is the case, for example, when religious newspapers rail against the lack of respect for *šehid* cemeteries, whereas independent media mock the incompetence of the institutions in charge of them. Such accusations are partly a reflection of the wider climate of distrust and bitterness prevailing in Bosnia-Herzegovina. However, denouncing breaches of the respect due the *šehidi* is also a way of talking in their name and, indirectly, using their memory to bolster one's own agenda. Therefore, seemingly petty polemics surrounding the new cult of *šehidi* can reveal deeper conflicts and changes experienced in the Muslim community.

### ***Šehidi* and the Controversial Articulation of the Meaning of War**

Recurrent debates surrounding the cult of *šehidi* testify to its importance in the articulation of the meaning and memory of war. During the war itself, when open criticism of the SDA's reislamization politics was made difficult by political pressures and self-censorship, an implicit denunciation was still possible through the rejection of the new cult of *šehidi*. This reality was quite obvious in Tuzla, an industrial city in north-eastern Bosnia governed by the Social Democrats (see Jansen, this volume). There, local newspapers criticized the use of the term '*šehid*' as conducive to discrimination against non-Muslim soldiers within the Bosnian Army, to artificial divides between them and their Muslim brothers in arms, and to a gross manipulation of Islam (Alispahić 1996: 66-9; 225-7).

Sometimes, this kind of polemic went far beyond newspaper columns and invaded all of local public life. On 25 May 1995, during the celebration of Youth Day, a holiday dating from the communist period, a Serb shell fell into the centre of Tuzla killing 71 people, most of them teenagers. In the following days, the municipality decided to bury all the victims in the same place and without any religious markers. Yet, whereas the local imams and priests supported this idea, the *Reisu-l-ulema* Mustafa Cerić insisted on separate burials. In the end, the choice was left to the families and 48 of the 71 victims were buried together in the Slana Banja Park, where the Partisan cemetery is also located. A year later, commemoration of the incident gave rise to new debates. *Ljiljan*, a Sarajevo weekly close to the SDA, accused the Mayor of Tuzla, Selim Beslagić, and other 'Muslims full of inferiority complexes [*iskompleksirani Muslimani*]' of having authorized the use of candles, 'a Christian symbol', during the funeral ceremony and, in so doing, of leading the Muslims into 'political slavery', 'cultural powerlessness', and 'idolatry' (Latić 1996). This comment, taken up by the SDA-controlled local newspaper *Zmaj od Bosne* and the cantonal TV station, provoked a sharp reply from the victims' families:

Instead of showing devotion to the dead, instead of the compassion felt by the city for the anniversary of this tragedy, these two media outlets led by the journalist V[edad] Spahić are busy insulting and humiliating not only the relatives and friends of the victims, but the whole city that has commemorated with dignity the biggest tragedy of its history. [In their eyes], we are guilty of wanting our children to rest together, the way they died, of refusing to divide them along national or religious lines, as they were not divided during their short lives. We are guilty of disobeying the *Reis* who came to Tuzla the day after the tragedy to tell us that it would be *haram* [illicit] to bury our children side by side. We are guilty of remembering our loved ones, as has been done for centuries on Bosnian soil, we are guilty

of lighting candles for the souls of our dead, as people light candles in front of *turbe*, churches and mosques, and this since Bosnia has been called Bosnia.<sup>16</sup>

In Bosnia-Herzegovina, death and its representation have played a key role in the articulation of the meaning of war (see also Duijzings, Grandits, this volume). Against this background, the dead can also be conjured up to silence the living. That *šehidi* were being used in this way was obvious in January 1995 when, for the first and last time during the war, Bosnian legal institutions were consumed by the sensitive issue of the war's true meaning. After Alija Izetbegović and the Iranian ayatollah Ahmad Jannati attended a parade of the 7<sup>th</sup> Muslim Brigade in Zenica, the five opposition party members of the Bosnian Presidency denounced the 'ideologization of faith' in the Bosnian Army, reaffirming that this army 'must be secular and multinational, beyond political influences and rivalries'.<sup>17</sup> The next day, Alija Izetbegović and Ejup Ganić, the two Presidency members from the SDA, retorted that the Zenica parade had only been 'an expression of faith, and the right to express one's own faith exists and will exist everywhere, including in the army'. They further stated that 'the emphasis put on faith in some of our army units ... is often a spontaneous reaction to the destruction of religious symbols', and that these units 'have protected the population from genocide, without ever committing genocide. Their religious inspiration did not prevent them, but rather encouraged them to protect the weak, their lives, their honour and their property, without first asking them their first names. Moreover, their cry of "God is great!" is the source of their courage and strength in the face of dangers implied by this long and difficult struggle'. And they conclude:

Let us count the graves! The fate of this country will be decided by those who are fighting, acting and dying for it!<sup>18</sup>

This propensity by the SDA leaders to use the war dead to homogenize the Muslim community and to claim a monopoly on the interpretation of the war itself has been apparent in various forms on many other occasions. During the war, these leaders readily referred to 'ultimatums' sent by the *šehidi* in order to justify their own strategic choices, as for example the acceptance or rejection of peace plans. During and after the war alike, 'counting the graves' and conjuring up the SDA's *šehidi* also enabled the party to underscore its contribution to the war effort, to brush aside embarrassing questions about its own responsibility for the outbreak or outcome of the war, and, last but not least, to mobilize voters against 'traitors' (*izdajnici*), 'deserters' (*podrumaši* – literally: those who hid in basements) and all those who 'do not recite the *fatiha* when innocent victims and soldiers are buried' (Izetbegović 1999a: 98).

Just as Bosnian legal institutions were circumvented in the use of the army as a tool of reislamization, they were again deprived of any sort of control over death and its interpretation: representatives of the *Islamska zajednica* took over the central role in ceremonies commemorating the war dead, and in Sarajevo, the most famous defenders of the city were buried on the grounds of the Ali Pašina mosque, next door to the Presidency, rather than in a military cemetery. Moreover, the construction of a new official memory was also aimed at undermining the communist and Yugoslav memory of World War II, which was still influential at the beginning of the war, both in state institutions and among the population. In 1994, for example, Deputy *Reisu-l-ulema* Ismet Spahić justified the introduction of the Day of

---

<sup>16</sup> Press release quoted in *Naša borba* (22 June 1996).

<sup>17</sup> Press release quoted in *Oslobođenje*, European weekly edition (2 February 1995).

<sup>18</sup> Press release quoted in *Oslobođenje*, European weekly edition (9 February 1995).

*Šehidi* by stressing the need to put an end to veneration of the Partisan movement and, more precisely, to the commemoration of the battle of Sutjeska.<sup>19</sup>

New official memories, however, are far from uncontested (see also Duijzings, Kolind, Jansen, this volume). In the post-war period, the apparent unanimity of the Muslim community on war-related issues has crumbled, the independent media has inquired into the SDA's mistakes and misdeeds, and some opposition forces have once more been tempted to blame the three main nationalist parties *en bloc*. The international organizations present in Bosnia-Herzegovina have also endeavoured to rid the local mass media and schoolbooks of bellicose language and have joined in the criticism of nationalist parties. The SDA and the *Islamska zajednica* have responded to all of this by rejecting the equation of victims with their executioners:

These days I have been watching some electoral spots on television, whose authors or sponsors are international organizations or, to be more precise, some individuals within these organizations. These spots insult those in power and openly support the other side. I don't know what gives them the right to do this, but I know how they do this. Most often [it's done] in an impudent way: for example, they suggest to the population and to the citizens of Bosnia that all sides in the war were equal, that there is no aggressor and no victim, that we are all equally guilty. We, who fought to defend freedom and, quite simply, our own lives, are worth nothing more than the SDS [Serb Democratic Party] and the *četnici*. ... We have protested, but opposition leaders remain silent – this situation suits them – they hope that, in this way, they will get a few more votes. They accept the exchange of votes for a state of amnesia. But amnesia will not get through. We will turn ourselves towards the future, we will teach people to forgive, whenever it is possible to forgive, but we will not forget. We would have to be idiots to forget, and we are not idiots. The time of innocence is gone. (Izetbegović 1999a: 100)

The SDA's attempts to reshape war memories to its own advantage have not always been successful: when, during the local election campaign of 2000, the party reminded voters that '[We have spent] the ten most difficult years together', the slogan backfired, since it could be interpreted as a recognition of the SDA's own share of responsibility in the hardships voters had endured during and after the war. Furthermore, the defeat of the SDA in the local elections of April 2000 and the general elections held seven months later triggered a shift in the balance of power underlying the way in which war memories were expressed. Inevitably, as the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and the Alliance for Change (*Alijansa za promjenu*) rose to power, the narrative of the war that had until that time been promoted by the SDA was increasingly called into question.

