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### Between emigration, de-Islamization and the nation-state: Muslim communities in the Balkans today

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## **Between emigration, de-Islamization and the nation-state: Muslim communities in the Balkans today<sup>1</sup>**

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Based on interviews and a series of fieldwork visits to Albania, Greece, Bosnia, Macedonia, Bulgaria and Turkey, this paper provides a synopsis of the main Muslim communities in Southeast Europe, their ethno-linguistic differentiation and their community organisations. It argues that in the last decade, an often-exaggerated concern with Islamist terrorism in the region has obfuscated the much more important processes of de-Islamization and emigration within the context of ambivalent or unsympathetic nation-states. As this paper shows, Muslim communities in the Balkans are characterised by the tension between both fragmentation and stagnation on the one side and stabilisation on the other: Fragmentation in linguistic, ethnic and religious terms as well as demographic and cultural stagnation particularly in Bulgaria and Greece, countered by processes of stabilisation through the re-emergence of established Muslim administrations and communities, particularly in the Western Balkans. This stabilisation is partly supported by Turkish state and religious institutions, which have replaced the conservative missionaries from the Gulf and Saudi Arabia. This 'Turkish turn', the paper argues, is likely to have a considerable impact on the future of Islam and Muslims in the Balkans.

**Keywords:** Islam; Muslims; Turkey; terrorism; Islamic Unions; Salafism; Wahhabism; Turkish foreign policy; Ottoman Empire; emigration; Jihadism; Balkans; Diyanet; Rijaset

### **Introduction**

<sup>1</sup>The horrific events of 9/11 solidified Western popular interest in Islamic radicalism,<sup>2</sup> empowered particular discourses on religion as an all-encompassing identity (cf. Sen 2006) and created new bodies of research. International organizations, governments, academic institutions and independent research centres became keen on supporting a wide range of scholarly explorations of interfaith understanding – issues of identity and Muslim minority politics. Thus, a great many journal articles and edited volumes on Islam in Australia (e.g. Dunn 2004, 2005), Europe (e.g. Hunter 2002; Nielsen 2004), Canada and the United States were published mainly by experts on the Middle East, theologians, political scientists, human geographers and anthropologists. Simultaneously, security analysts and think-tankers produced numerous studies on the threat of Islamic terrorism, focusing on the activities of

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Osama Bin Laden and *Al-Qaida*. It was in this context that a new body of neoconservative literature on Islam in the Balkans, primarily concerned with 'security', made its appearance.

Earlier scholarship on Muslims of the European periphery, produced by Orientalists (cf. Norris 1993), more recent anthropological and sociological investigations of memory, nationhood and identity (cf. Ellis 2003; Nielsen 2004), and the historical works of French academics (Bougarel 2003, 2005, 2007; Clayer and Bougarel 2001; Clayer and Germain 2008) are, however, much less accessible to policy-makers and the media industry than security-driven publications. Mainly due to their lack of engagement with theory and academic discourses in general, these publications easily captured a popular imagination unsettled by the 9/11 attacks and the American 'War on terror', shaping parts of the public debate on the Balkans in European medias. This distinct body of literature was perfectly isolated from aforementioned scholarly accounts and reproduced particular discourses concerning 'Islamic terrorism'.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, local and international media discussed Muslim presence in Southeast Europe and expressed concerns over the possibility of the Balkans becoming a hotbed of Islamic terrorism, *Salafism* and *Jihadi* terrorism. After all, the region had experienced brutal armed conflict in Bosnia and Kosovo, both conflicts with greater geopolitical repercussions, and the by-effect of state failure, impoverishment and anarchy. Many security analysts and journalists claimed that these were the exact conditions sought by Muslim terrorists in order to establish bases in the region from which they could organize their attacks on western European states and the US.

But is this really the case? Can we talk about a massive threat of Islamic radicalism in the Balkans? Is all influence from the outside world on 'local' or 'European forms' of Islam necessarily a bad thing? Do all Muslims in the area constitute a homogenous and monolithic body of believers? What is the value of statistical information concerning contemporary Muslim presence in Southeast Europe? And finally, how useful is the term 'Muslim' as an analytic category when research moves away from the domains of religious life?

This paper addresses some of these questions while scrutinizing widespread beliefs concerning the possible infiltration of 'alien' 'Wahhabi' and 'Middle Eastern' Islamic traditions and institutions into the Balkan peninsula. Throughout 2010, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Albania, Greece, Bosnia, Macedonia, Bulgaria and Turkey as the principal investigator for the British Academy research project 'Contemporary Islam in the Balkans'.<sup>4</sup> Based on these interviews and fieldwork, this paper provides a synopsis of the main Muslim communities in Southeast Europe, its ethno-linguistic differentiation and its community organization. It comes to the conclusion that the exaggerated concern with Islamist terrorism in the region has obfuscated the facts on the ground, that is, the deep fragmentation of Muslim communities, the re-emergence of established Muslim administrations and communities after a period of relative weakness and the increasing impact of the Turkish state and religious institutions on how Islam is lived and practised in the Balkans.

### **Fragmented identities and forced migration**

The Balkans' religious landscape, let alone its Muslim one, is indeed complex and often confusing. The fact that the region's Muslims by no means constitute a homogenous body of believers further complicates this multi-faceted landscape.

Popular theories circulating in Greece and Serbia concerning the existence of an 'Islamic diagonal' or a 'Green axis',<sup>5</sup> for example, can be easily deconstructed in light of linguistic, ethnic and theological differences: 'Balkan Muslims' speak different mother tongues (Albanian, Turkish, Slavic languages and Roma dialects); they consist of distinct ethnic groups (Albanians, Slavs, Turks, Pomaks, Torbesh and Roma); and they adhere to different theological traditions (especially mainstream Sunni Islam, *Bektashism* in Albania and Macedonia, *Alevi* communities in Bulgaria, and some strict Salafi communities as a result of the 'Wahhabi intermezzo' during the war years in Bosnia and Macedonia). These groups' distinctiveness is shaped by their radically different positions vis-à-vis their respective home states, determined by whether they are minorities, majorities or pluralities, and whether they are discriminated against or welcomed by the majority population. Additionally, one of the most important distinctions between these groups – and the hardest to represent numerically – is the manner in which they make sense of their own religious identity. The religiosity/secularity distinction cuts across the group identities mentioned above, but in different ways. For Muslims in the Balkans, 'being Muslim' means different things in different places at different times.

