



The role of Balkan Muslims in building a European Islam

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Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| Introduction | 3 |
| I. The Balkan Muslim populations | 6 |
| II – The evolution of Balkan Islam since 1990 | 12 |
| III- The Muslim world’s presence in the Balkans | 16 |
| IV – The place of Balkan Islam in Europe | 20 |
| Conclusions: Balkan Islam, European integration and the Turkish factor | 26 |

Introduction

By Mirjam Dittrich and Lucia Montanaro-Jankovski

Since the Iranian revolution of 1978-79, the issue of Islam and the challenge it supposedly poses to the West has become a matter of enduring international preoccupation.

Today, some 12.5-15 million Muslims live in the European Union, both immigrants and citizens, compared with only 800,000 in 1950. Islam is no longer just a foreign policy issue, but has become a domestic concern as well. Muslim communities have grown rapidly in Europe in recent decades and Islam has emerged as the second most followed religion in many European states.

The debate over Turkish membership of the European Union has raised questions over whether a country with a Muslim majority could become part of a “European identity”. Furthermore, the accession of a number of new Member States in the Balkans in the years ahead will bring some predominantly Muslims countries into the Union and nearly double its Muslim population.

This Issue Paper, written by Xavier Bougarel, stems from the discussions held within both the Multicultural Europe and Enlargement & Neighbourhood Europe programmes of the European Policy Centre (EPC), which are run in cooperation with the King Baudouin Foundation (KBF).

A project on ‘Islam and Muslims’ in Europe was established in 2003 as part of the Multicultural Europe programme, which aims to stimulate knowledge of – and reflection on – the issues surrounding the integration of Muslims in Europe, as well as Europe’s relations with Islamic countries. The EPC and KBF also launched a task force on the Western Balkans in February 2005, and consequently have put a strong focus on the Balkans in 2005 and will continue to do so in 2006. Our approach takes into account the importance of addressing the different political, economic, security and multicultural issues in the Balkans on their path towards European integration, as well as assessing EU policies towards the region.

Identifying and tackling the issues surrounding the integration of Muslims into European society at the European level has not been easy, as there is no specific European or national policy on this. While Muslims in Europe share a common religious belief, they do not form a unified transnational community because of the variety in their countries of origin, generational differences, and variations in religious practice and political affiliation.

Recent international events, particularly the aftermath of 9/11 and the terrorist attacks in Madrid and London, have created additional tensions for many Muslims in Europe, and led to misperceptions and inaccurate stereotyping. Political developments in Muslim countries (in the Middle East, Iraq, Afghanistan and the Balkans) have also had an impact on Muslim communities in Europe and led European governments to give this issue greater priority.

Numerous reports at the time of the Balkan wars about 'Islamic' arms transfers, jihad fighters and training camps, particularly in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Albania, raised concerns about the threat of Islamic radicalisation in the Balkan countries. The level of the threat from the Balkans has, however, diminished since then as numerous *mujahiddins* from Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Turkey who came to the region during the war did not stay on afterwards. But the future prospects for Muslim communities in Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Sandjak, southern Serbia and FYROM remain volatile.

Although, as the author explains, the different Muslim communities date back from period of Islamisation by the Ottoman Empire and have now realigned themselves into global Islam, there are, in essence, four main Muslim sub-communities/populations in the wider Balkan region: Albanians, Muslims/Bosniaks, Turks and Roma. In some regions, such as Western Macedonia and Southern Kosovo, several different Muslim groups coexist.

Politically, the main difference lies between the predominantly Turkish-speaking Muslims living in the Eastern Balkans, on the one hand, and the Albanian- and Slavic-speaking Muslims living in the Western Balkans (former Yugoslavia), on the other. While the political demands of the former have been limited to obtaining national minority status with the corresponding cultural rights, the latter have made more radical demands, from requests for territorial autonomy, to demands for the federalisation of the state (Macedonia) or outright independence (Kosovo and Bosnia-Herzegovina).

Bosnian Muslims have a rather low level of religiosity compared to other Balkan Muslim populations. However, in contrast to the secular educational system in Albanian-speaking areas (Albania, Kosovo and now FYROM), some political and religious actors in Bosnia and Herzegovina have tried to use the army and schools for authoritarian re-Islamisation purposes (religious education became semi-mandatory during the war, for instance), but have faced strong resistance from within Bosnian society.

This paper gives a broad overview of political and religious developments in the region before and after the fall of the Communist regimes in 1990, as well as the relationship between Balkan Islam and the Muslim world and the place the former occupies in the emerging pan-European Islamic public space.

The author states that a number of major socio-economic and cultural factors differentiate the Balkan Muslims from their fellow Muslims in the EU, including their location in rural areas and their commonality of language with other local non-Muslim populations (the pluralism in Bosnia-Herzegovina is a clear example of this.) Also, the Balkan Muslims are part of a regional political context dominated by ethnic and religious nationalism. Indeed, confronted with the break-up of the Yugoslav Federation, the Balkan Muslims' politicisation crystallised in distinct national and territorial claims rather than moves to federate their Islamic religious institutions.

The paper also argues that Turkish entry into the EU would have a considerable impact on the development of Balkan Islam and a European Islam, favouring exchanges between Balkan Muslims and Turkish religious

leaders which could offset Neo-Salafi influence in South-East Europe. (Neo-Salafism is an allegedly ‘pure’, more extreme and bellicose interpretation of the Islamic faith).

However, the author emphasises that the increased visibility of Islam in the Balkans has not necessarily been synonymous with the re-Islamisation of the Balkan Muslim population, reflecting rather more their politicisation and irredentist/nationalist objectives. This is why, in relation to both the Balkan Muslims and the defining of the future borders of the enlarged Union, it seems quite clear that the pending decisions over Bosnia-Herzegovina and, especially, Kosovo are paramount – they will frame the overall context for the years to come.

This is a context, incidentally, that is already characterised by a peculiar phenomenon: having dealt with the legacy of the Soviet Empire (2004), the EU enlargement process is now bound to deal with the legacy of the Ottoman Empire – and in two senses: the particular nature of relations between Muslims and Christians in the Balkans, and the candidate status of the former ‘Imperial’ power itself (Turkey), with some of its former subjects as either full members or fellow candidates.

In all these respects, the questions addressed by this paper are increasingly relevant for the future of European integration.

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The role of Balkan Muslims in building a European Islam

By Xavier Bougarel

Integrating the Balkan Muslims represents an opportunity as much as it does a challenge: on the one hand, the prospect of European integration can help to resolve some of the conflicts in the region; on the other, the historical experience of the Balkan Muslims can contribute to the development of a “European Islam”.¹

From 1981 to 2004, the only Balkan state in the EU was Greece, an almost entirely Orthodox country (albeit with a small Muslim minority in Western Thrace). In 2004, Cyprus joined the Union, but the northern, Turkish part of the island remained outside. In the coming years, the EU will expand to include other Balkan states, beginning with Bulgaria and Romania.

Among the challenges this will raise is the status of the Balkan Muslim populations, exemplified by the anachronistic terms of the Treaty of Lausanne,² and the fact that a number of conflicts currently on hold in the region (Cyprus, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia³) pit Muslim and Orthodox populations against each other – although this does not mean that Islam in particular, or religion in general, is the real cause of these conflicts.⁴ Furthermore, the 11 to 12 million Muslims in the current EU of 25 Member States will see their numbers almost doubled with the eventual accession of the Balkan states, which are home to some eight million Muslim citizens.⁵

To facilitate a better understanding of the potential interactions between developments specific to the Balkan Muslims, the EU enlargement process and the possible emergence of a European Islam, this paper will first examine the diversity of Balkan Muslim populations before explaining in greater detail the political and religious developments in the wake of the collapse of the Communist regimes in the region in 1990. This will be followed by a discussion of the relationship between Balkan Islam and the Muslim world – and Turkey in particular – and of its place within the ‘pan-European Islamic public space’ currently being formed.

I. The Balkan Muslim populations

The diversity of Balkan Muslim populations

When speaking of the “Balkan Muslim populations” or of a “Balkan Islam”, it is important to recognise just how diverse these populations are. All of them originate from the process of Islamisation that accompanied the Ottoman presence in the region from the 14th to the early 20th century, but they can in no way be described as homogeneous.

