

### Albanians' Islam(s)

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### Abstract and Keywords

Albanians in the Balkans present a unique socio-political case of how an 'ethnic' group's collective identity is not formed by religion alone. Constituting the majority population in the independent and sovereign states of Albania and Kosovo, and large minorities in Montenegro, Serbia, and Macedonia, scholars choose to identify Albanians firstly as Muslims. However, this association with faith often obscures other factors that contributed to Albanians' long history of state persecution and the periodic inter-communal conflicts that animate much of the scholarship on Islam in the Balkans today. Albanian Muslims constitute a diffuse and complex set of stories that make any understanding of the larger issues under study dependent on differentiating distinctive Muslim (and ethno-national) communities using various tools. This chapter will help scholars and policy-makers to differentiate between Albanian Muslims and situate their political, socio-economic, and spiritual diversity in the larger context of state and regional life over the last century of European and Balkan life.

Keywords: Islam, Albanians, statism, minority rights, ethnic identity

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## Introduction

Albanians<sup>1</sup> in the Balkans represent a rather unique socio-political case. Today, Albanians live as majorities in the independent and sovereign state of Albania and in the newly independent and contested state of Kosovo. Nominally, both these countries have an Albanian Muslim majority, thus being a rare instance in Europe. As much as these countries warrant study in the context of a larger survey on European Islam, Albanian Muslims do not inhabit these countries alone. They also make up numerically significant minorities in neighboring countries once part of Yugoslavia—Serbia, Macedonia, and Montenegro (Ellis 2003; Krasniqi 2011; Babuna 2000). Moreover, as a result of ongoing political and economic tensions in these territories, many Albanian Muslims have migrated elsewhere, now making large diasporas in Western Europe, Greece, Turkey, and North America.<sup>2</sup>

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One of the main problems that inhibits a true understanding of the complexities of Albanians' Islam is related to the predominance of "methodological nationalism" (Wimmer and Schiller 2002) that has characterized how different fields of inquiry and mainstream social science are applied to the study of Islam in the Balkans. Of the three variants of methodological nationalism identified by Wimmer and Schiller—ignorance, naturalization, and territorial limitation—the idea that a nationally bounded society is considered a "natural" entity of study (naturalization) unnecessarily reduces the analytical focus to the boundaries of the nation-state (territorial limitation) (Wimmer and Schiller 2002: 302–8). In this respect, it appears clear that such methods have been predominant in the study of Islam in the Balkans. (p. 476)

On the other hand, scholarship in local languages is conditioned by two main factors. First, since the very creation of new "nation-states" starting from the mid-nineteenth century, national historiographies have been dominated by an ethno-nationalist agenda. Due to the fact that most of these new states were created as a result of violence against other communities within the predominantly Muslim Ottoman Empire, sectarianism has constantly been the means by which Balkan nations were perceived. In this context, all the countries in the post-Ottoman Balkans continuously and systematically demonized and misrepresented Islam and Muslims living as minorities in these new states. As a result, political identities fit within national discourses that indiscriminately constructed the nation-state as an opposition to the Ottoman Empire. In this context, scholarship on Islam in the Balkans and its role in the development of the various communities in that part of Europe has thus been neglected.

The "ethno-nationalist" paradigm has been the predominant method of reading and telling the past in the Balkan states. As a result, politically manufactured and anachronistic terms and concepts, linked today to ethno-national affiliations and selecting, became prevalent in historical studies instead of the local terminology individuals used to self-identify in various contexts. More specifically, the spatial, cultural, and economic units used in ethno-national frames by "national" historiographies of the twentieth century prove to be restrictively self-referential and internalist, and they selectively ignore the intersecting forces that make the Ottoman Balkans so unambiguously valuable to studying the larger issues related to "modernity" in greater Europe (Blumi 2011b: 7). This has been the case with the official historiography in the states inhabited by Albanians after the fall of the Ottoman Empire—Albania, Yugoslavia, and Greece. Modern concepts of nation and "nation-state"—perceived as culturally and politically homogenous—were frequently projected into the past at the detriment of the terminology individuals used to self-identify in an ever changing socio-political Balkan context.

Another impediment to studying Islam in the Balkans is linked to the communist experience in the second half of the twentieth century. Due to the underlying tensions and antagonisms between communist states and religion, scholarship on Islam was limited and often partisan. While in socialist Yugoslavia, the liberalization of the system in the late 1960s resulted in an increase in studies on Islam and Muslim communities, communist Albania banned religion altogether. In such settings a major rupture in the development of

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religion and scholarship took place. Thus, states' hostile approach towards religion in general and Islam in particular played a great part in the way local historians read and analyzed the past and present.

Nonetheless, after the fall of communism in Eastern Europe and the "opening-up" of the region to Europe and the world, new scholarship did emerge in different disciplines (Clayton 1990, 2006, 2010; Popović 1990; Norris 1993; Duijzings 2000). Many of these new sociological and anthropological studies on Islam and Muslims in the Balkans shed light on various, previously neglected or outright ignored religious and social aspects that animate the life of Albanian Muslims in the region. Although these studies are limited in number and often superficial, they remain important for they represent a counterbalance to the ideologically motivated local scholars and journalists dealing with the (p. 477) issue of religion. However, in the aftermath of the Yugoslav wars and the 9/11 events, ideologically motivated scholars preaching ethnic separation, the "war on terror," or the clash of civilizations have initiated a new wave of challenges to the corrective scholarship emerging from outside the region. Therefore, the present social, political, and cultural cleavages and tensions in the region are seldom put in a wider context of the "clash of civilizations" (where Islam is indiscriminately portrayed as foreign and primitive) and Islam's "incompatibility" with democracy and modern European and Western values. This has contributed to the increasing level of Islamophobia in the region.

Thus, when put in the context of this larger survey on European Islam, it is crucial to appreciate that Albanian Muslims constitute a diffuse and complex set of stories that, it is argued in this chapter, make any understanding of the larger issues under study in this project dependent on differentiating distinctive Muslim (and ethno-national) communities using various tools. By offering an interdisciplinary approach that brings nuance to otherwise normative historical analysis and social scientific codification, this chapter will help scholars and policy-makers to differentiate between Albanian Muslims and situate their political, socio-economic, and spiritual diversity in the larger context of state and regional life over the last century of European and Balkan life.

In general, the relationship Albanians—who profess faith as both Christians (Catholic or Orthodox) and Muslims of various sects—had with most post-Ottoman states was directly influenced by their larger legal status as ethnic, as well as religious, minorities in each country. In Greece and Yugoslavia, for instance, Muslim Albanians were labeled as "minorities," whose added affiliation with an "alien," "Turkish" faith like Islam resulted in decades of persecution that was not necessarily the case for Bosniaks (who eventually became integrated into larger Yugoslav society) or even Pomaks in Bulgaria (Ghodsee 2009). For Albanians, being both religious and ethnic minorities often meant being labeled as "threats" to the national security of Greece and Yugoslavia throughout the Cold War (and later in the break-away countries of Serbia, Montenegro, and Macedonia).

This is in contrast to Muslim Albanians living inside the country of Albania, an independent state, in theory if not in practice, since 1912. Albanians who were "Muslims," when grouped into a single religious category, were often assumed to make up a "majority" of

the country's population. This did not translate, however, into protection from religious persecution. Depending on the era and regime in power, only certain subgroups of Albanian Muslims were persecuted on the grounds of their religious (sectarian) affiliation. In other words, although Albania was in one way a "Muslim" country, the diverse practices that emerged during 500 years of Ottoman rule meant that only a selected group of Muslims, at any given time, enjoyed protection from the more general trend of persecution in the larger Balkans. More importantly to recent events, even this distinction changed inside Albania with the insertion of Stalinist "reforms" in 1967 when Albania was declared the world's first "atheist state" (Doja 2000). From that point onward, all openly practicing Muslims, as well as Christians, faced often brutal state persecution (Pllumi 2008).

With this in mind, the chapter aims to cover two crucial aspects of Albanian Islam in the Balkan/European context. The first one is the diversity of interactions with various (p. 478) twentieth-century states experienced by Albanian Muslims in the Balkans. The second is Albanians' relationship with Islam. As will become clear throughout, the kinds of Islam practiced by Albanians have changed dramatically over the decades, often in direct response to state persecution in Albania, Greece, or Yugoslavia (post-Yugoslavia). As explained in the following, hostility towards Albanian Muslims often compelled them to modify how they practiced their faith, be it embracing regional traditions more strongly, or being drawn to a new kind of Islamic practice coming from Turkey or Saudi Arabia since the region has "opened up" to the world with the fall of communist regimes in the early 1990s. Finally, as there were very different experiences for Albanian Muslims living in Albania and Yugoslavia, these two aspects of Albanian Islam mentioned already will be explained in distinctive subsections in what follows.

## Charting a History of Difference in Balkan States

This part of the chapter is divided into five different sections analyzing: (i) the uniqueness of the Islam among Albanians in Europe; (ii) religious diversity; (iii) the experience of Albanian Muslims in inter-war and socialist Yugoslavia; as well as different trajectories and developments among (iv) Albanian Muslims in Kosovo and (v) Macedonia.

Albanian Muslims have faced many forms of persecution due to both their ethnic and religious identities. The scale of this persecution, however, is difficult to gauge. To a large extent, religious identity and/or Albanian ethnicity was not recorded in official state documentations since Ottoman times. This policy to strategically disguise demographic imbalances often protected the state from outside calls for greater protection of such large (but denied) groups. The logic was that the larger the Albanian population in these territories—often reluctantly incorporated into post-Ottoman, self-identified "Christian" states—the more grounds these Albanians had to claims for cultural and ultimately political rights. Indeed, after periods of forcible conversions of Muslims into Christians, states in the Balkans also pursued forced migration, thus contributing to yet another set of factors that distorted realistic demographic statistics. In many ways, the very fact that the states

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persecuting Muslims in the Balkans refused to provide documented records of these violent policies challenges the very nature of our research. The result is that an entirely different set of analytical tools are available to the social scientist.

### What Makes Albanian Muslims Unique in Europe?

As members of the Orthodox, Catholic, and Evangelical Christian, as well as Sunni, various Sufi, and Shi'a Muslim spiritual traditions, Albanians are often considered unique among the ethno-national groups of the Balkans (Roux 1992; Clayer 1990; (p. 479) Doja 2000; Poulton 1998; Lakshman-Lepain 2002). Many scholars recognize that this religious diversity has not been a barrier to Albanians who sought to form a common sense of belonging to a single ethno-national group, requisite in the twentieth century (Babuna 2004; Bougarel 2007; Blumi 1998). In stark contrast to how religiously different Albanians forged a common ethno-national identity, southern Slavs—Serbs, Croats, Bosniaks, Macedonians, Bulgarians—as well as Greeks and Romanians became permanently distinctive on these same sectarian grounds (Banac 2006; Poulton 1997; Mazower 2002). In the post-Ottoman Balkans, the rise of the nation-state led to the calculation that previously “mixed” communities were a liability in countries where the political elite deemed ethnic (thus religious) uniformity crucial for national survival (Poulton 1998).

This fate imposed by the victors of the First World War proved especially traumatic for Albanian Muslims. It was the Albanian Muslims who became the primary targets of those ascendant (self-declared “Orthodox Christian”) states—Montenegro, Serbia, Bulgaria, and Greece—which captured most of the former Ottoman Balkan territories (Mazower 2002: 113–44). Much of the post-First World War period thus became a tragic story of forced “population exchanges” whereby “foreigners” were “repatriated” to their “ethnic homelands.”<sup>3</sup>

Balkan history is often presented today by many local and foreign scholars in terms of such monolithic “ethnic” terms, which implicitly suggest communities retain the presumptions of distinct, quasi-primordial cultural identities that have supposedly persisted fundamentally unchanged over centuries (Popović 1986; Deliso 2007). Embedded in this logic is the assertion that religious affiliation specifically determines the contours of an ethnic community (Banac 2006; Iveković 2002). But as demonstrated next, Albanian Muslim faith is far more diverse and varied than can be captured by a reductionist analysis of just who was being persecuted in, for instance, twentieth-century Yugoslavia or Albania.

