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Navigating Faith and Politics: The Evolution of Islamic Education and NGOs in the Balkans

Muhamed Ali 

The Department of International Relations, University of Sharjah, Sharjah 27272, United Arab Emirates; mali2@sharjah.ac.ae

Abstract: This study employs a multi-dimensional approach to analyze the impact of Islamic education on the Balkans' religious, educational, and socio-political landscapes. Using descriptive, historical, and analytical methods, it examines the evolution and influence of Islamic educational institutions under Ottoman rule and their continued development through the 20th and early 21st centuries. The research evaluates the curricula, teaching methods, and societal roles of these institutions, exploring their contribution to Islamic knowledge dissemination and community building. Further, it investigates the complex interactions between these institutions, Middle Eastern NGOs, state power, and societal changes, aiming to provide a nuanced understanding of their legacy and relevance today. This study addresses the critical role of these institutions and NGOs in shaping Islamic religious education and their broader implications for the Muslim communities in the Balkans.

Keywords: Islamic education; institutions; NGOs; implications



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1. Introduction

Islamic educational practices in the Balkans, a region known for its diverse cultural and religious identities, have undergone significant transformations, particularly in the post-communist era. This study seeks to explore these changes by presenting a nuanced understanding of the historical developments, prevailing themes, and evolving landscape of Islamic education across different Balkan nations. By examining the roles of traditional Islamic educational institutions and NGOs, this research aims to understand their impact on the religious, educational, and socio-political landscapes of Balkan Muslim societies.

The research is guided by several key questions: What roles do traditional Islamic educational institutions play in developing Islamic religious education in the Balkans? How do NGOs influence Islamic education in the region? What are the impacts of these educational practices on the religious, educational, and socio-political environments of Balkan Muslim communities? How have Islamic educational institutions adapted to different socio-political contexts within the Balkans? What are the contemporary challenges faced by Islamic educational institutions in the region?

1.1. Literature Review

Terence Lovat (2020) highlights the essential elements of Islamic education, focusing on the dynamics of the teacher–student relationship and the balance between intellectual pursuits and spiritual/moral growth. He critiques Western pedagogical models, suggesting that Islamic education offers a holistic and moral approach that enriches Western educational practices. Isanović Amina Hadžimerović (2018) provides a comparative examination of Islamic educational systems across the Balkans, discussing their historical evolution. She identifies commonalities in organizational structures but also notes divergent curricular paradigms and varying degrees of integration with national educational frameworks, illustrating the adaptation of Islamic education to different socio-political contexts.

Harry T. Norris (1993) explores the influence of Muslim scholars and Sufi movements in shaping the Islamic educational and spiritual contexts of the Balkans. His analysis

includes the interconnections between Balkan Sufism and Central Asian religious practices, emphasizing the cultural and religious exchanges that have influenced educational practices. Štěpán Macháček (2006) addresses the resurgence of Islamic education following the collapse of communism, noting a significant increase in Islamic awareness and moral education since 1990. This resurgence plays a pivotal role in the ongoing re-Islamization of Balkan Muslims. Ahmet Alibašić (2010) documents the rapid advancement of Islamic educational institutions since the mid-20th century despite notable challenges in countries like Albania.

The anthology edited by Fatma Nevra Settie and Reitumetse Obakeng Mabokela (Herrera 2010), reviewed by Linda Herrera, sheds light on higher education in contexts with significant Muslim populations. Despite criticisms of its production quality, the work offers critical insights into the complexities facing Islamic higher education in transitional societies. Muhammad Amri and La Ode Ismail Ahmad (Amri and Ahmad 2019), along with Abdul Wahab Syakhrani (2020), emphasize the integration of moral and spiritual teachings in Islamic education, guided by the exemplary teachings of Prophet Muhammad. These studies highlight the educational goal of fostering moral excellence and the transformative potential of following Islamic educational models for societal advancement.

The body of literature on Islamic education in the Balkans presents a detailed exploration of its multifaceted nature, from its historical roots and institutional developments to its philosophical underpinnings and modern-day challenges. These studies collectively underscore the unique contribution of Islamic educational practices to addressing contemporary societal challenges and enriching the broader educational discourse.

1.2. Methodology

This study adopts a multi-dimensional approach, using descriptive, historical, and analytical methodologies to investigate the influence of Islamic education on the religious, educational, and socio-political environments of the Balkans. The descriptive analysis reviews the evolution and structure of Islamic educational institutions during the Ottoman period, examining curricula, teaching methodologies, and the societal roles of these establishments. The historical dimension explores the development of these educational systems from the 20th century into the early 21st century, helping to understand their impact on social cohesion, identity formation, and political engagement across Balkan communities.

The analytical component examines the interactions between Islamic educational entities, Middle Eastern NGOs, state powers, and societal changes over the centuries. By analyzing primary sources and scholarly literature, this study aims to decode the intricate relationships connecting religious education with broader socio-political and cultural transformations in the region.

