

Islam in Kosovo - the Current State of Affairs and the Way Ahead

by Xhabir Hamiti

Abstract

The traditionally moderate and tolerant interpretation of Islam dates back to the Ottoman Empire. Though extremist propaganda messages infiltrated Kosovo over the past 20 years, there are only isolated cases of radicalization in Kosovo.

Key words: Islam, Kosovo, Education, Religus Life, Propaganda

Islam is a monotheistic religion of global proportions, similar to Judaism and Christianity. The main monotheistic religions, originating from the lands of the East, grew and then spread worldwide. Kosovo Albanians, like other Balkans nations, became acquainted with Islam in the early 15th century, coinciding with the time the Ottoman Empire invaded the Balkan region which it ruled over until the early 20th century.

During the nearly 500- year Turkish-Ottoman presence, a large part of the Balkan nations converted to Islam. The Albanians, Bosniaks and the Pomaks in Bulgaria and Greece were some of the nations in modern-day Southeastern Europe, who widely embraced Islam as their spiritual religion. Even as we speak, traces of the rich historical heritage of the Ottoman Empire are present in many Balkan countries.

Prior to the their first contact with Islam, Albanians generally adhered to Christianity based on either Eastern Orthodox or Roman Catholic rites, while some nostalgically retained their ancient pagan Illyrian beliefs. By the end of 17th century, percentage of Albanians adhering to Islam became the majority, while the rest remained devoted to Christianity and split between the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic Church. It is worth noting that, despite the religious divide

or multi-confessionalism, there is no record of a religion-based conflict amongst Albanians. The struggle for survival as well as the fear of annihilation from the common foe, both in the past and the present, has united the Albanians without distinction, putting their national affiliation before the religious affiliation. Gjergj Fishta, a great Albanian national poet and a Roman Catholic cleric (1871-1940), delivered to his believers and all Albanians in general his famous message: "Truly we observe both Easter and Bajram (the main Muslim feast), but together we share Albanianism¹".

The Muslim theologist and patriot, Idriz Gjilani, was quoted saying: "Indeed we are a nation with three religions, but we share same blood, language and homeland²".

The Composition of Kosovo Muslims

Albanian Muslims comprise the largest religious community in Kosovo. The vast majority of them adhere to the Sunni branch of Islam, built upon a religious school of Islamic jurisprudence established by the scholar Abu Hanifa in the 17th century. This religious school

1 <https://www.slideshare.net/marjandodaj/vrtet-ne-kemi-bajram-e-pashk-por-shqiptarin-e-kemi-bashk-at-gjergj-fishta>

2 <http://orashqiptare.blogspot.com/2015/01/jemi-vellezer-kemi-tri-fe-por-vetem-nje.html>

of jurisprudence is currently predominant throughout the Islamic world, because it follows a 'middle course' in interpreting Islam. It recognizes the institution of analogy in the elaboration of legal religious provisions and allows the use of logic in the argumentation of religious matters by taking into account the 'time and place' perspective.

Another significant part Kosovo Muslims amounting to approximately 15 % adhere to the Sufi Dervish orders, representing religious mystic groups operating under their denominations such as: *Khalwati*, *Qadiri*, *Malamatis*, *Meolevi*, *Naqshbandi*, *Shadhili*, *Rifai*, *Bektashi*, *Sinani*, etc. Their particular rites, as well as the glorification of Ali, the fourth Muslim caliph who died in the year 661, represent the line of division between them and the rest of the Sunni Muslim majority in Kosovo. Instead of mosques, Dervishes perform their rites in their special shrines called "tekke". Although divided in rites, the Dervish orders, until 2013, were under the umbrella of the Islamic Community of Kosovo (ICK). Under the new draft law regulating the legal status of religious communities in Kosovo, mystic groups are defined as an independent religious community. ICK remains the largest religious institution in Kosovo.³ Prior to the collapse of the communist system and the breakdown of the former Yugoslavia, this community the ICK was registered with the legal authorities of Serbia in Belgrade. From that time up to the present day, all the religious communities in Kosovo, including ICK, continue to operate without a new legal status in the country's democratic setup. The draft law regulating the status of all religious communities in Kosovo has been passed by the Government, but has yet to receive the final approval of the Parliament.