### Albanian Muslim Diversity in Sect and Practice: Inside the Republic of Albania

Most conventional studies of the region recognized that the current Albanian state is Muslim, a view based on calculations drawn from the 1940s, according to which 70% of people were declared/considered to be Muslim, 20% Christian Orthodox, and 10% Christian Catholic. However, a 2011 census revealed a slightly different picture. (p. 480) According to the census data, 56.7% of the residents declared themselves as Muslims, 10%

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Catholics, 6.7% Orthodox, 2% Bektashi, while 13.7% did not declare their religious affiliation.<sup>4</sup> While the percentage of Catholics remained almost intact, this census indicates a decrease in the percentage of Muslims and Orthodox Christians. However, the large percentage of people who did not declare their religious affiliation leaves space for various interpretations as to the real religious composition of the country.

Nonetheless, largely missing from recent scholarship on Islam in the Balkans is the appreciation for quite different spiritual traditions that have shaped the way Muslims have lived in the region (Clayer 1990; Bougarel 2005). In territorial Albania throughout the twentieth century, for example, there have been three significant subcategories of practicing Muslims that require attention. Perhaps the most important group was a persecuted Muslim sect, the *Bektashiyya* (Bektashi), which settled in the thirteenth century in what is today larger cultural Albania (Blumi 2003b; Clayer 1992; Doja 2006; Duijzings 2000; Malcolm 1999; Norris 1993; Popović and Veinstein 1995; Rexhepagiqi 2003). The Bektashi, unlike other Sufi orders inhabiting the Balkans, though officially considered Sunni by way of their affiliation with legal traditions, were regarded as Shi'a by fellow Muslims because of their "esoteric" practices with a special reference to 'Ali, the cousin, and son-in-law, of the Prophet Muhammad, and his two sons Hasan and Hussayn.<sup>5</sup> In reality, due to the lack of a clearly defined theology, Bektashism could provide enough room to accommodate local influence and tradition, thus becoming, as Lakshman-Lepain argues, "the purest expression of Albanian religiosity" (2002: 38). Since the early nineteenth century, as a result of the entrenchment of the persecuted elite of the order in the south-western Balkans, the Bektashi became a crucial element in the social, cultural, economic, and political life of Muslims living in what is today southern Albania and northern Greece (Doja 2006: 90–105; Clayer 1992: 273–89).

After the formal collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the creation of a small, vulnerable Albanian Republic, only loosely controlled by competing factions, the state in the inter-war period took several steps towards the "nationalization" of religion, leading to the cutting of ties with Islamic institutions in Istanbul. Religious life was organized on four main principles: (a) laity of the state; (b) religious freedom; (c) equality among religions; and (d) recognition of three "national churches" (Islam, Christian Orthodoxy, and Catholicism) (Odile 1990; Lakshman-Lepain 2002; Lederer 1994; Clayer 2008). The internal doctrinal disputes between Bektashi and Sunni Albanians were seen as a source of weakness and state leaders desperately attempted to keep sectarianism out of inter-war Albanian politics. By the end of the Second World War, which saw the rise of the (p. 481) Enver Hoxha regime, elite membership to the Bektashi and Orthodox communities was strategically foregrounded by party affiliation (Blumi 1997).

In the aftermath of the fall of communism in 1991, Albanian society went through a process of multiple social, political, and identity transformations. In part, this took the form of an exodus of people beginning in July 1990, when hundreds of thousands of Albanians crashed the Italian and Greek borders in search of work and better living conditions in Europe (G. Krasniqi 2010; Mai 2008; Chiodi 2005). The two most dramatic examples are the more than 400,000 Albanians who have migrated to Italy and the 500,000

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who have relocated to Greece (Antoniou 2007: 155). This has had an immense impact on the way these people identified themselves and interacted with the others in their countries of admission. Among those in Greece, for example, many have chosen to change their Muslim names into “Greek Christian” ones in order to avoid discrimination (de Rapper 2008; Puto 2006; Ceka 2006). Population shifts in concert with these fluid conditions of religious identification thus make it virtually impossible for the various Sufi orders that traditionally were based in the southern regions of the country to survive. As reported by the Grand Mufti of Albania, Hafiz Sabri Koçi (himself of the Tijani Sufi order) in an interview in January 2000, most of the Sufi orders (*tekkes*) in Albania have more or less disappeared due to a lack of funds and followers. Moreover, he noted, the more mainstream Sunni Muslim and Bektashi communities, while having a broader base of faithful to rely on, are not fairing much better in respect to retaining their followers, with Albanians “returning” to their so-called “Christian European roots” (Clayer 2006; Doja 2003; Lakshman-Lepain 2002).

One important source of this slow demise of local Islam in Albania is the legacy of the communist regime that ruled from 1944 to 1991. In this period, the brutal persecution of religious leaders forced followers underground, leaving the dissemination of “tradition” in the hands of largely isolated, uneducated individuals. As a result, knowledge in the practice of Islam was all but lost as thousands of religious leaders were either murdered or arrested by the regime and the faithful compelled to worship in secret (Dizdari and Kasollja 1992). To those who were able to observe the first few months of Albania’s “liberation” from communist-imposed isolation, the consequences of such long persecution were glaringly evident when the first religious services took place. Both in the northern city of Shkodër on November 16, 1990, and then in Tirana on November 23, places of worship were reinstated but the ceremonies proved far from conventional (Blumi 2003b). It was clear that knowledge of even the most basic Islamic practices was virtually unknown to the youth.

In the same year, the Muslim Community of Albania (*Komuniteti Musliman i Shqipërisë*)—MCA—resumed its activities, claiming in its literature to be the main Muslim main organization in Albania.<sup>6</sup> Not long after, however, the Bektashi community reestablished the World Headquarters of the Bektashi Order in Tirana.<sup>7</sup> While the MCA formally includes all the Muslim sects of Albania—article 14:61 of its statute states (p. 482) that “All the sects are integral parts of the Islamic Community of Albania”—the Bektashi Community, having cut its ties with Turkey in 1929, reminded the world that its statute (adopted at the fourth congress of May 1945) declares the movement’s independence from the Sunni community. The reiteration of this independence has since 1990 caused tensions as rival groups of leaders conflicted over competing claims of legitimacy (Lederer 1994). In the end, the Bektashi Community in Albania has successfully kept its status as the “fourth religion” or “fourth church” in Albania, the other three being Sunni Islam, Orthodox, and Catholic (Lederer 1994; Lakshman-Lepain 2002).

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While internal debates, often resurfacing after decades of suppression during the communist period, raged within Albania, the void created during the communist era also offered many foreign Muslim organizations an opportunity to spread their particular brand of Islam into largely “ignorant” Muslim Albanian communities. Representatives from Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey rushed to a materially, and, to many, spiritually impoverished Albania (Blumi 2003a; Solberg 2007; Trix 1995; Deliso 2007; Bougarel 2003).

The results from this “invasion” of Muslim (and Christian) charities were immediate. According to a study conducted in the two universities of Tirana in 1994, three-quarters of the students asked stated they believed in God while only one-quarter of the professors who were instructing them claimed to be believers (Blumi 2003b; Tomo 1996). This “re-birth” of faith may have reflected a rebirth in religious institutions and a surge of attendance in religious-based schools that followed the 1990 opening of the country to foreign donors.

As a consequence of the perception that Albanians are in need of religious reintegration, the region has been a point of intense rivalry between competing “Islamic traditions.” The best example of this competition may again be found in Albania with the emergence of a Turkish network of both religious and secular schools, part of the Gülen movement, which has nearly monopolized the education of Albanian Muslims from the early 1990s (Agai 2002: 44–6). Fethullah Gülen (1938–) and his vast economic, pedagogical, and spiritual empire has been very successful in exporting his “Turkish” type of Islam (Solberg 2007; Öktem 2011).<sup>8</sup> In Albania, Gülen’s “secular” private schools, known by the name of Mehmet Akif, have emerged throughout the country since 1991, practically serving as an effective counterweight to more conservative Arab organizations coming to Albania at the time. From the very beginning, generous scholarship programs, a world-class English language instruction, and promises of a paid university education in Turkey have attracted thousands to these schools, which at their height numbered eight throughout the country. These schools do not put a heavy emphasis on Islamic education, and as many students confirm, Gülen’s message is decidedly more “liberal” than his more orthodox rivals funded by charities based in the Arab world.

This apparent “tolerant” religious education is part of the well-established Gülen role in thwarting radical Islamic influences around the world (Yavuz and Esposito 2003). (p. 483) Indeed, throughout Gülen’s writings and pronouncements, “Arab” literalism (better known as Wahhabism<sup>9</sup> or Salafism) is not the Islam for the modern era and is openly condemned in his schools. This counterweight to Wahhabi values is clearly playing an important role in how Islam is reintegrated into the lives of Muslims in Albania, as throughout Central Asia and parts of Europe (Yavuz 2012). Specific to Albania, unlike in other parts of the world, Saudi-funded schools have not gained a dominant position in the education of Muslims, a factor largely attributed to the success of these Gülen-inspired schools. As a result of this failure, Arab charities have redirected their money and attention to Kosovo, especially after 1999, leaving Albania to Fetullah Gülen and the “Christians” who include large numbers of Protestant evangelical and Orthodox programs (Blumi 2005).

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A crucial agent in this indigenous campaign to thwart “foreign” and “intolerant” interpretations of Islam was the Grand Mufti of Albania, Hafiz Sabri Koçi (1921–2004). Koçi was one of a handful of Albanian Muslim intellectuals who survived the communist era. Born on May 14, 1921, he passed his formative years in the northern Albanian city of Shkodër, once the epicenter of Albanian Islamic and Catholic culture. Too poor to continue his theological studies, he worked as the imam of the village mosque in Drisht and then as Mufti of Kavaja in central Albania. On July 4, 1966, he was arrested and given a prison sentence of 23 years for “threatening” the order of society. His legacy as a prominent theologian was not forgotten, however, and in 1990 his former colleagues and followers sought him out and asked him to return to perform his spiritual duties. From 1990 until his death in 2004 Hafiz Sabri Koçi, as the head of the Muslim Community of Albania, worked to link Albania to the Islamic world. Through his tireless lobbying, he successfully secured financial assistance for the building of religious institutions and the training of religious personnel. Raised in local religious institutions and a strong believer in religious tolerance, it is believed he will have been the last of the Albanian-trained Muftis in Albanian history to practice what many outsiders have called “unorthodox” local forms of Islam.

Albanian Muslims have also contributed to ongoing theological debates among many European Muslim communities. Perhaps the preeminent figure is Nasir al-Din al-Albani (1914–99) whose scholarship and public speeches have been decisive in positioning Albanians in the imaginations of Muslims around the world. Shaykh al-Albani was born in the Northern Albanian city of Shkodër and educated by his father, Al-Hajj Nooh Said Al-Burhani, the premiere Hanifi scholar of Albania at the time. Under persecution of the inter-war ruler of Albania, the family migrated to Syria where Shaykh al-Albani established himself as one of the Islamic world’s most important scholars of *fiqh* and *hadith*. Upon moving to Amman, Jordan in the 1970s, al-Albani cultivated his following into a veritable empire of scholarship which was disseminated by affiliated schools in several countries. Until his death, al-Albani attracted students from throughout the (p. 484) Islamic world, including many Albanians from the Balkans. His hundreds of hours of recorded sermons, teachings, and conversations are for sale in every Muslim city of the world today and his dozens of publications are the focus of intense debate among theologians. While his death has probably marked the end of his particular importance in modern Albanian Islam, it does not mean his legacy is in any way erased. Shaykh al-Albani represented a link between the Middle East and the Balkans that has produced a generation of Albanian theologians who may eventually influence the future of Islam in the Balkans. Although today al-Albani is not widely known among Albanian practitioners of Islam in the Balkans, some of his former students are actively engaged in spreading his ideas and teachings.

Similarly, Shuayyib Muharrem Arnauti, (1928–) offers an important theological link between the Arabic-speaking world and current Salafist groups operating inside Albanian communities. Shuayyib, being from a family of Albanian decent learned the foundations of Islam from his father in his birthplace, Damascus. Like Shaykh al-Albani, Shuayyib specialized in *hadith* and sought to bring this form of scholarship to a larger reading public in what were the earliest forms of modern populist Islamic literature (Blumi 2005). In 1955 he started to work as a lecturer of Arabic language and Islamic morality and then became

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a curator of a prominent library in Damascus. In 1982, like Shaykh al-Albani, he left for Amman and joined the *Risale* foundation as the chief of the cultural section, a position he still holds today. His extensive publications of over 160 volumes containing commentary on *hadith*, *fiqh*, and *tafsir*, have solidified Shuayyib's reputation as one of his generation's greatest theologians. Partly due to their cultural and ethnic affiliation, many students and theologians from the Balkans have come to study under his guidance.