Through these combined approaches, the research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of both the historical legacy and contemporary relevance of Islamic educational institutions within the Balkan societal mosaic. The study particularly focuses on the roles that traditional Islamic educational institutions and NGOs play in shaping Islamic religious education and their impacts on Muslim communities in the Balkans. This research raises important questions about the extent to which these institutions and associated foreign NGOs contribute to or detract from the development of Islamic religious education, as well as their broader socio-political and educational implications for Muslim societies in the region.

2. Navigating History: The Development of Islamic Education from Ottoman Influence on Contemporary Balkan States

The Balkans, also known as the Balkan Peninsula, is a region in Southeast Europe that holds significant geographical, historical, and cultural importance. The name “Balkans” is derived from the Turkish word for mountain, reflecting the area’s rugged terrain. The Balkans typically encompass Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, and Slovenia. The

Balkan Peninsula is bordered by the Adriatic Sea to the northwest, the Mediterranean Sea (including the Ionian and Aegean Seas) to the south, and the Black Sea to the east. The region is noted for its mountainous landscapes, with notable ranges such as the Balkan Mountains in Bulgaria, the Dinaric Alps, the Rhodope Mountains, and the Pindus range (Bideleux and Jeffries 2007). The Balkan Peninsula's geostrategic position is vital as it stretches towards Central Europe and the Mediterranean, acting as a barrier or passage between Asia and Europe and being close to Africa. This position also gives the Balkans logistical importance, serving as a base for potential military operations against fuel-rich areas and playing a crucial role in European integration and EU influence on the Mediterranean and Middle Eastern regions (Budak 2006, pp. 168–69). Historically, the Balkans have been a crossroads of various civilizations, including the Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, Ottomans, and Austro-Hungarians. This diverse history has resulted in a rich cultural mosaic characterized by a variety of languages, religions, and traditions. Towards the end of the 14th and the beginning of the 15th century, the Ottoman Empire emerged as the dominant military, political, and economic power in the Balkans, referring to the region as *Avrupa-i Osmani* (Ottoman Europe) and *Rumeli-i Şahane* (Aydoğmuş 2009, p. 165). During Ottoman rule, Europeans referred to the region as “European Turkey” (Davutoğlu 2004, pp. 121–22). In the early 19th century, coinciding with political developments on the international scene, Europeans began to use new names such as the Balkans and Near (Middle) East for these territories, reflecting subjective European perspectives (Davutoğlu 2004, pp. 121–22; Aydoğmuş 2009, p. 4; Budak 2006, pp. 165–66; Mazower 2002). The term “Balkans” and “Balkan Peninsula” was first used in 1808 by the German geographer August Zeune (Davutoğlu 2004, pp. 121–22; Aydoğmuş 2009, p. 4; Budak 2006, pp. 165–66; Mazower 2002).

Politically, the Balkans have undergone significant transformations, especially following the decline of the Ottoman Empire and the dissolution of Yugoslavia. Today, the region consists of a mix of EU member states, NATO members, and countries aspiring to join these organizations. Economically, the Balkans show diverse levels of development and integration into the global economy (Lampe 2000). Throughout history and into the present day, the Balkans have attracted the interest of major powers and international actors, including the USA, EU, Russia, China, France, Germany, Austria, and Turkey, which has played a significant role in the region in recent times (Budak 2006, pp. 168–69).

The Balkans' strategic importance on the international scene is underscored by its pivotal location, stretching towards Central Europe and the Mediterranean. It serves as both a barrier and a passage between Asia and Europe and is situated near the African continent. This geostrategic position enhances the Balkans' logistical significance, making it a potential base for military operations aimed at fuel-rich regions (Budak 2006, pp. 168–69). The Balkans also play a vital role in European integration efforts and are crucial for the influence of EU politics on the Mediterranean and Middle Eastern regions. The region's complex geopolitical landscape has made it a focal point for the interests of major powers and international actors, including the USA, EU, Russia, China, France, Germany, and Austria. Turkey, in particular, has played an essential role in the Balkans in recent periods, reflecting its historical and strategic ties to the region (Budak 2006, pp. 168–69).

Considering that Balkan Muslims were predominantly introduced to Islam during the Ottoman era, it is pertinent to provide an overview of Islamic educational activities under Ottoman rule in this region. In the Balkans, the Ottoman educational institutions offered training in various fields of Islamic sciences. Students were instructed by teachers or professors selected based on students' preferences. Upon completing their studies and under the mentorship of these professors, students were awarded *ijāzahs* (licenses to teach), which were granted by the professors rather than the institutions themselves (Idriz 2000, pp. 221–84; Idriz 2003, pp. 169–88).

Furthermore, it is important to note that education during the Ottoman period utilized traditional tools and was conducted in institutions such as *tekkes*, *ibtidai* schools, *idadi* schools, and *madrasas*. Initially, in the early 15th century, the educational system

included primary schools (muallimhana). By the 16th century, the educational structure had expanded to include Madrasas, Haniquahs (schools focused on mysticism and training dervishes), Dar al-Qur'an, and Dar al-Hadith.