In relation to the four main linguistic groups (Albanian-, Slavic-, Turkish- and Romany- speaking), the Balkan Muslims are divided along national and/or ethnic lines that are becoming increasingly dominant and formalised.

(Albanians, Bosniaks, Turks, Pomaks,⁶ etc.). Whilst the great majority are Sunni Muslims attached to the Hanafi *madhhab*,⁷ some belong to the Bektashi (in Albania and Kosovo) or the Alevi (in Bulgaria and Greece) minorities⁸. This explains why, in regions such as western Macedonia, southern Kosovo, the Rhodopes (Greece, Bulgaria) and Dobrudja (Romania), several different Muslim populations co-exist. It is in these regions too that ethnic identities remain the most fluid and competition between ethnic ‘entrepreneurs’ is liveliest.

Table I – Linguistic Profile of Balkan Muslim Populations (estimate for the early 1990s)

| | Albanian-speakers | Slavic-Speakers | Turkish-speakers | Roma (Gypsies) |
|---------------------------------|-------------------|-----------------|---|----------------|
| Greece | - | 30 000 | 90 000 | - |
| Albania | c. 2 240 000 | c. 10 000 | - | c. 50 000 |
| Macedonia | 480 000 | 90 000 | 80 000 | 50 000 |
| Bulgaria | - | 165 000 | 810 000 <i>of whom Tatars: 5,000</i> | 125 000 |
| Bosnia-Herz. | 5 000 | 2 010 000 | - | 5 000 |
| F.R.Y. (without Kosovo) | 80 000 | 270 000 | - | 30 000 |
| Kosovo (autonomous province) | 1 550 000 | 60 000 | 10 000 | 40 000 |
| Romania | - | - | 50 000 <i>of whom Tatars: 25,000</i> | - |
| TOTAL | 4 355 000 | 2 635 000 | 1 040 000 | 300 000 |

Source: Xavier Bougarel & Nathalie Clayer (dir.), *Le nouvel Islam balkanique, op.cit.* In this table, the figures for the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia have been divided into two: ‘Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (without Kosovo)’ and ‘Kosovo (autonomous province of the FRY)’, so as to provide greater detail and to be more in line with the political realities of the decade.

A large proportion of Balkan Muslims live in rural areas and still make their living from agriculture, raising animals or cultivating tobacco. In recent decades, demographic growth among Muslim populations and the exodus of Christian populations from rural areas have contributed to the ethnic homogenisation of certain regions (in Kosovo, western Macedonia, Sandjak, Rhodopes).

Urban Muslim elites have practically disappeared from the eastern Balkans (Bulgaria, Greece and Romania), following their massive migration to Istanbul and Anatolia. In the western Balkans (Bosnia-Herzegovina, Albania, Kosovo and western Macedonia), the urban Muslim presence dating back from the Ottoman period is still perceptible, but there are deep rifts within the Muslim communities in these areas between secularised urban populations on the one hand, and rural or neo-urban populations attached to traditional religious and cultural practices, on the other.

Finally, the geographical distribution of Muslim populations in the Balkans is very uneven. Up until 1991, the only Balkan state where a majority of the

population (roughly 70%) had a Islamic cultural background was Albania. With the break-up of Yugoslavia, two other political states or quasi-states with a Muslim majority appeared: the so-called “Bosniak-Croat Federation” – one of the two entities of Bosnia-Herzegovina⁹ – where approximately 75% of the population is Muslim; and Kosovo, whose final status is still uncertain, and where some 90% of the population is Muslim. There are also large Muslim minorities in Macedonia (33%), Serbia-Montenegro (4.5% without Kosovo) and Bulgaria. Greece and Romania have relatively small and very localised Muslim populations (1.5% and 0.2% respectively) in Western Thrace and Dobrudja.

Table II – Geographical distribution of Balkan Muslim populations (estimate for the early 1990s)

| | Number (est.) | Percentage (est.) |
|--|--------------------------|------------------------------|
| Greece | 120 000 | 1.5 % |
| Albania | c. 2 300 000 | c. 70.0 % |
| Macedonia | 700 000 | 33.0 % |
| Bulgaria | 1 100 000 | 12.5 % |
| Bosnia- Herzegovina | 2 020 000 | 46.0 % |
| Fed. Rep. Yugoslavia (without Kosovo) | 380 000 | 4.5 % |
| Kosovo (autonomous province) | 1 660 000 | 84.9 % |
| Romania | 50 000 | 0.2 % |
| TOTAL | 8 330 000 | 13.5 % |

Source: *ibid.*

A century and a half as religious minorities

A number of major socio-economic and cultural features differentiate the Balkan Muslims from those living in the EU, such as the fact that most live in rural areas and share languages with other, local, non-Muslim populations. Moreover, Balkan Muslim populations are part of a regional geopolitical context dominated by ethnic and religious nationalism, which in turn gives rise to specific types of political mobilisation.

The way in which national and religious identities are linked also varies considerably. The national identity of the Muslims/Bosniaks of Bosnia-Herzegovina and the Sandjak, for instance, developed on the basis of their religious identity, and despite the fact that they spoke the same language as Orthodox Serbs and Catholic Croats.¹⁰ The Albanian national identity has, by contrast, been established despite the religious cleavages that run through the Albanian-speaking populations of the Balkans.

To complicate the picture still further, national identities have undergone various changes over time and important regional differences exist: for

example, the links between Albanian national identity and Muslim religious identity are particularly strong in Kosovo and Macedonia, where Islam serves as an “ethnic marker” against Orthodox Serbs and Macedonians and facilitates the “Albanisation” of smaller Muslim populations.¹¹ It is therefore necessary to define the historic singularity that characterises Balkan Muslim populations as a whole.

The specific characteristics of Balkan Islam do not, in fact, result directly from an “age-old coexistence” between Muslims and non-Muslims. After all, similar situations can be found in many parts of the Muslim world and recent Balkan history has, in fact, been marked by the disappearance of areas of co-existence inherited from the Ottoman period, as witnessed by the population movements of the 20th century (during the Balkan and Greco-Turkish Wars in the 1910s and 1920s, the Second World War, and the Yugoslav wars of 1991-1999).

However, from the Congress of Berlin in 1878 to the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923, the withdrawal of the Ottoman Empire no longer led to the disappearance of local Muslim populations. Instead, they remained (at least partially) in the new, Christian-dominated Balkan states, and were therefore confronted with a totally new political and cultural environment.

Studying their experience as non-sovereign Muslim minorities in Europe – and the way that their political, religious and intellectual elites responded to this challenge – enables a better understanding of the specific features of Balkan Islam and its potential contribution to the emergence of a European Islam.

Prior to the Second World War, the Balkan states granted their Muslim minorities the religious freedoms prescribed by international treaties, whilst keeping them in a state of economic, political and cultural marginalisation.

From a religious point of view, the most immediate consequence of the withdrawal of the Ottoman Empire was the creation of Islamic religious institutions limited to the territory of the new Balkan states. At that time, Balkan Muslim communities tended to structure themselves around their religious institutions (*madrasas* – religious secondary schools; *waqfs* – religious endowments; and Sharia courts), and negotiate their allegiance to the central power on a clientelistic basis. The two relative exceptions were Albania, a country with a Muslim majority in which the Sunni elites conserved most of their political power, and Bosnia-Herzegovina, where the Muslim community created its own political party in 1906 and mobilised itself in the 1930s to defend Bosnia-Herzegovina as a distinct territorial entity.

Everywhere, the emerging Muslim intelligentsia denounced the backwardness of their own community and challenged traditional elites, rejecting their communitarian and clientelistic strategies and promoting nationalist projects or militant ideologies.

These institutional and cultural changes contributed to profound changes in religious life as well. The need for Islamic religious institutions to adapt to their new minority status – and more generally to the modernisation of the state and society – prompted changes in the way in which religion was taught in the

madrasas, *waqfs* were administered by their *mutawalis* (trustees), and Sharia was implemented by the Sharia courts.

This reform of these institutions, sometimes encouraged by central government, occurred alongside various debates on the legitimacy of traditional syncretic and Sufi practices, the adoption of western dress, the status of women and, more generally, the relationship between Islam, national identity and western modernity. Whilst such debates are not peculiar to the Balkan Muslims, they assumed a special dimension in this region.