### Albanian Muslim Diversity in Sect and Practice: Yugoslavia as a Whole

In contrast to these politically crucial Muslim community leaders from present-day Albania, other Muslim constituencies—Sufis—have played a largely misunderstood role in Albanian spiritual life because of a lack of such prominent, internationally recognized personalities (Clayer 1990; Blumi 2003b). As discussed further in the Kosovo section, Sufism was long seen by the Slavic Muslim elite based in Yugoslavia's designated Islamic center—Sarajevo—as a theological and political threat. As such, Albanian Muslim traditions were condemned by the state-funded, Sarajevo-based religious authorities (Blumi 2003a; Doja 2000; de Rapper 2008; Morrison 2008; Trix 1995).

A crucial phase of direct hostility from Yugoslavia's religious establishment was when Albanians responded to these attacks from Yugoslavia's state-backed Muslim Orthodoxy with the creation in the 1970s of underground Muslim networks, including an association of Sufi (Dervish) orders (*Bashkësia e Rradhëve Dervishe Islame Alije*, henceforth BRDIA), which was headed by Shaykh (*Sheh*) Xhemali Shehu of the Rufai *tekke* (lodge) based in Prizren (Blumi 2003b). The BRDIA, vilified by the Sunni Islamic (p. 485) leaders based in Sarajevo, quickly became a cultural force in Kosovo's public life as locals flocked to these Albanian institutions. By 1984, 126 Sufi lodges throughout Kosovo joined the BRDIA, representing 50,000 dervishes, which in 1998 reached a membership of 100,000 (Djurić 1998: 107; Rexhepagiqi 2003).

These numbers give us a sense of the vastness of this phenomenon and the richness of pre-1998–9 Kosovar Islamic life. Crucially, in face of this organizational resistance to formal state efforts to control Albanian religious practice, authorities in Sarajevo, representing the state and Slav Muslims in general, declared as “un-Islamic” the orders that operated in Kosovo until the mid-1990s—the Rufai, Kaderi, Halveti, Sadi, Bektashi, Nakshibendi, Sinani, Mevlevi, and Shazili.<sup>10</sup> This hostility left open the door for full-scale persecution as efforts to suppress Albanian nationalist ambitions fused with direct campaigns at physically eliminating Albanian spiritual autonomy from state influence (Blumi 2003b).

The influence enjoyed by Sufi organizations in rural Kosovo became not only a direct threat to the Muslim hierarchy based in Sarajevo, but by the 1970s, the “un-Islamic” Sufis also threatened the Kosovo-based wing of the Yugoslav Islamic Community. Indeed, throughout the 1970s and 1980s, members of the latter openly accused local Sufi *shaykhs* of “stealing” the faithful away from Sunni orthodox (Albanian-managed) mosques. They eagerly campaigned against these *tekkes* by accusing rural Albanians of “mysticism and

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primitivism." In many ways, the largely urban Albanian Muslim "establishment" shared first with Yugoslav and later with Serbian state authorities an open hostility towards the Sufi orders' organizing role in rural Kosovar society (Halimi 2000). This role posed a long-term threat to Belgrade's attempts to assert more control over rural Kosovo during the tumultuous 1990s, thereby providing the pretext for a persistent, institutional animosity still evident today in Kosovo (Poulton 1998).

The modern history of Albanians in Yugoslavia, therefore, represents a complicated intersection of state discrimination against certain kinds of Muslims and the specific use of administrative power to reconstitute the distribution of "ethno-national" communities in modern Balkan territories (Clayer 2001; Roux 1992; Norris 1993; Stefanović 2005). While acknowledged in the scholarship generally, the specific traumas experienced by very different Muslim Albanian communities throughout the twentieth century have often been ignored by scholars who focus on "Slavic" Yugoslavia. State policies addressing religious affairs prevented the unification of Yugoslavia's Muslims under one religious authority. Until 1929, all Muslims of Bosnia-Herzegovina and other ex-Habsburg territories were placed under the supreme authority of the office of the *Reis ul-ulema* in Sarajevo, while the supreme Mufti in Belgrade headed the Muslims of Serbia and Montenegro, which had occupied Kosovo since 1912 (Radić 2003: 199). Only in 1930 was a new law on the Islamic Religious Community passed, uniting Muslims in one Independent Islamic Religious Community (*Samostalna Islamska Verska Zajednica*) (p. 486) based in Belgrade. In 1936, as part of the state's concession to Bosnian Muslim leaders, the office of the *Reis ul-ulema* returned to Sarajevo.

State-sponsored attempts to "Slavicize" or deny Albanians influence in the Islamic institutions in Kosovo and Macedonia actually intensified after the creation of socialist Yugoslavia in 1945. The status of the Islamic Community and the *Reis ul-ulema*, which was not functional during the war, was restored in 1947 under the control of Bosnian Muslims willing to collaborate with the new socialist elite in Belgrade. Between 1957 and 1958, the Islamic hierarchy was reorganized, leading to a new form of centralization of religious affairs in Yugoslavia.

Following the fall of communism and the subsequent dissolution of the socialist Yugoslavia in 1992, Albanians in Yugoslavia were divided between two new independent states, Macedonia and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, comprising Montenegro and Serbia, which included Kosovo. For Albanians in Kosovo and Macedonia, this new reality also meant communities had to change the way they organized their lives around their religion. Likewise, the dissolution of Yugoslavia meant the end of the dependence on the *Riyaset* (office of the *Reis ul-ulema*) and control from Sarajevo. This newly found independence in terms of religious organization soon led to the emergence of competing factions that distinguished the role of Islam in politics in Kosovo (still occupied by Serbia) from the Republic of Macedonia (G. Krasniqi 2011: 194).

### Albanian Muslims in Kosovo

As in Albania proper, the diversity of religious/spiritual practices in Kosovo complicates otherwise simplistic explanations of Muslim life in this landlocked territory. According to the last census conducted with any accuracy prior to NATO intervention in 1999, Albanians made up 90% of the population in Kosovo, of which 92% were Muslim and 8% Catholic (Roux 1992; Doja 2000; King and Mason 2006).<sup>11</sup> There are smaller communities, such as the Turks, Bosniaks, Roma, Ashkali, Egyptians, and Gorans that form part of the Muslim majority in Kosovo. Much as in Albania proper, Kosovo was once a vibrant spiritual area where a great variety of Sufi orders intermingled with more conventional groups of Muslims linked to communities loyal to one of the four Sunni legal traditions. Indeed, before the wars of 1998–9, many of Kosovo's rural communities practiced forms of Sufism that actively resisted the Sunni orthodoxy imposed from Belgrade through its centralized Islamic authority (*Zajednica*) first established in Sarajevo. This history of resistance resulted in a particularly heavy dosage of violence that exploded (p. 487) with the war of 1998–9 in Kosovo, where Serbian forces seemed to target Sufi places of worship and their visitors especially harshly.

This situation has dramatically changed since June of 1999 with the end of the Milošević regime in Kosovo. In the post-war recovery, Arab charity groups not interested in helping rebuild these “unorthodox” practices diverted all their money to establishing mosques and schools that would promote a universalistic rather than a local form of Islam. Much as in Albania, therefore, the future of Kosovo's Sufi heritage is at serious risk because so few people attend their centers any more. In its place has been an aggressive Salafism promoted by wealthy outside donors (Blumi 2005).

The distraction of Kosovo's rural spiritual tradition, far more tolerant of cultural diversity and inter-sectarian cohabitation than the Islam propagated by Saudi-based humanitarian agencies dominating Kosovo's spiritual life today, creates a clear fissure in Kosovar society. In the devastation brought on rural Kosovo by war and post-war economic changes, little has been done by the international community (IC) to address these spiritual voids. Such neglect by those charged by UN resolution 1244 to administer Kosovo has resulted in long-term problems for the region. Instead of disinterested UN agencies providing the necessary support to Kosovo's destitute people, the provision of much-needed aid has been “outsourced” to wealthy Gulf-based charities who have supplied the material needs of Kosovar Albanian's poor. Although no accurate figures are available, it is estimated that Middle Eastern charities have invested some \$800 million in Kosovo (Poggioli 2010). On the other hand, the UN administration in Kosovo even praised the work of such organizations in providing relief assistance to people (*Saudi Press Agency* 2004).

Ironically, Rexhep Boja (1946–), the rebellious Mufti of the Islamic Community of Kosovo (*Bashkësia Islame e Kosovës*)—ICK—until being removed in 2003 by a more pliant Naim Tërnavë, could have filled the spiritual void.<sup>12</sup> Born in the period immediately following the reassertion of Serbian domination over Kosovo, Rexhep Boja lived very much in conditions of spiritual deprivation and political oppression. Perhaps due to his experience as a

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student studying in semi-illegality, he left for Medina where he finished his doctorate in 1985 with a dissertation on Islam in Yugoslavia. After receiving his doctorate, he returned to Kosovo to begin teaching Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) at the "Alauddin" school in Prishtina, of which he would become dean in 1992 and later helped administer as appointed Grand Mufti of Kosovo from 1990 to 2003.

His importance for Albanian Islam has been his active struggle to secure autonomy from Serbian control during the 1990s, publishing widely in journals that reached large Muslim audiences and balancing the needs of Arab money with local desires to remain culturally autonomous. He has been very active in promoting religious tolerance and the preservation of locally built mosques. Also he has been decidedly non-antagonistic (p. 488) and has cooperated with the IC, meeting European officials and visiting clergy from the Vatican.

The problem was that, under the leadership of Boja, representing the last remnants of a once strong, rural-based spiritual infrastructure, the ICK itself had little material resources to rebuild a religious and educational infrastructure. Since the election in 2003 of Tërnavë as Mufti, however, the theological/doctrinal battle with Saudi-backed Salafists has practically ended and the ICK seems to be especially well equipped to undermine what is left of Kosovo's Sufi traditions.<sup>13</sup> Instructively, the efficiency with which this flurry of "locally run" programs has gone about filling a void in rural Kosovo (not directly linked to the political machines created since 1999) hints at a sophisticated and global agenda something akin to a multinational cooperation seeking a dominant "market share."

The current tensions within Kosovo's Muslim communities are the direct result of the IC charged with managing post-war Kosovo, permitting Saudi organizations to operate in Kosovo without much supervision. As a result, individuals directly linked to these well-funded (and thus materially generous—with direct cash payments, no-interest loans, and scholarships to study in Saudi Arabia) organizations have been emboldened (or encouraged) to display an open hostility towards Kosovo's religious traditions. In many ways, the current clashes taking place between "bearded Salafists" who publicly flaunt their growing numbers during daily (public) prayers and with the large number of women fully veiled (a practice never seen in Kosovo in the twentieth century) and the traditional "moderate" Albanian Muslims reflect the tensions instigated by the Yugoslav state against Sufis in the 1945–91 period. As during the twentieth century, the struggle today is for control over the formal institutions of the Kosovar Albanian *ulama*, the actual way Islam is practiced as ritual, and how Muslims are allowed to dress.

## Albanian Muslims in Macedonia

Islam in Macedonia, in contrast to Albania and Kosovo, has been politicized since the beginning of the 1990s. Overt nationalist policies have sought to stir up fears among the Christian and non-Albanian population about the "Albanization" of Macedonia through Islam (Gaber 1997). Albanian political leaders representing the main parties as well as the head of the Islamic Community, Sulejman Rexhepi, have constantly denied these accusa-

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tions (Rexhepi 2002).<sup>14</sup> Despite the realities in local Albanian politics where Rexhepi (and Islam) plays a modest role, the Skopje government has persistently (p. 489) framed the issue to the outside world, in particular since September 11 (9/11), as one in which Macedonia is facing a wave of political Islamic fundamentalism. This suggests that, as was evidenced in Milošević's Yugoslavia, post-war Kosovo, and recently even in Albania, the politicization of Islam does not have to originate from Muslims, but can be—and often is—stirred up by non-Muslim politicians seeking to exploit current perceptions about Islam in the larger world.

Macedonia has a particularly long history of this kind of politics. The post-1991 period was experienced as a time of insecurity both in terms of the Albanian national and religious identity, as both Albanian ethnicity as well as Islam were deemed incompatible with the Macedonian elite's vision for a national Orthodox Macedonian state (G. Krasniqi 2011: 201). The 1991 Macedonian constitution established a privileged position for the ethnic and religious majority (Macedonia was defined as a national state of the Macedonian nation and the constitution makes explicit reference only to the Orthodox Church).