The fragmented nature of these identities is further complicated by the specific historical context of gradual 'De-Islamization' since the nineteenth century, which has shaped the institutions as well as the sensibilities of Muslims in the Balkans. Forced migration has continued since the early nineteenth century alongside Ottoman withdrawal from its former European possessions. Episodes of flight and ethnic cleansing peaked during key ruptures and historical turning points, from the independence of Greece in the 1830s and that of the Bulgarian principality in 1878, to the Balkan Wars of 1912–1914 and the Greco-Turkish War and the Lausanne Exchange of Populations in the 1920s. Every emerging Christian state in the Balkans eventually coerced at least part of their Muslim populations to flee the country. These early wars and population exchanges resulted in around 1.5 million Muslims being evicted or forced to flee, almost exclusively to Turkey (McCarthy 1995).

The migratory waves of different communities continued unabated after World War II and during the Yugoslav and Communist eras. Hundreds of thousands of Muslims of different ethno-linguistic affiliations migrated to Turkey, whether by choice or by force. In 1950 and 1951, around 150,000 Bulgarian Turks were expelled as a '*fait accompli*' (Clayer and Bougarel 2001, 30; Höpken 1997, 67). Ellis (2003) describes in particularly harrowing detail how the 'voluntary' migration treaty between Tito and Prime Minister Menderes led to the exodus of 300,000 Muslims of all ethnic groups in Yugoslavia, via Skopje to Turkey, between 1953 and 1960. The 1953 migrations broke the back of the Turkish communities in Macedonia (Ibrahim 2010; Selimovski 2010), also substantially reducing the numbers of other Muslim communities, particularly in the Sandžak, the homeland of most of Turkey's Bosniaks. Finally, a particularly vile episode in the forced emigration of Muslims from the region was the expulsion of over 370,000 Bulgarian Turks after a failed campaign of 'national rebirth' and 'enforced Slavization' under the Communist leader Todor Zhivkov in 1989. As Höpken reminds us, the euphemistically termed 'Great excursion' became one of the final blows for the Communist regime in Bulgaria (1997, 71, also Ragaru 2001), but not necessarily for the emigration<sup>6</sup> of Muslims from the region.<sup>7</sup>

These recurring episodes of enforced emigration remain a decisive experience for at least two reasons. First, they underlie the factual roots of the fear of some Muslims in the region of being expelled from their home countries one day, as well as

the ‘bunker mentality’ that is inextricable from this anxiety.<sup>8</sup> Second, these experiences reinforce the deep connections between most Muslim groups in the Balkans with their kin ethnic groups in Turkey, and hence the level of ‘familiarity’ and ‘intimacy’, which has often been de-emphasized in equal measure by the sending states, nationalist movements, Turkey as the receiving country and even by scholars on both sides.<sup>9</sup> This assertion holds particularly true for Kosovo and Macedonia, where most remaining Albanians and Turks are in close contact with family members living in Turkey, and even more so for Bulgaria and Greece, where channels of interaction with Turkey are very intensive. It is less so the case for Albania and Bosnia-Herzegovina, where emigration to Turkey occurred mostly in earlier stages, not between the post-war years and the 1990s.

Keeping in mind this history of emigration and stagnation as well as the highly differentiated context of Islam and Muslims in the Balkans, some key demographic and institutional structures still characterize the close to nine million people in the Balkans<sup>10</sup> who identify themselves as Muslim. Demographic material in the region is not very reliable and questions of religious affiliation are not always straightforward to establish. Furthermore, censuses are highly politicized affairs as they might expose facts that are not viewed positively by ruling elites.<sup>11</sup> Censuses in Kosovo, Albania and Macedonia have either been postponed repeatedly or remain contested. Informed guesses on the size and differentiation of Muslim communities in the Balkans can still be made, however, based on the indispensable volume ‘*Le nouvel Islam balkanique*’ by Clayer and Bougarel (2001) and its authors’ demographic study of Muslim communities. I have partly updated and adjusted these figures to account for the new countries that emerged after their original research had been conducted.<sup>12</sup>

Table 1. Approximate number of Muslims in Southeast Europe.

| Country                                     | Numbers   | Share in general population (estimate) (%) | Muslim community           |
|---|-----------|--|----------------------------|
| Kosovo                                      | 1,800,000 | 90   | Muslim majority            |
| Albania<br><i>Including Bektashis</i>       | 2,300,000 | 70   |                            |
| Bosnia-Herzegovina                          | 2,200,000 | 48   | Very large Muslim minority |
| Macedonia                                   | 700,000   | 33   |                            |
| Montenegro                                  | 110,000   | 18   |                            |
| Bulgaria                                    | 1,100,000 | 14   |                            |
| Serbia<br><i>Sandžak Presevo Vojvodina</i>  | 500,000   | 5  | Muslim minority            |
| Greece<br><i>Western Thrace<sup>a</sup></i> | 130,000   | 1.5  | Minority Islam             |
| Croatia                                     | 50,000    | 1.3  |                            |
| Romania                                     | 50,000    | 0.3  |                            |

Source: Based on Clayer and Bougarel (2001, 16) and adjusted with census material and interviews. All figures are rough estimates.

<sup>a</sup>These figures exclude the significant numbers of Muslim immigrant communities in the Attiki region of Athens and to a lesser extent in Thessaloniki (Antoniou 2005; Papadopoulou-Kourkoula 2008).