Between the Ottoman legacy, Kemalist revolution and Communist modernisation

From the end of the 19th century, part of the Balkan Muslim elite distanced itself from the declining Ottoman Empire and sought to formulate a “local Islam” that would be compatible with Western modernity. To this end, secular intellectuals and reformist *ulema* (religious scholars) looked for new models in the Arab world, the Indian sub-continent or Tsarist Russia, and became interested in the Salafist ideas of Jamaluddin al-Afghani and Muhammad Abduh.¹²

In 1923, the Kemalist revolution in Turkey exacerbated tensions between the secular intellectuals and traditional elites, and between reformist and traditionalist *ulema*: in each case the former were anxious to follow the path mapped out by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, while the latter maintained close relationships with anti-Kemalist leaders exiled in Greece and Bulgaria.

Last, but not least, the unending controversies over the national identity of the Balkan Muslim populations demonstrated the problems they faced in fitting into a European geopolitical order dominated by the principle of the nation state. Both the need to legitimise their presence in the post-Ottoman Balkans and the crystallisation of a modern Turkish national identity had the effect of driving non-Turkish-speaking Balkan Muslims to stop defining themselves as “Turks” in the Ottoman (religious) sense of the term and, rather, to stress their indigenous nature and their pre-Ottoman past.

This, however, raised new problems of identity. Whilst traditional elites and rural populations were inclined to define themselves as “Muslims”, the modernist intellectuals of Bosnia-Herzegovina declared themselves to be “Serbs” or “Croats” of Islamic faith, and those of Bulgaria and Greece identified with the modern Turkish nation. Finally, whilst predominant at home, the Albanian Muslim community perceived itself as a “cultural minority” in Europe and progressively adopted the founding myths of Albanian nationalism, based on the rejection of religious divisions among Albanian-speakers and the denunciation of the “Ottoman yoke”.

In the 1930s, as political tensions grew in the Balkans, Islamist and pan-Islamist ideologies appeared in the region. From 1941, the Third Reich tried to exploit nationalist and pan-Islamist feelings among Balkan Muslims, but Turkey’s refusal to join the war alongside the Axis powers and the reversal of the military balance in 1943 wrecked plans for an autonomous Bosnia-

Herzegovina and a Great Albania, or the creation of a state that would encompass all the Muslim populations of the Balkans.

In 1945, the establishment of Communist regimes in the region also meant big changes in the traditional organisation of Balkan Muslim communities. (It is telling that the only Balkan state where Islamic religious institutions still exercise educational and judicial responsibilities is Greece.) At the end of the 1940s, the Communists dismantled the traditional religious institutions – Sharia courts were abolished in Yugoslavia; *waqfs* were nationalised; and most of the *madradas* were closed. This policy reached its pinnacle in Albania, where all religious activity was banned in 1967. In Yugoslavia, by contrast, the liberalisation of the 1960s led to a revival of Islamic religious institutions and the resumption of debates that had been interrupted by the repression of the immediate post-war period.

Moreover, the accelerated modernisation of the Communist period favoured the development of intellectual elites, who in turn became the standard bearers of new national aspirations.

In some respects, the Communist regimes simply precipitated developments that had already been perceptible before the Second World War. Despite the Cold War, the celebration of the struggle for national emancipation from the “Ottoman yoke” and the modernising dimension of the Communist project continued implicitly to value western modernity.

More concretely, industrialisation and urbanisation, the development of education and leisure, and the eviction of religious actors from the public arena led to a rapid secularisation of Balkan societies and a sharp decline in religious practice. Muslim populations, and especially those living in urban areas, were not spared from this process, as shown by arguments over the wearing of the veil – a hugely controversial issue in the inter-war period. Wearing the veil was banned by the Communist authorities at the end of the 1940s. More than half a century later, it is seen by most Balkan Muslims as a symbol of rural life and backwardness. Likewise, the increase in the number of mixed marriages in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Albania is a direct consequence of Communist modernisation.

In the Balkans, various rules of “good neighbourliness” and heterodox religious practices reflect centuries of co-existence between Muslims and non-Muslims. However, the softening of the ethnic boundaries separating the two, the adoption by Muslims of food practices contrary to Islamic rules (such as the consumption of alcohol or pork), and the way in which Islamic religion was relegated to the private sphere are not the result of five centuries of Ottoman tradition, but rather of five decades of Communist modernisation.

From this point of view, the celebration of Balkan Islam as a “European Islam” conceals – rather than reveals – its specific characteristics, as do the concerns expressed by outside experts on the post-Communist Balkans about the “radicalisation” of Muslim populations or the creeping “wahhabisation” of Balkan Islam, referring to the neo-fundamentalist movement founded at the end of the 18th century which is characterised by its hostility to Shiism, Sufism and religious innovation.¹³

II – The evolution of Balkan Islam since 1990

The politicisation of Balkan Muslim populations

By fostering the crystallisation of national identities and the emergence of new elites, the Communist regimes created the conditions necessary for the emergence of Balkan Muslim populations as autonomous political actors. It was not, however, until the crisis which led to the eventual collapse of those regimes in 1990 that this process of politicisation became visible.

In 1989, the Turks' assimilation campaign in Bulgaria and the abolition of Kosovo's autonomy in Serbia resulted in violent riots. The following year, the introduction of a multi-party system led to the creation of political parties that represented the Balkan Muslim populations in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Sandjak, Kosovo, Macedonia and Bulgaria. The sole exception to this was Albania, where the law forbidding the creation of political parties based on ethnicity or religion was enforced.¹⁴

The creation of distinct political parties for Balkan Muslims represented a major break with the pre-1945 period, when traditional leaders generally preferred to negotiate their allegiance to the central government and the political parties in power on a clientelistic basis. This trend is linked to the economic and cultural modernisation of the Balkans. As a rule, the new political parties are headed by new elites that are the product of Communist modernisation and have a secularist orientation.

The main exception is the Party of Democratic Action (SDA) in Bosnia-Herzegovina, which was founded by pan-Islamist activists, who were later joined by intellectual circles and clientelistic networks linked with the former Communist Party. However, although the SDA initially tried to federate all the Muslim populations in the disintegrating Yugoslavia, these parties are constituted on an ethnic rather than a religious basis. Moreover, within the dramatic context of the 1990s, those created at the start of the decade have seen their hegemony contested by several political rivals (except in Bulgaria).

The politicisation of the Balkan Muslims is thus a general phenomenon, but one that has taken different forms depending on the demographic and political context in which it occurred. In this respect, the main distinction to be made is between the Muslim populations of the eastern Balkans and those of the western Balkans, especially the former Yugoslavia. In the eastern Balkans (Bulgaria, Greece and Romania), Muslims are for the most part Turkish-speaking and represent only a minority of the total population within centralised and relatively stable states. The demands made by the political parties representing them have been limited to obtaining national minority status, with the corresponding cultural rights.

In the case of former Yugoslavia, Slavic- and Albanian-speaking Muslims constitute either the majority or a large minority of the population in territorial entities acceding to independence. Having enjoyed wider cultural and political rights in Communist Yugoslavia, and been faced with the violent break-up of the Yugoslav federation, Muslim populations in these areas have made much more radical demands, from requests for territorial autonomy (Sandjak and

Preševo Valley in Southern Serbia) to demands for federalisation of the state (Macedonia) or independence (Kosovo and Bosnia-Herzegovina).

The Yugoslav wars, in fact, resulted in the appearance of two states or quasi-states with a Muslim majority: Bosnia-Herzegovina, divided into two entities; and Kosovo, whose final status remains unresolved. Here again, Albania is a different case, since no recognised political party has ever made specific demands on behalf of the Muslim part of the population and religious divisions have only played a role in political life insofar as they match regional or family allegiances.

However, even if the overall demographic and institutional context is the most important factor in explaining the differences between the political parties representing Balkan Muslims, it is far from the only one.

The attitude of the central government (insofar as it exists) also played an important role in the political developments of the 1990s. In Bulgaria, the authorities' decision to restore the rights of the Turkish minority in 1990 significantly contributed to the easing of ethnic tensions and the integration of the Movement for Freedom and Rights (DPS) into Bulgarian political life. In former Yugoslavia, by contrast, the unyielding position of the Serbian authorities contributed to the SDA's decision to opt for independence for Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1991, and systematic repression in Kosovo largely explains the growing crisis of legitimacy which faced the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK) from 1996 onwards and the challenge it faced from political forces in favour of an armed struggle.