In Macedonia, according to the last population census of 2002 (contested by both the Albanian and Macedonian sides) there were 674,015 Muslims out of a total population of 2,022,547. From those, 509,083 were stated to be ethnic Albanians or roughly 25% of the total population.<sup>15</sup> As in the other two cases where large numbers of Albanian Muslims still reside in the Balkans, relying on disputed census data alone makes it difficult to appreciate the actual significant intra-group distinctions that have often made the experience of being "Muslim" in the Albanian context both tenuous and violent. In the case of Macedonia, ethnic numbers and percentages have been a contentious issue since the country's independence in 1991. Formal requirements for citizenship often change at the discretion of Macedonian Slav authorities aiming to assure the Albanian share of the entire population never reaches levels that could lead to new protections/rights for a segment of society no longer considered "a minority" deserving "tolerance" rather than power (Brown 2006).

For their part, the leaders of the Albanian community in Macedonia have since independence sought to influence future mediations between local interested parties by asserting Albanians actually constitute more than 40% of the population (ICG 1999). Tensions last rose again in 2011, when Macedonia's census was officially stopped after the Balkan country's census law was repealed by its government. This came as a result of increasing tensions between the two major political parties (representing the two main ethnic communities) in the government. In a situation of delicate ethnic balance within this fragile Balkan state, numbers and percentages have direct bearing on the political weight of the different ethnic communities.

It is instructive to note that these tensions over Albanian demographics in Macedonia have mirrored much the same concerns of nationalist Serbian officials in Kosovo throughout the Yugoslav era. In the 1970s and 1980s, the Macedonian authorities launched a number of initiatives to prevent the Muslim community of Macedonia (p. 490) from becom-

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ing what they called “Albanianized” rather than remaining loyal to their “faith” or even the universal Yugoslav identity (Roux 1992). In 1970, for instance, the Association of the Macedonian Muslims was formed with the blessing of authorities in order to effectively split the Muslim community along ethno-national lines (Poulton 1997: 94). By 1981, these efforts to drive a wedge between non-Albanian Muslims and Albanian Muslims took the form of a new bureaucracy which state officials helped establish in Macedonia’s third city, Gostivar. In creating this so-called “scientific circle” of different Muslim groups, authorities claimed there was a dire need to study more carefully Muslims in Macedonia as parts of disparate groups. At the same time, once-suppressed religious institutions, such as the “Isa Beu” *madrassa*, was reopened in Skopje in order to expand direct state authority over Muslim affairs in general. In addition, authorities launched a state-funded Muslim newspaper—*El Hilal*—in three languages: Macedonian, Albanian, and Turkish, to expand and complement the ongoing theme of halting Albanian cultural “hegemony” over the faithful (Popović 1990: 25–6).

Of course, as elsewhere in the Balkans, Muslims in Macedonia are not homogeneous in religious terms. The majority of them are Sunni Muslims, belonging to the Hanafiyya school of jurisprudence,<sup>16</sup> but a sizeable minority, of which there are no official numbers, also belong to one of the six Sufi orders still in operation in Macedonia. There are also some Bektashi who further perplex the spiritual environment for Macedonia’s Muslims.

Today, the Islamic Religious Community of the Republic of Macedonia (IRC) is the main organization of the Sunnis and is currently led by Haxhi (Hajji) Sulejman Effendi Rexhepi.<sup>17</sup> Thanks to state support, the IRC claims to be the legitimate authority over all Muslims in Macedonia. It has a dervish (*tekke*) section, despite efforts by most Sufi orders to remain independent, constituting an ongoing source of tension. For their part, the Sufi Orders are organized by the Islamic Dervish Religious Community, which was created in 1993 but is not recognized by the state. In practice, the Bektashi Community does not belong to any of those religious organizations, but has an independent status and thus is often the victim of hostility from Sunni imams and followers.

It must be stressed that the officially registered Islamic Religious Community is ruled by a 1994 statute. Unlike in Albania or Kosovo, the Executive Council of the IRC in Macedonia consists of twenty-three members (persons) and works in six main sectors: religious education, science and culture, information and publications, administrative, financial sector, and the sector dealing with the property of pious foundations (*awqaf/waqf*). It is comprised of all the Muftis, the director of the Islamic High School, the rector of the Islamic Theological Faculty (established in 1997), the director of the humanitarian organization “El Hilal,” all the directors of the six sectors mentioned above, the president of the Association of the Imams, and five lay people, who are selected personally by Haxhi (Hajji) Sulejman Effendi Rexhepi, the current *Reis ul-ulema*. Four additional members are the Muftis from the diaspora in Switzerland, Germany, the Scandinavian countries, and the United States. (p. 491)

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Although the Islamic Religious Community claims to unify all the Muslims in Macedonia, regardless of their ethnic origin or branch of Islam, there are credible claims by non-Albanian Muslims as well as Macedonian politicians that this institution unifies mainly Albanians and much less so people from other ethnic groups due to its political connection to the Albanian Democratic Party (*Partia Demokratike Shqiptare*—PDSH). In fact, a Muslim Albanian has led the Islamic Religious Community since 1994, when the latter became independent from the Islamic Community of Yugoslavia.

However, the ascendant role of Albanians in the organization of religious life of Macedonia's Muslims was challenged in the 1990s with the creation of a separate Muslim Religious Community (MRC), led by former Sarajevo *Reis ul-ulema*, Jakub Selimoski, who was Slav Macedonian.<sup>18</sup> The MRC viewed itself as the rival organization to the Islamic Religious Community (IRC), since the former not only unified the Torbeshi (Slav Macedonian Muslims), Turks, Bosnians, and Roma, but also some Albanians. Despite the financial and political support he received from the state, however, Selimoski eventually gave up on his parallel organization and decided to merge with the Islamic Religious Community in 1994, where he later acted as senior coordinator for religious education.

As a result of the democratization of Macedonia and an increased level of communication and interaction with the outside world, the Islamic Religious Community has recently become an arena of struggle between different interest groups, be it in the form of religious sects or political parties (G. Krasniqi 2011: 202–3). A power struggle seems to have begun within the Islamic Religious Community between the moderate mainstream and the radical (usually referred to as the “Wahhabi”) wing. Leaders of the Islamic Religious Community in Macedonia do not deny the presence of the Wahhabis in the country; indeed, according to the more moderate Muslims demonstrating the same kind of concern as their Kosovar neighbors, the Wahhabi sect now “controls” several mosques in Skopje. Several incidents, including physical confrontations, have taken place in different mosques over the last few years, reflecting the contentious process of laying claim to both physical properties in the form of mosques and schools, but also the worshipers who frequent them. Despite the fact that the presence of Wahhabis in Macedonia is undeniable, these claims and counter-accusations might also have political connotations. Major political parties representing Albanians in Macedonia, especially the Democratic Union for Integration (*Bashkimi Demokratik për Integrim*—BDI) and the PDSH have often clashed over the control of religious institutions (Iseni 2007). There is another arena, however, where the tensions within Albanian Muslim communities are playing out, and that is the focus of the next section, one that will try to offer some explanations for some key segments of Albanian Muslim society gravitating towards “foreign” influences linked to Salafism. (p. 492)

## Social Dynamics among Muslim Albanians

Deep and multiple social and political transformations that occurred in the Balkans in the aftermath of the fall of communism have created new social dynamics among Balkan Muslims, including Albanians. Despite the fact that there is an ever increasing number of

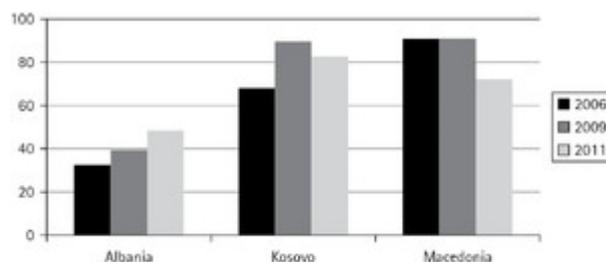
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studies on the transition from communism to democracy and free market economies, as well as on migration, the effects of these multiple transformations on religion and the lives of the Muslims in the region remain uncharted. As will be shown, in the absence of more comprehensive and systematic studies and surveys measuring and depicting social dynamics among Muslim Albanians, the predominant superficial journalistic-type works in the region draw far too much attention to the asserted alarming “radicalization” and “the threat coming from the Middle East.” By adopting an essentialist and generalizing approach to presenting Islam, such studies/reports, which dominate local and international media, have contributed to the creation of a simplified and mostly negative tableau of Islam and Muslims in the region. Thus, the root causes of the problem of the nascent radicalization in the region are often ignored.

Thus, in this part of the chapter we discuss some of the social dynamics that delineate the lives of Albanian Muslims in the Balkans today. The first section looks at different forms of religiosity present among Albanians in the Balkans. The second section looks at the presence of different and often opposing religious trends/interpretations. The last section looks at the issue of gender/ethnic/class differences among Albanian Muslims.

### (Re)religionization of the Balkans

The Balkans is known for its plurality of religious traditions, languages, and ethnicities. Decades of wars, conflicts, and migration and attempts by the post-Ottoman (Christian) states to erase the Ottoman legacy and mainstream religions have transformed the landscape of the Balkans and pushed various religious denominations to the verge of extinction. In addition, decades of secularizing policies pursued by socialist Yugoslavia and more so by communist Albania have resulted in a highly secularized population.



*Figure 11.1* Importance of religion among Albanians in the Balkans

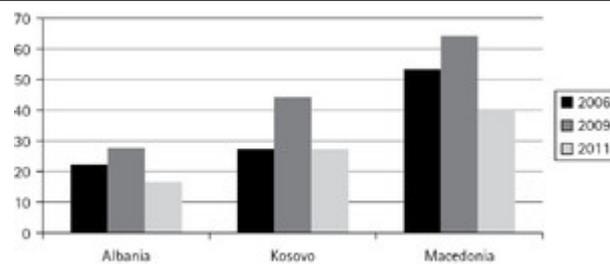


Figure 11.2 Attended religious service among Albanians in the Balkans

Nonetheless, since the early 1990s, the pendulum began to swing in the opposite direction. Faced with serious political crisis, conflict, and almost permanent social and economic insecurity, many individuals in the Balkans' transition societies turned to religion. As a result, the role of religion appears to be growing among Albanians in the Balkans (Figure 11.1). In the case of Albania, the share of people stating that religion played an important part in their lives has risen from 32.5% in 2006 to 48.4% in 2011. In the case of Albanians in Kosovo and Macedonia, the share of people stating that religion plays an important role in their lives is even higher. In the case of the former it varies from 67.9% in 2006, to 89.5% in 2009, and 82.7% in 2011. In the case of Macedonia, in (p. 493) 2006 and 2009 some 91% of Albanians stated that religion was important in their lives, whereas in 2011 the percentage fell to 72.1.

Nonetheless, when it comes to attendance of religious services, percentages are smaller in all the three countries and show tendencies of further decline (Figure 11.2). Again, the share of people who attend religious services in Albania is smaller than the one in Kosovo and Macedonia. In 2011, the share of people in Albania who declared that they attend religious service fell to 16.6% from 27.7% in 2009. Likewise, in the case of Kosovo the percentage fell from 44.2 in 2009 to 27.2 in 2011. Although the share of people among Albanians in Macedonia who attend religious services is the highest among the three, nevertheless it fell from 64.3% in 2009 to 40.4% in 2011.

However, the increased role of religion in public space and the occasional politicization of religion do not always translate into positive public attitudes towards Muslims. Indeed, new opportunities that were created after the fall of communism for many "faith-based" international organizations and agencies to get involved in the process of transforming societies and identities, as well as the new post-9/11 global context, have had direct impact on the way Islam and Muslims are perceived. The general increase of the inter-confessional prejudice in the region in the aftermath of the fall of communism (p. 494) (Koinova n.d.: 22) was followed by an increase of prejudice towards Islam, especially the new (radical) tradition that is gradually making headway in the region.

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### Different Religious Trends and the Root Causes of Albanians' Failure to Confront Salafists

Some Albanians—usually in poor, rural communities—choose to appeal to “Wahhabis” for representation because they see no other viable option.<sup>19</sup> With the dying Sufi orders incapable of attracting younger followers and the large amounts of money available to Salafist groups to spend on any number of projects in the utterly impoverished rural areas of Kosovo, the future of Islam in Kosovo seems one in which the socio-economic gap between rich and poor, rural and urban found in any Third World country will determine the relative success of radical Islamic groups in south-eastern Europe. As argued by scholars studying the post-conflict performance of the United Nation’s Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK), policies adopted by the international community have contributed to the marginalization of many of Kosovo’s rural poor, a result of political opportunism among cultural or economic elites closely linked to the United States and European Union (EU) (King and Mason 2006; Morrison 2008; V. Krasniqi 2007).