The late 19th century saw the establishment of national schools among Balkan nations, marking a significant shift in educational activities. However, the 20th century was characterized by the rise of socialism/communism, which adversely affected the religious practices and development of Islamic education in the region. The implementation of these suppressive measures varied among states, with harsher implementations in countries like Bulgaria and Albania, while in others like Yugoslavia, the cultural impact was realized differently. Following the fall of communism in the 1990s, Islamic communities in the Balkans faced the challenge of establishing new educational institutions to meet the educational needs of Muslims. The creation of new madrasas and faculties of Islamic studies in the latter half of the 20th century stands out as a major achievement for Muslims in the region (Hadžiomerović 2018, pp. 809–24).

Examining the development of Islamic education in the Balkans throughout the 20th century and into the early 21st century, we observe that this process comprises several components: Islamic education is managed and controlled by Islamic communities, including madrasas, Islamic faculties, mosques, and maktabas. A second educational approach, which is influenced by the development of democratic values in the Balkan states, leads to new state-led approaches to religious education, such as offering religious education at primary and secondary levels (Alibašić 2009, pp. 51–52). Thus, the 20th century witnessed significant political and social upheavals globally, with the Balkans experiencing particularly profound transformations. These changes dramatically influenced the relationships between religion and the state, leading to emergent debates about their nature, type, and future. Due to the varied political, cultural, ethnic, and religious landscapes of each country, it is not feasible to discuss a uniform model of religion–state relations. To facilitate a clearer understanding of these relationships, it is helpful to categorize the states into four groups: The first group includes what are known as “religious states,” consisting of around 12 countries, where religious institutions govern both the religious and legal systems. The second group, comprising approximately 60 states, maintains an “official religion” with a secular legal framework. The third group includes about 120 “secular” states, and the fourth group consists of five “anti-religious” states that actively oppose religious practices. Examples include Saudi Arabia and Iran as “religious states”; England, Spain, Italy, Poland, and Norway as countries with an “official religion”; Germany, France, and Belgium as “secular states”; and China and North Korea as “anti-religious” states (Kuru 2011, pp. 247–53; Köylü 2017, pp. 229–30). Additionally, Monsma and Soper delineate three types of religion–state relations within liberal democracies: The “partial establishment” type, where the state endorses a particular religious group as the state religion, as seen in England and Greece. The “strict separationist” type, where religious groups are considered separate from the state and generally function as a part of civil society without direct financial support from the state, is exemplified by the USA and France. The third type seeks a balance, as in the Netherlands, Germany, Austria, and Norway, where the state officially recognizes various religious groups, supports their existence, and provides economic aid without religious or secular bias (Monsma and Christophen 1997; Köylü 2017, pp. 229–30).

When examining the relationship between religion and the state, it is evident that significant tensions between religious states and anti-religious states are uncommon. In religious states, religion significantly influences the educational systems, whereas, in anti-religious states, religious education is notably absent from school curricula. Additionally, the concept of secularism in state political systems can be bifurcated into two categories: “passive” or “accommodating secularism,” as exemplified by the USA, and “confrontational secularism,” as seen in France. These distinctions highlight the diverse strategies that states employ regarding the inclusion of religion in their public and private educational systems. The topic of religious education in Western societies sparks considerable debate among experts for several principal reasons. The first issue is whether religious education

should be viewed primarily as an educational activity or as a religious one. The second point of contention concerns the implementation of religious education: Is it part of the mainstream curriculum, is it supplementary preparation provided by religious groups for public school sessions, or is it specifically structured within church-affiliated schools? The third significant debate arises from the varied policies and practices surrounding religious education, which are deeply influenced by the historical complexities of different religions and sects in Europe. As a result, religious education frequently dominates national discourse, making international comparisons challenging due to these complexities (See [Halstead 2005](#), pp. 7731–36). As we move from this broader examination of the interplay between religion and education in the Balkans, it is essential to explore specific case studies that highlight these dynamics. One such example is the revitalization and reform of the Isa Beg Madrasa in Skopje, North Macedonia. This case illustrates the ongoing efforts and challenges in maintaining and modernizing Islamic educational institutions within the region.

3. Revitalization and Reform: A Comparative Analysis of Madrasa Education in the Balkans

3.1. North Macedonia

The Isa Beg Madrasa, an Islamic high school located in Skopje, North Macedonia, experienced a prolonged interruption in its operations due to the Bulgarian occupation in 1941. This halt lasted until 1979, when the Islamic Community of North Macedonia (ICNM) undertook efforts to restore the institution. By the 1984/1985 academic year, the madrasa resumed educational activities as a legally recognized private entity supported by the Ministry of Education and funded by the ICNM. Its primary purpose is to prepare students for roles as imams, hatibs, and vaiz ([Nexhipi 2011](#), p. 24). Following the year 2000, the Isa Beg Madrasa saw a substantial increase in enrollment, driven by North Macedonia's law on compulsory secondary education. To accommodate this growing interest, the ICNM expanded its educational reach by opening additional branches in Tetovo and Gostivar and planning for future expansions in Kumanovo and Kicevo ([Ebibi 2011](#), personal communication). Curricular modifications were first introduced in 1996 to streamline educational offerings, which included the consolidation of some subjects, the elimination of others, and the introduction of mathematics. By 2010, further reforms had integrated modern scientific disciplines such as Chemistry, Physics, and Didactics, reflecting shifts toward a broader educational paradigm ([Ali 2012](#), p. 209).

