

# THE RACIALIZATION OF THE ETHNIC AND RELIGIOUS CONSCIOUSNESS OF MUSLIM COMMUNITIES IN THE BALKANS

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## Introduction

The Balkans (or Southeast Europe), is the cultural and historical bridge between East and West. It is a region where many civilizations have been emerged and developed, as well as a land that has witnessed endless wars fought to enhance different visions of history. It is the geographical boundary between two worlds; Europe and Asia. Historically and strategically, the Balkans are today as important for the future of Europe as they had always been. The collapse of the Soviet Communism in the late 1980s triggered a series of significant political, social and cultural transformations in the Balkans. In former Yugoslavia, as elsewhere, this transformative process brought about the re-emergence of nationalism and the reappearance of religion in social and political life.<sup>1</sup>

Different national elites utilize the religious sentiment and the ethnic consciousness of the minorities in the region, aiming to shape and reshape national and state identities in order to suit their interests. The fall of Communism created a great number of new opportunities for many 'faith-based' international organizations and agencies to get involved in the process of transforming societies and identities. In the case of former Yugoslavia, for instance, many international religious organizations and networks from

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<sup>1</sup> Krasniqi, Gëzim, *The 'forbidden fruit': Islam and politics of identity in Kosovo and Macedonia*, (European Studies Centre, University of Oxford, June 2010), p. 2

the Middle East and other Muslim countries, started to compete each other so as to gain the favor of the ‘forgotten European Muslims’ in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia, Kosovo, FYROM and Albania.<sup>2</sup>

Saudi Arabia and Iran targeted the Balkan region, which became part of a master plan to proselytize radical Islam in areas where Muslim minorities lived. The Balkans have become an ideal hub for them, from where to challenge Europe, as well as a region where the type of fighting that led to the victory of the Afghan-Arab jihad could be reproduced. Today, new emerging powers are eager to promote the proliferation of conflicts in areas where Muslims live. Consequently, the Balkans should not be ignored or erased from the world’s political agenda. Western publics remain under the false impression that the region has been pacified. Europe continues to turn away from and ignore this threat, while the situation in the area is becoming more and more perilous.

This research paper deals with the role of religion and politics, as well as of external and internal factors for the growing radicalization among Muslim communities in Kosovo, Bosnia-Herzegovina and FYROM. In addition to this, depicts how major political mistakes have reinforced the spreading of the most reactionary and extreme interpretations of Islam - particularly Wahhabi-<sup>3</sup> and to what extent Muslim identity play a role in perceptions of European Union policies and a future in the European Union. Besides, there are now two orders in Europe; on the one hand, Europeans and their geopolitical interests and on the other, the moving towards the establishment of a global Islamic Caliphate through the Balkans, considering the role of religion in the formation of Albanian identity in the Balkans at the beginning of the twentieth century and the socio-political changes that characterized different Albanian societies in the Balkans following the collapse of Communism.

The paper is divided in four sections. The first one is referring briefly to the historical background of the Islam in the Balkans, before and after the launch of the ethnic and

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<sup>2</sup> Krasniqi, Gëzim, *The ‘forbidden fruit’: Islam and politics of identity in Kosovo and Macedonia*, (European Studies Centre, University of Oxford, June 2010), p. 3

<sup>3</sup> **Wahhabism**, is an ultra-conservative branch of Sunni Islam (though some people dispute that a Wahhabi is a Sunni). It is a religious movement among fundamentalist Islamic believers, with an aspiration to return to the earliest fundamental Islamic sources of the Quran and Hadith, with inspiration from the teachings of Medieval theologian Ibn Taymiyyah.

religious radicalization. The second section, is describing the radicalization of the Muslim Communities in the Balkans generally, the way Western governments face the radicalization in the region and how this attitude allows fundamentalist movements transform the Balkans into a hub for radical activity or even terrorist plots against Europe and the West, as well as the current affairs in Kosovo, Bosnia- Herzegovina and FYROM. In the third section, we can see the conclusions of our research regarding to the ethnic and religious radicalization of the Muslim communities who live in the Balkans.

## **A Background of the Islam in the Balkans**

In spite of its varied nature, there is one common characteristic shared by most Muslims in the Balkans; Islam. In the last few decades, Balkan Muslim populations have left behind their traditional status as non-sovereign religious minority (dating from the post-Ottoman period) and affirmed themselves as autonomous political actors. The explanation for this phenomenon lies in the conflicts of the nineties and, in a broader sense, in the process involving the collapse of the Communism and consequently, the disintegration of Yugoslavia.<sup>4</sup>

As a result, political parties that represent these populations and voice their national claims were created, leading to a growing “nationalization” of Islam and Islamic religious institutions. Together with the restoration of religious freedoms, this political and national awakening of the Balkan Muslims explains the increased visibility of Islam in the regions. New religious actors emerging, threat religious life, while the ‘nationalization’ of Islam has not prevented either the diversification of religious practices, or the individualization of faith.