The main local beneficiaries of this UNMIK order, now members of parliament or in government after Kosovo’s declaration of independence, have adopted much of the same hostility towards the rural poor in Kosovo as their UNMIK predecessors. Indeed, many have exploited the current sentiment towards the outbreak of “radical Islam” throughout the world to justify partnerships with European and American interests who openly assist in the persecution of opponents who happened to be labeled “Muslim” as well. Ironically, this strategic use of “Islamophobia,” similar to that practiced by far-right parties elsewhere in Europe, is creating large sections of Kosovar society who have no means to survive other than accepting relief from the very radical organizations deemed “a threat” among Kosovo’s political and cultural elite (Ceka 2006; Puto 2006).

As a result of the radically changed post-9/11 international context, the loyalties of many people being educated in well-funded religious schools and mosques no longer remain in a Kosovo or Albanian context, but are universal in nature (Blumi 2003b). Indeed, similar dynamics are quietly emerging throughout Europe’s younger generation of Muslims, now detached from traditional, more tolerant, forms of practice. Such possible resentment had already manifested itself by 2003, articulated by various personalities, such as imam Shefqet Krasniqi.<sup>20</sup> One of his early students initiated perhaps the (p. 495) first open debate about what had largely been going on unnoticed in Kosovo among its most directly affected Muslims being trained by Salafists. In 2003, Armend Podvorica, a student at the Faculty of Islamic Studies in Prishtina, in 2003 instigated a public campaign through a series of public letters against the then Grand Mufti of Kosovo, Rexhep Boja, who had been complaining loudly about the growing power of Saudi agencies. Podvorica’s public attacks on Boja, in theory his spiritual guide, revealed the underlying tensions that Wahhabi ascendancy in some parts of Kosovo created for the region, at that time still under UNMIK administration. Within the next few years, such open attacks were commonplace; indeed, Boja, who was trying to warn the world of the growing threat of “Salafist extremism” in Kosovo, was formally expelled from his position in 2003 by Tërnavë.

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Revealingly, in Podvorica's words, Kosovars never learned the "true" Islam. Instead, they inherited the "bastardized" form from Turkey [sic] which "has nothing to do with religion." Podvorica goes on to challenge Rexhep Boja's stated concerns with extremism by qualifying the acts of "these Muslims" (interestingly, implying Boja is not one) who are running schools and "are well respected in Arabia." That "they follow the authentic path" was a crude attempt to assuage any concerns readers of the daily *Koha Ditore* that published Podvorica's letter may have had about the legitimacy of Wahhabi doctrine. As Podvorica's pious Arab Muslims were rhetorically distinguished from what he is clearly identifying as Boja's "bastardized" Islamic tradition, Podvorica exhibits a tell-tale sign of doctrinal rigidity that fails to accommodate the interpretations of other Muslims, let alone talk to them.<sup>21</sup>

Podvorica's letter perfectly highlights the underlying indoctrination and exposure to new and radical interpretations of Islam that were occurring in Kosovo's most impoverished neighborhoods and villages by 2003. Podvorica crudely demarcated a border which separated the faithful and the true followers from those who are not. This method of differentiation quickly became the expected format in which to discuss Islam in Kosovo. Indeed, a number of incidents have occurred in which Wahhabi-trained Albanians have disrupted community meetings by verbally attacking those who did not subscribe to their doctrine. This led to a tacit "mosque war"—i.e. competition between traditional practitioners and imams and Salafi ones over the control of the mosques. For instance, in 2008, Xhabir Hamiti, a professor of Islamic studies in Prishtina and a prominent critic of the Wahhabis, was beaten up by masked men. Similarly, in January 2009, a group of nine Albanians, apparently belonging to a group of followers of the more radical imams, severely beat Imam Osman Musliu while he was entering a mosque in a central Kosovo village.<sup>22</sup> Imam Musliu's crime was that he criticized the head of the Islamic Community of Kosovo, Naim Tërnavë, for (p. 496) not standing up against Wahhabism and warned the latter would soon take control of more mosques.

Some of the more prominent imams that stand out for their radical interpretation of Islam include Fadil Sogojeva, Dr. Shefqet Krasniqi, and Mazllam Mazllami (Haraqija and Duriqi 2012). Sogojeva has studied at the Al-Imam Muhammad ibn Saud University in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, and now works as imam of the Ebu Bekr Es-Sidik in Prishtina. As previously mentioned, Dr. Krasniqi studied in Medina and later became a professor at the Islamic Studies Faculty and imam of the Grand Mosque in Prishtina. Imam Mazllami, on the other hand, works in the region of Prizren in southern Kosovo. All these religious figures maintain a regular public presence and make extensive use of social media to convey their message and communicate with their followers and the public in general. In addition to frequent public meetings with their followers, these figures occasionally travel to Western Europe in order to pursue their campaigns among the large Albanian diaspora.

At the other end of the spectrum is a group of self-anointed "traditionalists"<sup>23</sup> such as Xhabir Hamiti, Mullah Osmani, Idriz Bilalli, Lulëzim Esati, Avni Sinani, etc. who openly question the motivations of faith-based charity groups in general and "foreign" religious practices imported to Kosovo in particular (Maxhuni 2012). These antagonist groups, as

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well as “secularists,” have shaped the contours of political debate in Kosovo.<sup>24</sup> The result has been several years of quiet community building, with an occasional outburst of rhetoric that animates anti-“Salafist” sentiments.

While there is a growing sense of organization among such groups, the promotion of what are perceived as “foreign” Islamic practices by a number of vocal, self-declared “secularists” and “traditionalists”—the forced segregation of women from social activities, dress codes, “Islamic” cultural values—is still viewed with mistrust among the vast majority of Albanians in Kosovo and Albania. These kinds of debates have also taken place in other regions of the former Yugoslavia, but with a decidedly different set of motivations behind the polemic, as evident in neighboring Macedonia and Serbia, where ethnic tensions between Albanians and Macedonians and Serbs and Bosniaks respectively have taken an Islamophobic character since the early 1990s. Due to the existing almost clear-cut religious and ethnic differences in these societies, ethnic and social unrest and tensions have led to increasing Islamophobia. (p. 497)

### Religion and Gender/Ethnic/Class Differences

One thing that surfaces after reviewing the underlying tensions within and between distinct Muslim communities is that local social dynamics in many ways mirror the Muslim experience in Europe. This is especially true for Muslim women (V. Krasniqi 2007). Women have traditionally played a prominent role in urban Albanian history while having long been subordinate to men socially and economically in rural areas. Much has changed in all three Albanian societies in the twentieth century as extensive migration pressures, war, and state policies to integrate women into the workforce altered the “traditional” role of Albanian women living in towns. Urban women are generally well integrated into the secular educational system, seek employment, and live lives much like their Western European counterparts. In contrast, women and children in rural areas in particular are vulnerable to rural poverty, trauma, and a lack of a stable household as mothers struggle to make ends meet, often without a husband. As noted earlier, the plight of rural Kosovo after the war has been something Western international aid agencies have, in particular, neglected to address. In their absence, Islamic relief groups supported by the Saudi government have taken over the responsibility for the education of rural children (albeit entirely religious in content) and for their nourishment and are seen as trustworthy providers among the population. This is especially crucial for rural widows who seem to have little political support from the major parties.

In all three areas where Albanian Muslims predominate, women are in theory legally protected from discrimination by the state but culturally they are often marginal in their male-dominated communities. This is particularly true of rural areas, a situation which today is being reinforced by a growing bifurcation between rural and urban women as the segregationist ideologies of Saudi-based funding agencies in rural Kosovo pursue conservative agendas that limit women’s access to the outside world. This explains the growing number of women who wear hijab or, on some rare occasions, niqab. In addition, followers of some of the indigenous Salafi groups demanded education reform in Kosovo’s secu-

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lar schools. These groups have expressed opposition, for example, to the teaching of human biology in public meetings throughout the country as inappropriate for young girls and young boys who are still seated together in the classroom. In this respect, calls for the segregation of the classroom by sex and the required teaching of religious texts tie into concerns about “immoral” influences. So far, there has been little public support for these initiatives. Many of these debates take place increasingly in blogs and other social media such as Facebook, replacing what were, until the early 2000s, the normal methods of community building: the printed journal/newspaper/magazine. Social media such as internet forums and Facebook have become an invaluable tool in the hands of religious organizations and local imams in their attempt to raise awareness of what they consider are proper religious practices (Haraqija and Duriqi 2012).

Education, therefore, is an area of great concern for Albanians eager to exclude Arab Salafi influences. Indigenous Muslim pedagogical traditions still exist but are based mostly in the region's larger towns. In Kosovo, the ICK has organized the “Alauddin” *madrasa* since the 1960s in Kosovo's capital city, Prishtina. However, there is little incentive for local (p. 498) children to attend this school as there are many more attractive options, such as studying in a Gulf country. Alauddin, therefore, draws most of its students from the rural migrant families who have little or no money to support their children's education. This leads to a constant money shortage as traditional donors like Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Arab states are clearly directing their resources towards their own schools based in rural areas, far away from the influence and the inspection of Kosovo authorities.

In Macedonia, the previously mentioned “Isa Beu” *madrasa* network is at present the only secondary school providing Islamic religious instruction. It operates under the organizational structure of the Islamic Community set up in Macedonia and it has successfully kept Arab Islamic influences at arm's length. Instead, the school offers a more indigenous approach to the study of Islam, with far more openness to allowing outside influences to shape the way Muslims understand religion and engage in religious practice. The reason for girls' studying at home is a continued belief that girls should be separated from boys, an indication that Albanians in Macedonia live up to their reputation as being the most conservative of the three Albanian societies in the region.

Ten *madrasas* were opened in the main cities of Albania within three years of the fall of the communist regime. As of 2000, 1,504 students attended these schools, out of which 148 are girls.<sup>25</sup> The reason for the small number of girls may attest to the fact that families in Albania prefer their girls to attend the under-funded state schools, or if they are lucky enough, to send their children to the Turkish Mehmet Akif schools on scholarship. Female students are particularly keen on attending these schools as they usually facilitate subsequent entrance into secular Turkish universities and do not impose the rigid gender segregation demanded by the more orthodox *madrasas*.

# Religion in Public Space

Throughout the modern history of Albania and the former Yugoslavia where the majority of Albanian Muslims lived, Islam as a doctrine of political activism has never played a major role. This is in spite of clear trends towards mobilizing religion in the Balkans in the service of realizing political ends (Babuna 2004). As a result of this, but also reflecting states' attempts to underplay the role of religion, especially under communism, scholars have neglected to study the presence of Islam in public spaces and society at large. With the exception of some studies on the position and rights of the Albanian minority in inter-war Yugoslavia (see the historic section), the relationship between Islam, Albanians, and the state, both in Albania and Yugoslavia, has been mostly neglected or touched upon only briefly in those studies focusing in inter-ethnic relations in Yugoslavia. As a result of the "resurgence" of Islam in the aftermath of the fall of communism and the creation of new states in the territory of Yugoslavia, the region is (p. 499) experiencing an ever increasing presence of Islam in public spaces. Hence the increase in scholarly attention on the role of religion in general and Islam in particular in public space and society (Gaber 1996; Doja 2000; Babuna 2000; Gjuraj 2000; Alibašić 2010; G. Krasniqi 2011; Öktem 2011).

What many scholars argue is that throughout the struggle against anti-Albanian nationalism in Kosovo and Macedonia, Albanians never reverted to using their sectarian identity to challenge totalitarian rule. Scholars have long made this assertion because of the assumption that Albanians of Orthodox, Catholic, and Muslim faith were collectively being victimized and that their ethnic loyalties superseded their religious (Duijzings 2000: 153–61; Young 1999: 5–14). This assumption did not change substantially even after the fall of communism in Europe and the consequent reemergence of religion as an important personal signifier and identity marker. This is in contrast to other predominantly Christian states such as Greece, Croatia, and Serbia where religion and nationalist sentiment were utilized by different national elites to shape and reshape national and state identities in order to suit their interests.

## Legal and Institutional Status of Islam

As regards formal legal status, Albania, Kosovo, and Macedonia constitutionally are defined as secular states whose laws are neutral in matters of religious beliefs. Likewise, these states' constitutions guarantee freedom of belief, conscience, and religion, including the right to accept and manifest religion, the right to express personal beliefs, and the right to accept or refuse membership in a religious community or group. These provisions guarantee an equal position for Muslims in these states and societies, at least in principle. However, the treatment of Islam and Muslims within these polities is contingent on state policies as well as inter-ethnic, intra-ethnic, and religious power dynamics.