Finally, the experience in Macedonia, where Albanian parties in power are systematically challenged by more "radical" actors, suggests that, in the long run, the sham political integration of Muslim populations can not effectively compensate for their economic and cultural marginalisation, and that the attitude of the political parties that represent them also depends on the internal rivalries within – and the make-up of – each community.

Islam and national identity in the post-Communist Balkans

The politicisation of the Balkan Muslims – and, in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo, their accession to political sovereignty – signals a rejection of the status of non-sovereign minorities which has characterised them since the end of the 19th century. The best illustration of this is the abandonment of the ethnic label "Muslim": in Bosnia-Herzegovina, where it was officially replaced by "Bosniak" (*Bošnjak*) in 1993; in Western Thrace, where the Muslim minority rejects the religious categories set out in the Treaty of Lausanne and demands recognition of its Turkish identity; in Bulgaria and Macedonia, where Slavic-speaking Muslims are still hesitating between national identification with the Orthodox majority, assimilation within the Turkish or Albanian minority, and promotion of a specific Pomak or Torbeshi identity.¹⁵

Within the context of the "return of religion" common to the whole of post-Communist Europe, this rejection of the "Muslim" national label paradoxically goes together with a strengthening of the links between Islam and national identity.

This is particularly obvious in Bosnia-Herzegovina, where the adoption of the national label “Bosniak” went hand in hand with a sustained effort by the SDA and the religious institutions to put Islam at the heart of this new Bosniak national identity. In a country where religion is the main feature which distinguishes the different ethnic communities from each other – and where war has hardened ethnic boundaries – religious monuments and ceremonies play a key role in delineating ethnic territories and mobilising populations.¹⁶

To a lesser extent, a similar reshaping of the links between Islam and national identity can be found in the Albanian-speaking area. On the one hand, the events of the post-Communist period have made the Albanians of Kosovo and Macedonia (almost exclusively Sunni Muslims who have maintained closer links with Turkey) the new driving force of Albanian nationalism. On the other, in Albania – as in former Yugoslavia – the anti-Ottoman (and even anti-Islamic) dimension of classical Albanian nationalist ideology has been challenged by some religious and secular intellectuals who maintain that conversion to Islam has in fact protected the Albanians from Serbian or Greek assimilation.¹⁷

Whilst sometimes motivated by a desire to “re-Islamise” Balkan Muslims, this strengthening of the links between Islam and national identity has instead led to a “nationalisation” of Islam. In no case have the ethnic boundaries that divide the Balkan Muslims have been overcome, as shown by the violence against Roma and Bosniaks in Kosovo after 1999 or the territorial and ethnic break-up of Islamic religious institutions in former Yugoslavia.

In regions where the political parties representing Muslim populations pursue autonomous or irredentist projects, an unprecedented phenomenon has also appeared: namely, the administrative boundaries of the religious institutions do not coincide anymore with state boundaries. In Serbia, for example, the mufti of Novi Pazar (Sandjak) is attached to the Islamic Community of Bosnia-Herzegovina, whilst the *jama'ats* (local assemblies of believers) of the Preševo Valley do not recognise the authority of the mufti of Belgrade.

The new administrative boundaries thus reflect a shift in the political allegiance of Islamic religious institutions to the detriment of central government, and are exposing hidden nationalist agendas. The politicisation of Balkan Muslims has also had one further consequence; namely, increasing political rivalries within their religious institutions, which can result in serious crises.

Balkan Islam between institutional renewal and internal diversification

The use of religious institutions for nationalist and political purposes sheds light on the true nature and limits of the “revival of Islam” that many experts are talking about. The increased role played by religious actors in the public arena, due to the lifting of the former restrictions on their activities and a wider redefinition of the relationship between religion and politics, does not put into question deeper socio-cultural trends such as the decline in religious practice or the individualisation of faith. Moreover, this “return of religion” is not limited to Balkan Muslims, but is perceptible all over post-Communist Europe.¹⁸ It is

against this background that the transformation of Balkan Islam since 1990 has to be considered.

The revival of Islamic religious institutions, already perceptible in Yugoslavia in the 1970s, is particularly evident in Bulgaria (where they stagnated until the end of the 1980s) and in Albania (where all religious activity was forbidden between 1967 and 1990). This revival can be seen in the construction of new mosques, the opening of *madrasas* and higher Islamic academic institutions, and the burgeoning of religious publications.

Islamic religious institutions maintain close links with the state, thanks to Islam's status as an "historic religion", and through the state departments or secretariats for religious affairs which still exist in most Balkan states. At the same time, however, democratisation processes are threatening the monopoly that religious institutions previously enjoyed, *de jure* and *de facto*, over religious life. Political parties and cultural associations created after 1990 tried to organise certain religious events and even collect the *zaka'at* for themselves, while diverse Sufi orders, proselytising movements and militant networks took advantage of the opening up of borders to establish themselves in the Balkans.

The very unity of religious institutions is being endangered by dissenting imams and *jama'ats*, and by the multiplication of political, doctrinal and personal rivalries. These rivalries have sometimes ended in legal proceedings or violent clashes between rival factions, and the post-Communist period has been marked by several crises, such as the break-up of the Islamic Community of Yugoslavia in April 1993; the recurrent and open rifts in the Islamic Communities of Bulgaria and in Macedonia; and the assassination of Salih Tivari, Secretary of the Islamic Community of Albania, in January 2003.

In all the Balkan countries except Greece, the collapse of the Communist regimes led to an increased role for religious actors in the public arena. This did not, however, mean the restoration of the Islamic religious institutions to their historical structuring function. The reintroduction of Sharia courts was not, for instance, seriously envisaged anywhere, and the restoration of the *waqfs* raises considerable legal and practical problems. In most Balkan countries, the educational system remains strictly secular – there are, for example, several instances of young girls being excluded from secondary schools for wearing the veil in Albania and Kosovo. In Kosovo, as in Macedonia, the main Albanian parties did not support the Islamic religious institutions' demand for the introduction of religious education in public schools. The situation is different in Bosnia-Herzegovina, where the wearing of the veil is permitted in secondary schools and universities, and religious education was semi-mandatory during the war.

But, whilst barracks and schools have become the main places for the implementation of authoritarian re-Islamisation policies promoted by the SDA and the Islamic Community, the few tentative steps which have been made to extend these policies to the private sphere (*fatwas against* the consumption of alcohol; campaigns against mixed marriages or the celebration of Christmas, etc.) have been strongly resisted by the Bosnian population.

The increased visibility of Islam in the Balkans is thus not tantamount to a “re-Islamisation” of Muslims in the region. Moreover, there are still significant differences in just how religious they are, from the rather low level among the Albanians of Albania and the Bosnians of Bosnia-Herzegovina to the high levels in Western Thrace, Macedonia and Kosovo. Nor is there any direct link between the level of religiosity of the Muslim populations, the legal status of Islamic religious institutions and the extent to which Islam is central to their politicisation, as is particularly well illustrated by the case of Bosnia-Herzegovina, where a deeply secularised Muslim population has brought a tiny minority of pan-Islamist activists to power.

Finally, the post-Communist period has been marked less by a genuine religious revival than by the reshaping and diversification of religious practices. Certainly, there is an increased interest (and participation) in the most important moments of religious life, but their strictly religious character is becoming blurred by new national, cultural, or festive, dimensions.

III- The Muslim world’s presence in the Balkans

The Muslim world and the geopolitical redrawing of the Balkans

Between 1945 and 1990, the Balkan Muslims were condemned to isolation, with the partial exception of Yugoslavia where, from the 1960s, new links developed between the Islamic Community and the Muslim world. Contacts established at that time between Bosnian pan-Islamist activists and other Islamist actors played a key role in later developments.

From 1990, the reintegration of Balkan Islam within global Islam took various forms. A wide array of economic, political and religious actors from the Muslim world arrived in the Balkans and Islamic religious institutions benefited from extensive material help in opening new *madrasas* and building mosques. But it was the outbreak of war in Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1992 that enabled these actors to exert some influence on the redrawing of the Balkans geopolitical map.

