

# The Endurance of Islam at the South-easternmost Edge of the European Union: The Case of Western Thrace, Greece

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## Introduction

Islam is not new to the Balkan Peninsula. Introduced in the 7th century, it gradually spread beyond Saudi Arabia. The Ottoman Empire was one of the main actors for the promotion and protection of Islam in other countries. Especially through the westward expansion of Ottomans, locals living across the Balkans became familiar with the essences and basics of Islam as religion was located at the core of the Ottoman system of administration. For instance, according to the Ottoman *millet* system, all citizens living under the Ottoman administration were divided on religious lines, i.e Muslims and non-Muslims.

Located in Southern Europe, Greece is one of the Balkan countries that has a history of Ottoman rule of more than five centuries. It won the War of Independence against the Ottomans in 1821 and gradually expanded its national territories. Parallel to the expansion of the country, Greece also promoted unification through nationalisation, homogenisation and Hellenisation policies of its society and culture. Thus, the vast majority of the Greek population identifies

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itself with Orthodox Christianity and interpret Islam and 'Turkishness' as the "other" of their ethnic and religious characteristics.

This paper aims to focus on the survival of Islam in one of the regions of Greece. In the first section, it provides brief information about Islam in other regions of Greece while the second section makes deeper analyses about the past and the present of Islam in Western Thrace. In doing so, this study argues that Islam is still alive in Western Thrace but that religious autonomy cannot be fully applied on the grounds that the practices of the Greek state continue to violate the minority's religious rights and liberties that are safeguarded by the Greek constitution as well as in bilateral and international treaties that Greece has signed and ratified.

### Islam outside of Western Thrace

With the acquisition of new lands in the 19th century, the overall number of Muslims living across the country reached a sizable number. This caused Greece to sign bilateral treaties with the Ottoman Empire, such as the Treaty of Istanbul (1881) and the Treaty of Athens (1913), so as to protect and promote the rights of the Muslims living on both new and old lands of the country.<sup>2</sup> It was 1923 when Greece, for the first time, signed an international agreement – the Peace Treaty of Lausanne – some articles of which were dedicated specifically to the protection of the religious, educational and cultural rights of the two minorities in Greece and Turkey, the Muslim Turkish minority of Western Thrace<sup>3</sup> and the Orthodox Christian Greek/Rum minority living in Istanbul, Imbroz (Gökçeada) and Tenedos (Bozcaada) respectively.

During the Lausanne meetings, both countries also agreed to exchange their Turkish and Greek populations, which worked for the homogenisation of both countries across the Aegean Sea. As a result of this compulsory population exchange process, around 1.5 million Greeks left their lands in Turkey and migrated to Greece while the number of Turks arriving from Greece to Turkey were approximately half a million.<sup>4</sup>

Only two communities were exempted from this compulsory population exchange: the Turks of Western Thrace and the Greeks of Istanbul. Each amounting to about 100,000-150,000 people, the members of these two communities who remained *in situ* continued living on their historic lands but became officially recognised minorities in their host nations. In this context, both Greece and Turkey also proved to function as the external homelands or kin-states of the co-ethnicities left on the other side of the Turkish-Greek borders.

In 1923, Western Thrace was incorporated into Greece. At that time, Albanian Muslims, also known as Tsam Albanians, living in the northwest part of Greece,

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and Turkish Muslims living in the northeastern borderland with Turkey constituted the two primary Muslim minorities in Greece. Still, the total population of Muslims, most of whom lived collectively with their co-religionists, was quite low compared to the Orthodox Christian majority. In 1947, the islands of Rhodes and Kos, located in the southeastern Aegean Sea, were annexed by Greece and as a result, a group of ethnic Turkish Muslims was added to the overall Muslim population of Greece.

In the beginning of the 1950s, one of the two major Muslim communities disappeared when the Tsam Albanians were ousted from Greece on the grounds that they had cooperated with the Italian-Albanian forces against Greece during World War II.<sup>5</sup> However, the demography of Muslims in Greece increased at the beginning of the 1990s with the arrival of immigrant Muslims especially from Albania and African and Southeast Asian countries.<sup>6</sup> There are no exact official statistical data about the total population of Muslims in today's Greece. But, it is estimated that the number of immigrant Muslims is more than half a million<sup>7</sup> and the Muslim Turks living in Western Thrace and the two islands of the Aegean Sea are approximately 150,000 and 5,000 respectively. Furthermore, there is also a small community of Greek Muslims primarily in Athens who are composed of ethnic Greek citizens who decided to convert and follow Islam.<sup>8</sup>

As of 2013, the Greek population is around 11 million, less than 10% of which are Muslims. Apart from the growing phenomenon of Islam across the country, there are also some other small religious groups settled in different parts of Greece. Some of them are recognised as known religions, e.g. Catholics, Baha'is, Methodists, Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses, while others, such as Scientologists and Hare Krishna Devotees, have neither been recognised known religions nor granted permission from Greek authorities to establish places of worship.<sup>9</sup>

Having provided an overview about the presence of Islam in Greece, the following section of this paper explores the main characteristics of Islam in the context of Western Thrace.