In the case of Albania, according to the constitution, there is no official religion in the country and the state is neutral in questions of belief and conscience; it also guarantees the freedom of their expression in public life. According to the law, the state recognizes

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the equality of religious communities and relations between the state and religious communities are regulated on the basis of agreements entered into between their representatives and the Council of Ministers and ratified by the Assembly. The Albanian government signed such agreements with the main religious communities: the Roman Catholic Church (in 2002), the Muslim Community of Albania (2008), the Orthodox Church of Albania (2008), the Bektashi community (2008), and more recently (2010) with the Evangelical Brotherhood of Albania (VUSH), a Protestant umbrella organization (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor 2011a: 2).

Although the government does not require registration or licensing of religious groups—religious movements may acquire the official status of a juridical person by registering with the Tirana District Court under the Law on Nonprofit Organizations—the State Committee on Cults, under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Tourism, Culture, (p. 500) Youth, and Sports, is charged with regulating relations between the government and religious communities. Religious communities are juridical persons. They have independence in the administration of their properties according to their principles, rules, and canons.

When it comes to the issue of education, public schools are secular and the law prohibits ideological and religious indoctrination. Religion is not taught in public schools. However, religious communities may establish their schools or educational institutions, which should be licensed by the Ministry of Education of Albania. According to official figures, religious communities, including the MCA and the Bektashi Community, organizations, and foundations had 135 affiliated associations and foundations managing 102 educational institutions (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor 2011a: 3). Apart from the numerous Islamic schools and training centers for imams administered by the Albanian Muslim Community (MCA), a new Theological Islamic University was established in Tirana in 2011.

The constitution of the Republic of Kosovo guarantees freedom of belief, conscience, and religion, including the right to accept and manifest religion, the right to express personal beliefs, and the right to accept or refuse membership in a religious community or group. The state also ensures and protects religious autonomy and religious monuments within its territory. Religious denominations are free to independently regulate their internal organization, religious activities, and religious ceremonies, as well as to establish religious schools and charity institutions in accordance with this constitution and the law.

Nonetheless, Kosovo still does not have a legal mechanism to register religious groups thus creating a number of practical challenges for religious groups in Kosovo in owning and registering property and vehicles, opening bank accounts, and paying taxes on employees' salaries (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor 2011b: 2). This fact, together with the specific status of the Orthodox Church of Serbia in Kosovo (which does not recognize the state of Kosovo), have created a particular situation where religious groups act unhindered and unregulated by the law.

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The field of religious education remains unregulated by the law as well. Nonetheless, various religious communities organize their religious schools. Apart from the regular Friday sermons organized in mosques around Kosovo, ICK managed the religious high school "Alauddin" *madrassa* (established in 1949) based in Prishtina but with branches in other major cities as well. Its curriculum is a mixture of religious and non-religious subjects. Up to 2009 some 1,100 students had graduated from that school (Hamiti 2009: 235). ICK also runs the Faculty of Islamic Studies in Prishtina. This faculty attracts students from Kosovo but also Albanian students from Albania, Macedonia, Serbia, Montenegro, etc. Some 118 students, of whom 20% are female, have graduated from this faculty since its establishment in 1992 (Hamiti 2009: 237).

Despite the fact that the legal status of religious communities is not yet regulated properly, graduates' diplomas were accepted and recognized by the Ministry of the Education of Kosovo, but the faculty is currently experiencing some problems with accreditation (Alibašić 2010: 626). In terms of the curriculum, with the exception of Arabic language (p. 501) and a couple of Islamic philosophy courses, only courses in the traditional Islamic disciplines of Qur'an recitation, *tafsir*, *hadith*, *'aqida*, Islamic jurisprudence, etc., are offered at this faculty in Prishtina, thus making it the least open to non-religious courses of all the Islamic faculties in the Balkans (Alibašić 2010: 625).

In Macedonia, likewise, the state is secular and guarantees freedom of religion and religious organization. Although there is no official religion in Macedonia, the Macedonian constitution (amended in 2001) specifically lists five religious groups: the Macedonian Orthodox Church, the Islamic Religious Community of Macedonia, the Roman Catholic Church, the Jewish Community, and the Evangelical Methodist Church.

The law requires religious groups to register in order to acquire status as legal entities. The law provides detailed information about the materials for new registrants and a timeline in which the court must issue its rulings and also requires that the registered leaders of religious groups be Macedonian citizens (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor 2011c: 3). Although the law is quite detailed, the Bektashi Community of Macedonia (Tetovo), an Islamic Sufi order that is involved in a long-running property dispute with the IRC, and which continues to occupy the Bektashi compound in Tetovo thus limiting Bektashis' ability to worship, has been unable to register (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor 2011c: 3).

Private religious primary schools are not allowed under the law, but there are no restrictions on private religious schools at the secondary level and above, or on religious education that takes place in religious spaces. IRC manages the religious high school "Isa Beu" based in Skopje but with branches in other towns in Macedonia, as well as the Faculty of Islamic Studies, established in 1997. According to data from IRC's official website, from 1984 to 2011 some 1,850 pupils graduated from the "Isa Beu" *madrassa* and in the academic year 2011/2012 the school enrolled some 750 full-time and 300 part-time pupils.<sup>26</sup> In comparison, 130 students have graduated from the Faculty of Islamic Studies so far and at present there are 230 students enrolled. Following a decision by Ministry of Education

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and Science of Macedonia, from 2010, Isa Beu *madrassa* would become a publicly funded school operating under the ministry's supervision, a move that entailed changes in the curriculum, including the introduction of a large number of non-religious courses (Al-ibašić 2010: 626).

In all three countries there is a serious problem related to the restitution of religious properties expropriated by the former socialist and communist government in Yugoslavia and Albania. While ownership of religious objects has been restored to the appropriate religious communities, most other properties, such as land and *waqf*-s, have not. Moreover, central government and local authorities are often selective when it comes to granting permission to religious communities to erect objects of worship.

Finally, regarding shariah, the religious law of Islam, none of the countries provide for partial or full implementation of it. Albania, Kosovo, and Macedonia are organized (p. 502) on the principles of civil law and their constitutions do not allow existence of any sort of religious-based courts. Indeed, no such requests have been put forward by local Muslims or official religious organizations in these countries.

### The Role of Religion in Society

In the case of Albania, religion in general and Islam in particular did not occupy a prominent position in the public sphere and political life. Even prior to all religion being banned in 1967, a thoroughly secular set of institutions was developed since the 1920s. Although culturally marginalized as a result of the hostile attitude of the communist regime towards religion, Albania's religious plurality and a sense of inter-sectarian tolerance and unity were mostly preserved. While today this inter-sectarian sense of unity exists, the most important reason for a lack of outright sectarianism (such as in the form of religious parties) in Albanian political life is the fact that such parties are legally banned. However, in the early 1990s, exponents close to President Sali Berisha and the Democratic Party, such as Abdi Baleta<sup>27</sup> and Bashkim Gazidede,<sup>28</sup> were proponents of the idea that Albania should take its place in the great family of Islamic nations and states (Misha 2008: 146–7). Albania's membership at the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) is an expression of such a vision.

Nonetheless, since the fall of communism in Albania, religion has never become a contentious issue in everyday politics and public life. Regardless of the state's secularism and non-interference in the organization of religious life in Albania, deep transformations in the constitution of the population caused by almost half a century of orthodox communist rule and successive waves of emigration have hampered a faster recovery of religious communities and life, including the organization of Muslims. In the case of the Muslim Community of Albania (MCA), restitution of land and property seized by the state during communism remains one of the main challenges. A case in point is the prolongation of the decision to provide the MCA with land to build a mosque in the centre of Tirana. Despite continual promises by both political camps in the local and central institutions of governance, the issue is yet to be resolved.

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In the case of Kosovo, even during the period under direct Serbian rule and oppression, religion did not play a major role in public space. As a declared socialist state, religion was relegated to a personal issue with state laws and educational policies aggressively avoiding reference to religion. In fact, throughout the 1990s, religious identity and institutions were never utilized by political leaders to achieve political and national cohesion. Although the ethnic and linguistic commonalities that bound Albanians together, as well as the threat coming from the Serb state, helped to supersede religious (p. 503) differences between Catholic and Muslim Albanians, no Kosovar Albanian political party or association of any importance rallied around Islamic symbols, let alone a language of Islamic fundamentalism in opposition to the Serbian regime. Nonetheless, religious motives—in this case Muslim ones—did play a role in defining and constructing the self-image of many Albanians in opposition to the Serbian (Orthodox) “Other” (G. Krasniqi 2011: 196).

However, in the aftermath of the 1999 war, ICK made various attempts to increase its role in social and political life. One of the ways to increase the presence of Islam in post-1999 public space and social life was through the revitalization and extension of its network of mosques and other religious organizations. The last war in Kosovo left approximately 200 (of the more than 600) mosques damaged or destroyed along with other Sufi lodges and Islamic schools (*madrasas*), archives, and libraries (Herscher 2006: 41). Since 1999, the Islamic Community of Kosovo, through various funding channels, has been reconstructing 113 war-damaged mosques and building 175 new ones.<sup>29</sup> An investigation by *Balkan Insight* reveals that almost all have been erected illegally. Most of these mosques, especially the ones in rural areas, have been built without any permission from local authorities.

Undoubtedly, this increased the presence of Islamic symbols in the public space in Kosovo. But debates about mosques did not take centre stage until 2011 when various Muslim organizations, with tacit support from the Islamic Community, stepped up street protests demanding a location for a new city-center mosque. For many years now, various organizations of Muslims have been asking for a location and permission to build a new mosque in the center of Prishtina, opposite the newly erected Albanian Catholic Cathedral named after Mother Teresa.<sup>30</sup> While denying accusations that the protest was against the cathedral, the organizers of the protest, a newly created movement called *Bashkohu* (Unite),<sup>31</sup> complained that Catholics, though a small minority in Kosovo, are more privileged than the majority Muslims when it comes to obtaining permits for places of worship.<sup>32</sup> Finally, in late 2012, ICK and the Municipality of Prishtina reached an agreement to build the new mosque in the location proposed by the latter.

This is not the only example of mobilization of Kosovo's Muslims against what they consider discrimination from the state. Similar protests, attracting considerable (p. 504) media attention both locally and internationally, were organized in 2010 against an Administrative Instruction (No. 6/2010) adopted by the Ministry of Education which introduced a ban on headscarves in public elementary and secondary schools. The issue of the headscarf (hijab), which, together with requests to introduce religious education in public schools, caused considerable debate in Kosovo; thanks to the presence (for the first time) of the only political party that is often identified as an Islamic leaning party—the Party of

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Justice (*Partia e Drejtësisë*—PD).<sup>33</sup> Supported by 27 MPs from both the ruling coalition and opposition parties, the Party of Justice initiated changes in the “Law on Pre-University Education” in Kosovo that would allow the use of the headscarf and the introduction of religious education in public schools. Amid heated debates in the parliament and press,<sup>34</sup> the Assembly of Kosovo voted in August 2011 not to permit the Islamic headscarf (hijab) or any religious instruction in public schools.<sup>35</sup> The parliamentary and public debate on these issues was framed as a choice between “the past” and “the future.” Likewise, both camps invoked human rights and non-discrimination laws in support of their position (Schwartz 2011).

These debates, as well as the attitude of the Albanian politicians in Kosovo, are symptoms of growing tensions between a rather conjectural tendency of “self-negation” (to convince Europeans that Albanians are not really Muslims) and the increasing role of Islam in Kosovar society and politics (G. Krasniqi 2011: 199). Kosovo’s political leaders have often gone too far in suppressing and undermining the Islamic layer of Albanian identity. Surveys show that 8% of people point to Islam as the religion discriminated against (Centre for Humanist Studies “Gani Bobi” 2011).