Between 1992 and 1995, Muslim countries launched numerous diplomatic initiatives in support of Bosnia-Herzegovina, and provided it with material support which had an important influence on the war. In 1992, Iran began sending weapons and military instructors to the Bosnian army. In 1993-1994, it was joined by other Muslim countries such as Turkey and Pakistan, whilst financial support from the Persian Gulf monarchies amounted to several billion dollars. At the same time, several thousand foreign *mujahiddins* were incorporated into the “*el-Mudžahid*” unit in 1993.¹⁹ As for the Albanian fighters who had come from Kosovo or from the diaspora, most of them fought in the “*Handžar divizija*”,²⁰ a military unit created in Croatia in 1991 but based in central Bosnia from 1992.

Nevertheless, the mobilisation of the Muslim world in favour of Bosnia-Herzegovina had its limits. Some Muslim countries, such as Indonesia and Libya, sided with the “non-aligned” rump Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro), while the support from Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey resulted

less from disinterested solidarity than from a struggle for influence between regional powers. These states took care not to enter into open conflict with the Western great powers and even the delivery of Iranian weapons was made with the implicit approval of the United States. Moreover, the Muslim world's support did less to alter the military situation on the ground than the balance of power within the Muslim/Bosniak community itself. The SDA's leaders never stopped playing the American card to counter Serb military superiority. At the same time, however, the "Muslim brigades" linked to the party were trained by Iran, and arms and military equipment were distributed to the regular units of the Bosnian army in exchange for their political allegiance.

From 1996 onwards, several factors contributed to reduce the role of the Muslim world in the redrawing of the Balkans' geopolitical map. The signature of the Dayton Peace Agreement and the arrival of US troops in Bosnia-Herzegovina in December 1995, on the one hand, and the bomb attacks in Nairobi and Dar-es-Salam in August 1998 and the beginning of the "war against terror", on the other, encouraged the US to fight Iran's influence and that of the "Arab-Afghan" networks in the region. The 11 September 2001 attacks only reinforced this trend.

One more specific factor should be taken into account: namely, the outbreak of new armed conflicts in Kosovo and Macedonia. The 1998-1999 war in Kosovo did not result in a strong mobilisation of the Muslim world, for at least two reasons. Firstly, the leaders of the main Albanian parties and of the Kosovo Liberation Army (UÇK) are secularist and did not call for the Muslim world's support. Secondly, Albanian separatism and the NATO intervention provoked rather mixed reactions in Muslim countries, which attach great importance to the principles of national sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Furthermore, while many Kosovo Albanians who had fought in Bosnia-Herzegovina joined the UÇK, only a few dozen *mujahiddins* from Bosnia-Herzegovina itself or from the Muslim world followed them. Grouped together in small and largely autonomous units, they played only a marginal military role, and sometimes faced UÇK hostility – although they appear to have played a more important role in the guerrilla movements that appeared later in southern Serbia and Macedonia.

The Muslim world's influence on the evolution of Balkan Islam

Despite some scenarios envisaging the appearance of a "Green Axis" in the Balkans, the role of the Muslim world in the redrawing of the region's geopolitical map has remained limited and national interests have prevailed over religious solidarity.

The arrival in the Balkans of Islamic NGOs and *mujahiddins* linked to "Arab-Afghan" networks also gave rise to alarmist rumours about the transformation of the Balkans into a "bridge-head" for Islamic terrorism and the creeping "wahhabisation" of Balkan Islam. These rumours grew after the September 11 attacks, even though the terrorist strikes were condemned by all the Balkan Muslims' political and religious leaders. It is important, therefore, to reassess the role of the "jihadist" and "wahhabite" networks in the Balkans,

and place them within the wider context of the interactions taking place between Balkan Islam and global Islam.

The presence of “al-Qaeda” in the Balkans is evidenced by the fact that several of Osama Bin Laden’s “lieutenants” and some of the terrorists responsible for the attacks in New York and Madrid have been staying a while in the region. Bosnia-Herzegovina and, to a lesser extent, Albania, appear to have served – and still serve – as sanctuaries for “al-Qaeda” members and for other radical Islamists wanted in their own countries.²¹ (This could explain why “al-Qaeda” has never attacked Western interests in the Balkans.)

Foreign *mujahiddins* have also succeeded in recruiting some followers among the local Muslim youth. Several hundred young Bosniaks fought in the “*el-Mudžahid*” unit during the war, before creating the Organisation of the Active Islamic Youth (OAIO) in 1996. This process was replicated, on a smaller scale, in Kosovo, where the main religious unit – the “*Abu Bekir Sadik*” unit in Kosovska Mitrovica – was created by an Albanian veteran of “*el-Mudžahid*” unit.

However, the threat represented by these local “jihadists” should not be overstated. It is true that several OAIO members were convicted for a wave of anti-Croat bomb attacks in central Bosnia in 1997-1998, and former Albanian *mujahiddins* apparently took part in the anti-Serbian riots of March 2004. In both cases, however, the impact of local “jihadists” on the political climate and interethnic relations remains marginal. Likewise, while some of them left for Chechnya, none have so far been implicated in any anti-western terrorist attack or in the armed struggle in Iraq.

For the *mujahiddins* who came to the Balkans, holy war (*jihad*) and religious proselytism (*da'wa*) belong together. In a similar way, Islamic NGOs often use humanitarian aid as an incentive to encourage people to fulfil their religious duties (wearing the veil, attending religious education classes, etc.).²² All of them contribute to the circulation of new religious doctrines coming from the Arab world and challenge the former monopoly of Hanafi *madhhab*, as well as the religious legitimacy of the heterodox practices of Balkan Islam. These new doctrines are also spread through books and pamphlets translated from Arabic, videos and websites, and the young *ulema* returning from Islamic universities in the Persian Gulf. This new generation of imams plays an increasingly important role in local religious life through their preaching in mosques and the teaching they provide in the *madrasas* funded by the Gulf states.

Numerous experts are labelling this “imported Islam” as “wahhabi Islam”, contrasting it with a supposedly heterodox and tolerant “local Islam”.²³ But the spectre of a “wahhabisation” of Balkan Islam conceals what is really at stake. In fact, the representatives of these new religious doctrines do not define themselves as “Wahhabis”, and are sometimes openly hostile to the Saudi regime. The label “neo-Salafists” – which refers to religious movements that demand a return to the religion of the “pious ancestors”²⁴ – would thus be more appropriate and is a reminder that, from the start of the 20th century, the development of Balkan Islam has been influenced by various religious doctrines from the Muslim world.

Furthermore, there is an important difference between the para-state actors linked to oil monarchies, such as the universities of the Gulf states or the Saudi aid committees in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo, and the non-state actors linked to the “Arab-Afghan” networks. Whilst the former favour developing links with Islamic religious institutions, the latter prefer to support Islamic centres or youth movements outside the official institutions.

Most of the conflicts that have occurred since 1990 within the Islamic religious institutions in various Balkan countries have given rise to speculation about a confrontation between “modernists” and “Wahhabis”. But this speculation, often fuelled covertly by one of the factions involved, hides much more complex struggles for influence between political parties or between personal and regional cliques.

It is true that all the Islamic religious institutions in the Balkans depend on Muslim countries for financial support, and these in turn have recruited powerful local supporters. However, the neo-Salafists have not taken control of the religious institutions – far from it – and they face hostility from a large majority of Balkan Muslims, both believers and non-believers, because the religious practices they promote are regarded as retrograde and contrary to local tradition.

An excessive focus on “Wahhabi” influences thus masks the fact that they too are part of the internal diversification of Balkan Islam and are confronted with other external influences, most notably from Turkey and its multiple religious movements and actors.

Turkey as a regional power and “second homeland”

Turkish political and religious actors play a very specific role in the Balkans, because of Turkey’s geographical proximity and its links with the region’s Muslim populations. Whilst other Muslim countries regard the Balkans as important primarily for symbolic reasons, Turkey’s Balkan policy is based on two very concrete elements: its conflict with Greece and its bid for EU membership.

This explains why Turkey has signed economic and military cooperation agreements with most of the Balkan countries and why, to an even greater extent than other Muslim countries, it got involved in the Balkan crises of the 1990s only with the approval of the United States and within the framework of the United Nations and NATO.