A small number of militant Islamism set between Bosnia, FYROM and Kosovo, as well as in Albania, filled with fighters, are ready to deploy to Afghanistan, Iraq and the various fronts of the holy war. Looking back at this region, there have occasionally been radical manifestations of Islam in the former Yugoslavia, but it is certainly not all jihadist. It was thus that Muslims in Bosnia used Islam during and after the war, with the objective of marking their specific historical-cultural identity and separating

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<sup>4</sup> Del Conero, Mattia, *The Islam of the Balkans, an unknown galaxy*, (ResetDoc, September 14, 2011)

themselves from the country's two other ethnic groups, the Croatians and the Serbs. In FYROM, the Albanians rediscovered Islam with the intention of claiming greater unity against the Slavic majority. The Albanians in Kosovo, however, unlike these other groups, represent the country's majority group.

Such political and religious developments have been encouraged by the reintegration of Balkan Islam within global Islam and, more particularly, by the arrival in the Balkans of diverse actors from the Muslim world.<sup>5</sup> The latter have not only played a significant role in the political struggles for power within each Balkan Muslim community, but have also contributed to the spread of new religious influences, such as the neo-Sufi movements coming from Turkey.<sup>6</sup> These factors also have transformed Muslims' role, sanctioning the change from a religious minority to the representatives of a nation or of a nation-state.

### **The Radicalization of the Muslims in the Balkans, as a growing threat to moderate Muslims and Christian communities**

The Balkans is a hotbed of ethnic and religious conflict that erupted into sectarian conflict and civil war in the 1990s, due to the breakup of the former Yugoslavia. Sunni Islam is the majority religion in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo, while Christianity is the dominant religion in Bulgaria, Croatia, FYROM, Montenegro, Serbia, and Slovenia.<sup>7</sup> It was until the outburst of ethnic and sectarian violence in several former Yugoslav states in the 1990s, that Muslims had traditionally been moderate and had mostly lived peacefully with their non-Muslim neighbors.

Imams trained in Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey are promoting a more fundamentalist and radical form of Islam; this can be a growing challenge for the moderate Muslims in the Balkans. Saudi Arabia is the source of the radical Wahhabi imams who are radicalizing other Muslims all over the world, including the US. The

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<sup>5</sup> Bougarel, Xavier, *The role of Balkan Muslims in building a European Islam*, (European Policy Centre, November 2005), p. 22

<sup>6</sup> 'Neo-Sufism' and 'universal Sufism' are terms used to denote forms of Sufism that do not require adherence to Shariah, or a Muslim faith. The terms are not always accepted by those it is applied to. The Universal Sufism movement founded by Hazrat Inayat Khan, teaches the essential unity of all faiths, and accepts members of all creeds.

<sup>7</sup> *Radical Islam: A growing concern in the Balkans*, (PatriotsBillboard.org, January 11, 2013)

US/NATO intervention in the Balkans opened the door for them to work their evil, not only in the Balkans, but throughout the EU and the US.<sup>8</sup>

Most of FYROM's ethnic Albanian minority are Muslims; however, they have generally been secular. But experts are now seeing an increasing radicalization in pockets of the country's Islamic community, particularly due to the brief war against FYROM government forces in 2001, fought by armed groups from the ethnic Albanian minority. The situation has raised concerns that the region could become a breeding ground for terrorists with easy access to Western Europe, and that radicalized European Muslims with EU passports could slip across borders and blend into society.<sup>9</sup> According to a Vatican report issued after recent developments in Albania, "There are enormous funds pouring in from Saudi Arabia and Turkey to radicalize Muslims in the country".

Radical Islamists are growing increasingly across the region. Professor Darko Tanaskovic, a former Yugoslavia ambassador to Turkey and Azerbaijan, has stated "The situation is really very alarming. Radical Islamic sects in this region are already superseding moderate ones."

At the center of the issue is the Wahhabi sect, an austere brand of Islam most prevalent in Saudi Arabia and practiced by bin Laden and the Taliban. "Wahhabism in FYROM, the Balkans and in Europe has become more aggressive in the last 10 years," said Jakub Selimovski, head of religious education in FYROM's Islamic community.<sup>10</sup> He said Wahhabis were establishing a permanent presence in FYROM. FYROM is not the only state where Wahhabism seems to have blossomed; according to Nusret Imamovic, the informal leader of Wahhabis in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the country needed to be regulated by Sharia law. Imamovic said: "Islam has an unbreakable bond with the policy [of Sharia]. For us, the highlight of Islam is jihad. Allah loves those who fight in his way".<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> *Blowback: Wahhabi Imams radicalizing Muslims in the Balkans and elsewhere*, (1389 Blog-Counterjihad, July 7, 2010)

<sup>9</sup> *Radical Islam on rise in Balkans*, (ProBoards Forum, September 19, 2010)

<sup>10</sup> *Radical Islam on rise in Balkans*, (ProBoards Forum, September 19, 2010)

<sup>11</sup> *Radical Islam: A growing concern in the Balkans*, (PatriotsBillboard.org, January 11, 2013)

In particular, the growing fundamentalism in Bosnia and Herzegovina is prompting an exodus of the country's Christians. According to a report issued by the Netherlands-based Church in Need aid organization, Bosnia and Herzegovina's Catholic population has fallen by half over the past two decades. The Catholic Cardinal of Sarajevo Vinko Puljic shares his concern: "Time is running out [for Christians in the country] as there is a worrisome rise in radicalism".