3.2. Bosnia and Herzegovina

In a parallel development, the Islamic Community of Bosnia and Herzegovina (ICBH) administers six prominent madrasas, recognized for their comprehensive secondary religious education programs: Ghazi Husrev Bey Madrasa (Sarajevo): Continuously operational since its establishment in 1537; Bahram Bey Madrasa (Tuzla): re-established in 1993, originally founded in 1626; Elči Ibrahim Pasha Madrasa (Travnik): re-established in 1993, initially opened in 1706; Osman Efendi Redžović Madrasa (Visoko): established in 1992; Džemaluddin Efendi Čaušević Madrasa (Cazin): established in 1993; Karađoz Bey Madrasa (Mostar): re-established in 1995, originally established in 1557. These institutions offer a curriculum that allows students from the third year onward to choose from Islamic Studies, Philology, Social Studies, Mathematics and Sciences, and Multidisciplinary Studies. Notably, reforms in 2004 shifted the focus away from traditional career pathways like an imam, khatib, or muallim/muallimah, incorporating more secular courses, which sparked diverse public discussions.

3.3. Albania

After the collapse of communism, Albania emerged as one of Europe's newest democracies, prioritizing religious freedom and belief. The Muslim Community of Albania (MCA) operates seven madrasas, integrating religious and secular disciplines within their curricula: Madrasa Hafiz Mahmud Dashi (Tirana); Madrasa Hafiz Sheh Shamia

(Shkodër); Madrasa Mustafa Varoshi (Durrës); Madrasa Hafiz Ali Korça (Kavajë); Madrasa Elbasan Liria (Cërrik); Madrasa Vexhi Buharaja (Berat); and Madrasa Abdullah Zem-blaku (Korçë) (Hadžiomerović 2018, pp. 809–24; Jazexhi 2018, p. 33). Until 2003, these institutions primarily received funding from Arab NGOs, but more recently, Turkish organizations, notably from the Fethullah Gülen movement, have taken a significant role (Hadžiomerović 2018, pp. 809–24).

3.4. Kosovo

The Alauddin Madrasa in Kosovo stands out as the sole Islamic school offering instruction in the Albanian language during the Communist regime. Presently, its curriculum is an amalgamation of religious and non-religious subjects, with diplomas recognized by the Kosovo Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology, which also supports the institution financially (Hadžiomerović 2018, pp. 809–24).

3.5. Croatia

The Islamic Secondary School Dr. Ahmed Smajlovic, located in the Croatian capital, provides instruction in Croatian. Established in 1992 and recognized as a private school in 2000, it transitioned to a general Islamic high school, or Islamic Gymnasium, in 2006. The curriculum aligns with those of public high schools, reflecting efforts to integrate Islamic education within the broader educational system. (Alibašić 2010, p. 630; Hadžiomerović 2018, pp. 809–24).

3.6. Serbia

In Serbia, the regulation of Muslim–state relations has led to the establishment of dual institutions: the Islamic Community of Serbia (Islamska zajednica Srbije-IZS) based in Belgrade and the Islamic Community in Serbia (Islamska zajednica u Srbiji-IZuS) located in Novi Pazar. This bifurcation has resulted in the creation of parallel Islamic educational structures. The IZS manages the Nahla preschool, the Sinan Bey Madrasa in Novi Pazar, and the Bakija Hanuma Madrasa for females in Prijepolje. Conversely, the IZuS oversees several institutions in Novi Pazar, including preschools, maktabs, and the Gazi Isa Bey Madrasa (Kostić 2019, p. 592).

3.7. Montenegro

Montenegro's Mehmed Fatih Madrasa, with branches for both genders, epitomizes Islamic education in the country. Established in Podgorica, this institution offers a curriculum that includes both religious and non-religious courses, reflecting a modern approach to Islamic education. Controversies have arisen over the activities of the female branch of the Novi Pazar Madrasa operating in Rozaje, which have been disputed by the Islamic Community in Montenegro (ICM) (Pacariz 2019, p. 474). Despite these challenges, the Mehmed Fatih Madrasa's diplomas are recognized by Montenegro's state university, signaling a growing acceptance of madrasa education within the national education system. Moreover, graduates from this institution are pursuing further studies at universities throughout the Balkans, illustrating the broader academic pathways available to them (Hadžiomerović 2018, pp. 809–24).

This analysis underscores the diverse approaches to integrating Islamic education within the secular educational frameworks of the Balkans, highlighting both the achievements and ongoing challenges faced by these institutions in a rapidly changing educational landscape.