At the legal level, this period brought the first indictments against high-ranking officers of the Bosnian Army by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), while at the same time, several SDA leaders who had occupied key posts in the military and secret services were prosecuted for embezzlement or terrorist activities. At the discursive level, onslaughts against the war memory promoted by the SDA intensified. In April 2001, the new state-level Prime Minister, Božidar Matić, asserted that 'Bosnia-Herzegovina does not

---

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in *Ljiljan*, 23 March 1994. In July 1943, in the gorges of the Sutjeska River (eastern Herzegovina), thousands of Partisans broke through enemy lines after having been surrounded by German forces. This battle, at which the death toll was very high and which is considered the greatest armed feat of the Partisan movement, was duly commemorated during the communist period and remains a site of commemoration attracting people from various parts of the former Yugoslavia.

have an army, but three political phalanxes set up by the three nationalist parties'.<sup>20</sup> Predictably, this statement provoked strong reactions. Rasim Delić, the former head of the Bosnian Army, protested on behalf of 'all those who fought, died, sacrificed their health and parts of their bodies for a unified, independent, multiethnic and democratic Bosnia-Herzegovina and not for whatever political party'.<sup>21</sup> He also became the leader of an Association for the Protection of the Legacy of the War of Liberation (*Udruženje za zaštitu tekovine oslobodilačkog rata*). Newspapers close to the SDA, for their part, denounced what they termed the subjugation of the Muslim community to an 'aggression of amnesia'<sup>22</sup> and 'serial humiliation'.<sup>23</sup>

At the same time, the conflict between the Alliance for Change and veteran associations over the reform of war pensions brought the concept of *šehid* back to the centre of political life. In order to understand the place of this concept in the political and social crisis of 2002, however, it is first necessary to consider how it has contributed to the political construction of the veteran population (veterans, war disabled, and families of fallen soldiers) as a specific social group enjoying a specific material and moral status.<sup>24</sup>

### **Šehidi as Cornerstone of the Veteran Identity**

As early as in the first months of the war, the Bosnian Presidency subsumed Bosnian Army soldiers under the jurisdiction of laws dating back from the 1980s that applied to members of the Yugoslav armed forces as well as veterans of the Partisan movement. Due to the institutional chaos of this period, however, material aid to Bosnian soldiers and their families became the de facto responsibility of municipalities, the largest public companies, and myriad diaspora networks and humanitarian organizations. The SDA and the *Islamska zajednica*, for their part, focused from the outset on war widows and orphans. The material aspect of these efforts to promote the concept of *šehid* was reflected in regular visits and the distribution of humanitarian and financial aid to the families of *šehidi* by the local Muslim charity *Merhamet*, the association *Fatma* and various foreign Islamic NGOs.

Once again, it was only in 1993 that the Bosnian authorities were able to set up nationwide social assistance mechanisms adapted to war circumstances. At that time, Fikret Muslimović, head of the Department of Morale, warned that the 'resolution of the social and statutory problems faced by the soldiers, the families of *šehidi*, the disabled and the wounded' was an urgent necessity since, 'if we maintain our present way of operating, problems will keep accumulating, the discontent of the soldiers, their families, and the families of *šehidi* and the disabled will grow [and] the fighting spirit will deteriorate' (Muslimović 1993: 42). A few months later, a participant at the seminar dedicated to Islam as the 'spiritual force of the defence' established a clear link between the symbolic importance of the *šehidi* and the material care to which their children are entitled:

We, the living, have a burning obligation towards the orphans of this war, an obligation we have no right to ignore because they are the children of our soldiers ... and the Prophet has

---

<sup>20</sup> Interview with Božidar Matić in *Večernji list*, 3 April 2001.

<sup>21</sup> Press release reproduced in *Jutarnje Novine*, 7 April 2001.

<sup>22</sup> *Preporod*, 15 April 2002.

<sup>23</sup> *Ljiljan*, 12 August 2002.