The weak economies of Balkan states, in the face of the EU debt crisis, have hurt their ability to combat threats from Islamist extremists. According to the World Bank, the Balkans, which does 55 percent of its trade with the EU, has fallen into a "double dip" recession, with unemployment above 25 percent in four of the six countries of the Western Balkans. In Serbia, almost a third of the workforce is unemployed.<sup>12</sup>

Greece is also considered part of the Balkans, as are parts of Turkey and Romania. Greece has a large Muslim immigrant population, but so far has not faced the challenges from radical Islamists feared by its Balkan neighbors, while Romania is also not facing this problem from its tiny Muslim population.<sup>13</sup> Many in the West are alarmed that Islam in Turkey has become more conservative in recent years and has moved away from its strict secular system. However, radical Islamist leaders have made little headway in Turkey, since the state still monitors mosques and Islamic institutions and cracks down on radical clerics.

## **Radical Islam in Kosovo: an abrupt and dangerous reversion to religion**

The end of the conflict in the western Balkans has seen a rise of radical forms of Islam, particularly in Kosovo. Adherents of radical brands of Islamism, particularly Wahhabis, have taken root in Kosovo and the Western Balkans since the end of the 1999 conflict, in many cases based in mosques and madrassahs that are funded from the Middle East.<sup>14</sup> The presence of Islamist extremists has fuelled tensions

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<sup>12</sup> *Radical Islam: A growing concern in the Balkans*, (PatriotsBillboard.org, January 11, 2013)

<sup>13</sup> *Radical Islam: A growing concern in the Balkans*, (PatriotsBillboard.org, January 11, 2013)

<sup>14</sup> *Radical Route-Salafism in the Balkans*, (Dimal Basha, January 29, 2013)

within the Muslim community of the region, pitting the traditionally more moderate and secular local brand of Islam against the new arrivals.

The expansion of radical Islam worldwide has become a major concern to the international community. In the Balkans, the Muslim population has traditionally been relatively secular and moderate, following liberal Islamic schools of thought.<sup>15</sup> However, during the turbulent 1990s, thousands of foreign-born radical Muslims arrived in Bosnia-Herzegovina to help their ‘brothers in need’ – and to spread the extremist Wahhabis ideology in Eastern Europe. The majority of the Muslim population in the western Balkans nevertheless remains opposed to the often violent rhetoric espoused by Wahhabism preachers. This has led to a number of internal conflicts between clerics in Kosovo, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Albania and FYROM, as well as between adherents of the more liberal Hanafi and Sufi schools, and followers of the ultra-conservative Wahhabis traditions.

It had been hard to call the Kosovo Albanians Islamists until recently. The Albanians ethnos doesn’t have its roots in religion like it takes place in case of, say, the Serbs, the Bulgarians, the Greeks or the Croats.<sup>16</sup> After independence was proclaimed unilaterally in 2008, the radicalization started to rapidly spread, though the process of religious transplantation in Kosovo had begun since 1999, soon after the conflict with Serbia ended. Islamic organizations have been operating in Kosovo for almost a decade now, and have managed to create influential social networks that aim to penetrate inside Kosovo’s Islamic community and to re-shape the ethnic Albanian national identity into a religious one.<sup>17</sup> Although many of these organizations do not have a radical or violent agenda, certain organizations propagated more extremist views.

Kosovo is now facing the urge of Albanian nationalism and Kosovo Islamism. Ironically, some Kosovo Albanians fear the growing rise of Kosovo Islamism because

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<sup>15</sup> *Radical Route-Salafism in the Balkans*, (Dimal Basha, January 29, 2013)

<sup>16</sup> *Kosovo: Outpost in Battle for Universal Caliphate*, (Strategic Culture Foundation, Online journal, February 22, 2013)

<sup>17</sup> *Radical Route-Salafism in the Balkans*, (Dimal Basha, January 29, 2013)

while Albanian nationalism and Kosovo Islamism share some common themes, it is clear that Kosovo Islamism hopes to devour Albanian nationalism.<sup>18</sup> Some European leaders, have nevertheless been alerted by the attempted Islamization of Kosovo and of the rest of the Western Balkan territory. There is a noticeable fear that the territory will be in flames sooner rather than later, endangering the stability of the EU as a whole.<sup>19</sup> There is a growing anxiety in the region upon the issue and more specifically of the aims for the creation of a Greater Albania, which coincidentally are eagerly supported not only by nationalistic circles, but from Islamist ones as well.

The issue of "Greater Albania" which was mentioned previously is another tinderbox in political terms and is gaining in pace based upon all available data. It's a common secret and an obvious everyday political reality that nationalistic movements from all Albanian communities in the Balkans are actively pursuing such prospect which can only be achieved through another "Balkan war" of the scale of the ones back in 1912-1913 which were also the prelude for WW1.<sup>20</sup> In overall, the normalization of the Balkans and in particular of Kosovo is far from over and new set of issues are emerging such as the gradual expansion of extremists from the Middle East.