### Islam inside Western Thrace

Extending 8,575 square kilometres, Western Thrace constitutes the northeastern borderland of Greece with Turkey in the East and Bulgaria in the North. It is composed of the three prefectures of Xanthi (*İskeçe*), Rodopi (*Rodop*) and Evros (*Meriç*) with the main cities being Xanthi, Komotini (*Gümülcine*) and Alexandroupolis (*Dedeağaç*) respectively.<sup>10</sup> The Muslim concentration is higher in Rodopi than it is in Xanthi and Evros.

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A *sui generis shari'ah* (Islamic law) is applied in Western Thrace. That is, since Ottoman times, Muslims living in Western Thrace have had the right to solve their problems via *shari'ah* only in matters of marriage, divorce and inheritance.<sup>11</sup> In fact, *shari'ah* has always been a part of religious autonomy safeguarded by international treaties like the 1923 Peace Treaty of Lausanne. Still, being citizens of Greece, they are also free to choose between *shari'ah* or civil law. For instance, a Muslim can either opt for an Islamic marriage under the authority of the mufti or a civil one, and both would be officially accepted by the authorities.

Given that Greece interprets minority rights on territorial basis, Muslim Turks can enjoy their group-based rights, including religious ones, only inside the boundaries of Western Thrace. This interpretation of the principle of territoriality is one of the main reasons why Greece rejects the construction of mosques and cemeteries in cities such as Athens and Thessaloniki, or the functioning of existing ones to serve the religious needs of its Muslim citizens anywhere other than Western Thrace.

Almost all members of the minority in Western Thrace are Sunni Muslims. Only a small section of them follow the Alevi-Bektashi sect.<sup>12</sup> Both groups co-exist peacefully. Because Turkey has been the primary external country acting as the kin-state and guarantor country of the Muslim-Turkish presence in Western Thrace, mentioning its impact on the type of Islam adopted by the minority in Greece is essential. Since the minoritisation of Western Thrace Muslims in 1923, the vast majority of the minority has been following Sunni Islam promoted by the highest official religious authority of Turkey, the Presidency of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı*).

Members of the Muslim minority either live in Muslim-only localities or co-habit with their Orthodox Christian neighbors. But, the number of those living in the former type of settlements are much greater than the latter; thus, mutual communication and cooperation on matters of religion between the two main communities of the region remain limited. Apart from Muslims and Orthodox Christians, there are also small groups of Armenians and Jews settled within the boundaries of Western Thrace.

After a brief introduction, the next section focuses on the main characteristics of Islam in the context of Western Thrace.

### The Mufti as the Religious Head

Since Ottoman times, muftis have been the religious heads and spiritual leaders of Muslims in Western Thrace. All three mufti offices based in Komotini, Xanthi and Didimotihio continued to function after Western Thrace became part of Greece. Although the 1913 Athens Treaty regulated the election of the chief mufti

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as the head of Islam across Greece,<sup>13</sup> this did not happen since the vast majority of Muslims left the country due to the population exchange between Greece and Turkey. Still, in comparison to the long-standing position of the chief mufti in Bulgaria, for example, there is still no chief mufti in Greece responsible for the religious matters of Muslims inside and outside of Western Thrace.

From 1923 to the mid-1980s, there were no major problems with the mufti or his role and responsibilities *per se* given that the state respected Law 2345/1920<sup>14</sup> that regulated various matters including the election of muftis. Until that time, Muslims in Western Thrace had the right to define their muftis in all three prefectures. But, when the mufti of Komotini died in 1985, controversies occurred between the Greek authorities and the Muslim minority. The state sought to terminate the election of muftis and instead transfer this right to state officials since muftis had some judicial powers emanating from the *shari'ah* in Western Thrace. The Muslims, however, insisted on electing their own religious heads in their historic lands. In the end, Law 1920/1991<sup>15</sup> replaced Law 2345/1920 as a result of which Greece started to appoint muftis in all three prefectures of Western Thrace. Provided that Western Thracian Muslims were determined to elect their own religious heads, a double-headed system was formed in two prefectures where the majority of the Muslim Turkish minority lived. Thus, since the beginning of the 1990s, there have been two mufti offices in Komotini and two in Xanthi; and each prefecture has one elected and one appointed mufti.<sup>16</sup>