<sup>24</sup> On Croat veteran associations, see Grandits, this volume. On civilian victim associations, see Delpla, this volume.

said: ‘The one who takes care of the family of a *šehid* is elevating himself to his level.’ If we cannot bring back the son, the father, the brother, or the husband war has taken from them, we can at least, through our care, through grateful attention and receptiveness, stop their tears and breathe a bit of happiness into their souls. In so doing, we are not only accomplishing a deed that is pleasing to God, but are providing more security to our soldiers and reinforcing their fighting spirit. (Muminović 1994: 84)

In the following years, free housing, access to basic utilities as well as various social benefits have been granted to the war disabled and the families of *šehidi* and fallen soldiers, while the salaries owed to all army members were compensated for by the distribution of privatisation vouchers (Purišević 2000). In this way, a new social welfare system has slowly replaced the one inherited from the communist period. Furthermore, the purpose of this residual welfare state was not only to bolster the fighting spirit of the Bosnian Army: against the background of the collapse of the production economy, it has cushioned the impact of widespread impoverishment (see Maček, Jašarević, this volume), alleviated tension between a destitute population and a minority of *bogataši* (‘*nouveaux riches*’) and *ratni profiteri* (‘war profiteers’), and facilitated the coalescence of new social groups produced by the war. A World Bank report noted that in 1999 in the Muslim part of the Federation there were 80,140 war veterans, 33,149 war disabled and 87,803 recipients of pensions for the relatives of fallen soldiers. According to this same report:

If one considers extended family members, at least one third of the population is directly affected by veterans’ affairs. Politically, it is a powerful lobby group, and well organized. ... Socio-culturally, vet[eran]s are viewed as having ‘saved’ their respective ethnicity. They are distinguished as ones that stayed rather than fleeing as refugees. Finally, their sacrifice, by life or limb, is recognized by the population as something which should be compensated for, recognizing that full compensation is impossible. (Gregson 2000: 3)

In the Muslim part of the Federation, *šehidi* are at the heart of this new social welfare system, as shown by the relatively high sums paid by state institutions in pensions to families of *šehidi* and fallen soldiers,<sup>25</sup> as well as the SDA’s establishment of a Foundation for Families of *Šehidi* and War Disabled. More generally, *šehidi* and their families represent the cornerstone of the financial, institutional and symbolic constructs that are buttressing veterans’ collective identity. The ultimate sacrifice of the *šehidi* not only occupies a central place in the memory of their brothers-in-arms but also serves to call attention to their own losses: amputated limbs and disabled bodies, ruined professional ambitions, months and years spent on the frontline. Against this background, *šehidi* are invoked by veterans in order to remind society of its indebtedness to them, to justify their privileged legal and moral status, as well as the additional material and symbolic retributions they demand for themselves.

At the same time, reference to the *šehidi* is also used by state authorities in order to segment, rank, and control the veteran population. As early as August 1992, a Veterans’ Union (*Unija veterana*) was founded in Sarajevo with the aim of providing ‘moral and material assistance to all those who need it, above all to the families of fallen soldiers and war

---

<sup>25</sup> At the beginning of 2002, in the Muslim part of the Federation, the monthly war pension granted to widows of *šehidi* and fallen soldiers ranged from 257 to 572 KM (129 to 286 €), depending on the number of children. At the same time, the average salary in the Federation was 459 KM (230 €), and the average pension 170 KM (85 €).

disabled'.<sup>26</sup> Two years later, this union was converted into a state-wide United Soldiers' Organization (*Jedinstvena organizacija boraca*, JOB), which covered all segments of the veteran population and was partly influenced by the SDP. In order to defuse the threat presented by this initiative, the SDA first encouraged the foundation of separate associations for war disabled (the Union of War Disabled, *Savez ratnih vojnih invalida*) and families of fallen soldiers (the Organization of the Families of *Šehidi* and Fallen Soldiers, *Organizacija porodica šehida i poginulih boraca*), before launching its own Alliance of Demobilized Soldiers (*Savez demobilisanih boraca*) in 1998.

Finally, reference to the *šehidi* has fed other forms of statutory discrimination which, despite their lack of legal foundation, have had great practical impact. The dual institutional and legal constructs that are so characteristic of SDA power practices can also be found in the social assistance mechanisms set up for the veteran population. In particular, the material support that *Merhamet*, SDA foundations and Islamic NGOs have granted only to the families of *šehidi* (as opposed to those of fallen soldiers) have contributed to the establishment of a two-tier social welfare system which benefits the SDA's political clients (see also Maček 2000: 192-3). Between 1996 and 2001, the inability of the Federation Parliament to pass a law on the 'rights of soldiers, war disabled and families of *šehidi* and fallen soldiers' and the ensuing legal void has thus benefited the SDA.<sup>27</sup>