4. From Foundations to Frontiers: The Growth and Challenges of Islamic Higher Education in the Balkans

The Faculty of Islamic Studies in Prishtina stands as a pioneering institution in the Balkans, uniquely offering courses in the Albanian language. Accredited in 2012, it boasts a robust academic framework, including a four-year undergraduate program and master's degrees in Islamic Theology, catering to a growing interest in religious studies in the region

(Alibašić 2010, p. 625; Available online: https://brill.com/display/book/edcoll/9789004184763/Bej.9789004184756.i-712_051.xml accessed on 16 June 2020). Furthermore, Albania's Beder University, which was inaugurated in 2011 and inspired by the principles of the Turkish Gülen Movement, although not primarily a theological institution, features a Department of Islamic Sciences. This department offers academic programs leading to bachelor's and master's degrees in both Modern and Basic Islamic Sciences, highlighting a nuanced approach to Islamic education that blends traditional teachings with contemporary academic standards (Jazexhi 2018, p. 33; Kolegji Universitar Bedër 2024).

Despite ongoing initiatives, the establishment of a Faculty of Islamic Studies in Croatia remains in the planning stages, reflecting the complexities and varying paces of educational development across the region (Alibašić 2010, p. 630; Hadžiomerović 2018, pp. 809–24). In Serbia, the Islamic community supports two major institutions, each hosting a Faculty of Islamic Studies—one in Belgrade and the other in Novi Pazar. These faculties are critical centers for Islamic scholarship and education, underlining the geographical and cultural spread of Islamic learning across the Balkans (Kostić 2019, p. 592).

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Islamic community administers several prominent institutions. Notably, the Faculty of Islamic Studies in Sarajevo, affiliated with Sarajevo University since 2014, offers a comprehensive range of academic programs. These include degrees in Islamic Theology, Religious Pedagogy, and specialized training for imams and teachers. With an enrollment of approximately 800 students per term and a faculty comprising both Ph.D. and master's holders, the institution is a beacon of Islamic higher education in the region (Idriz 2017, pp. 185–97). The Islamic Pedagogical Faculty in Zenica, initially established as a short-term training program in 1993, has evolved into a significant educational entity affiliated with the University of Zenica. It now offers bachelor's and master's degrees in Social Pedagogy, Preschool Teacher Education, and Arabic Language and Literature and has even expanded to include a doctoral program in Contemporary Islamic Educational Thought, signifying its growing academic stature (Idriz 2017, pp. 185–97). Similarly, the Islamic Pedagogical Faculty in Bihac, integrated into the University of Bihac since 1996, offers programs in Islamic Religious Education and Social Pedagogy and Spiritual Care. Despite its achievements, the reliance on external lecturers highlights an area for potential enhancement in faculty development and program structuring (Idriz 2017, pp. 185–97). Additionally, there was an ambitious proposal to establish an International Islamic University in Bosnia and Herzegovina, incorporating the Faculty of Islamic Studies and the Ghazi Husrev Bey Library. However, this initiative remains unrealized, illustrating the challenges of educational expansion in the region.

Meanwhile, in North Macedonia, the Faculty of Islamic Sciences in Skopje has become a cornerstone of the Islamic community since its inception in 1997. Accredited by the Ministry of Education in 2008/2009, it employs 17 lecturers and actively engages in collaborations with both local and international universities. This faculty aims to strengthen its international ties, particularly with institutions in Turkey and Western countries, to enhance its educational offerings and academic reputation (Pajaziti 2010, p. 41). These developments illustrate the diverse and dynamic nature of Islamic higher education across the Balkans, showcasing both significant achievements and the ongoing challenges that these institutions face as they strive to serve their communities and foster academic excellence in Islamic studies.

5. From Ilmihal to Qur'an: The Essential Role of Maktabas in Balkan Islamic Learning

In Montenegro, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, North Macedonia, Kosovo, and Serbia, maktabas remain active and integral to the Muslim community. Their voluntary participation underscores their function as supplementary centers of learning that enhance, rather than replace, formal education (Pacariz 2019, p. 474). Serving as vital elements of mosques, maktabas play a key role in disseminating fundamental Islamic knowledge to both young and mature members of the Muslim communities. These institutions are pivotal in maintaining the continuity of religious education across different generations,

focusing on critical practices such as Qur'an recitation and the understanding of ilmihal. The persistent presence of maktabas throughout the Balkans highlights their crucial role in preserving Islamic traditions and educational practices. Although attendance may vary with the changing educational environment, the significance of maktabas as centers of Islamic learning and practice is unequivocal. They continue to be essential educational institutions that strengthen the cultural and religious identity of Muslim communities in the region.

6. Fostering Democratic and Religious Values through Public Education in the Balkans

Since the 2008–2009 academic year, the Republic of North Macedonia has made significant strides in incorporating religious education into its public school curriculum, emphasizing subjects like Introduction to Religions, Ethics of Religions, and Classical Culture in European Civilization. These courses are strategically designed to equip the next generation with the knowledge and skills essential for thriving in a pluralistic society and for future citizenship within the European Union.