Looking from a historical angle, this study stresses that the vast majority of the Muslim minority continues to side with elected muftis and recognises them as their spiritual leaders. They reject the authority of the appointed mufti on the grounds that their right to define their religious leaders has been violated by the state. In the 1990s, the cases of elected muftis were also brought before the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg. Dealing with them, the court concluded that Greece had indeed violated religious freedom of the minority in Western Thrace.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, they had no impact on the Greek state's determination to continue appointing muftis in Western Thrace.

As the external homeland of the minority, Turkey officially recognises the elected muftis as the religious leaders of the Muslim Turkish minority at national and international levels.<sup>18</sup> It is only the Greek state that recognises the appointed muftis as religious heads. Despite major controversies between the minority and the state, this double-headed structure still prevails. As a result, the right of Muslims to elect their own religious leaders in an EU-member country continues to be infringed even in 2013.

## Religious Education: The Teaching of Islam and Quran

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The teaching of Islam has never been prevented by authorities in Western Thrace. It has been taught at *madrasahs*, or religious schools, and partly at bilingual primary schools located in districts with a minority concentration.<sup>19</sup> Until recent times, *madrasahs* were the main places for education about Islam. The main role of these schools was to prepare the religious elite of the minority such as muftis and imams. In 1925, it was reported that 16 *madrasahs* were serving the religious needs of the community's next generation of Muslim clergymen (Andreadis 1956:74). However, only two religious schools located in Rodopi and Xanthi remained; around 500 students attended these schools in the late 2000s.<sup>20</sup>

Until the 1970s, most of the courses taught at *madrasahs* were in Turkish and Arabic. However, courses taught in Greek gradually replaced the Turkish ones, and thus courses about Islam decreased in number. Thus, this study emphasises that *madrasahs* ceased to provide the Muslim community with clergymen after the 1970s. Rather, they started preparing their students to take university entrance exams and land a seat at a university, as was the case for the average Muslim student enrolled in a public or private secondary school in the region. Therefore, it is useful to underline that religious schools have actually lost their 'religious' identities and that the term 'religion' has become a mere label.

Because the type of education changed, Muslim students who wanted to develop their knowledge of Islam primarily went to Turkey to attend religious secondary schools and study Islamic theology for higher education. This becomes blatant when sees the profiles of the religious elite of the Muslim community in Western Thrace; most of them are either graduates of *İmam Hatip Lisesi* (a religious secondary school) or *İlahiyat Fakültesi* (the Faculty of Divinity). Only a few of them graduated from universities in the Middle East and North Africa in countries like Syria, Egypt and Saudi Arabia where they studied Islamic theology. Since the 1970s, this trend of going to Turkey for religious education has not changed. Therefore, the religious elite of the community still feels closer to the type of Islam promoted by Turkey than any other Muslim country.

### The Role of *Waqfs* (Religious Charitable Foundations) in the Development of the Minority's Socio-Economic Well-Being

Among the oldest remnants of the Ottoman jurisdiction, *waqfs* have functioned across Western Thrace for centuries. These charitable foundations, also known for being the most important source of income for the Muslim community,<sup>21</sup> played a vital role in the survival of the socio-economic and religious life of the autochthonous Muslim Turkish minority. Most mosques also own *waqf* properties from which they acquire some revenue used for the expenditure of their houses of worship. In fact, *waqfs* that belong to the mufti offices in the chief cities are wealthier than those owned by mosques in villages and towns since the former own valuable immovable properties located in city centres. At this point, it is

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significant to note that most of these properties were left to mufti offices by the Ottoman administration of the region while others were donated by local Muslims.

Until the advent of the 1967 military regime, all *waqfs* owned by mufti offices had been governed by members of the Muslim minority elected by the Muslim locals of the region. During the junta regime, the administrative boards of the *waqfs* were replaced by community members appointed by the military.<sup>22</sup> Despite the fact that the junta rule of Greece ended in the mid-1970s, no elections were held for the governing bodies of *waqfs* in Western Thrace. Despite the minority's desire for elections, these boards have continued to be governed by Muslims that have been appointed by state authorities since the 1970s. When one of them dies, the authorities replace him immediately with another Muslim.<sup>23</sup> Given that *waqfs* are still under their control, the community can neither elect board members nor exercise effective power to control the incomes and expenditure of *waqfs* belonging to mufti offices.