In Macedonia, like in other Orthodox-majority states in the region, religion came to play a decisive role in the definition of modern national identity. Likewise, in the aftermath of the fall of communism, religion experienced a revival and the Macedonian Orthodox Church occupied a more prominent role in the public sphere (Babuna 2000; G. Krasniqi 2011). Especially under the right-wing government in Skopje, the Orthodox Church of Macedonia received very privileged treatment, reminiscent of the alliances between “the altar and the throne.” In a situation of an almost clear-cut religious, ethnic, and linguistic distinction and delicate balance between the Slav Macedonians and ethnic Albanians, this increased presence of Orthodox religious symbols in public life in Macedonia mobilized the Muslim Community, which demanded equal treatment. After the 2001 conflict, under the Ohrid Framework Agreement and the subsequent constitutional changes<sup>36</sup> that improved the position of Albanians within Macedonia, the Islamic Religious Community received explicit constitutional recognition by being mentioned (p. 505) alongside the Orthodox Church in article 19 of the new constitution as one of the country’s religious communities.

In situations where religious communities act as organized structures of respective ethnic groups, the erection of various religious objects and symbols has become a way of ethno-religious demarcation in Macedonia. A case in point is the ongoing debate on the urban revitalization project “Skopje 2014,” which foresees the erection of a series of historical monuments in the city center, together with a new church. Initiated by the right-wing party VMRO, the aim of this project is to erect as many monuments as possible to prove the Macedonian and Orthodox character of the capital city. This project, as well as the previous project to erect a 66-meter cross, known as the “Millennium Cross,” on the top of Skopje’s surrounding mountains, overlooking the city, has outraged Albanians who see it as an attempt by Orthodox Macedonians to symbolically appropriate the landscape and territory. This process of “religionization” of landscape through the erection of symbols

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sustains the argument that the main struggle in Macedonia is between Christianity and Islam (Robelli 2011: 152). Thus, Albanian NGOs (such as “Zgjohu” [Wake Up], “Iliricum Libertas,” etc.) and the Islamic Religious Community have reacted by demanding permission to rebuild an old mosque in the city center, which had been destroyed decades before by the Kingdom of Yugoslavia (before the Second World War). Indeed, religious symbols and objects in Macedonia serve as “proxies” in the political and national battle between Macedonians and Albanians for the control of territory and state institutions. In a situation where the contested nation-building of the Macedonian majority is deeply intertwined with the reemergence of Orthodoxy as an important pillar of identity in Macedonia, various requests coming from Macedonia’s Albanians, deemed to be national in their essence, often assume religious connotations.

Despite animosities and competition, the Orthodox Church and the Religious Islamic Community in Macedonia were successful in pushing for the introduction of religious education in elementary schools. The 2008 decision of the Macedonian government to introduce religious education as an elective subject provided both these organizations with opportunities to provide instructors for classes on Islam and Christianity. Some opposition parties and civil society groups challenged the decision and took the decision to the constitutional court of Macedonia, which repealed article 26 of the Law on Primary Education that allowed religious education for different religious groups.<sup>37</sup>

The increased presence of Islam in public space in Macedonia is mostly due to a specific political and constitutional system of power-sharing that enables Albanian Muslims to demand the same treatment as the majority Orthodox population. Thus, paradoxically, the enhanced role of the Orthodox Church in Macedonia and its attempts, mostly supported by the state, to increase social role of Christian Orthodox religion in the Macedonian society has provided a leeway for the Islamic Religious Community to do the same. (p. 506)

As regards religious promotion and propaganda, apart from the official journals published by the official religious institutions, in recent years there has been a mushrooming of religious publishers. Publishers such as “Logos-A” (Skopje), “Furkan ISM” (Skopje), “Lib-Art” (Prishtina), “Progresi Botime” (Tirana), etc., have been very productive in translating foreign religious scholars into Albanian and publishing other religious books and journals. Profiting from the almost completely unregulated and uncontrolled publication sphere in the region, as well as from foreign donations, these new publishers have created a very effective circulation network, thus increasing the presence of religious-themed publications in local bookshops and book fairs.

Likewise, proponents of an “Islamic revival” among Albanians have managed to establish a TV channel dedicated to Islam and religious education. Coordinated by the Kosovar “Center for Islamic Studies,”<sup>38</sup> Peace TV, an enterprise directed from India, Saudi Arabia, and Dubai by a hardline Islamist preacher, Zakir Naik, has established a 12-hour daily program in Kosovo. It also includes interviews in the Albanian language with Kosovo Muslim figures under the influence of Wahhabism. As argued by Al-Alawi, the entry into Kosovo of Naik’s Peace TV, known for its hardline interpretations of Islam and insults directed

at spiritual Sufis, Shi'a Muslims, non-fundamentalist Sunnis, Jews, Christians, and Hindus, represents an additional tool in a novel campaign by South Asian Islamists backed by Saudi money to establish a foothold among Europe's indigenous Balkan Muslims.<sup>39</sup>

In short, Islam, together with other religions in the region, has resurged in public space in the Balkans in the aftermath of the fall of communism. As a result, religious objects, mostly funded with money from foreign religious organizations and networks, have mushroomed in recent years, transforming an urban and rural landscape which once was dominated by its old Ottoman stone mosques. On the other hand, new opportunities offered by internet, social media and digital TV platforms have been utilized by radical Islamist interlopers and their financiers, mainly from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states, in order to "awaken" Balkan Muslims and "connect" them to a larger world community of Muslims.

## International Constraints and Islamophobia

Since 9/11, there has been a tendency by local commentators to see social, political, and cultural and religious cleavages and tensions in the region through the ideological lens (p. 507) of the "clash of civilizations" (where Islam is indiscriminately portrayed as foreign and primitive). This often results in assertions that Islam's "incompatibility" with democracy and modern European and Western values can in part account for the tensions in these post-socialist societies. Linked to this is the renewed interest in the role of Islam in the formation of the modern Albanian national and political identity and its position vis-à-vis Europe. Study has also begun to focus on the increasing public hostility towards Islamic institutions amounting to populist forms of Islamophobia. Whereas the relationship between Islam and the Albanian nation and state(s) attracts wide academic interest, the issue of Islamophobia remains largely neglected by scholars from different disciplines. In contrast, the issue of Islamophobia has constantly remained high on the agenda of the local media.

The increased presence of many "faith-based" international organizations which engaged in the process of transforming societies and identities after the fall of communism and the post-9/11 context has reactivated the debate on the issue of Albanian identity and belonging. There is a tendency among some Albanian intellectual and political circles to view the past (under the Ottoman Empire) and the present religious composition of the population as incompatible with the EU and "Western civilization" in general. This is best exhibited in the public hostility towards Islamic institutions in Albania today. It is, for example, quite acceptable today among non-Muslims and southern Albanians in particular to claim that its 500-year relationship with Islam is a by-product of "foreign" invasion (i.e. Ottoman) and should be abandoned (de Rapper 2008; Kadare 2006; Lubonja 2004; Poulton 1997; Brisku 2006; Welton and Brisku 2007; Sulstarova 2007). This sentiment is articulated by Albanian academics with links to the old communist regime and the famous author Ismail Kadare in particular (Jazexhi 2007; Brisku 2006; Kostovicova and Prestreshi 2003; Öktem 2011; G. Krasniqi 2011; Qosja 2006; Doja 2003). Indeed, since 1997, the ruling

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"Socialist Party" has been particularly eager to stress Albania's non-Islamic identity (Gju-raj 2000).

Albanian elites and populations in Albania, Kosovo, and Macedonia are among the most pro-European and pro-American residents of the region.<sup>40</sup> This vision seems to be supported by central religious organizations as well. Islamic actors in Albania such as MCA publicly endorse democracy and European integration in their statements, seeing it as the best "shield" against past repression as well as a survival strategy in the dominant anti-Islamic atmosphere that has characterized post-communist transition (Elbasani and Saatçioğlu 2011). Likewise, a recent survey conducted in Kosovo suggests that some 91.5% of the people in Kosovo support Kosovo's pro-Western orientation and (p. 508) exclude other cultural and ideological alternatives; only 1.8% think that religion and Islam are the only values to be followed (Center for Humanist Studies "Gani Bobi" 2011).

Nonetheless, the predominance of secular-minded political elites among Albanians combined with the ever-increasing "anti-Islamic" discourse in Europe, have had a noticeable impact on the way Muslims are perceived by local people, both Albanians and the others, in the region. Thus, the increase in the number of mosques built with international Islamic organizational money is seen by Albanian politicians and people as detrimental to the vision of a modern Albanian identity that is above all "European" and "Western." Consequently, any acts of implicit or explicit expression of Islamic leaning, especially that influenced by external radical networks or movements from the Gulf region, is perceived by Albanian media, intellectuals, and many other people as a direct attack on this pro-European and pro-Western political vision promoted by elites. Even isolated cases, such as that of a radicalized 21-year-old of Kosovo-Albanian origin living in Germany, Arid Ukaj, who in March 2011 opened fire on a busload of American troops at Frankfurt airport, killing two and severely wounding another pair, suffice to renew debates on potential links between Albanian Muslims, radical Islam, and terrorism.<sup>41</sup> The survey conducted by the Center for Humanist Studies "Gani Bobi" (2011) reveals that 40% of people in Kosovo are of the opinion that radical Islam is gaining strength in Kosovo, while 24.3% see it as a threat to Kosovar society and its pro-Western orientation.

In Macedonia, with the global effect of the 9/11 bombings, religion would eventually become the key criterion of distinction among Macedonia's population. In other words, for many nationalistic Macedonian politicians, the religious belonging of Albanians (Muslim) provided legitimate grounds for discrimination. In line with this logic, various Macedonian politicians sought to capitalize on the "war on terror" and thereby strengthen their position vis-à-vis Albanians by trying to give a religious connotation to the Albanian demands for more rights and equality within the state. The state and security apparatus has appropriated "anti-terrorism" discourse in order to portray the mostly Muslim Albanians as suspicious. Evocative of Samuel Huntington's concept of the "clash of civilizations," nationalist Macedonian circles tend to draw a line of essential difference between the "right side" and the "wrong side," with the Albanians occupying the latter (G. Krasniqi 2011: 202; Robelli 2011: 152).

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In the modern history of Albanians, religion was an important element of their identity but mostly it was kept separate from national identity. In many respects, their nationhood superseded their religious identities. This is why they hardly ever felt part of a broader Muslim transnational community of believers (*umma*). The traditional form of Islam practiced by Albanians provided enough room for religious tolerance and coexistence. The majority of religious leaders as well as people still seem to favor the (p. 509) traditional form of practicing Islam.<sup>42</sup> However, different state experiences, as well as different socio-political contexts, have left their scars in the three major Albanian milieux in the Balkans. In addition, attempts by various radical transnational networks to “re-Islamize” Albanians expose these societies to new and mostly radical forms of Islam, thus risking instilling radical ideas among the new generations of Muslim Albanians.

Decades of foreign influence and tireless underground work have allowed religious extremists to establish a foothold in the Balkans while growing with the cooperation of international radical networks. These groups have produced an army of young people with a proven readiness to join the international cause of “Islam.” As earlier in Libya and Iraq, once the conflict in Syria erupted, local radical leaders mobilized hundreds of Albanians to join the anti-Assad oppositions, in particular the Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS)—the two militant groups that are sometimes linked to Al-Qaeda (Zelin 2013). The growing number of Albanian “jihadists” contributing to this campaign against the Assad regime has led to a number of *shahids* (martyrs) discussed by radical groups in Kosovo in their online media. Such exposure to the deaths of Kosovar Albanians in Syria has raised public concerns and prompted the reaction from Albanian and Kosovar institutions, which undertook in early 2014 legal changes aimed at criminalizing future participation in foreign religious and sectarian wars.

## Conclusion

One century after the fall of the Ottoman Empire in the western Balkans, the latter’s Muslims have undergone a process of multiple social and political transformations. The spillover from one regime to another, followed by state-enforced measures to “domesticate” Islam, has left an indelible trace in the traditional and heterodox Islam practiced among Albanians. Likewise, developments in regional and international politics, especially after the fall of communism, have resulted in the emergence of three interconnected, yet distinct Muslim milieux among Albanians in Albania, Kosovo, and Macedonia. Despite the fact that all these countries are defined as secular states the relationship between the state and religious institutions has not always been one of neutrality. This has been conditioned by the type of regime, the share of Muslims in the overall population, as well as the international context and constraints.