The introduction of these subjects aims to bolster and affirm the democratic and religious values within the society. Specifically, the subject Ethics of Religions, taught in the sixth year for two academic hours per week, engages students with the fundamental principles of ethical behavior across various religions. This includes understanding ethics related to goodness and morality and recognizing the humane and tolerant behaviors promoted by religious ethics. This course also encourages tolerance and respect for diverse religions in Macedonia, fostering skills in dialogue and cooperation among different religious and ethnic communities (Ramadani 2010, pp. 111–12). Similarly, the course on Introduction to Religions, also scheduled for two academic hours weekly, introduces students to the concept of humans as inherently religious beings, covers key aspects of monotheistic and other modern religions, and emphasizes respect and understanding for diverse beliefs. It prepares students to engage in dialogues with people of different faiths and understand the role of religion in maintaining peace (Shotarovska and Gjeorgieva 2010, pp. 104–5). The Classical Culture in European Civilization subject, equally allotted two academic hours per week, exposes students to the rich tapestry of European languages, traditions, literature, and art, enhancing their appreciation and understanding of European cultural heritage (Janjatova 2010). Together, these courses represent North Macedonia's commitment to preparing its youth for life in a diverse and dynamic European society, promoting an educational ethos that values tolerance, respect, and intercultural dialogue. Meanwhile, in 1994, the Ministry of Education of Bosnia and Herzegovina took a significant step by introducing religious education as an elective course in primary and secondary schools. This initiative sparked a series of debates among Bosnian citizens, primarily centered around two key concerns: Whether religious education might foster divisions among students based on religious lines and the potential impact of religious education on enhancing awareness and fostering inter-religious dialogue among young people.

It's important to note that while these subjects are elective, once chosen, they become mandatory for the student. These courses are graded and typically occur for one to two hours per week across all primary school grades and for one hour per week in the first two grades of secondary school (Idriz 2017, pp. 185–97). In addition to these educational reforms, the first official kindergarten under the Islamic Community of Bosnia and Herzegovina (ICBH) auspices opened in 2012 in Brčko, marking another milestone in the community's educational initiatives (Idriz 2017, pp. 185–97). In Serbia, religious education was introduced into public schools as an optional subject in 2001. It has since evolved to become an elective but compulsory subject, offered weekly across all grades, provided there is a minimum interest from seven students (Hadžiomerović 2018, pp. 809–24). This policy ensures that religious education is accessible while still respecting the principles of voluntary participation. In Croatia, similar provisions are in place. According to Croatian law, Muslims are entitled to organize religious education in all public schools, given that at least seven Muslim students are enrolled. This reflects a broader commitment to

accommodating religious diversity within the educational system (Hadžimerović 2018, pp. 809–24; Hevesevic 2020, p. 167). Furthermore, the establishment of the Institute for the Arabic Language and Islam in 2018 signifies a deepening engagement with Islamic studies. Plans are underway to introduce the Arabic language as an elective course at the Faculty of Philosophy and Religious Studies at the University of Zagreb, further expanding the academic opportunities in Islamic studies (Hevesevic 2020, p. 167). Conversely, in Kosovo, the landscape of religious education in public schools is markedly different. The new Kosovo Constitution, alongside existing laws, explicitly prohibits the provision of religious education within the public school system. This policy underscores a distinct approach to secularism in education, aiming to keep religious instruction separate from public educational institutions (Hadžimerović 2018, pp. 809–24). These varying approaches to religious education across the Balkans highlight the diverse strategies that different countries employ to integrate or separate religion from public education, each shaped by unique historical, cultural, and political contexts.

7. The Shifting Sands of Islamic NGO Influence in the Balkans: From Arab to Iranian and Turkish Engagements

Following the collapse of communism, a significant shift occurred in the religious landscape of the Balkan region with the establishment of numerous NGOs rooted in Islamic traditions. These organizations quickly became central to the educational fabric of the area, introducing new challenges for the established Muslim religious communities in Kosovo, Montenegro, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, and Albania. Traditionally, these communities adhered to a form of Islam deeply embedded in their cultural practices. However, the introduction of NGOs from diverse Islamic backgrounds—Arabic, Turkish, Iranian, and others—brought fresh perspectives that sometimes clashed with the existing paradigms of religious life.

In the early 1990s, these Islamic communities were first introduced to the operations of such NGOs, which not only brought humanitarian and cultural initiatives but also different Islamic teachings and practices previously unfamiliar to the local religious frameworks. The presence of these organizations often led to a dual system within the religious communities, which had historically been managed solely by regional Islamic communities. Notably, the influx of these new entities challenged the financial structures of traditional institutions. For instance, the Gülen congregation, now labeled a terrorist organization by Turkey, actively engaged in collecting Zakat, Sadaqah, and Qurbān, thereby diverting funds that would traditionally support the budgets of local Islamic religious communities.