#### **a) The spread of extremism**

The spread of Wahhabism in the western Balkans is closely linked to the break-up of Yugoslavia, the conflict in Bosnia-Herzegovina and the UN embargo imposed on all six former Yugoslav republics (Bosnia- Herzegovina, Croatia, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Slovenia) from 1992 to 1995.<sup>21</sup>

Foreign-born holy warriors, arrived in Bosnia-Herzegovina from countries such as Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Yemen and Afghanistan to help their Muslim 'brothers' (Bosniaks) in the war against Serbia and Croatia. These "holy warriors" introduced radical doctrines to the relatively secular Muslim populations of Bosnia-Herzegovina,

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<sup>18</sup> *Bosnia, Cyprus and Kosovo: America and Islamism in the Balkans*, (Islamic Terrorism and Religious Persecution, October 19, 2011)

<sup>19</sup> Michaletos, Ioannis, *Kosovo's Islamist movement and regional developments*, (RIMSE, March 14, 2013)

<sup>20</sup> Michaletos, Ioannis, *Kosovo's Islamist movement and regional developments*, (RIMSE, March 14, 2013)

<sup>21</sup> *Radical Route-Salafism in the Balkans*, (Dimal Basha, January 29, 2013)

which later spread across the western Balkan territories. Recent violent incidents – some resulting in the killings of innocent civilians - as well as the growing number of followers of radical doctrines, indicate how the expansion of radical Islam in the western Balkans could pose a threat to the stability of the region.

This expansion particularly affected Kosovo, which after two decades of political and socio-economic struggles, declared its independence from Serbia on 17 February 2008. Since 1999, when the international community interfered to stop the bloody conflict in Kosovo, the country has been faced with the rise and expansion of radical Wahhabi Islam. This expansion has been supported by foreign Islamic agencies and propagated by indoctrinated local Islamists. During the late 1990s, various foreign actors with an interest in propagating radical forms of Islam, such as Wahhabism, took advantage of the fragile post-conflict situation in Kosovo and established themselves in the region.<sup>22</sup> The majority of Kosovo's ethnic Albanians are moderate Muslims and many are Western-oriented. These new forms of radical Islam have therefore clashed with the more liberal Islam practiced in Kosovo, causing a clash of Islamic interpretations in which moderate Muslim Kosovars avoid to adopt the Wahhabist doctrine.

The beginnings of the clash between moderate and radical Islam in 1999 resulted in rivalry between younger clerics, who had travelled to Arab countries for their religious education due to the comparative lack of resources in Kosovo and aimed to establish Wahhabism in the region, and mainstream Muslims who favored maintaining the Ottoman Islamic traditions.

The conflicts, the shattered social coherence and family structures, the absence of institutions, as well as the influx of religious charity organizations, have all fostered the expansion of radical Islam in Kosovo. During the past decade, Albanians in

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<sup>22</sup> *Radical Route-Salafism in the Balkans*, (Dimal Basha, January 29, 2013)

Kosovo have been growing more conservative, and are now turning to religion in greater numbers than ever.<sup>23</sup>

#### **b) The process towards the establishment of a universal Caliphate**

The political party "Islamic Movement to Unite (LISBA)", has been recently established. This particular party follows a clear pan-Islamic agenda composed by radical Sunni elements. The aim of that party is to push towards an Islamic Caliphate in the Balkans.<sup>24</sup>

LISBA is a clear indication of the formal appearance of Muslim Brotherhood in the Balkans been supplied with capital from Qatar mostly, with an eventual goal of establishing a stronghold in the Southeastern part of Europe. It has already announced the launching of a large scale campaign going beyond the Kosovo boundaries to encompass the whole Muslim world. This is the first out-and-out Islamist party in the Balkans that declares the creation of Greater Albania and has set the goal of making the Balkans a part of Islamic Caliphate.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, the newly formed Islamist party is directly connected with the groups controlled by the Muslim Brotherhood in Bosnia-Herzegovina and also acts as a coordinating hub for similar groups in Albania and FYROM.

The pace of Islamization of Kosovo is being consistently upgraded, through a variety of means.<sup>26</sup> Muslim funds, institutes and other structures flood Kosovo today. They invest hundreds of thousands dollars into the construction of mosques, religious education and other projects. Around 200 mosques have been erected since 1999, while a similar number of Christian churches and monasteries was destroyed, a clear case of cultural genocide in which the international forces paid little attention. Pristina

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<sup>23</sup> *Radical Route-Salafism in the Balkans*, (Dimal Basha, January 29, 2013)

<sup>24</sup> Michaletos, Ioannis, *Kosovo's Islamist movement and regional developments*, (RIMSE, March 14, 2013)

<sup>25</sup> *Kosovo: Outpost in Battle for Universal Caliphate*, (Strategic Culture Foundation, Online journal, February 22, 2013)

<sup>26</sup> Michaletos, Ioannis, *Kosovo's Islamist movement and regional developments*, (RIMSE, March 14, 2013)

has 22 mosques for the population of 200 thousand and the number keeps on growing.<sup>27</sup>

Europe does see the growing threat of converting Kosovo into an instrument of creating the Greater Albania and Eurasian Caliphate. But the root of the problem is that the West is a hostage to its own Kosovo project.<sup>28</sup>

The reversion to religious practices in the wake of the collapse of communist rule, combined with the dire economic situation, have opened the door for new forms of extremism, which individuals and organizations have pursued to take advantage of.<sup>29</sup> Kosovo's institutions do not have the means or the will to address and confront Islamist radicals. Funding from benefactors in Saudi Arabia and other Islamic countries is continuing to sponsor various agencies that distribute extremist literature and propagate fundamentalist Islamist beliefs in Kosovo and the wider region.<sup>30</sup> While the Europeans are pursuing their geopolitical interests, the Balkans, and Kosovo in particular, are rapidly converting into an important outpost of the forces waging fight for establishing a Universal Caliphate.<sup>31</sup>