At the same time, Turkey has developed its own religious policy in the Balkans, through the Secretariat for Religious Affairs (*Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı*). This state body has established close links with the Islamic religious institutions in the region, and provides them with significant material support directly or indirectly (grants for students visiting Turkish universities, funding for local imams’ salaries, etc.).

In this way, Turkey is trying to exert some control over the development of Balkan Islam and counter the growing influence of the Arab world. In 1995, one of the aims of the creation of an Islamic Euro-Asian *Shurah* (Assembly) –

which brought together the Islamic religious institutions of Turkey, the Balkans, the Caucasus and central Asia – in 1995 was to compete with the Islamic Council for Eastern Europe, created four years earlier with the support of Saudi Arabia and the Islamic World League (*Rabitah al-Alam al-Islami*).

At the religious level, however, the most active Turkish actors are without doubt non-state ones. The neo-Sufi movement of the *fethullahci* has opened several Turkish colleges in the Balkans, and various Turkish Sufi orders have developed close links with their Balkan counterparts. Similarly, the main Turkish Islamist and nationalist parties maintain regular contact with some political and religious representatives in the Balkan Muslims.

The specific role played by Turkish political and religious actors cannot be understood without taking into account the fact that Turkey continues to represent a “second homeland” for many Balkan Muslims. This is especially true for Turkish minorities, which retain strong institutional, cultural and personal ties with the country.

However, this does not prevent the Balkan Turks, when appropriate, from stressing their European identity or denouncing the “backwardness” of their Anatolian “brothers”. Identification with Turkey is also much weaker among Slavic- and Albanian-speaking Muslims, who stress their indigenous nature. Yet the historical ties, cultural affinities and commercial exchanges that connect them with Turkey – and the fact that a large part of the Turkish population originates from the Balkans – explain why Turkey is also perceived as a “second homeland” by numerous non-Turkish-speaking Muslims in Macedonia, Kosovo and Sandjak. If only for this reason, any reflection on the Balkan Muslims’ role in the emergence of a European Islam cannot be separated from the issue of the EU’s enlargement to Turkey.

IV – The place of Balkan Islam in Europe

Islam in the Balkans and the EU: convergent or divergent development?

Before returning to the potential interactions between developments specific to the Balkans Muslims, EU enlargement and the possible emergence of a European Islam, it is important to look at what brings Balkan Muslims closer to their counterparts in Western Europe – and what separates them.

There is a widespread belief that the former are much less religious than the latter. In reality, there are wider variations in the level of religiosity among Balkan Muslims themselves; for example, between the Albanians of Albania and those of Kosovo and Macedonia, between rural and urban populations, or between older and younger generations – and similar differences exist in Western Europe between first and second-generation migrants. Likewise, the increased visibility of Islam is a general phenomenon all over Europe, due to its improved institutional recognition within the context of the settlement of sizeable Muslim populations in Western Europe or the restoration of religious freedoms in Eastern Europe, its use for ethnic and political purposes, and the transformation of religious practices themselves.

The differences between the religious practices of Muslims in the Balkans and those in Western Europe are thus more qualitative than quantitative, and also reflect some major differences in the form and degree of the institutionalisation of Islam.

In former Yugoslavia, for example, the existence of a relatively dense network of mosques and pilgrimage places facilitates the organisation of large religious gatherings. Conversely, wearing the veil at school or work is probably more difficult in Albania, Bulgaria and Greece than in the UK or Germany. Finally, the overall diversification of religious practices and appearance of numerous religious associations and proselytising movements should not conceal important differences in way institutional and legal frameworks have developed.

In Western Europe, many *jama'ats* and local religious associations are still mono-ethnic and autonomous, despite the development of larger Islamic federations, Sufi orders and proselytising movements, and the setting up of representative bodies in some EU countries. In the Balkans, there has been a rapid increase in the activities of Islamic religious institutions but, at the same time, the monopoly they previously exerted over religious life has been challenged by a wide array of other actors.

In a sense, Islam is becoming increasingly institutionalised in the EU countries, whilst its institutional frameworks are weakening in the Balkan countries. These developments should, however, be put into perspective. Since the starting points are different, apparently divergent processes can bring about a similar result – that is, the existence of representative bodies which play an important regulatory role in religious life, but cannot pretend to exercise a monopoly any more.

Bosnia-Herzegovina is a good illustration of this tendency: after requiring the exclusive right to use the label “Islamic” and the banning of neo-Salafist movements such as the OAIQ, the Islamic Community developed, in the early 2000s, a *modus vivendi* with these movements which, for their part, were compelled to moderate their language and seek the protection of religious institutions after the September 11 attacks.

The influence of the institutional and political contexts on the forms of mobilisation of Muslims in the Balkans and in Western Europe is even more evident. Put simply, in Western Europe, the Islamic associations and movements that have appeared in recent decades have made religious demands that may go as far as calling for the recognition of a specific family law, but they never challenge the political institutions – and even less the territorial integrity – of existing nation states. In the Balkans, by contrast, political parties representing Muslims are constituted on an ethnic basis and make national claims which may go as far as demanding territorial autonomy or outright independence.

Muslims in Western Europe want to be recognised as a legitimate and established religious community (although this has not been possible in many Member States, not least because of differences within the Muslim community itself), which means that their ethnic origin loses some of its political significance. Their counterparts in the Balkans reject their

traditional status as non-sovereign religious minorities in order to identify themselves with an already existing nation state (the Albanians of Kosovo and Macedonia, and the Turks of Bulgaria and Western Thrace) or to develop their own national project (the Muslims/Bosniaks of Bosnia-Herzegovina).

These important differences not only relate to the “indigenous” or “non-indigenous” nature of Muslim populations, but also to the fact that, in the Balkans, the creation of nation states is still an ongoing process, whilst in Western Europe, European integration favours the emergence of a multicultural or even a transnational definition of the political community. Religious actors and symbols therefore play a very different role in the mobilisation of Muslim populations. In Western Europe, the defence of common claims favours a rapprochement between mono-ethnic religious associations. In the Balkans, Islamic religious institutions are destabilised by the strengthening of distinct ethnic and national identities.

Similarly, in the EU countries, conflicts with the state crystallise around the implementation of certain religious precepts (the wearing of the veil, gender separation, *halal* food, etc.) in public institutions such as schools or hospitals. In the Balkans, conflicts with the state are focused on the status of national languages or the teaching of “national subjects” like history and literature, whilst polemics over religious issues play only a secondary role and rather reflect socio-cultural and political rifts within the Muslim communities themselves.

Generally speaking, the debates on Islam that divide Muslim communities in the Balkans are not the same as those in Western Europe: in fact, they are often more reminiscent of those taking place in Turkey. Whilst Muslims in Western Europe have to “reinvent” themselves as a religious minority, Balkan Muslims are partly brought back to the challenges faced by countries with a Muslim majority: in Albania because Muslims have been in the majority since 1912; in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo because these new states or quasi-states have also a Muslim majority; and in Bulgaria and Greece because the Turkish minorities in these two countries are influenced by political and religious developments in neighbouring Turkey.

This certainly does not mean that the creation of “Islamic republics” in the Balkans is on the cards – even the SDA’s founders have never envisaged such an option, both because of the regional geopolitical balance of power and their own ideological ambivalence. More generally, awareness among Balkan Muslims that they live in a multi-faith region and represent a “cultural minority” in Europe remains strong, as does their desire to participate fully in the European integration process.

However, in cases where Muslims constitute a majority of the population, Islam’s place in redefining the relationship between the state and religious actors, between the public and the private sphere, becomes an issue for the whole of society – hence the slogan of the Bosnian *Reis-ul-Ulema*, Mustafa Cerić: “For a secular state, against a secular society.”²⁵

The diasporas: between political radicalism and religious invisibility?

Having clarified the specific characteristics of contemporary Balkan Islam, situated mid-way between the Islam of Western Europe and that of Turkey, it is useful to examine the relationship of the Balkan Muslim diasporas with their communities of origin, and with the other Muslims living in Western Europe.

Temporary or permanent migration is not a new experience for Balkan Muslims. Between 1878 and 1945, more than 2,500,000 *muhacirs* (refugees) left the Balkans for Istanbul and Anatolia, and populations of Balkan origin are a major component of contemporary Turkish society. In the 1960s, the signature of framework agreements enabled Greek and Yugoslav migrants to work in Germany, Austria, Switzerland and the Scandinavian countries. In the following decades, the migrant flows of Balkan Muslims reoriented themselves gradually toward Western Europe and, to a lesser extent, North America and Australia.