The political landscape of the secular Balkan countries also faced challenges due to the activities of these Islamic-based NGOs. The conflict in Syria saw the recruitment of many young individuals from Kosovo, highlighting the region's vulnerability to external conflicts and the ineffectiveness of local policies to counteract such trends. This situation led the Kosovo government to take drastic measures, including the closure of 14 Muslim NGOs such as AKEA—The Association for Culture, Education, and Schooling. Critics argue that these government actions were more politically driven than based on substantial evidence or judicial reasoning (Ali 2018). Further complicating matters, the murder of some young men near Skopje was exploited by the then North Macedonian government, led by the national-conservative party VMRO-DPMNE under Nikola Gruevski, to make unfounded claims of Islamic terrorism. Such politically motivated actions strained interreligious and international relations within the Macedonian society.

The transformation from a bipolar world system to unipolarity has led to profound socio-political, economic, and cultural shifts across the globe, and the Balkans have been no exception. With the democratization efforts in these countries, the entry of religious congregations and Islamic movements into the region has marked a new era, reshaping the religious and cultural landscape of the Balkans. Over the past two and a half decades, one of the most prominent Islamic congregations in the Balkans has been the Gülen Movement, which enjoyed substantial backing from the Turkish state, especially under the Justice

and Development Party. However, this congregation came under severe scrutiny after being accused by the Turkish government of orchestrating the failed coup on 15 July 2016, subsequently being designated as a dangerous terrorist organization. (Turkey officially designated the Gülen religious group as terrorists in 2016). Following the failed coup attempt in Turkey in July 2016, the Turkish government attributed the coup to the Gülen movement, led by exiled cleric Fethullah Gülen. Subsequently, Turkey initiated a comprehensive crackdown on alleged Gülenists domestically and internationally, extending to the Balkans.

In the Balkans, countries such as Albania, Kosovo, and Bosnia-Herzegovina faced significant pressure from Turkey to act against individuals and institutions associated with the Gülen movement. This included demands to shut down Gülen-affiliated schools and to investigate and potentially arrest individuals connected to the movement. For instance, Turkey requested the Albanian government to investigate and arrest Gülen supporters, including public figures and journalists (Spahiu 2016). Kosovo and Bosnia-Herzegovina experienced similar pressures, with Turkish authorities urging these governments to scrutinize anti-Erdoğan journalists and other alleged Gülen supporters (Stockholm Center for Freedom 2021). In some cases, Balkan countries complied with Turkey's demands. In Kosovo, for example, six Turkish nationals linked to Gülenist schools were deported to Turkey in 2018 under controversial circumstances, which drew criticism from human rights organizations (GOV.UK 2023). This incident highlighted Turkey's significant influence and economic leverage in the region (Spahiu 2016).

The crackdown also involved leveraging Turkey's economic investments and soft power in the Balkans. This strategy included fostering pro-Erdoğan sentiment among local populations, which sometimes resulted in public demonstrations and media campaigns supporting Turkey's stance against the Gülen movement (Stockholm Center for Freedom 2021). Overall, the aftermath of the coup saw Turkey undertaking a broad and multifaceted campaign to dismantle the Gülen movement's presence in the Balkans through diplomatic, economic, and social pressures on local governments and communities (Spahiu 2016; Stockholm Center for Freedom 2021).

Initiating its presence in the early '90s, the Gülen movement has significantly contributed to the educational landscape by establishing several schools and two universities in Tirana—Epoka and Beder University. Beyond education, their activities extend into business, media, and nongovernmental sectors. Alongside the Gülen movement, the congregation of Aziz Mahmut Hudayi has been active since the late '90s, initially stepping in during the aftermath of the Kosovo War to provide humanitarian aid. This congregation's efforts led to the reopening of the old Madrasah of Gjakova in 2006, where they began training new hafizes, alongside opening several dormitories and starting Quran learning courses in Kosovo. Their influence is also noted in North Macedonia, Albania, and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Another significant player is the Sulejmanxhi congregation, active across Albania, Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and North Macedonia. This group focuses on countering the Wahhabi movement by upholding the Hanafi tradition and has established dormitories across various Albanian cities to facilitate Quran reading and teach basic Islamic concepts. Furthermore, the Nurxhi congregation is dedicated to disseminating the works of Said Nursi, translating and explaining his writings into the Balkan languages, and making them accessible to the broader public (Solberg 2007).

It is crucial to note that, apart from the Gülen and Nur (Nurxhi) movements—which maintain a unique operational approach and show little interest in collaborating with local NGOs—most other Turkish congregations and movements have formed alliances with local partners across Albania, Kosovo, Bosnia, North Macedonia, and Montenegro. These partnerships highlight a diverse and dynamic interplay between local traditions and the influences brought by these Turkish religious movements, shaping a complex mosaic of religious life in the Balkans today. The early 1990s marked a pivotal shift in the Balkans with the emergence of numerous Muslim NGOs of Arab origin. These organizations, deeply connected with significant Islamic movements such as the Salafi movement and the

Muslim Brotherhood (Ihvanul Muslimin), played substantial roles in shaping the religious landscape. By 1997, it was reported that Albania alone hosted 95 representatives from these organizations. However, the landscape drastically transformed after Albania joined the U.S.-led war on terrorism, resulting in the shutdown of many Arab-origin NGOs by the mid-2000s (BIRN 2014). The turn of the millennium introduced another phase of Islamic influence in Albania, predominantly through educational and religious leadership under the auspices of the Gülen movement, despite broader restrictions on Arabian NGOs. In contrast, North Macedonia witnessed limited expansion of Arab-origin NGOs due to strong control by the Macedonian Islamic Community (BFI) and the state's cautious stance towards these organizations.