### **Bosnia-Herzegovina: the ideal hub for the evolution of Radical Islam**

Bosnia is the context within which Islam plays a more important role, both numerically -seeing that the Bosniacs (as Bosnian Muslims call themselves) are the majority- and politically, bearing in mind that during and after the war Islam has increased its influence in the public sphere and in imposing its values.<sup>32</sup>

Since World War II, religious and ethnic tensions have been weak, held in check primary through the force of will and repression by Yugoslavian dictator Tito. But after his death, latent identities began to ferment and were taken advantage of by

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<sup>27</sup> *Kosovo: Outpost in Battle for Universal Caliphate*, (Strategic Culture Foundation, Online journal, February 22, 2013)

<sup>28</sup> *Kosovo: Outpost in Battle for Universal Caliphate*, (Strategic Culture Foundation, Online journal, February 22, 2013)

<sup>29</sup> *Radical Route-Salafism in the Balkans*, (Dimal Basha, January 29, 2013)

<sup>30</sup> *Radical Route-Salafism in the Balkans*, (Dimal Basha, January 29, 2013)

<sup>31</sup> *Kosovo: Outpost in Battle for Universal Caliphate*, (Strategic Culture Foundation, Online journal, February 22, 2013)

<sup>32</sup> Del Conero, Mattia, *The Islam of the Balkans, an unknown galaxy*, (ResetDoc, September 14, 2011)

opportunistic political leaders.<sup>33</sup> Multi-ethnic peace evaporated as each group increasingly identified not with their long-time neighbors, but instead with a broader cultural community which was defined primarily along religious lines. Roman Catholic Croatia aligned itself with neighboring Italy and Germany. Eastern Orthodox Serbia aligned itself with neighboring Greece and distant Russia.

But the shift in religious and ethnic consciousness was strongest among Muslims in predominantly Muslim Bosnia. At the beginning of the war, Bosnian Muslims were mostly secular in their worldview and regarded themselves as Europeans first and foremost. But as Yugoslavia began to break up all of that changed, so as the rejected multi-ethnic political parties which were pursuing a course of moderation.<sup>34</sup>

Political Islam emerged powerfully in Bosnia when, in 1970, Alija Izetbegovic, who was later elected president in the nineties, published the Islamic Declaration, proposing a closer relationship between religion and politics, all with a context that accepted Western culture, and without the final objective of creating an Islamic government.<sup>35</sup> He proclaimed the idea of a united transnational Islamic state in accordance with the Quran laws, *“Islam has become love and compassion... He who rises against Islam will reap nothing but hate and resistance... In one of the theses for an Islamic order today we have stated that it is a natural function of the Islamic order to gather all Muslims and Muslim communities throughout the world into one. Under present conditions, this desire means a struggle for creating a great Islamic federation from Morocco to Indonesia, from the tropical Africa to the Central Asia”*. He also said, *«There's no peace or coexistence between the Islamic faith and non-Islamic social and political institutions”*.<sup>36</sup> The Yugoslav authorities arrested Izetbegovic for his declaration.

In 1990-1991, when the winds of war began to blow over Bosnia, the Islamic cause authoritatively reappeared on the scene and became the pillar that sanctioned the re-elaboration of the Bosniac identity. Religion became the unifying factor for Bosnian

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<sup>33</sup> *Religious wars in the Balkans*, (about.com Agnosticism/Atheism)

<sup>34</sup> *Religious wars in the Balkans*, (about.com Agnosticism/Atheism)

<sup>35</sup> Del Conero, Mattia, *The Islam of the Balkans, an unknown galaxy*, (ResetDoc, September 14, 2011)

<sup>36</sup> *Kosovo: Outpost in Battle for Universal Caliphate*, (Strategic Culture Foundation, Online journal, February 22, 2013)

Muslims and the means with which they could distinguish their historical-cultural identity from that of Serbs and Croats.<sup>37</sup>

In the course of the war, international radical Islam also arrived. Many Islamists, mainly coming from Saudi Arabia, arrived in Bosnia and enrolled in the Armija, the Bosniac army. After the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreements, some Islamists moved to the Chechen front and later to Iraq and Afghanistan, while others instead remained in Bosnia, forming pockets of radical Islamism that are still left behind and form a minority group. After 9/11 the E.U. and the American government applied pressure on Sarajevo to expel former veterans considered dangerous. The Bosniac political elite mainly complied with the European and American demands.

Nearly 20 years after the guns fell silent in Bosnia-Herzegovina, a growing number of the country's Muslims have become frustrated with the democratic path their country has taken; and that frustration is being exploited by Islamists.<sup>38</sup> Unlike ethnic Croats and Serbs in Bosnia, Muslim Bosniaks, who feel alone in their effort to forge and maintain their own identity and political institutions, receive no economic, political, or moral support from neighboring countries. And increasingly, the argument that Shari'a law -and not democracy- is the answer for Bosnia, is getting a broader hearing.<sup>39</sup>

Bosnia is one of the poorest countries in Europe; it is still contending with deep ethnic and religious divisions left over from the disastrous war of the 1990s. It inherited a fragile, often unworkable government structure from the war-ending 1995 Dayton accords. "This country has for 20 years been in a state of institutionalized temporariness and temporary solutions," Vlado Azinovic, a Sarajevo-based security expert and former RFE/RL journalist who has written a book on whether Al-Qaeda has a presence in Bosnia, says. "And as long as it stays like that, as long as we are facing a deep political and moral crisis of all values in society, it will remain a fertile ground for

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<sup>37</sup> Del Conero, Mattia, *The Islam of the Balkans, an unknown galaxy*, (ResetDoc, September 14, 2011)

<sup>38</sup> Coalson, Robert, Nikolic Maja, *Radical Islamists see an opening in Bosnia*, (The Atlantic, March 1, 2013)

<sup>39</sup> Coalson, Robert, Nikolic Maja, *Radical Islamists see an opening in Bosnia*, (The Atlantic, March 1, 2013)

the spread of various radical ideologies, among which [radical Islam] has stood out recently.”