Greece's admission into the EU in 1981 and the crisis which faced the Communist regimes at the end of the 1980s accentuated this development. In the 1990s, the violent break-up of Yugoslavia prompted the arrival of several hundred thousand Bosnian and Kosovan refugees in West European countries (Germany, Scandinavia, Switzerland, Belgium, etc.). Many of them settled permanently in these countries, despite the return policies and the forced repatriation measures implemented at the end of the 1990s. At the same time, Albania saw the legal or illegal emigration of 800,000 people, representing almost a quarter of its population, to other European countries, with most going to Greece and Italy. As more than two-thirds of Albanian citizens have an Islamic religious background, this meant the arrival of some 500,000 "sociological Muslims"²⁶ in the EU.

This explains why the 1990s were marked by the creation of numerous Bosniak, Albanian and (West Thracian) Turkish cultural associations, and attempts by political parties such as the SDA and LDK to control the mobilisation of their respective diasporas, beginning with fund-raising and the collection of humanitarian aid.

The fierce struggles for influence that followed are also rooted in older ideological divides. Sometimes, political refugees who arrived in Western Europe at the end of the Second World War or during the Communist period took charge of the mobilisation of the diasporas. This was particularly true of the Albanian diaspora, in which several extreme-right and Marxist-Leninist organisations were active. At the end of the 1990s, the latter organised their own fund-raising and contributed actively to the development of the Albanian guerrilla movements in Kosovo and Macedonia.

However, the fact that some ultra-nationalist actors played a key role in the mobilisation of the Balkan Muslim diasporas does not mean that they are, as a whole, more radical than their communities of origin. On the contrary, the disproportionate influence of small groups of political activists also reflects the fact that Balkan Muslims who have settled in Western Europe are first and foremost concerned with their integration into their new country. Diasporic

associations and networks have also played a mediatory role between their communities of origin and the European institutions.

There are other distinct features of Balkan Muslim diasporas at the religious level. In the 1990s, numerous Bosnian and Albanian Islamic centres were opened in Western Europe, reflecting both the numerical growth of the Balkan Muslim diasporas and the “return of religion” already noted in the Balkans. Nevertheless, within the context of the diaspora, this “return of religion” has not been accompanied by increased visibility for Islam.

This “religious invisibility” of the Balkan Muslim diasporas, which contrasts with the attitude of other Muslim communities in Western Europe, can be explained in several ways.

Firstly, Balkan Muslims already had experience of being a religious minority prior to their migration to Western Europe. Secondly, many Balkan Muslims are willing to dissimulate their Muslim identity and thus to disassociate themselves from other “non-European” Muslims. This explains why Balkan Muslims in the diaspora have relatively little contact with other “non-European” Muslims, with the partial exception of the Turkish community.²⁷ Finally, in the Balkans themselves, the increased visibility of Islam cannot be disassociated from its “nationalisation”. In Western Europe, however, the priority given to the “national cause” prompts community leaders to put aside any religious claim that might compromise them in the eyes of the local authorities or public opinion .

Towards the formation of a pan-European Islamic public space?

The socio-cultural and historic features specific to the Muslims in the Balkans and in Western Europe have led numerous outside experts to contrast the “indigenous” Islam of the Balkans with the “non-indigenous” Islam of Western Europe. However, the presence in Western Europe of second- and third-generation Muslims of non-European origin and of sizeable Balkan Muslim diasporas puts this distinction into question. Moreover, such a distinction conceals some phenomena that, although of limited importance, could in the long run contribute to the formation of a pan-European Islamic public space.

The oldest of these phenomena is the intermediary role played by some religious activists originating from the Balkans. In several west European countries, such as Belgium and Austria, the Balkan Muslims who arrived after the Second World War played an important role in the opening of the first mosques in the 1950s. In the following decades, it was, by contrast, *Gastarbeiter* (economic migrants) who had first visited Turkish or Arab mosques who created the first Yugoslav Islamic centres in Germany and established links with various Sufi orders and proselytising movements. During the Communist era, these religious activists in Western Europe played an essential role in maintaining contacts between Balkan Muslim communities and the Muslim world, and the transfer of new religious doctrines and practices to their countries of origin. Their importance declined, however, when the opening of borders enabled religious actors from the Muslim world to establish direct contacts in the Balkans.

Since the 1990s, other phenomena have increased in importance. The break-up of Yugoslavia resulted in some 120,000 Bosniaks and Albanians living in Slovenia, Croatia and narrow Serbia in a “semi-diasporic” situation similar, in many respects, to that of the Muslims in Western Europe. At the same time, other Balkan countries have themselves become immigration countries: for example, tens of thousands of Pakistani, Egyptian and North African workers live in Athens, where they rub shoulders with 15,000 Muslims from Western Thrace, and Romania now counts more foreign Muslim residents – mostly Arab students and businessmen – than local Muslim citizens.²⁸

The distinction between “indigenous” and “non-indigenous” Islam is thus becoming blurred, even though there is little contact between Balkan Muslims and migrants from the Muslim world. In addition, since the beginning of the 1990s, Balkan Muslims living in a “semi-diasporic” situation in cities such as Athens and Zagreb are playing a growing political and religious role. In Zagreb, in particular, the mosque that opened in 1987 played an active part in the creation of the SDA in 1990 and was an important bridge between Bosnia-Herzegovina and the Muslim world throughout the war period. The fact that Mustafa Cerić, the imam of the Islamic Centre of Chicago from 1981 to 1986 and the main imam of the Zagreb mosque from 1986 to 1993, became then the *Reis-ul-Ulema* of Bosnia-Herzegovina underlines the importance of the diasporic experience in the most recent development of Balkan Islam.

Mustafa Cerić is also the only Islamic religious leader from the Balkans who actively participates in pan-European forums such as the European Council for *Fatwa* and Research²⁹ and stresses the need to federate the Muslim communities at the European level. He is therefore encouraging the formation of a pan-European Islamic public space, which is still in its infancy: most religious authors whose work has been translated into the Balkan languages are dealing with the challenges faced by countries with a Muslim majority – despite the growing popularity of authors like Jusuf al-Qaradawi or Tariq Ramadan – and the intellectual legacy of Balkan Islam is completely unknown in Western Europe. It therefore remains an open question whether the possible formation of such a pan-European Islamic public space is more likely to result from the activities of pan-European religious forums or rather be facilitated by the European institutions to which the Muslims of the Balkans and Western Europe turn to raise their problems and present their demands.

At the end of the 1980s, the Turkish minority in Western Thrace was the first Balkan Muslim community to seek the help of the European institutions to resolve its conflict with the Greek authorities. Several delegations from the Council of Europe and the European Parliament visited Western Thrace, and the European Court of Human Rights required the Greek courts to reconsider the sentence passed on the “illegal muftis” elected by the Turkish minority. The associations of Western Thracian Turks in Germany played a key role in these European lobbying strategies, which demonstrates once again that diasporic actors can fulfil a double function of innovation and mediation.³⁰

More generally, the pressure exerted by the Council of Europe, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the European Court of Human Rights has destabilised the Greek nation-state

model, as illustrated by the controversy over the existence of Slavic-speaking national minorities or the mention of religion on identity cards.

Similar processes can be found elsewhere in the Balkans. European institutions are very much involved in the development of legal guarantees for the national minorities or constituent nations of the Balkan countries. The signature of the 1997 European Convention on Minority Rights and the appointment of Turkish ministers in 2001 by Bulgaria were, for example, important steps towards official recognition of the Turkish national minority. Furthermore, while Greece, strengthened by its membership of the EU, can ignore certain OSCE or European Court of Human Rights' injunctions, other Balkan states cannot.

Within this context, the trend for some Muslim political and religious actors to turn to European institutions is no longer limited to Greece. The European Court of Human Rights sanctioned the Bulgarian authorities for intervening in the designation of the Grand Mufti in 1995 and for banning the activities of a several Islamic NGOs in 2000. Such judicial decisions raise questionmarks over the control traditionally exercised by Balkan states over Islamic religious institutions, as well as these institutions' monopoly on the religious life of Muslim populations.