In November 2000, the rise to power of the Alliance for Change destabilized these social assistance mechanisms inherited from the war and led to an open conflict between the new Federation Government and the veteran population, whose growing frustrations had actually been one of the factors leading to the electoral defeat of the SDA. In July 2001, the World Bank and the Office of the High Representative (OHR) demanded drastic cuts in veteran-related state expenditures, which were seen as the major contributor to the budget deficit.<sup>28</sup> Two months later, the Minister for Veteran Affairs, Suada Hadžović, presented a new draft law that discontinued all pensions for able-bodied war veterans, partly disabled war veterans (up to 50 percent disability) and relatives of fallen soldiers who held paid employment.

Although this draft law foresaw a substantial increase in the pensions granted to the most severely disabled war veterans and the poorest relatives of fallen soldiers, it met with strong protest from veteran associations and the SDA. The latter saw this crisis as a good opportunity to take revenge on the Alliance for Change. The showdown between the Federation Government and the veterans reached its peak during street protests organized on 1 March 2002, the tenth anniversary of Bosnian independence. When the Federation Prime Minister Zlatko Lagumdžija tried to address the crowd of thousands of veterans gathered in Sarajevo, he was taken to task by a group of protesters. A few weeks later, the government withdrew the draft law and began new talks with the veteran associations, in spite of the pressures put on it by the World Bank and the OHR. Munir Karić, representative of the Party for Bosnia-Herzegovina (SBiH), a member of the Alliance, and head of the War Veterans Commission, then submitted his own draft law to the Federation Parliament, a law that would have been much more profitable for the veterans, but the costs of which would have exceeded... the total budget of the Federation! Against the advice of the government, this law was passed on 25

<sup>26</sup> Statutes of the Union of the Veterans of the Resistance Movement of the Republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina (*Unija veterana pokreta otpora RBiH-e*), partly reproduced in *Ljiljan*, 16 May 1994.

<sup>27</sup> This state of affairs, however, was mainly due to obstruction from the Croat Democratic Union (HDZ) which has been preoccupied with upholding its own system of parallel war pensions for veterans of the Croat Defence Council (HVO) with the financial support of Croatia (see Grandits, this volume).

<sup>28</sup> In 1999, The World Bank reported that veteran-related expenditures in the Federation amounted to 210 million KM (105 million €), that is 26 percent of the overall Federation budget (Gregson 2000: 10).

September 2002. Ten days later, the nationalist parties won the general elections, and the whole debate on veterans' issues was brought full circle.

The importance of war-related social benefits to the survival of many households is sufficient to explain the strong resistance to the proposed cuts in veteran benefits. Yet the crisis of 2001-2002 must also be placed into the wider context of the crisis of veterans' collective identity. Since the end of the 1990s, the veteran population has experienced a rapid decline in its material and moral status. At the material level, war veterans have been directly affected by an economic crisis that has left half of the working population unemployed (see Jašarević, Jansen, this volume). Delays in the payment of pensions accumulated and the privatisation vouchers distributed at the end of the war lost 97 percent of their value within a few years. Following the new property laws passed by the OHR in 1998, private houses and socially-owned flats that had been allocated to veterans were returned to their pre-war owners, leading to awkward situations where war disabled or war widows were expelled to make way for people considered 'deserters' in the case of Bosnian Muslim refugees coming back from abroad, or 'traitors' and 'criminals' in the case of Serb and Croat returnees (see Stefansson, Armakolas, this volume). This restoration process gave rise to numerous protests, with the sense of injustice reaching a peak in December 2001, when the Court for Human Rights ordered the restoration of socially-owned flats to their former, pre-war occupants: officers of the Yugoslav People's Army.

Coupled with challenges to the official narrative of the war, this decline in veterans' material status nourished the feeling among veterans that their prestige was rapidly vanishing and that wartime normative categories and hierarchies were becoming blurred. In 2001, the debate over the draft law on war pensions further deepened this identity crisis: the law no longer based pension amounts for veterans and their closest relatives on wartime sacrifices and merit but on actual, present material need. The new law thus devalued their wartime status: it reversed the relationship of indebtedness linking veterans to society as a whole and exposed their difficulties in earning a legitimate income, caring for their families and building a new social status under post-war circumstances. In short, it turned war heroes into social misfits and powerless family heads. What was more, by placing veterans of the Bosnian Army, of the Croat Defence Council (HVO) and former supporters of Fikret Abdić<sup>29</sup> into one pension fund, the new law further blurred the categories and hierarchies inherited from the war.