Iran's influence in the Balkans also became notable through various NGOs, although its presence was less pronounced in Macedonia due to the Sunni dominance and the firm grip of the BFI on religious institutions. Noteworthy Iranian entities, such as The Foundation of the Quran, The College Saadi, and the Cultural Foundation Saadi Shiraazi, have become significant instruments of Iranian soft power, particularly in Albania (Michaletos 2010). Despite the potential benefits brought by these diverse foreign congregations and NGOs—ranging from humanitarian to cultural contributions—their presence is not without complications. Often, these groups carry a sectarian congregative mentality that can lead to radical stances and inflexibility in accepting differing viewpoints, which contradicts the inclusive nature of Islamic values and the principles of democratic societies. Moreover, these organizations can project their political disputes into the religious domain, thereby contributing to divisions within the Muslim community. Furthermore, these foreign entities occasionally exert influence that overshadows national and religious identities, transforming religious disputes into political ones. Such dynamics complicate the social fabric of these regions, sometimes leading to actions that surprise even seasoned experts, such as unexpected alliances within the Albanian Muslim community.

In conclusion, while the activities of these congregations and NGOs have played a transformative role in the Balkan Peninsula, particularly among Albanian territories, there is a crucial need for coordination and cooperation. The Islamic religious communities in these regions should take a proactive role in overseeing and integrating the activities of these organizations to ensure they contribute positively to society. Moreover, political leaders in the region should focus on integrating these groups into the civil societal framework through supportive policies that enhance their ability to maintain religious and cultural values rather than exploiting these entities for political leverage. This nuanced approach will help preserve the integrity of the religious and cultural landscape in the Balkans, ensuring that foreign congregations and NGOs serve as bridges rather than barriers within the communities they aim to support.

8. Concluding Insights: Addressing Educational, Socio-Political, and Religious Dynamics among Balkan Muslims

From the late 14th to the early 15th centuries, under Ottoman influence, the Balkans emerged as a significant center for religious, cultural, and scientific enrichment. This influence endured until the empire's decline, after which new political entities, like the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, introduced challenges that tested the resilience of these longstanding educational structures. Despite facing various political and economic upheavals, the Muslim communities in the Balkans continued to uphold and promote their religious and cultural heritage. Islamic education, particularly through the 20th century, played a central role in maintaining Islamic traditional values and fostering dialogue among diverse cultural, religious, and ethnic groups.

This period was marked by the foundational use of madrasas and maktabas as conduits for Islamic knowledge. Moving into the late 20th and early 21st centuries, the establishment of higher Islamic institutions and the inclusion of religious studies in some public school curricula underscored a significant evolution in educational approaches, reinforcing religious values and raising societal awareness among the youth.

Strong advocacy for increased collaboration among higher Islamic educational institutions in the Balkans, particularly through student and faculty exchanges and the development of joint master's level programs, has the potential to significantly elevate the educational standards offered to students from the region and beyond. Furthermore, initiatives such as organizing summer schools, international conferences, and publishing collaborative research are aimed at supporting and enriching the Muslim communities in the Balkans. The traditional Islamic educational systems observed in Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia serve as robust models that other parts of Europe might well consider adopting. These systems have proven effective in mitigating the influence of foreign ideologies and maintaining traditional Islamic practices, showcasing their capacity to foster religious and cultural continuity amidst diversity.

However, the involvement of foreign Muslim congregations and NGOs, particularly those originating from Turkey, Arab countries, and Iran, has occasionally led to challenges. These groups have sometimes embraced a sectarian approach that can incite radical positions and generate conflicts, undermining broader Islamic values and democratic norms. This has occasionally exacerbated tensions related to national and religious identity within the region.

It is advised that the activities of these foreign entities should focus on enhancing religious and cultural understanding rather than fostering division. Improved cooperation and coordination with local Islamic communities could reduce potential conflicts. Moreover, it is crucial for political leaders in the region to refrain from exploiting religious groups to mask political or economic shortcomings. Instead, fostering policies that integrate these groups into the broader societal framework and support their constructive contributions is essential.

Additionally, ensuring that Islamic education in the Balkans remains a beacon for promoting traditional values and facilitating dialogue is vital. The influence of external entities should be managed carefully to guarantee that their presence contributes positively to the region's cultural and religious mosaic. Regional political leaders must view religious institutions and groups as essential partners in building a cohesive society rather than as tools for political manipulation. Policies that promote integration rather than marginalization of these groups could lead to more stable and harmonious social dynamics, which not only enhance social cohesion but also strengthen the democratic foundations of the region. This collaborative approach enriches the region's position in the diverse, multilingual, and multireligious tapestry of Europe, ensuring a harmonious interplay between tradition and modernity.

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