One of the most intriguing aspects of the Balkans' Muslim presence, despite emigration and violent conflict, is the existence of three countries in which Muslims represent the majority of the population (cf. Table 1). While Albania had been the only Muslim-majority country left in the Balkans after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in 1912, this changed with the independence of Bosnia-Herzegovina<sup>13</sup> in 1991 and Kosovo in 2008. Around six million Muslims live in Kosovo (predominantly Albanian with small Turkish and Slavic-speaking populations), Albania (almost exclusively Albanian) and Bosnia-Herzegovina (Bosniak); each country has an approximate population of about two million Muslims. At least 700,000 citizens of Macedonia are of Muslim faith, most of them Albanians and to a much lesser extent Turks, Bosniaks (*Goran*) and Roma. These groups constitute slightly less than a third of the entire population as a whole, and probably more.<sup>14</sup> Significant Muslim minorities live in Montenegro and Serbia, particularly in the Sandžak. Even though Bulgaria's Muslim population of Turks (and smaller communities of Slavic-speaking Pomaks and Roma) make up only 14% of the population of Bulgaria, they still amount to more than a million people. Among the smaller Muslim minorities, the mostly Turkish Muslims of Western Thrace in Greece deserve a mention. They only account for 130,000 individuals, but are important in terms of Greek-Turkish relations and due to their particular legacy of Ottoman institutions.<sup>15</sup>

In terms of linguistic differentiation, one can ascertain three main language groups. Albanian speakers are the largest Muslim community in the Balkans today, with the language spoken widely in Albania, Kosovo and Macedonia.<sup>16</sup> The second largest language group is that of Slavic languages, dominated by Bosnian but also consisting of small groups of Slavic speakers in Kosovo (*Goran*), Macedonia (*Torbesh*), and Bulgaria and Greece (*Pomak*). Turkish speakers account for slightly less than a quarter of the Muslims of the region, with significant numbers in Bulgaria and Greece, and enclaves in Kosovo and Macedonia. Finally, a small group of

Table 2. Ethno-linguistic differentiation of Muslim populations in Southeast Europe.

| Language groups            | Presence in countries   | Share (%) |
|----------------------------|---|-----------|
| Albanian speakers          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Albania</li> <li>● Kosovo</li> <li>● Macedonia</li> <li>● Montenegro</li> </ul>  | 52        |
| Slavic speakers            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Bosnia</li> <li>● Torbesh in Macedonia</li> <li>● Pomaks in Bulgaria and Greece</li> <li>● Gorani in Kosovo</li> </ul> | 32        |
| Turkish speakers           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Bulgaria</li> <li>● Greece</li> <li>● Macedonia</li> <li>● Kosovo</li> <li>● Romania</li> </ul>                        | 12        |
| Speakers of Roma languages | Everywhere in the region, particularly in Bulgaria  | 4         |

Source: Based on Clayer and Bougarel (2001, 19) and expanded with fieldwork material. All figures are rough estimates.

speakers of Roma languages needs to be mentioned, even though most of them also speak Turkish, Albanian or Slavic languages.

This linguistic diversity suggests a high level of fragmentation and an absence of a space of cultural continuity. If Muslim elites in the region were fluent in Turkish and partly in Arabic up to the inter-war period, and all Muslims in Yugoslavia were educated in Serbo-Croat until the 1990s, new generations taught at schools since the 1990s lack a common language. Particularly Albanian speakers, many of whom used to be bi- or tri-lingual (with command of Serbo-Croat and Turkish, particularly in Kosovo and Macedonia), are now almost exclusively educated in Albanian. There is, hence, no *lingua franca*, which binds the Muslim communities of the Balkans together. It would, however, not be entirely exaggerated to argue that Turkish seems to be making a modest comeback at the level of Muslim elites, due to the educational resources provided by the Gülen movement, a religious network of schools presided by the charismatic preacher Fethullah Gülen, Turkish scholarship programmes, as well as Turkish state agencies such as Turkish Development and Cooperation Agency TİKA and the Presidency of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet*).<sup>17</sup>

As shown in Table 2, Muslims in the Balkans do not have a common language with which to speak to one other. This notion of linguistic fragmentation becomes even more pronounced in countries composed of two or three neighbouring linguistic groups. This does not only curtail a 'common sense of Muslimhood', but can actually fuel inter-ethnic animosities. Languages in the Balkans carry complex historical contingencies that play out differently in each country. Albanians, for example, often associate Gorani (Slavic) speakers in Kosovo and Torbesh (Slavic) speakers in Macedonia with their unsavoury experience of Serbo-Croat rule in the two Yugoslavias (Aruçi 2008). In Macedonia, good relations between the Turkish minority and the Macedonian state<sup>18</sup> have tarnished the usage of Turkish, a language that had been the common idiom of the Muslim urban classes, the *Şehirli*, in cities such as Skopje (Üsküp/Shkup) and Tetovo (Kalkandelen) well into the 1990s (Ellis 2003; Poulton 1997).

In both Greece and Bulgaria, language policies benefiting smaller groups within the Muslim minority have led to further resentment. Though state policies have not

Table 3. Ethno-linguistic differentiation of Muslim populations according to country.

| Country                            | Largest ethno-linguistic group | Other ethno-linguistic groups   |
|------------------------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Kosovo                             | Albanians                      | Turkish, Roma, Gorani (Bosnian) |
| Albania                            | Albanians                      |                                 |
| Bosnia-Herzegovina                 | Bosniaks                       |                                 |
| Macedonia                          | Albanians                      | Turkish, Torbesh, Roma          |
| Montenegro                         | Albanians                      | Bosniak, Turkish                |
| Bulgaria                           | Turks                          | Roma, Pomak                     |
| Serbia                             | Bosniaks                       | Albanians                       |
| <i>Sandžak, Presevo, Vojvodina</i> |                                |                                 |
| Greece                             | Turks                          | Pomak, Roma                     |
| <i>Western Thrace</i>              |                                |                                 |
| Croatia                            | Bosniaks                       |                                 |
| Romania                            | Turks/Tatars                   |                                 |

Source: Based on Clayer and Bougarel (2001, 16) and expanded with fieldwork material and interviews.