Against this background, veterans' protests crystallized rapidly around two symbolic issues. The first was the very personality of the new Minister for Veteran Affairs, Suada Hadžović. In the eyes of many veterans, the reversal of their status was embodied by the fact that a woman was now in charge of 'their' ministry, whereas Sefer Halilović, the first head of the Bosnian Army (and a man), had been appointed as Minister of Social Affairs, an area of government activity typically associated more with women (see Helms, this volume). Veterans thus put forth repeated demands for Hadžović's resignation and denied her the right to speak in the name of the veteran population, in spite of the fact that she was herself a war widow.<sup>30</sup> Hadžović also became the target of violent attacks in the media close to the SDA.

---

<sup>29</sup> In September 1993, after the Bosnian Parliament had rejected the Owen-Stoltenberg peace agreement, an uprising led by the local strongman and Bosnian Presidency member Fikret Abdić resulted in bloody fighting with the Bosnian Army in the Cazinska krajina (Bihać area). Abdić's supporters were regarded by the *Islamska zajednica* as *murtadi* (apostates) and thus denied a religious burial.

<sup>30</sup> Suada Hadžović's husband, an influential local politician in the Sarajevo suburb of Ilidža, was murdered by the Serbs at the very beginning of the war. Asked whether she would consider her husband a *šehid*, Hadžović replied: 'My husband was a Social Democrat and he had his own ideological opinions. I consider that I

After she denounced the misuse of female bodies in advertising campaigns during an unrelated initiative, *Ljiljan* accused her of disrespecting the (male) bodies of the war disabled and the *šehidi*:

This time, Minister [*ministrica*] Hadžović showed that she has an opinion about bodies exposed on billboards. She was very constructive. For other bodies, which were long ago exposed under the fire of shells and the view of snipers on the front lines of defence of the state of Bosnia-Herzegovina, the Minister was not really so understanding. ... More precisely, the Minister has thrown [the term] families of *šehidi* out of the Law, purely on a stylistic level one would say. But it's not only style [that is at stake]. The new Ministry will once again settle accounts with the *šehidi*, and then will throw out those used and mutilated bodies not onto billboards, but onto the street. Recently a real reckoning with those who got pensions as soldiers and war disabled has started. All souls, then, who survived with some sort of body parts or remnants are being freed of any income and thrown out onto the street. They would be better off naked on a billboard. (Omeragić 2001)

As shown by this quotation, the other issue of concern to the veterans' organizations close to the SDA was the wording of the new law, in which the term 'war military disabled' (*ratni vojni invalidi*) was replaced with 'military disabled' (*vojni invalidi*), and all references to *šehidi* had been removed. The veteran crisis of 2001-2002, together with this battle over terminology, therefore centred around the concept of *šehid*. On 17 December 2001, the Day of *šehidi*, the *Reisu-l-ulema* himself added a dramatic dimension to this issue by stating that 'the right of the *šehidi* to be called '*šehidi*' is established in the Qur'an. This right has also been established by the Prophet, it was not invented in Bosnia. ... At stake here are our human and religious rights. What is put into question is the honour of our faith. Consequently, whoever attacks this right is attacking our faith and our honour' (Cerić 2002). In order to better underscore the universal dimension of the issue, without undermining the specific status enjoyed by the *šehidi*, Mustafa Cerić also resorted to a rarely used distinction between *šehidi* (martyrs) and *šahidi* (witnesses):

It seems that some people still don't know what a *šehid* is. We who are alive are *šahidi*, and those who gave their lives on God's Path are *šehidi*. If someone denies the [concept of] *šehid*, he is also denying the [concept of] *šahid*. The attempts to deprive us of our right to call those who have sacrificed their lives '*šehidi*' amount to attempts to deprive us of our right to testify. What is at stake is not only the denial of those who are *šehidi*, but the negation of us, the *šahidi*, the witnesses to what took place [in Bosnia-Herzegovina]. (Cerić 2002)

Three weeks later, when Hadžović was asked by the Congress of Bosniac Intellectuals to present the new draft law, members of the audience demanded that she first utter the word '*šehid*'. When she began to respond by saying that 'the nature of the war has not yet been defined', the same people interrupted her and ostentatiously left the room shouting: 'Get up, families of *šehidi*!'<sup>31</sup> A few days later, in an interview given to the daily newspaper *Oslobođenje*, Hadžović accused the SDA of having orchestrated the incident to put her on the spot. She also clarified her interrupted remark on the nature of war by saying that she had ongoing international legal proceedings in mind:

---

would offend him by calling him a *šehid*. ... He was not a believer but he respected people who sincerely believed in God.' (interview in *Oslobođenje*, 12 January 2002)

<sup>31</sup> *Oslobođenje*, 6 January 2002.