According to Yossef Bodansky, the director of the congressional Task Force on Terrorism and Unconventional Warfare, “There is a terrorist network in Bosnia, composed of several well-trained and connected groups, which are directly or indirectly responsible to Osama bin Laden.”<sup>40</sup> The Balkans are home to over 6 million Muslims -making up 70 percent of Albania's population, 40 percent of Bosnia-Herzegovina's, 17 percent of FYROM's, and 19 percent of Serbia and Montenegro's- so it is not unreasonable to assume that al Qaeda would attempt to use the cover of those populations to hide, operate, and recruit. At least some of the Muslim fighters in the Balkans are believed to have trained in al Qaeda's camps in Afghanistan. But does that constitute an al Qaeda presence in the Balkans and a terrorist threat?

As is the case with most things in the Balkans, the answer is not entirely clear. Tracing any potential al Qaeda connection in the Balkans, however, starts by looking past bin Laden to Alija Izetbegovic, who was president of Bosnia and Herzegovina from 1996 to 2000. A political autocrat who was hailed by Bosnian Muslims as the “father of the nation,” Izetbegovic's manifesto, the *Islamic Declaration*, is the first link in any chain that might connect the Balkans to al Qaeda. Izetbegovic asserted that, **“The Islamic movement must and can take over political power as soon as it is morally and numerically so strong that it can not only destroy the existing non-Islamic power but also to build up a new Islamic one.”**<sup>41</sup> While not explicitly calling for violent jihad, these sentiments are not far from bin Laden's rhetoric.

Just a few years ago, the kind of radicalism was truly a fringe phenomenon with little traction among Bosnia's Muslims. The official Islamic Community was headed by respected moderate Mustafa Cerić until he stepped down in the summer of 2012.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup>V. Pena, Charles, *Al Qaeda: The Balkans connection*, (Project Muse, April 16, 2005)

<sup>41</sup>V. Pena, Charles, *Al Qaeda: The Balkans connection*, (Project Muse, April 16, 2005)

<sup>42</sup>Coalson, Robert, Nikolic Maja, *Radical Islamists see an opening in Bosnia*, (The Atlantic, March 1, 2013)

Today, the environment in the country is conducive to the growth of Wahhabist movements in Bosnia.<sup>43</sup>

### **FYROM: Radical Islam threatens the country's institutions**

Although largely ignored by international observers, the rapid growth of Islamism in the Republic of FYROM is of greater importance as a social phenomenon, than anywhere else in Southeastern Europe, on a par with similar developments in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Since the demise of Yugoslavia and FYROM's independence in late 1991, foreign Islamists have found fertile soil in this small and economically-underdeveloped country.<sup>44</sup> The simultaneous Islamist strategy of radicalizing and intimidating the mainstream Muslim population, has created a serious challenge to the country's historic, tolerant Hanafi and Bektashi traditions.

Islamist activity in FYROM is most widespread in those areas where the Muslim population -the vast majority of whom are ethnic Albanians- is concentrated. Although most of FYROM's ethnic Albanian minority is Muslim, it has generally been secular. But experts are now seeing an increasing radicalization in pockets of the country's Islamic community.<sup>45</sup> Islamist groups are also beginning to concentrate on areas where few Muslims live, in the south and east of the country, with the aim of expanding their influence and territorial control nationwide.

The organization that officially represents FYROM's Muslim population of 675,000 is the Islamic Community of Macedonia (ICM). The ICM's leading cleric, known as the *reis-ul-ulema*, is presently Sulejman Rexhepi.<sup>46</sup> In July 2010, following a fight and near-riot at the Isa-Bey Mosque in Skopje under Wahhabi control, Rexhepi admitted publicly that the ICM had lost its authority over several mosques in the capital, due to the growing influence of radical Islam in FYROM. The Isa-Bey Mosque has turned into a stronghold of radical Islam. Ramadan Ramadani, the Imam of the Isa-Bey Mosque, rejected the claims that his mosque is the flagship of Wahhabism.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Coalson, Robert, Nikolic Maja, *Radical Islamists see an opening in Bosnia*, (The Atlantic, March 1, 2013)

<sup>44</sup> *Macedonia*, in *World Almanac of Islamism*, (American Foreign Policy Council, July 14, 2011)

<sup>45</sup> *Radical Islam on rise in Balkans*, (ProBoards Forum, September 19, 2010)

<sup>46</sup> *Macedonia*, in *World Almanac of Islamism*, (American Foreign Policy Council, July 14, 2011)

<sup>47</sup> *Radical Islam in Macedonia worries Western observers*, (euobserver.com, July 8, 2010)

While international diplomats and religious experts have voiced concerns about fundamentalist threats to FYROM's stability and the spread of radical Islam among Muslim communities in the Balkans,<sup>48</sup> most tend to take a cynical view; they consider Islamic infighting to be little more than internal politicking between rival ethnic Albanian parties over property proceeds and other financial interests, and not as an issue of genuine religious extremism.<sup>49</sup> Nevertheless, in FYROM today, fundamentalist Islam is unmistakably becoming more visible in daily life.