been fixed in Greece, especially in the 1980s, the Greek state has tended to endorse education in Pomak<sup>19</sup> to counteract the weight of Turkish. Such educational projects, however, failed to reverse a longer-term process of Turkification in Western Thrace.<sup>20</sup> In Bulgaria, grand projects of ‘rebirth’ and ‘assimilation’ have confronted the Bulgarian-speaking Pomaks with the predicament of choosing between the Bulgarian state, which would prefer them to fully embrace a Bulgarian identity and eventually shed their Muslim faith,<sup>21</sup> and the Bulgarian Turks, who expect them to de-emphasize their Slavic origins and identify as Turks.<sup>22</sup> This situation contributes to explaining why some Pomak communities in Bulgaria have chosen to orientate themselves towards the religious institutions of the Arab world and the study of Arabic rather than Turkish (see Table 3).<sup>23</sup>

### The institutional organization of Muslim communities

An additional layer of differentiation that underlies the complexity of Muslim communities in Southeast Europe concerns their institutional organization, relations with the state and the majority population, and their attitude towards the Ottoman legacy. All Islamic administrations in the region have evolved from Ottoman structures of religious governance, albeit at different historical moments and in different fashion, and all used to have a special relationship with the institution of the Caliphate and the *Şeyh-ül İslam* in Istanbul. Bosnia-Herzegovina was the first territory to receive a religious administration engineered in the image of Austrian institutions and with the explicit aim to reorient Bosnian Muslims away from the Ottoman Empire. Yet, as Mirnes Kovač, editor of the Islamic Journal ‘*Preporod*’ (Renaissance) emphasizes, despite these efforts: ‘the *Reis-ul ulema* [the holder of the high Islamic office created by the Austrian government] throughout the monarchy would be praising first Kaiser Franz Joseph in his *hutbas*, and then the Caliph and Sultan in Istanbul’ (Kovač 2010). The final authority lay with the *Mesşihat İstambulski* (Omerdić 2010), the office of the *Şeyh-ül İslam* in Istanbul.<sup>24</sup>

In Albania, the break with Istanbul was more pronounced because it was initiated by secular Albanian nationalists, implemented by the state, and occurred even before the abolition of the Caliphate in Istanbul. This break led to the establishment of an Albanian religious community called *Diyanet* and an Islamic Congress in 1923 (Clayer 2008, 129). The isolation of Muslims, as well as other religious groups in Albania, took on an infinitely more dramatic turn with the declaration of the world’s first ‘atheist state’ in 1967 (Clayer 1997, 115). In all other cases, the religious communities were established on the basis of bilateral agreements with the Ottoman Empire and carry an Ottoman imprint in terms of organization and doctrinal orientation, which neither the Habsburgs nor the Yugoslav rulers seem to have eradicated completely. The *Rijaset* in Sarajevo administered all Muslim religious affairs since the 1930s, and neither of the two Yugoslav states outlawed religion as such or enforced a break with the Ottoman – Hanefi tradition, the mainstream denomination of Muslims in the Balkans. In the 1980s, Yugoslav authorities even tolerated a moderate Islamic renaissance.<sup>25</sup> This renaissance was helped by the survival of Sufi religious brotherhoods or *tarikats* through the socialist era, allowing for a continuity in Muslim practice and identity that is particular to the Balkans and to the Ottoman heartlands, where most of them originated. These *tarikats*, particularly in Macedonia and Kosovo, continued to maintain low-profile contacts with their equally ostracized counterparts in Turkey, where Sufi lodges were outlawed in



1925, even though they often continued their meetings in private. No such contacts were, however, possible between Turkey and the communities in the more restrictive regimes of Albania and Bulgaria, where Sufi brotherhoods were effectively abolished and lodges were closed down.

Attitudes towards the Ottoman legacy are also historically contingent. The further east a country is located, the more positively its Ottoman legacy and religious dimension seem to be evaluated. In Bosnia, the Empire is often remembered as an ambiguous historical heritage: the empire is revered by many for introducing Islam, but scolded for having abandoned the Bosniaks to the Austrians in the nineteenth century (Resic 2010).<sup>26</sup> It is often firmly rejected by the majority of secular elites in Albania proper, who think of this legacy in terms of a backward religious empire that drew an essentially European Albania into the Orient.<sup>27</sup> In Kosovo and Macedonia, lay Muslims and functionaries of the Muslim religious communities alike generally hold the former empire in high esteem, generalize the sentiment to Turkey, and consider their practice and meaning of Islam as a decidedly Ottoman and Turkish one.<sup>28</sup> This attitude is shared by secular observers, such as Krenar Gashi (Director of the Kosovar Institute for Policy Research and Development, KIPRED) who suggests that Islam in Kosovo is: ‘Turkish-style Islam. . . The Islam here is the Islam that the Turks have brought in’ (Gashi 2010), while the Director of the Museum of the Prizren League, Parim Kosova argues that ‘if it was not for the Ottomans, there would be no Albanians today. . . and we would have become Serb or Greek’ (Kosova 2010). A sentiment that had been surfacing now and again during my interviews was captured by the *Şeyh* of the *Halveti* lodge, a Sufi brotherhood in the *Saraqhane* neighbourhood of Prizren: ‘It is the Turks who have brought Islam thus far. It is also the Turks who abolished the Caliphate. The one

Table 4. Islamic Unions in the Balkans.