### Sacred Spaces: Houses of Worship and Cemeteries

Relative to the aforementioned problems with mufti offices and the administration of *waqfs*, mosques have functioned uninterruptedly since 1923. The state never prohibited Muslims from attending prayers at houses of worship or prevented the call for prayer that is still echoed five times a day from minarets.

Mosques are governed by a board, known as "*mütevelli*," whose members are determined by the local mosque-goers. The members of these boards are responsible for the administration of these houses of prayer, including paying the electricity bills and collecting money from their congregations to pay the imam's salary. To note, imams in villages or towns are paid by local Muslims while those in major cities are paid by the *waqfs'* administrative boards. Along with leading prayers, imams also teach both Muslim children and their families how to recite Qur'an. As a result, the vast majority of Muslims in the region today do not know the Arabic language but can recite Qur'an without understanding its meanings.

Aside from the challenges imposed by Law 3536/2007, also known as "the 240 Imam Law" which limits the right to define teachers of the Qur'anic courses given in mosques to a committee of five people some of whom are Greek officials,<sup>24</sup> the community's sacred places – mosques and cemeteries – have been operating without major problems with authorities. Nevertheless, they have been frequently targeted by extremist and ultra-nationalist mobs since the decline of Greek-Turkish relations in the mid-1950s. In the past, attacks were relatively rare but they have recently increased with the rise of ultra-nationalism across Greece. For instance, arson attacks damaged a mosque in the village of Toksotes in Xanthi four times in the last six years – 2004, 2007, 2009 and 2012.<sup>25</sup> (It was seriously damaged but not completely destroyed.

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In addition, there are also many old and historical mosques, tombs and cemeteries that need immediate restoration or reopening that are being disregarded. The Sultan Bayazid Mosque in Didimotihó, for example, is one of the oldest mosques in the Balkans but Greek officials keep turning a blind eye to the necessity to fund its preservation. This is also the case for other old and dilapidated Ottoman heritage across the country.<sup>26</sup> Given that the state is currently facing a deep economic crisis, it is unlikely that it will devote a budget for the preservation of this heritage inside and outside of Western Thrace.

### Conclusion

Since the 1923 Lausanne Peace Treaty, members of the Muslim Turkish minority have managed to protect their religious characteristics in an ethnically and religiously homogenous Greek society. The state granted some religious rights to its Muslim citizens in Western Thrace while it violated various international texts that it signed and ratified, e.g. 1923 Peace Treaty of Lausanne, by limiting religious autonomy of its Muslim Turkish citizens in Western Thrace.

As I explored above, although these people have been EU citizens since Greece's EU membership in 1981, they are still unable to choose their religious heads as well as members of the administrative boards of their religious charitable foundations. Nor can their mosques avoid being hate-motivated targets of Greece's non-Muslim citizens who feel themselves uncomfortable with the continuity of the Muslim Turkish presence in Western Thrace.

To conclude, Islam has survived in this part of the European Union and members of the Muslim Turkish minority continue to live on their historic lands without being assimilated into the majority's Orthodox Christian culture. However, the religious autonomy of the Muslim Turkish minority of Western Thrace has never been fully provided since 1923 due to the state's different policies which aim to control the religious liberties of the minority that emanate from the international treaties that the state had signed and ratified.

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### References

<sup>1</sup>The map of Western Thrace, (accessed 29 January 2013), <http://www.maps-of-greece.com/thrace-map.htm>.

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<sup>2</sup>K. Tsitselikis, *Old and New Islam in Greece: From Historical Minorities to Immigrant Newcomers* (Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff, 2012) 34-36.

<sup>3</sup>Greece officially defines the minority as 'Muslim' while Turkey and the minority itself never use religious identification. The latter prefers to use 'Turkish' or 'Muslim Turkish' to identify the minority presence in Western Thrace. While doing so, they underline that it is not only religious but also national, ethnic and imperial, which contradicts with the official Greek discourse. I personally use both 'Turkish' and 'Muslim' either together or interchangeably when I refer to the minority in Western Thrace.

<sup>4</sup>A.A. Pallis, *Exchange of Populations in the Balkans* (London: Anglo-Hellenic League, 1925), 8 ; E. Kontogiorgi, *Population Exchange in Greek Macedonia: The Rural Settlement of Refugees 1922-1930* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 73.

<sup>5</sup>L. Divani, *Ελλάδα Και Μειονότητες: Το Σύστημα Διεθνής Προστασίας* ("Greece and Minorities: The System of International Protection under the League of Nations") (Athens: Nefeli, 1995) 257-258.