³ <http://bislame.net/>

Besides Albanians, Kosovo Muslim community also includes Turkish, Gorani and Torbesh (who speak a mix of Slavic languages) groups, as well as Roma and Ashkali minorities.

Organizing Islamic religious life in Kosovo

According to the Constitution of the Republic of Kosovo, religion is clearly separated from the state: (Article 8: The Republic of Kosovo is a secular state and is neutral in matters of religious beliefs)⁴. Due to this legal constitutional norm, Kosovo Muslims and other religious communities carry out their religious activities through independent private institutions. Mosques are the main places of gatherings, where Muslim believers perform their daily and weekly religious prayers. Currently, Kosovo has a total of 810 mosques (most of them inherited from the Ottoman Empire). Following the war, over 218 mosques have been rebuilt on the foundations of old mosques destroyed by Serbian forces, while an additional 300 new mosques were built. Meanwhile, Muslim Dervish Orders⁵ have around 72 small tekke's throughout Kosovo, concentrated mainly in the towns of Prizren, Gjakova and Rahovec. Islamic religious communities in Kosovo continue to be funded on a voluntary basis by their believers and followers. None of the religious communities is funded by the state.

Islamic educational institutions in Kosovo

The Islamic religious staff in Kosovo is trai-

⁴ <http://www.kushtetutakosoves.info/repository/docs/Constitution.of.the.Republic.of.Kosovo.pdf>

⁵ <http://www.btkonline.net/>

ned by two major educational institutions, the Secondary Madrasa "Alauddin"⁶, founded in 1951 and thus one of the oldest Islamic religious schools in the country, and the Faculty of Islamic Studies⁷ as a private institution under the ICK supervision. The Islamic religious school "Alauddin" is funded by the Ministry of Education of Kosovo, based on a decision taken dating back to when Kosovo was administered by UNMIK (United Nations Mission Interim in Kosovo) between 1999 and 2008. The "Alauddin" Madrasa was largely active during the partly monist system in the former Yugoslavia, where its teachings attracted students from all Albanian inhabited lands of the former Yugoslavia as well as other nationalities.

The "Alauddin" Madrasa has two separate subsidiaries in the towns of Prizren and Gjilan and counts around 600 students, both male and female. Students who graduate from this school cherish the right to pursue studies in different university-level courses, both at home and abroad. The "Alauddin" Madrasa in Pristina ranks second, behind the well-known Sarajevo-based "GaziHusrevbeg" Madrasa, and thus has a large influence in Southeastern Europe in terms of training the Albanian-speaking imams and religious teachers. The duration of studies in this school until 1984 was five years, and four years from 1984 to 2013, but was reduced to three years since 2013.

Apart from the religious secondary education, the ICK (Islamic Community of Kosovo) also embodies a higher education institution, the Faculty of Islamic Studies founded in 1992. Unlike the "Alauddin" Madrasa, the Faculty of Islamic Studies provides its educational activities on the basis of financial sup-

port secured directly from the ICK, which is also its founder. Due to the failure to determine the legal status of the ICK within the country's new institutional framework after independence in 2008, this higher education institution has not yet been registered nor licensed with country's judicial authorities. It is worth mentioning that the Faculty of Islamic Studies has been awarded accreditation for both educational levels, Bachelor and Master. In 2012, the Senate of the University of Pristina ruled in favor of inclusion of this Faculty at the University of Pristina. However, the Kosovo Ministry of Education has not taken any step to forward the procedure to legitimize and formalize this decision.

Upon completion of studies, students in this educational institution are awarded a professional degree to serve as imams in mosques or teachers at Islamic religious secondary schools in the country. The Faculty is open to both genders. After graduation, many students pursue their Master studies in universities, both at home and abroad. The Faculty curriculum is mainly based on the curriculum of the Faculty of Islamic Sciences in Sarajevo.