Rather than destroying existing Islamic institutions, today's extremist faction simply wishes to take over authority nation-wide, and to redirect activities in a more fundamentalist direction. To accomplish this strategy, they are tactically manipulating the Western-based concept of "civil society" to conceal their true motives. Using the "legitimate cover" of various NGOs, charities and publishing entities, they thus participate in domestic and international conferences, political events, "human-rights" activities and various demonstrations.<sup>50</sup> At the same time, these radicals have expedited the goals of Saudi Arabia and other Islamic states by overseeing the construction of hundreds of foreign-funded mosques.

The Skopje branch of the Islamic Religious Community, IVZ, in FYROM has warned that radical Islamist groups following Wahhabi teachings are trying to take control of the central mosques in Skopje. It is commonly accepted that the supporters of radical Islam believe they can establish themselves by taking over mosques. They are aware that they cannot get the trust from the majority of believers with their previous, more or less aggressive tactics.<sup>51</sup> So their goal is to become imams and through preaching to spread their interpretation of Islam.

Islamist activity in FYROM over the past decade-and-a-half has been guided largely by outside interests, such as Saudi and other Gulf state charities, and proselytizers from Pakistani groups like the Tablighi Jama'at or countries like Turkey and Malaysia. Often global Islamist NGOs registered locally or Western Europe (the UK is a major

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<sup>48</sup> *Radical Islam in Macedonia worries Western observers*, (euobserver.com, July 8, 2010)

<sup>49</sup> *Macedonia*, in *World Almanac of Islamism*, (American Foreign Policy Council, July 14, 2011)

<sup>50</sup> *Macedonia*, in *World Almanac of Islamism*, (American Foreign Policy Council, July 14, 2011)

<sup>51</sup> *Radical Islam "Threatens Macedonia"*, (BalkanInsight, July 2, 2010)

hub) are used as intermediaries. However, since the 1990s, relatively fewer suspicious charities have been allowed to register in the country, in comparison to Albania, Kosovo and Bosnia, due to a measure of resistance from FYROM's security officials.<sup>52</sup>

Muslims from Macedonia, some of whom have studied in radical *madrassas* in Pakistan, have gone on to join al-Qaeda's *jihad* against the United States and the Coalition in Afghanistan. Authorities in FYROM are reluctant to confirm any threat of radical Islam in the country. But a government official, speaking on condition of anonymity due to the sensitivity of the topic, did acknowledge that radical groups and their followers are being closely observed.<sup>53</sup> Other governments have been less so; Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Liberman, for example, did state for the record that radical Islam in FYROM and the Balkans is a major concern during a joint press conference with FYROM's Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski in January 2010.<sup>54</sup>

For years, security experts have warned about rising Islamism in FYROM -without arousing much attention, though. Wahhabism in FYROM, the Balkans and in Europe has become more aggressive in the last 10 years. The increasing clout of radical Islam is causing a rift in the country's Muslim community, with a power struggle developing within the country's official Islamic Religious Community between the moderate mainstream and the emerging Wahhabis wing.<sup>55</sup> A destructive, radical and extremist current has appeared with an intention of taking over the lead of the Islamic religious community.

Since the 1990s, hundreds of young Muslims from FYROM have also gone to study in Islamic states, such as Egypt, Syria, Saudi Arabia and Malaysia, while others have come into contact with radical Islam while working in Europe. Pakistan's Tablighi Jama'at movement has also sent large numbers of missionaries to FYROM, and has brought hundreds of Muslims to study in radical *madrassas* in Pakistan.

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<sup>52</sup> *Macedonia*, in *World Almanac of Islamism*, (American Foreign Policy Council, July 14, 2011)

<sup>53</sup> *Radical Islam on rise in Balkans*, (ProBoards Forum, September 19, 2010)

<sup>54</sup> *Macedonia*, in *World Almanac of Islamism*, (American Foreign Policy Council, July 14, 2011)

<sup>55</sup> *Radical Islam on rise in Balkans*, (ProBoards Forum, September 19, 2010)

One victim of the growth of fundamentalist Islam has been the country's more peaceful Bektashi Order -a minority within a minority. Comprised primarily of ethnic Albanians, this more liberal branch of Islam is considered heretical by many Muslims worldwide; in FYROM, they are particularly despised by Salafis, who condemn them as being even worse than Christians and Jews. During and after the brief 2001 war, the country's main Bektashi shrine, the historic Harabati Baba Tekke in Tetovo, was vandalized and partially occupied by Islamic radicals associated with the NLA. Members of the order who have spoken out against the extremists have been threatened and, despite entreaties to successive FYROM's governments, the Bektashis still cannot register themselves as a distinct religious group.<sup>56</sup>

