

## On the Road to God: Bosnian Muslim walks 3,500 miles to Mecca

Claire Schaeffer-Duffy | Oct. 31, 2012 NCR Today

With no money and just a rucksack on his back, Senad Hadzic, 47, walked 3,500 miles through seven countries and two deserts to make his pilgrimage to Mecca. Climatic extremes and a war zone were all part of the journey, but he reached the holy city in Saudi Arabia in time for Eid al-Adha, a Muslim holiday commemorating Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son, who, in the Islamic narrative, is Ishmael, not Isaac.

A pilgrimage to Mecca is one of the five pillars of Islam, a duty Muslims are expected to perform at least once in their lifetime. Today, most pilgrims make the trip via airplane, bus, train or automobile.

Hadzic's method of travel was far more arduous. His 314-day trek, which began in December in his hometown in Bosnia, took him through Serbia, Bulgaria, Turkey, Syria, Jordan and finally Saudi Arabia. He braved sub-zero temperatures in the mountains of Bulgaria and blistering desert heat. Australian blogger [Rusty Woodger reports](#) [1] Hadzic kept the rigorous Muslim fast of Ramadan as he walked, and that over the course of his travels, went through 12 pairs of shoes, three large rucksacks, seven tracksuits, seven mobile phones, three pairs of glasses and 1,000 pairs of socks.

"There wasn't a single easy day, every day has been difficult. But at the same time it has been exciting," Hadzic [told the BBC](#) [2].

Most remarkable was the Bosnian Muslim's passage through war-torn Syria, a country inaccessible to foreign journalists. Hadzic told the BBC he spent hours on the Syrian border haggling for a visa. He said once he obtained it, an officer in President Bashar al-Assad's army "asked me to pray for him in Mecca, if I managed to get out of Syria alive."

Having a Syrian visa means "nothing -- a rebel fighter can walk out of a cornfield and demand your passport," Hadzic said.

"No one shot at me. I was stopped by armed people who inspected my passport. But when I said I was on the road to God, both the rebels and the army of President Assad let me continue."

Hadzic said he kept a Bible as well as a Quran in his rucksack because he is "a religious man." In one account of his travels, he mentioned the many dreams he had in which God told him the way to go.

Hadzic's Syrian experience reminded me of my husband's pilgrimage through war-torn Bosnia. The year was 1993. Scott, a man of Franciscan faith, had organized a peace walk with a small band of Americans to some of the areas of fighting. Wherever they walked, the peace activists distributed leaflets calling for disarmament and the taking up of "nonviolent resistance to secure peace and justice." Their daily regimen always included reciting an interfaith prayer for peace.

One afternoon, the walkers found themselves praying in a courtyard in Mostar, a city of ferocious fighting. The balconies of the apartment buildings surrounding them were fortified with sandbags, behind which crouched

Croatian snipers. Amid the popping of guns, the walkers began their prayer, as they always did, with a strike of the Buddhist mindfulness bell followed by a chanting of the Hebrew Shema: "Hear O Israel, the Lord is Our God; the Lord is One." The bell and the chant caught the attention of the snipers who emerged, one by one, from behind the sandbags to join the supplicants below. Heads bowed, they encircled the Americans and listened as all the prayers were recited.

"Those guns the snipers used were high-velocity rifles with scopes that assured precise aim," Scott later told me. "Every shot fired meant someone was killed. But for a few minutes, at least, the shooting stopped."

My cynical self wants to dismiss accounts of war-zone pilgrimages as foolish and naïve. Maybe they are. But oh, don't we need more of such foolishness to cut through the paralyzing fear that allows so much violence and injustice to continue?

I heard Hadzic's story on the radio while driving home from Washington, D.C., last Friday. Talk of the presidential race had dominated the airwaves, and much of it was depressing. Panic is a national sentiment these days, and with it comes a bunker mentality and distrust.

And then there is Hadzic with his simple and persuasive faith, out in the open air, enduring the extremes of climate and human nature, doggedly putting one foot in front of the other, his destination understood by many, a man on the road to God.

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**Links:**

[1] <http://rustywoodger.blogspot.com/2012/10/senad-hadzic-reaches-mecca.html>

[2] <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-20093919>