In the case of Albania, religion was banned for many decades and even after the introduction of political pluralism, state institutions and politicians often showed signs of hostility towards Islam and Muslims. In the case of Kosovo and Macedonia, Muslims in these two countries have been for a long time governed by a Slav-dominated central religious orga-

nization in Yugoslavia. Since the early 1990s, the newly found (p. 510) independence in terms of religious organization also quickly led to the emergence of differential trajectories of Islam and politics in Kosovo and Macedonia. In the former, in the period of ethnic tensions and war, religion was superseded by ethnicity in the process of ethno-national mobilization and homogenization. After 1999, however, new dynamics have evolved in the relationship between religion and politics. Dreaming of a "European" identity for Kosovo, Kosovar elites have often been hostile towards an increased role of Islam in social and political life. This is exemplified by backlashes over the location for new mosques in Prishtina, or the use of headscarves and the introduction of religious education in public schools. In Macedonia, on the other hand, Muslims are in a minority position and for two decades now have sought to build an alliance with the Albanian parties in the battle for equal treatment in society.

In this respect, mastery over the cultural landscape commanding the loyalties of Albanian Muslims constituted a primary administrative goal of the state. Indeed, throughout the modern history of Albania and the former Yugoslavia where the majority of Albanian Muslims lived, Islam as a doctrine of political activism has never played a major role. This is in spite of clear trends towards mobilizing religion in the Balkans towards realizing political ends (Babuna 2004). Throughout the struggle against anti-Albanian nationalism in Kosovo and Macedonia, for instance, Albanians never reverted to using their sectarian identity to challenge totalitarian rule. Scholars have long made this assertion because of the assumption that Albanians of Orthodox, Catholic, and Muslim faith were collectively being victimized and that their ethnic loyalties superseded their religious identities (Duijzings 2000: 153-61; Young 1999: 5-14).

Political Islam as it has emerged in other parts of the world, therefore, is still in its infancy and struggles for a foothold on otherwise hostile political terrain (Halimi 2000; G. Krasniqi 2011). That said, there are indications that small groups are actively trying to create an Islamic political party in Kosovo, Macedonia, and Albania. In Kosovo, for instance, one can follow in the Islamic Community of Kosovo's journal *Takvimi*, the occasional debate over the merits of an Islamic party in dealing with the political and social issues plaguing Kosovo today (Blumi 2005). In any case, it is the overall political and social context that shapes the development and transformation of identity, and in this context, religious identities as well. In the case of the Albanians, the growing foreign influence after the dissolution of Yugoslavia has left many traces in the region and has introduced followers of traditional forms of localized Islam to a new and radically different form of Islam known as Salafism or Wahhabism. These largely foreign practices of a faith that has long existed in the Balkans have led to important tensions in a part of Europe that is increasingly marginalized as economic crisis exasperates long-held prejudices towards Europe's indigenous Muslims.

Although an increasing number of works have been published on Albanians in recent years, the issue of religion as well as everyday practices among Albanians in the Balkans still is under-researched. In fact, most of the works take a historical approach, focusing on the institutional aspect of religious organization through history. On the other hand,

the fall of communism, the dissolution of Yugoslavia, and the post-9/11 contexts have triggered a new and immense process of overall cultural and socio-political (p. 511) transformations. Therefore, more study is needed to gauge the changing landscape of religion in the Balkans and Albanian's relationship to Islam in a broader internationalized context. In order for scholars to grasp the new dynamics in the region, it is necessary to focus on sociological and anthropological studies that use various qualitative data, as well as ethnography. In this vein, we would be able to gain a better understanding about the values and principles that inform Albanian Muslims' lives today and shape their understanding of religion, attitudes, behaviors, and religious practices. Only in this way will we be able to elucidate the endangered rich fabric of Albanian religious tradition(s).

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### Notes:

(1) The authors would like to thank the editor and Gent Cakaj for constructive comments on earlier versions of this chapter.

(2) These Albanian Muslims living abroad form a diaspora that, in some estimates, constitutes half of Europe's Albanians (Blumi 2011a).

(3) The most studied case of this process is that of Christian "Greeks" indigenous to the towns and villages of western Anatolia being "exchanged" for "Turks" (Muslims) living in the Balkans (Mazower 2002; McCarthy 1995). Less appreciated, this history of negotiated "repatriation" of Muslims (claimed to be Turks) similarly led to the violent persecution of Albanians (and other indigenous Muslims) throughout Greece and Yugoslavia from the late 1920s onwards (Roux 1992; Schwandner-Sievers 2004; Stefanović 2005). Such widespread persecution resulted in the creation of an Albanian diaspora in Turkey alone estimated to be more than 1.4 million today (Blumi 2011a: 162).

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(4) This census was boycotted by some of Albania's ethnic minorities (Greeks above all). For the complete results of the census see Instat, *Population and Housing Census, 2011*. Available at <[http://www.instat.gov.al/media/177354/main\\_results\\_population\\_and\\_housing\\_census\\_2011.pdf](http://www.instat.gov.al/media/177354/main_results_population_and_housing_census_2011.pdf)>.

(5) Sunni Islam has four basic legal schools (*madhhab*). The Hanafi *madhhab*, founded by Abu Hanifa in the eighth century was the official *madhhab* of the Ottoman Empire, and was the only one represented in the Balkans until the 1990s. Present-day Salafists most actively involved in the Balkans are often considered to be close to the stricter Hanbali *madhhab*, founded by Ahmad ibn Hanbal at the beginning of the ninth century.

(6) <<http://www.kmsh.al/index.php>>.

(7) <<http://www.komunitetibektashi.org>>.

(8) For more on Gülen, his mission, and activities see his official website <<http://www.fgulen.com/>>.

(9) So-called after its spiritual leader, Muhammad b. 'Abd al Wahhab (1703–92), who aimed to invigorate Islam by sweeping away corruptive and sinful practices. See Blumi (2005).

(10) *Buletin HU* (1978), vol. 2, p. 6. See also Rexhepagiqi (2003).

(11) A new census was carried out in Kosovo in 2011, but was boycotted by most of the members of the Serb community. According to data from this census, Albanians constitute 92.9 % of the overall population of 1.7 million. As regards religion, Muslims constitute 95.6% of the overall population in Kosovo. See the final results of the 2011 census in Kosovo, available at <<http://esk.rks-gov.net/rekos2011/?cid=2,1>>.

(12) Boja has remained on the sidelines of Kosovo's spiritual life ever since. Since 2008 he is Kosovo's ambassador to Saudi Arabia. See <<http://www.bislame.net>>.

(13) Naim Tërnavë, born in 1961 in Fushë Kosovë, finished the "Alauddin" *madrassa* in Prishtina and continued his studies at the "Al-Azhar" University in Cairo. In 2005 he finished his Master studies at the American Open University in Cairo. From 1995 to 2003 Tërnavë served as the dean of the "Alauddin" school in Prishtina before being elected as the Grand Mufti of Kosovo, a position he still holds.

(14) Sulejman Rexhepi was born in 1947 in Skopje. He studied in Prishtina (Kosovo), Sarajevo (Bosnia and Herzegovina), and then in Kuwait. He was one of the co-founders of the "Isa Beu" *madrassa* in Skopje, as well as of the Faculty of Islamic Studies in Skopje.

(15) <<http://www.stat.gov.mk>>.

(16) The Hanafiyyah school is one of the four orthodox Sunni schools of law.

(17) <<http://www.bim.org.mk/>>.

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(18) Jakub Selimoski (1946–2013) was born in Kicevo (Macedonia). He studied in Skopje, Sarajevo, as well as at the Al-Azhar University in Cairo. In March 1991 he was elected head of the united Yugoslav Islamic Community. In the same year, he became the head of the short-lived Islamic Council for Eastern Europe.

(19) The majority of Albanian Muslims in Kosovo and Macedonia live in rural areas. For statistics on population in Kosovo and Macedonia see <<http://esk.rks-gov.net/rekos2011>> and <[http://www.stat.gov.mk/Default\\_en.aspx](http://www.stat.gov.mk/Default_en.aspx)> respectively.

(20) Shefqet Krasniqi, imam of the Central Mosque in Prishtina and close associate of Mufti Tërnavë, is perhaps the most outspoken public religious figure (<<http://www.krenaria.com/>>). He received a Ph.D. from the Islamic University in Medina in Saudi Arabia. He rose to prominence in Kosovo when he engaged in public debates over the veiling issue and the need to declare Kosovo an Islamic state.

(21) Armend Podvorica, "Besimi i denjë nuk është ekstremizëm," *Koha Ditore* (January 7, 2003), 11.

(22) United States Department of State, *2009 Report on International Religious Freedom—Kosovo*, October 26, 2009, available at <<http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4ae8612d91.html>> [accessed April 10, 2012].

(23) They see new and foreign influences as being detrimental to the old and tolerant tradition of Islam once dominant in the region. Some of these regional religious leaders were engaged in forming a separate organization—the Union of Workers of the Islamic Community of Kosovo (*Shoqata Sindikale e Punëtorëve të Bashkësisë Islame të Republikës së Kosovës*) in September 2011. They criticized Naim Tërnavë for his links with radical organizations and toleration of foreign influences. See M. Mulaj, "Themelohet Shoqata Sindikale e Punëtorëve të Bashkësisë Islame," *Kosovapress*, September 6, 2011, available at <<http://kosovapress.com/?cid=1,26,134609>> [accessed September 10, 2012].

(24) A growing number of politicians, MPs, and women's rights activists openly criticize the "foreign" Islamic practices applied in Kosovo.

(25) Information tabulated from materials available at the Islamic Community Union located in Tirana.

(26) <<http://www.bim.org.mk/bimbrosur.pdf>>.

(27) Abdi Baleta is a former diplomat and publicist from Albania.

(28) Bashkim Gazidede directed the National Intelligence Service (SHIK) during the rule of Sali Berisha (1992–7).

(29) Besiana Xharra, "Kosovo Turns Blind Eye to Illegal Mosques," *Balkan Insight* (January 12, 2013). <<http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/kosovo-turns-blind-eye-to-illegal-mosques>> [accessed January 15, 2013].

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(30) The idea to build a cathedral emerged more from political than religious needs as it is interpreted as an example of the pro-Western orientation of the (Muslim) majority and inter-religious tolerance of Albanians.

(31) *Bashkohu* was created in 2010 and it advocates a more prominent role of Islam in Kosovar state and society. So far it has staged protests to demand the building of a grand mosque in Prishtina, introduce religious education in schools and allow women to wear headscarf in school. In early 2013 it announced the creation of an Islamic party. See <<http://www.bashkohumene.org>>.

(32) Petrit Çollaku, "Kosovo Muslims Step Up Mosque Protests," *BalkanInsight* (June 30, 2011). <<http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/muslim-community-demand-for-new-mosque-in-pristina-centre>> [accessed December 15, 2011].

(33) See its official site: <<http://www.drejtesia.org/>>.

(34) Nebih Maxhuni, "Ligji i debateve," *Gazeta Express* (August 29, 2011), 8–9.

(35) See the transcript from the plenary session of the Kosovo Assembly on August 29, 2011, available at <<http://www.assembly-kosova.org/?cid=1,177,3643>>.

(36) This agreement was signed in 2001 after months of sporadic fighting between Albanian rebels and the Macedonian army and police, which claimed hundreds of lives. It paved the way for major political reforms that improved the rights of the Albanian minority in Macedonia.

(37) See decision 202/2008 of the Constitutional Court of the Republic of Macedonia, dated April 15, 2009.

(38) This centre appears to exist only online and via television. For more see <<http://www.qsi-ks.com/webi/index.php>>.

(39) Irfan Al-Alawi, "Extremists Establish Foothold in the Balkans," *Gatestone Institute* (September 24, 2012). <<http://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/3360/kosovo-peace-tv>> [accessed January 15, 2013].

(40) According to the data assembled by Gallup Balkan Monitor, Albanians in Kosovo, Macedonia, and Albania show the highest support for the US leadership. In 2012, the support for the US among Albanians in Kosovo was 92.2%, in Albania 80.2%, and among those in Macedonia 55.5%. Likewise, Albanians in the Balkans show the highest level of support for the EU membership of their respective countries. Data from 2011 reveal that support for EU integration among Albanians in Kosovo is 95.4%, in Macedonia 72.3%, and in Albania 87.1%. Source: Gallup Balkan Monitor. Survey data available at: <<http://www.balkan-monitor.eu/index.php/dashboard>>.

(41) The Kosovar institutions and printed media described the attack as "shameful", which will damage the image of Albanians. See "The Frankfurt shootings: the Kosovo con-

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nection," *The Economist* (March 3, 2011). <[http://www.economist.com/blogs/newsbook/2011/03/frankfurt\\_shootings](http://www.economist.com/blogs/newsbook/2011/03/frankfurt_shootings)> [accessed December 20, 2011].

(42) A survey conducted in Kosovo shows that 61% of people favor the traditional way of practicing Islam (Centre for Humanist Studies "Gani Bobi").

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