Branches of Islam in Kosovo

Kosovo Muslims are followers of the Sunni-Hanafi religious school of jurisprudence that has taken roots among Balkan Muslims and beyond, largely due to the influence of the Ottoman Empire in organizing religious life. The way of interpreting Islam among Muslims in Kosovo and Southeastern Europe for centuries has been and still remains, the middle course- inclusive rather than exclusive. In addition, the mystical groups represented by

⁶ <http://medreseja.com/>

⁷ <http://www.fsi92.net/>

Dervish orders, supported this approach and interpretation of Islam in Kosovo. Muslims of our country, up to the end of 20th and early 21st century, never knew nor heard of extreme and radical approaches to Islam. Radicalism and extremism were unfamiliar terms amongst Kosovo Muslims and Albanians in general. Muslim believers in Kosovo had no problem sharing a roof with or living in a family with different religious beliefs of its members. The tolerance and mutual reverence of individual religious beliefs among Albanians has always been an example to follow, both inside and outside their lands.

As an indigenous nation of Southeastern Europe, the Kosovo Muslims, regardless of their religious adherence, have shown their ability to preserve and respect customary good neighborly traditions, while sharing the common good and bad. Even presently, the traditional soft Islamic course reflecting an inclusive rather than exclusive approach to the religion, continues to prevail in Kosovo, regardless of a slight variation caused by foreign religious doctrines reaching Kosovo and the region following the collapse of the communist system in the Balkans. Over the past two decades and particularly following the war of 1999, non-domestic Islamic religious schools and doctrines have fought and competed for domination in Kosovo. The countries of the Arabian Peninsula, a majority of which follow a course of strict interpretation of Islam, have sponsored local conservative ideologists, who succeeded in establishing small cells and groups of their members in Kosovo. Fortunately, they were unable to widely expand their influence. By contrast, Turkey, which considers its religious heritage in Kosovo and the Balkan region to be part of its historical past, has tried to be very active in the region. Due to the absence of any

large group of Shiite community in Kosovo, Iran has chosen to extend its influence through the establishment of associations and scientific journals in the spirit of Shiite ideology. There is only a symbolic number of Shiite believers in Kosovo, who are concentrated mainly in the multiethnic and multicultural town of Prizren. Differentiations in terms of Islamic religious interpretations in Kosovo could only be observed over the past two decades and fortunately are not widespread.

The impact of the global propaganda on violent religious extremism in Kosovo

Kosovo Muslims are indigenous citizens of Europe, and therefore they see and feel their present and future within the European Union. Kosovo Muslims do not consider their religious affiliation as an obstacle to European integration. Even Western European nations who have opened their doors to Kosovo Albanian immigrants, declare that regardless of religion, Albanians are one of the immigrant social groups whose integration into their living environment was the easiest.

External influences of Islamic religious ideology of global proportions have failed to find fruitful soil in Kosovo. Nevertheless, and similarly to other countries, it could not entirely prevent foreign propaganda coming from the war hotspots in Iraq and Syria from penetrating into the country mainly through the uncontrolled distribution of religious literature as well as the influence of various online websites. This sort of propaganda, proclaimed in the name of Islam, inspired a number of citizens of Kosovo to join the fronts of extremist and terrorist groups in Iraq and Syria. However, owing to the measu-

res undertaken by the Government of Kosovo, particularly in the course of the last two years, Kosovo has not registered any case of one of its citizens joining ISIS.

With all the powers available and in cooperation with state institutions, the ICK has recently been working intensively to prevent violent forms of interpretation of Islam in Kosovo. With every passing day, citizens of our country are realizing that violent religious extremism leading to terrorism, should not and cannot be part of our society in any form.

The extreme approach to religion, which is embraced nowadays in the countries of East, is seen by Kosovo Muslims as a religiously and politically deviating agenda that has nothing to do with Islam as a religion in the first place, nor with their regional and European future.

The future of Islam in Kosovo

Islam in Kosovo will continue to be developed and nourished in the spirit of tolerance and respect for all the country's religious communities. Muslim believers of Kosovo, regardless

of ethnicity, both now and in the future will aspire and work towards Euro-Atlantic integration. They are aware that Brussels is their political center today. The interpretation of Islam will remain a domestic one, taking into account the context of culture and tradition as well as the local, regional and European perspective, and shall restrict itself from imitating foreign ideologies and serving politically driven religious purposes.

However, Western Europe must work harder to speed up Kosovo's integration into the European Union. The isolation of Kosovo from the western world, which has taken place so far, by impeding the free movement of its people, will allow foreign groups to take advantage of its harsh economic and political situation.

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