<sup>6</sup>For more information about Muslim immigrants in Greece, see Antonis A. Antoniou, "Muslim Immigrants in Greece: Religious Organization and Local Responses," *Immigrants & Minorities*, Vol.22, Nos.2&3, July/November 2003, 155-174.

<sup>7</sup>A. Triandafyllidou, *Immigrants and National Identity in Europe* (London: Routledge, 2001), 90-93.

<sup>8</sup>S. Sevi & H.Haci, "Greek Muslims," *Zaman*, 24 October 2010.

<sup>9</sup>US Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor,

"International Religious Freedom Report," 2011,(accessed 30 January 2013), <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/193027.pdf>,4; G. Mavrommatis, "Minorities in 20th Century Greece," in Takashi Sashima (ed.), *Continuity and Change of Ethnicity and Socio-Cultural Order in Alevi/Bektashi People: Turkey, Western Europe, Greece and Bulgaria* (Research Program Proceedings) (Osaka: Osaka State University, Faculty of Human Sciences, 2006), 50-69.

<sup>10</sup>The map of Western Thrace (2013) (accessed 29 January 2013) <http://www.maps-of-greece.com/thrace-map.htm>.

<sup>11</sup>For more information about shari'ah applied in Western Thrace, see T. Cin, *Yunanistan'daki Türk Azınlığın Hukuki Özerkliği* ("Legal Autonomy of the Turkish Minority in Greece") (Ankara: Orion, 2009).

<sup>12</sup>V. Aarbakke, "The Muslim Minority of Greek Thrace," Ph.D. Dissertation (unpublished) (Bergen: University of Bergen, 2000), 339. More about minority

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<sup>13</sup>The Greek Official Gazette, FEK A'148, 3 July 1920.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

<sup>15</sup>The Greek Official Gazette, FEK A'11, 4 February 1991.

<sup>16</sup>M. Hunault, Council of Europe-Parliamentary Assembly (PACE), Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights, European MP and Rapporteur, "Freedom of religion and other human rights for non-Muslim minorities in Turkey and for the Muslim minority in Thrace (Eastern Greece)," Doc.11860, 21 April 2009, accessed 29 December 2011,

<http://assembly.coe.int/Documents/WorkingDocs/Doc09/EDOC11860.pdf>, 12-13.

<sup>17</sup>ECtHR Judgement, *Serif versus Greece*, 1999, accessed 10 January 2013, <http://hudoc.echr.coe.int/sites/eng/pages/search.aspx?i=001-58518>;

ECtHR Judgement, *Agga versus Greece*, 2002, accessed 10 January 2013, <http://hudoc.echr.coe.int/sites/eng/pages/search.aspx?i=001-60690>.

<sup>18</sup>Republic of Turkey, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Turkish Minority of Western Thrace" (accessed 25 December 2012) <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkish-minority-of-western-thrace.en.mfa>.

<sup>19</sup>For more information about religious education, see A. Huseyinoglu, "The Development of Minority Education at the South-easternmost Corner of the EU: The Case of Muslim Turks in Western Thrace, Greece," PhD dissertation (unpublished) (Brighton: University of Sussex, 2012), 251-256.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 253-254.

<sup>21</sup>K. Tsitselikis, "The Legal Status of Islam in Greece," *Die Welt des Islams*, 44, 3, 2004, 420.

<sup>22</sup>A. Chousein, "Continuities and Changes in the Minority Policy of Greece: The Case of Western Thrace," MSc. Thesis (unpublished) (Ankara: Middle East Technical University, 2005), 92.

<sup>23</sup>C. Borou, "The Muslim Minority of Western Thrace in Greece: An Internal Positive or an Internal Negative 'Other'?", *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, Vol. 29, No. 1, March 2009, 11.

<sup>24</sup>As of 2013, discussions about applicability of Law 3536/2007 still continue in Western Thrace. "Azınlık Yok Sayıldı, 240 İmam Yasası Geçti" ("The minority is ignored, the 240 Imam Law is adopted"), *Gündem*, 18 January 2013.

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<sup>25</sup>"Bir seçim arefesinde daha Okçular Camii'ne taşlı saldırı" ("The mosque in Toxotes was once more targeted on the eve of the general elections"), *Millet Gazetesi*, 24 May 2012.

<sup>26</sup>For more information, see N. Konuk, *Yunanistan'da Osmanlı Mimarisi* ("Ottoman Architecture in Greece") (Ankara: SAM, 2004).

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