| Country            | Name  | Link   |
|--------------------|---|--|
| Kosovo             | <i>Bashkësia Islame</i>   | <a href="http://www.bislame.net">www.bislame.net</a>   |
| Albania            | <i>Komuniteti Musliman</i><br><i>Komuniteti Bektashi</i>  | <a href="http://www.kmsh.al">www.kmsh.al</a><br><a href="http://www.komunitetibektashi.org">www.komunitetibektashi.org</a>   |
| Bosnia-Herzegovina | <i>Islamska Zajednica/Rijaset</i>   | <a href="http://www.rijaset.ba/en/">www.rijaset.ba/en/</a>   |
| Macedonia          | <i>Bashkësia Fetare Islame</i><br><i>(Makedonya Islam Birliği)</i>  | <a href="http://www.bim.org.mk">www.bim.org.mk</a>   |
| Bulgaria           | <i>Мюсюлманско Изповедание –</i><br><i>Главню Мюфтийство</i><br><i>Bulgaristan Başmüftülüğü</i>   | <a href="http://www.genmufti.net">www.genmufti.net</a>   |
| Serbia             | <i>Mešihat – Islamske Zajednice u Srbiji</i><br><i>(Belgrade)</i><br><i>Rijaset – Islamska Zajednice u Srbije</i><br><i>(Novi Pazar)</i>  | <a href="http://www.islamskazajednica.org">www.islamskazajednica.org</a><br><a href="http://www.rijaset.rs">www.rijaset.rs</a>   |
| Greece             | <i>Elected Muftis of</i><br><i>Komotini/Gumuljina</i><br><i>Xanthi/Iskeçe</i><br><i>Appointed Muftis of</i><br><i>Komotini (Μουφτεία Κομοτηνής)</i><br><i>Xanthi/Iskeçe (Μουφτεία Ξάνθης)</i> | <a href="http://www.gumulcinemuftulugu.info">www.gumulcinemuftulugu.info</a><br><a href="http://www.iskecemuftulugu.org">www.iskecemuftulugu.org</a><br><a href="http://www.muftikomotini.com">www.muftikomotini.com</a><br><a href="http://www.muftixanthi.com">www.muftixanthi.com</a> |
| Turkey             | <i>Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı</i>  | <a href="http://www.diyenet.gov.tr/english/">www.diyenet.gov.tr/english/</a>   |

Source: Based on fieldwork research and interviews with the Islamic Unions of Kosovo, Albania, Bosnia, Macedonia and Bulgaria.

Table 5. Relations between official Muslim communities and the state.

| Muslim Community   | Perspectives   | Role of state   | Anti-Muslim sentiment/status   | Majority Islam<br>Islam in competition with secular Muslims |
|--|--|---|--|---|
| Kosovo<br><i>Bashkësia Islame</i><br>Albania<br><i>Komuniteti Musliman</i><br>Bosnia-Herzegovina<br><i>Islamska Zajednica (IZ)</i> | Legitimate but discriminated<br>Legitimate but discriminated<br>Legitimate and supported | Secular/equidistant to all religions<br>Secular/Equidistant to all religions<br>Secular/Formally equidistant to all religions, yet strong relations between the Federation and the IZ | n/a<br>n/a<br>Present in other communities   | Majority Islam<br>Islam in competition with secular Muslims |
| Macedonia<br><i>Bashkësia Fetare Islame</i>  | Legitimate but discriminated against   | Secular, but Orthodoxy has elevated status<br>Community life is unhindered, but observation   | Present  | Significant Minority Islam<br>Contested                     |
| Bulgaria<br><i>Bulgaristan Başmüftülüğü</i>  | Heavily discriminated against  | Secular, but Orthodoxy has is 'traditional religion'<br>State interferes with and obstructs community life  | Prevalent after 9/11, Anti-Muslim, anti-Turkish Party (ATAKA) supports government, regular attacks | Significant minority Islam<br>Beleaguered                   |
| Serbia<br><i>Islamska Zajednica (Belgrade)</i><br><i>Islamska Zajednica (Novi Pazar)</i>   | Conflict over the Belgrade and Novi Pazar-based mufti                                    | Orthodoxy preferred, state interferes with community life   | Prevalent, but change in state attitude  | Significant minority Islam<br>Contested                     |
| Greece<br><i>Elected Muftis</i><br><i>Appointed Muftis</i>   | Strong conflict between elected and appointed muftis                                     | Orthodoxy is considered part of Greek national identity. Suspicious of 'Muslim' minority  | Prevalent, existence of nationalist party with anti-Muslim discourse (LAOS)                        | Beleaguered Islam   |

Source: Based on fieldwork research and interviews with the Islamic Unions of Kosovo, Albania, Bosnia, Macedonia and Bulgaria.

and only audible voice of Islam was muted. If there is any country, which can now bring this voice back, and carry Islam further, it is Turkey' (Abidin 2010).

A most intriguing insight, which emerged from interviews with leaders of the Islamic Communities (see Tables 4 and 5), is the fact that only the three Muslim-majority countries – Kosovo, Albania and Bosnia-Herzegovina – seek to maintain fully secular regimes in which all religious communities are effectively separated from the state. In all three cases, disestablishment is anchored in both constitutional provisions and public policies of governments, which stress maintaining equidistance to all religious groups in the country. In Albania, for instance, all four major religious groups, Muslims, Bektashis, Catholics and Orthodox, are recognized (Kruja 2010). In some cases, equidistance can even result in disadvantaging the majority-community. According to community leaders in Kosovo and Albania, for example, municipal governments in Tirana and Prishtina, despite being dominated by (secular) Muslims, discriminate against the Muslim community by refusing building permits for mosque projects in the city centre while actively encouraging the building of Catholic and Orthodox Cathedrals. Many municipal governments view these circumstances as demonstrative of the 'European-ness' of Albanian culture, referencing the Christian roots of pre-Ottoman Albania (Hajrullahu 2010).<sup>29</sup> An increasing number of intellectuals, however, also believe that they 'do not have to be ashamed of being Muslim' (Krasniqi 2010).

Divisions over doctrine are significant in some countries, particularly in Albania, where a significant proportion of Muslims adhere to the *Bektashi* sect, which has played an important role in the emergence of secular Albanian nationalism, but which differs in doctrine and praxis from the Orthodoxy of Sunni Islam. In Macedonia, there is a more pronounced conflict between the *Bektashi*<sup>30</sup> and Sunni communities, particularly over the right to use real estate (i.e. brotherhood lodges). Even though there is also an *Alevi*<sup>31</sup> community in Bulgaria (Gruev 2010), it is insignificant in terms of numbers and political influence. In fact, and despite the aforementioned divisions, there is also a layer of common reference, which is thin at the moment, yet may play a more important role in the near future: the overwhelming majority of Muslims in the Balkans adhere to a mainstream Sunni Islam of the *Hanafi* school of Islamic jurisprudence, a tradition they share with the majority of Muslims in Turkey.<sup>32</sup>