Wahhabis are known for their radical actions and harassment of Muslim believers. Wahhabist structures act against the Constitution of the Islamic Community, the rules of procedure and hierarchy.<sup>57</sup> While none of the several FYROM's governments elected since the country's 1991 independence have ever directly aided Islamism, neither have any of them done anything to stop it. This is largely due to the need to confront larger issues, such as the poor economy and infrastructure, the Macedonia name dispute with Greece, and chronic nationalist demands from the ethnic Albanian side. But the state's non-confrontational policy is also due to a lack of confidence, present and former officials attest.<sup>58</sup>

## Conclusions

Though ethnic and religious conflict in the Balkans is nothing new, the rising influence of radical Islam in the region is a dangerous development that could threaten the stability of southeast Europe in 2013.<sup>59</sup> Wahhabis adherents have been taking advantage of vulnerabilities in the region, with its historical and political instability and high rates of unemployment, to exploit ordinary Muslims for the advancement of fundamentalist and extremist agendas.<sup>60</sup> This has occurred through a process of

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<sup>56</sup> *Macedonia*, in *World Almanac of Islamism*, (American Foreign Policy Council, July 14, 2011)

<sup>57</sup> *Radical Islam in Macedonia worries Western observers*, (euobserver.com, July 8, 2010)

<sup>58</sup> *Macedonia*, in *World Almanac of Islamism*, (American Foreign Policy Council, July 14, 2011)

<sup>59</sup> *Radical Islam: A growing concern in the Balkans*, (PatriotsBillboard.org, January 11, 2013)

<sup>60</sup> *Radical Route-Salafism in the Balkans*, (Dimal Basha, January 29, 2013)

indoctrination, infiltration and financial subsidies. Moreover, Islamist radicalism has not been high on the agenda of Kosovo's law enforcement agencies, which has given the extremists space and conditions to spread.

Thousands of Islamists from all over the world were allowed freely into Bosnia, while Islamists, criminals, and terrorists were used in Kosovo.<sup>61</sup> Islamic charities and Islamic organizations are intent on spreading radical Islam throughout the Balkans and Bosnia, Kosovo, and FYROM are breeding grounds for spreading this dangerous ideology. After all, Islamic nations and organizations are funding many Islamic institutions throughout the region and added to the higher Muslim birthrate and pro-American policies towards the Muslims of Bosnia and Kosovo, then the radical Islam predominance, could become a future reality.<sup>62</sup>

Ongoing mistrust since the wake of the 1990s wars, between the major ethnic and religious groups in the Balkans remains a significant threat to the stability of the region and gives radical Islamists an important recruiting tool.<sup>63</sup> Although radicalization of Islamists in the Balkans is a slow process, ongoing economic stagnation and high youth unemployment is working to expedite the spread of fundamentalist Islamist ideology.

Religious extremism is a growing threat and danger to human society. Radical Islamist clericals justify not only acts of terrorism against individuals, but also mass murder against whole groups of people regarded as infidels.<sup>64</sup> As religiously-motivated terrorist attacks become more frequent, the relatively secular governments of the Balkans could become immersed in conflicts with radical Islamists. Nevertheless, security experts interviewed in Kosovo do not suggest that there is an imminent threat

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<sup>61</sup> *Bosnia and Kosovo: radical Islam, organ trafficking and media bias*, (Islamic Terrorism and Religious Persecution, October 19, 2011)

<sup>62</sup> *Bosnia and Kosovo: radical Islam, organ trafficking and media bias*, (Islamic Terrorism and Religious Persecution, October 19, 2011)

<sup>63</sup> *Radical Islam: A growing concern in the Balkans*, (PatriotsBillboard.org, January 11, 2013)

<sup>64</sup> Moshe Reiss, Rabbi, *Islam and the West*, (BibleCommentator.com)

from Wahhabi extremism, although governments and law enforcement agencies in the Western Balkans have begun to feel the pressure from Islamist fundamentalists.<sup>65</sup>

This threat could take the form of direct violence and terrorist attacks, or attempts to stir inter-ethnic or religious tensions. Weak law enforcement means that tensions and insecurity could raise and spill across borders, if extremist movements and their sympathizers are not countered, opening up the possibility of wider destabilization across the region.<sup>66</sup> It is a threat that, while not immediately explosive when compared to the serious regional problems of organized crime and political instability, could pose a greater risk in the future if the extremist ideologies are allowed to take root and to spread.

These concerns are prompting regional officials to sound the alarm on the growing threat posed by the fundamentalist clerics trained in Saudi Arabia or Pakistan or emigrated from these nations.<sup>67</sup> There are some good signs in the fight against radical Islam in the region. In early December Kosovo extradited Shukri Alia to FYROM, where he was sentenced to three years in prison for harassing moderate Muslims. In addition, several governments in the region are working to implement economic reforms and clamp down on religious violence.

The worsening economic crisis in the Balkans could draw more followers to radical Islam in the region and lead to more terrorist incidents in 2013. Although this is a problem that has been mostly overlooked by the West, regional leaders recognize this threat and hope to counter it with economic reforms and cracking down against radical Islamist activities.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> *Radical Route-Salafism in the Balkans*, (Dimal Basha, January 29, 2013)

<sup>66</sup> *Radical Route-Salafism in the Balkans*, (Dimal Basha, January 29, 2013)

<sup>67</sup> *Radical Islam: A growing concern in the Balkans*, (PatriotsBillboard.org, January 11, 2013)

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