If we state that there has been an [external] aggression, and so we do, since we who stayed here were directly affected by it, then terms like ‘*šehid*’ and ‘family of *šehid*’ unnecessarily reopen the question of the nature of the war: was it aggression, or was it some kind of religious war?<sup>32</sup>

This terminological and symbolic struggle reached a new peak in the aftermath of the street protests held in Sarajevo on the 1st of March 2002. Taken to task by some protesters, the Federation Prime Minister Zlatko Lagumdžija compared them to the Serb hooligans he had been faced with a year earlier in Banja Luka.<sup>33</sup> Immediately, the SDA demanded that Lagumdžija publicly apologize for this ‘shameful statement’ – through which, they said, he had ‘likened’ the legitimate discontent of the defenders of Bosnia-Herzegovina to the orgy [of violence] staged by the *četnici* during the opening ceremony for the rebuilding of the Ferhadija mosque in Banja Luka’ – and called for his resignation.<sup>34</sup> Lagumdžija countered by asking the SDA to apologize to the veterans, ‘to whom it has lied for years, and whom it has led into distress and misery’, before denouncing an attempt at ‘transforming their legitimate anger into a cheap [bit of] political manipulation’.<sup>35</sup> A few weeks later, however, the Federation Government changed the wording in the draft law and, out of a lack of solutions to the material difficulties faced by the veteran population, filled it with flattery. The official formula used in the title of this draft (as submitted by Munir Karić to the Federation Parliament) was: ‘soldiers, war disabled, families of *šehidi* and fallen soldiers of the war of defence and liberation’.

It is difficult to know how far the prediction made by some veteran associations, that the parties of the Alliance for Change ‘will attend their own [electoral] burial in October [2002] if they do not use the word “*šehid*”’,<sup>36</sup> has proven to be true. It is obvious, however, that the intended reform of the war pension system, conceived by the World Bank and the OHR merely as an adjustment to ‘objective’ financial constraints, called into question normative categories and hierarchies inherited from the war and, in the process, stirred up certain social tensions and political conflicts running deeply through the Muslim community. Beyond just the veteran crisis of 2001-2002, the way a new cult of *šehidi* has developed in Bosnia-Herzegovina suggests that the violent transformation of ethno-national identities in this country cannot be explained without taking into account their links with other social and cultural categories dating back from the pre-war period or produced by the war. In order to homogenize the Bosnian Muslim population, the SDA has not only resorted to nationalist and religious rhetoric, but has also integrated into its own power practices some patriarchal and militaristic values, as well as some social welfare practices inherited from the communist period. The conflicts surrounding the cult of *šehidi*, for their part, show that this homogenization process is neither complete nor unchallenged. The term ‘*šehid*’ reflects specific interpretations and memories of the war, as well as new social divides and normative hierarchies within the Muslim community. Its formal acceptance by a majority of Bosnian

---

<sup>32</sup> Interview with Suada Hadžović in *Oslobođenje*, 12 January 2002.

<sup>33</sup> On 7 May 2001 in Banja Luka, thousands of Serb protesters violently interrupted the opening ceremonies for the rebuilding of the Ferhadija mosque (destroyed in 1993), compelling a few hundred attending Bosnian Muslims, along with official representatives of the international community and the Federation, to take refuge inside the building of the *Islamska zajednica*. During these riots, one Bosnian Muslim was killed and dozens of others were injured.

<sup>34</sup> Press release quoted in *Oslobođenje*, 3 March 2002.

<sup>35</sup> Press release quoted in *Oslobođenje*, 4 March 2002.

<sup>36</sup> Kasim Memić, president of the Organization of Demobilized Soldiers in Ilidža (Sarajevo), quoted in *Oslobođenje*, 6 January 2002.

Muslims has been accompanied by regular tensions between political authorities and bereaved families, and funeral practices emphasizing the individual dimension of death and grief.