All countries with significant Muslim minorities in the region are in principle secular, but in Macedonia, Bulgaria, Serbia and Greece, Orthodoxy has an elevated status of 'preferred' or 'traditional' religion (Pajaziti 2010; Yalimov 2010) both in constitutional and in every-day life terms. These incompletely secular arrangements result in state–community relations fraught with tension, albeit to different degrees. In Macedonia, where the Muslim community has now become largely synonymous with the country's sizable Albanian population, the 'Islamic Union' (*Bashkësia Fet-are Islame*) is left to operate relatively freely, even though functionaries complain of intelligence operations and observations against some of its mosques, in which *Salafi*-leaning preachers maintain a presence (Selimovski 2010).<sup>33</sup>

In all other Southeast European countries with significant Muslim minorities, the state tends to interfere with the religious administrations: state agencies and courts override the election of religious representatives by lay people and often appoint *muftis* against the will of the laity. In Serbia, Bulgaria and Greece, parallel institutions with state-appointed *muftis* are pitted against those with popularly elected *muftis* (cf. Aliş 2010; Chouseinoglou 2010; Emin 2010; Ismailov 2010). Both in

Bulgaria and Greece, these incomplete secular arrangements coincide with high levels of Islamophobic sentiment, expressed by anti-Muslim political parties such as ATAKA and LAOS, and characterized by recurring violent attacks against mosques and cemeteries. In Bulgaria, a particular problem remains the obstruction of the accreditation and extension of the Islamic Institute in Sofia of the Chief Mufti, which would create better conditions for the education of imams and religious scholars in Bulgaria (Chouseinoglu 2010; Köseömer 2010; Ismailov 2010). This experience of unsympathetic state behaviour<sup>34</sup> and popular disaffirmation contributes to a sense of being ‘beleaguered’ and ‘unwelcome’, particularly among more pious Muslims who attend mosques on a regular basis and experience the discrimination more acutely.<sup>35</sup>

### Conclusion

As this brief exploration of the demographic, religious, ethno-linguistic and institutional differences among Muslims in the Balkans suggests, the term ‘Balkan Muslims’ or ‘Islam in the Balkans’ is a highly misleading one. The concept needs to be used with great caution as it implies the notion of a ‘common Muslimness’, or a collective identity bridging different countries, languages and historical origins. As has been shown, however, ‘Being Muslim’ is often a very local affair and only one of many identities, i.e. national, ethno-linguistic (and, though not discussed here, those of class and gender). In addition to ethnic, religious and linguistic fragmentation – which is considerable – Muslim communities in the Balkans must also negotiate diverse institutional and societal frameworks that range from majority to minority status, from secular regimes to arrangements which privilege the Orthodox Church, and from societies where Islam holds a generally positive connotation to more Islamophobic contexts. At the same time, a layer of institutional and doctrinal persuasion is apparent (expressed in the historical orientation towards Istanbul’s religious authorities, the prevalence of the *Hanafi* school and the presence of *tarikats*), permeating most of the region’s Muslim communities. Attitudes towards Turkey and the Ottoman Empire, however, vary greatly. These sentiments range from general dismissal among the secular elites of Albania, to ambiguous scepticism in Bosnia, and to high levels of sympathy and intimacy in Macedonia and Kosovo. Turkish Muslims in Bulgaria and Greece tend to orientate themselves toward Turkey by default, despite the virulently anti-Ottoman historical education and anti-Turkish sentiment in the public sphere.

The debate on Islam in the Balkans in the aftermath of 9/11 and the ‘War on Terror’ has been distorted by security analysts and think-tankers, who helped to create the chimera of a large Muslim bloc that risks falling prey to the ideologues of Islamic terrorism and the promoters of alien traditions like Salafism and Wahhabism. This bloc, however, does not exist. Muslim communities in the Balkans remain fragmented, disconnected and often marginalized. Emigration, assimilation, de-Islamization have been salient features of the experience of Muslims in the Balkans, together with the emergence of new, but often weak and contested nation-states, hitherto inconclusive processes of Europeanization and marginalization particularly in contexts of Christian majorities. The Balkan landscape of Islam remains a complex and complicated one that is shaped by transnational religious networks, Turkish legacies and increasingly new Turkish networks, by intra-regional and intra-community dynamics, regional relations and European policies.

## Notes

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the international workshop ‘After the Wahhabi Mirage: Islam, politics and international networks in the Balkans’ at the University of Oxford in June 2010. This research is based on a British Academy Small Research Grant. I would also like to thank Eldar Sarajlić, Gëzim Krasniqi, Ali Chouseinoglou, Altin Raxhimi, Patricia Styss and Dimitris Antoniou for their contributions.
2. European and American popular interest in Islamist radicalism is surely not a phenomenon of the early 2000s. It can be traced back at least to the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979 (cf. Said 1981). In many European countries, a series of crises implicating Muslim immigrant communities marked such rise in interest. In the UK, the fatwa against Salman Rushdie in the late 1980s was such a turning point; and in France, it was the election victory of the Islamic Salvation Front in Algeria and the following war in the 1990s (Öktem and Abou-El-Fadl 2009). The fear of larger geopolitical conflicts between ‘Islam’ and the ‘West’ was later reinforced with the articulation of Huntington’s theory on the *Clash of Civilizations* in the early 1990s (Huntington 1993).
3. Books were published with such enticing titles as *Unholy Terror: Bosnia, Al-Qaida and the Rise of Global Jihad* (Schindler 2007), *Al-Qaida’s Jihad in Europe: The Afghan–Bosnian Network* (Kohlman 2004), *Al Qaeda in Europe: the New Battleground of International Jihad* (Vidino 2006) and *The Coming Balkan Caliphate: the Threat of Radical Islam to Europe and the West* (Deliso 2007).
4. I conducted interviews with members of the Islamic Unions of Bosnia, Albania, Kosovo, Macedonia, Bulgaria, with the Turkish Presidency of Religious Affairs (*Diyamet*), as well as with think-tankers, academics and religious actors.
5. Bougarel had dismissed the ‘Islamic encirclement’ and ‘radicalization’ narrative as early as 1997, concluding that it would ‘be unjustified and dangerous to present Balkan Islam and its current evolutions as a threat to Europe. There is no “green axis” in the Balkans, and the Muslim populations of this region are not a crisis factor, but victims and actors among others in a wider regional crisis’ (1997, 17). This thoughtful rejection of a biased discourse, however, came just a few years before 9/11, a date after which the ‘green axis’ narrative became even more pronounced.
6. Probably around half of those who fled Bulgaria in 1989 eventually came back, yet there is a general consensus among community leaders that the most able and successful members of the community and almost all intellectuals remained in Turkey. There is also a significant number of Bulgarian Turks who now live and work in both countries (Gruev 2010; Ismailov 2010; Parla Alpan 2006, 2007).
7. In addition to emigration, Muslim immigration to the Balkans has come to play a role as well, even though there exists little in terms of scholarship or reliable data. Muslim immigrant communities, particularly from Syria, exist particularly in Bulgaria, where Syrian students began to live in the 1960s and 1970s. Greece has certainly the largest Muslim immigrant communities particularly in Athens. They mostly hail from Pakistan, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, as well as from the Levante and North Africa. A smaller part of early arrivals in the 1960s and 1970s have, mostly educated members of middle-class families from Egypt, Lebanon and Palestine, have now secure residence permits or citizenship. The great bulk of recent immigrants, however, tend to be low-skilled and often have volatile residence status. Their number is estimated at several hundred thousand.
8. This may also partly account for the ferocity of Albanian nationalism in Macedonia and the particularly fearful withdrawal of urban Muslims from Tetovo and Skopje, which Ellis describes in her closing chapter of ‘Shadow Genealogies’, called ‘Everything my father is telling you’ (Ellis 2003, 151 ff.).
9. None of the actors involved in the migratory waves to Turkey seemed to have an interest in dwelling on the event: Bosniaks and Albanians who migrated to Turkey thought of themselves as fully equal citizens of the Turkish Republic; the Turkish Republic imposed a homogenous national identity that was not to be tainted by memories of the old homeland; and the evicting states were happy to have the number of Muslims reduced. More recently, nationalist sentiment among Albanians, and to a lesser extent Bosniaks, has also added to the focal shift away from the immigrant communities in Turkey. There is often a sense of pride that is conveyed, however, when people in Bosnia claim that ‘[T]here are probably 3–4 million Bosniaks in Turkey’ (Kalajdžić 2010).

10. The figure of nine million excludes Muslims in the Thracian provinces of Turkey, i.e. Istanbul, Edirne, Tekirdağ and Kırklareli.
11. In Macedonia in particular, most Albanians believe that the state is manipulating census data in order to keep the share of Albanians below the constitutionally significant threshold of 33% (Ismaili 2010; Selimovski 2010). In Albania, members of the *Komuniteti Musliman* suggest that there have been efforts to manipulate the numbers of Muslims in the census expected for 2011 by counting members of the broadly Muslim *Bektashi* sect separately (Kruja 2010).
12. Clayer and Bougarel's study rests on the figures available at the time, which in some cases were very limited. For example, in Albania, where the share of Muslims in the total population was established as 70% in 1942, no recount has taken place ever since.
13. Strictly speaking, Bosnia-Herzegovina is a Muslim plurality country, in which Muslims constitute the largest group, but not the majority. Considering, however, that the Republika Srpska is now almost homogeneously Serbian, it is fair to say that the Bosniaks (i.e. the Bosnian Muslims) are the majority in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina.
14. According to the *Bashkësia Fetare* of Macedonia, the number might be as high as 900,000 with a share of 80% Albanians, 10% Turks and 10% Roma and Bosniaks (Selimovski 2010).
15. Due to bilateral agreements and the Lausanne Treaty, the Muslim communities of Western Thrace continue to have access to *Sharia* courts. Since Greece emerged as one of the destinations for Muslim scholars and dignitaries after the abolition of the Caliphate in Turkey, the Ottoman language in Arabic print was used in newspapers and education well into the 1970s (Bonos 2008; Chouseinoglu 2010; Katsikas 2009).
16. It is this linguistic continuum, which is increasingly referred to as a larger 'Albanian space' of cultural interaction (Zogiani 2010), not to be confused with the political project of a 'Greater Albania'.
17. I conducted most of my interviews with members of Muslim community organizations in Turkish. In Bosnia and Albania, where no indigenous Turkish speakers exist anymore, my counterparts had studied in Turkey or at the Gülen schools, where Turkish is one of the languages of instruction. In Kosovo and Macedonia, Turkish is still spoken widely, at least among the now mostly Albanian urban Muslims.
18. In Macedonia, relations between the state and the Turkish minority have been exceptionally good: For Macedonian political elites, the Turkish community was the proof that Muslims are not marginalized in the country and that existing conflicts are caused by Albanian nationalism. At the same time, good relations with the Turkish community also helped the emergence of the close economic and political cooperation between the Turkey and Macedonia.
19. The Pomaks are a particularly interesting case. They inhabit the mountain ranges of the Rhodopi on either side of the Greek-Bulgarian border. Different contexts have led Pomaks to mostly dissociate themselves from Turks in Bulgaria, while assimilating into the Turkish community in Greece (for these differential trajectories of Pomak identity, see Brunnbauer 1999; Demetriou 2004; Michail 2003).
20. The ban on the word 'Turkish' and its derivatives in reference to anything concerning the minority population of Western Thrace took place right after the unilateral declaration of independence of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus in 1983. The more successive Greek governments tried to prevent the emergence of a single Turkish minority consciousness, however, the more 'Pomaks' and 'Gypsies' consolidated into 'Turks'. This process was facilitated further by both push and pull factors: Turkey provided generous conditions for university education in Turkey, while Muslim students were disadvantaged in Greece due to their limited language skills. In the last decade or so, Greek policies have become more integrative, particularly in terms of education.
21. In the Kircali area, a Pomak convert to Orthodoxy, Bojan Sarajev, has now established a monastery, which at least Turkish Muslims in the region see as part of a strategy to induce Pomaks into conversion (Gruev 2010; Köseömer 2010).
22. The Chief Mufti of Bulgaria, Mustafa Aliş Hacı Efendi, himself of Pomak origin (but Turkish-speaker), firmly placed Pomak identity within the Turkish context. He told me: 'We count all Muslims as Turks'. When I inquired whether this also included Pomaks, he responded in a way that really brought to the fore the fluidity of Pomak identity:

- ‘Yes. The Pomaks are the real Muslims. The Turks have survived with their Turkish ethnic identity, but the Pomaks had to cling to their Muslimness’ (Aliş 2010).
23. There is a wide consensus among both scholars and members of the Muslim community that the Pomaks in Bulgaria suffered disproportionately from punitive discrimination (Emin 2010; Ismailov 2010) by the state. Some Pomak communities have been more exposed to Saudi influences and education in the Arab world. Polygyny and *niqab* occurs at least in some Pomak villages, and observers explain this with the impact of imams educated in Salafi institutions (Ismailov 2010). In some villages like Ribново and Srnca, Saudi foundations are still active and many Imams have an educational background in Saudi Arabian institutions (Gruev 2010).
  24. As the eminent scholar Fikret Karčić reminds us, the office of the *Reis-al Ulema* in Sarajevo and the organization of the Bosnian Muslim community developed as an Ottoman institution, and accepted the symbolic sovereignty of Istanbul (Karčić 1997, 2008).
  25. In comparing the situation in Yugoslavia and particularly in Kosovo with both Turkey and other Balkan countries, Şeyh Abidin Efendi, who inherited the chair of the Prizren Halveti lodge from his father, stated that ‘Like in Turkey, there has been a rupture here, but the tekkes were never closed. Individuals were discouraged to come. But the places of worship always stayed open’ (Abidin 2010).
  26. Such ambiguity goes alongside strong shows of support during sport events. A good example was the WM match between Turkey and Croatia in 2008, when thousand of Bosniak fans went out to the streets of Sarajevo waving Turkish flags. [<http://bosnian-footballculture.blogspot.com/2008/06/turmoil-in-bosnia-after-turkey-croatia.html>].
  27. For a detailed overview of the debate in Albania and the often Islamophobic attitudes towards Ottoman history and Muslim identity, including a critique of Albanian novelist Ismail Kadare’s principled stand against the Ottoman past and Islam, see Olsi Jazexhi’s article on ‘The Political Exploitation of Islamophobia in post-communist Albania’ (Jazexhi 2010).
  28. The mufti of Prizren, Lütfü Balık, during an interview in a café in downtown Prizren, confided that ‘Turkey is our great brother in spiritual terms. If it was not for Sultan Murat, I would not have been a Mufti but a Priest’ (Balık 2010).
  29. This has been brought to my attention by several interview partners in Prishtina and Tirana, where prayer space in the central town is indeed very limited to only a few Ottoman mosques, many of which are now under reconstruction (Hajrullahu 2010; Kruja 2010). In both countries, political elites have emphasized the existence of Christian minorities, to de-emphasize the Muslim identity of the majority (Krasniqi 2010). The unintended side-effect of these policies is that mosque congregations often unwillingly spill out on to the pavements during Friday prayers in Prishtina (Karabaxhaku 2010) and in Tirana’s small but iconic Ethem Paşa mosque on Skanderbeg Square, which biased observers then cite as proof of growing Islamization.
  30. The *Bektashi* are a Sufi brotherhood with roots in the Anatolian town of *Hacıbektaş*. The brotherhood played a major role in the Islamization of the Balkans in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, despite its relatively heterodox Shia origins and its proximity to the *Alevi* community. Even though the sect remains strong in Turkey, it held a particularly important role in the formation of Albanian nationalism and took on a more decidedly Albanian orientation after the lodge was closed down in Turkey in the 1920s. Today, relations between the *Bektashi* organizations in both countries have been revived.
  31. Like the *Bektashi*, the *Alevi*s are a heterodox community with distant relations to Shia Islam and developed mainly among Turks and Kurds, initially in Eastern Anatolia on the border with Safavid Iran. *Alevi* faith today is still rather localized, yet boasts at least 10 million adherents in Turkey. Due to a very different set of practice and doctrine, *Alevi*s are often seen as heretics by Sunni Muslims. In Bulgaria, *Alevi*s are located in the central Balkan range and particularly in the village of Yablamovo, where they constitute a compact community of 5000–6000 people (Gruev 2010).
  32. The *Hanafi madhab* was the dominant school among the Turks and in the Balkan provinces of the Ottoman Empire. It is often described as more flexible (and sometimes, less convincingly, as more liberal). In the Arab world, the predominant *madhabs* are *Shaafi*, *Hanbali* and *Maliki*. Hence, it would be fair to argue that the Sunni-Hanefi tradition of Ottoman provenance does create a religious continuum that sets it apart from other Muslim traditions.

33. There are Salafi preachers who have established a presence in half a dozen of mosques in Skopje, and who tend to engage in provocative acts against the Islamic Union (Ismaili 2010). Some members of the Union suggest that the Salafi preachers may be manipulated by actors within the Macedonian security services to tarnish the Muslim community at large.
34. A member of the Mufti's office described the barrage of court cases surrounding the election of the mufti and the delaying tactics of the state with regard to the construction and accreditation of the Islamic Institute in the following manner: 'This is a state reflex. At the first sight, it looks perfectly legal, as if there were no politics involved. But when you look closer, it is a completely different story'.
35. In Bulgaria, if not in Greece, assimilationist projects undertaken by Todor Jivkov still influence state behaviour. Many Muslims and Turks do, in fact, assimilate, a fact that is not welcome amongst the organized Muslim Community and the Turkish minority (Aliş 2010; Köseömer 2010). Even though assimilation is a very problematic policy that runs against European human and minority rights norms, it is also fair to say that it creates ways of being accepted into mainstream society, reducing experiences of feeling 'unwelcome' and 'beleaguered'. As a matter of fact, especially for Turks in Bulgaria who insist on their ethnic and religious differences, migration to Turkey is always an easier path than the fight for political change and recognition as a community by the state (Emin 2010).

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