Other decisions have also blurred the distinction between "indigenous" and "non-indigenous" Islam and have destabilised some legal principles on which the European geopolitical order is based. In Croatia, for example, Bosniaks and Albanians have been granted the status of "new national minorities"³¹ following pressure from the OSCE and the Council of Europe, and this despite the fact that this status fits badly with the notion of 'national minority' promoted by these regional organisations. Thus, everything indicates that the integration of the Balkan countries in an enlarged Europe should contribute to the ongoing redefinition of the political status of the Balkan Muslim populations and the relationship between the Balkan states and Islamic religious institutions.

Conclusions: Balkan Islam, European integration and the Turkish factor

In the last few decades, Balkan Muslim populations have left behind their traditional status as non-sovereign religious minority (dating from the post-Ottoman period) and affirmed themselves as autonomous political actors. This development, precipitated by the collapse of the Communist regimes in 1990, has resulted in the creation of political parties that represent these populations and voice their national claims, and led to a growing "nationalisation" of Islam and Islamic religious institutions.

Together with the restoration of religious freedoms, this political and national awakening of the Balkan Muslims explains the increased visibility of Islam in the regions. This has not, however, meant the restoration of the Islamic religious institutions to their historical structuring role, nor to a real increase in religiosity among the Balkan Muslims. Quite the reverse. The religious institutions' former monopoly over religious life is threatened by the

emergence of new religious actors and the “nationalisation” of Islam has not prevented either the diversification of religious practices nor the individualisation of faith.

Such political and religious developments have been encouraged by the reintegration of Balkan Islam within global Islam and, more particularly, by the arrival in the Balkans of diverse actors from the Muslim world. The latter have not only played a significant role in the political struggles for power within each Balkan Muslim community, but have also contributed to the spread of new religious influences – be they the neo-Salafist doctrines coming from the Gulf States or the neo-Sufi movements coming from Turkey.

Finally, the important differences between Muslims in the Balkans and Western Europe in relation to political mobilisation and religious organisation do not preclude the existence of links that foreshadow the possible emergence of a pan-European Islamic public space through, among others things, contacts between Balkan Muslim diasporas and other Muslim communities living in Western Europe, the creation of pan-European religious forums, and the common resort to institutions such as the European Court of Human Rights and the European Parliament.

Against this background, one can speculate about the potential impact of EU enlargement on the Balkan countries. It is clear that the future political development of Muslim – and non-Muslim – communities in the region depends, above all, on the settlement of the conflicts currently on hold and an overall improvement in the economic situation. EU enlargement, whether in the direct form of membership or through an indirect form of transitory “semi-protectorates”, only makes sense if it contributes effectively to achieving these two objectives.

The way the Bosniaks in Bosnia-Herzegovina or the Albanians in Kosovo and Macedonia define their national agenda, for example, might be quite different depending on whether or not they regard the EU as an institutional framework capable of ensuring their physical security and their economic prosperity – as indirectly confirmed, despite its final failure, by the referendum held in Cyprus in April 2004 on the island’s reunification.³²

With regard to the development of Balkan Islam, EU enlargement to the region will inevitably influence current processes and debates. On the one hand, the participation of Balkan Muslims in the European integration process will probably once again give precedence to issues specific to Muslim religious minorities, especially if EU enlargement goes together with the settlement of the conflicts currently on hold in the region and prevents the creation of Muslim “ghettos” in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo. On the other hand, the European integration process can only accelerate the redefinition of the relationship between the Balkan states and the region’s “historic religions” and, more broadly, between political and religious actors, and the public and private spheres.

Such changes will probably favour a gradual convergence of the institutional frameworks and intellectual challenges with which Muslims of the Balkans and of Western Europe are confronted, and thus the formation of a pan-European

Islamic public space. This, in turn, could lead to a re-discovery of an intellectual legacy that is specific to Balkan Muslims, but could nevertheless contribute to the formulation of a European Islam.

The question of EU enlargement to the Balkans, and of its impact on Balkan Islam, is inseparable from the discussions surrounding Turkey's bid for Union membership. Turkey is part of the same post-Ottoman area as most of the Balkan countries, it is directly involved in the Cyprus conflict (whose features are quite similar to those of other Balkan conflicts), and it favours a definition of the relationship between the state and religious institutions that recalls, in many ways, that in use in several Balkan states.

Within this context, it appears that Turkish membership of the EU could be a stabilising factor in the region. Turkey behaved with great moderation during the Bulgarian crisis of 1989-1991 and the Yugoslav wars of 1992-1999 and, more recently, it has made considerable concessions in an effort to resolve the Cyprus conflict. The recognition of Turkey as a rightful European state would also considerably weaken the ideologies that deny Balkan Muslims a legitimate presence in Europe, and calm fears among these populations of encirclement and precariousness, which are exploited by some political and religious extremists.

This potentially stabilising role of Turkish membership of the EU is perceptible at the religious level as well. This does not mean Turkish "secularism" is a model that can be exported to other European countries: on the contrary, this model is itself experiencing a process of crisis and redefinition that Turkish entry into the Union would only accelerate.

Yet, in a more indirect and informal way, Turkish membership would have a considerable impact on the development of Balkan Islam and the emergence of a European Islam. Firstly, it would encourage exchanges between Balkan Muslim and Turkish religious actors and counterbalance the neo-Salafist influences coming from the Persian Gulf countries. Secondly, by including Turkish Islam in the wider problem of Muslim communities as "cultural minorities" in Europe (even though Islam is clearly in the majority in Turkey), Turkish membership would bring about major changes in the way that the questions about the Muslim presence in Europe are formulated, and how European Muslims themselves address this issue.

In the end, both the role Balkan Muslims will play in the formulation of a European Islam and the place that they will occupy in the political imagination of an enlarged Europe will largely depend on Turkish membership of the EU.

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Endnotes

¹ The notion of a “European Islam” refers to the creation of a public space common to the various Muslim communities living in Europe and, under the influence of their integration into non-Muslim and largely secularised societies, to the emergence of new interpretations and practices of Islam. See, among others, Jorgen NIELSEN, *Towards a European Islam*, Basingstoke: Macmillan (1999); Olivier ROY, *Vers un islam européen*, Paris: Esprit (1999). For a critique of the notion of a “European Islam”, see Alain ROUSSILLON, “‘Islam d’Europe’ or ‘Musulmans européens’: reconduire l’exception musulmane?”, *Cahiers d’étude sur la Méditerranée orientale et le monde turco-iranien*, n° 34 (July 2002), pp. 331-338.

² The Treaty of Lausanne was signed in 1923, at the end of the Greek-Turkish war, and organized the exchange of populations between Greece and Turkey along religious criteria. It also defined the rights of the few populations spared by this exchange (the Muslims of Western Thrace and the Greek Orthodox of Istanbul). The Treaty established for the Muslim minority of Western Thrace a bilingual education system and granted to the muftis appointed by the Greek authorities large competences in matters of family law.

³ Henceforth to be referred to as ‘Macedonia’.

⁴ For further reading on the religious dimensions of the Yugoslav wars, see Thomas BREMER (Hg), *Religion und Nation im Krieg auf dem Balkan*, Bonn: Justitia et Pax (1996); Vjekoslav PERICA, *Balkan Idols: Religion and Nationalism in Yugoslav States*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (2002).

⁵ Throughout this paper, the terms “Muslims” or “Muslim populations” apply to those people or populations having a Muslim family or cultural background (so-called “sociological Muslims”), irrespective of their actual level of religiosity. For further reading on Balkan Islam, see Alexandre POPOVIC, *L’islam balkanique. Les musulmans du sud-est européen dans la période post-ottomane*, Berlin-Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz (1986); Hugh POULTON & Suha TAJI-FAROUKI (eds.), *Muslim Identity and the Balkan State*, London: Hurst (1997); and Xavier BOUGAREL & Nathalie CLAYER (dir.), *Le nouvel Islam balkanique. Les musulmans, acteurs du post-communisme (1990-2000)*, Paris: Maisonneuve & Larose (2001).

⁶ Pomaks are Bulgarian-speaking Muslims. Most of them live in Bulgaria (150 to 200 000 people), but a smaller group of Pomaks (about 30 000) lives in the Greek part of Thrace. There are other Slavic-speaking Muslim populations of this kind, such as the Torbeshi, who speak Macedonian and live in Macedonia (80 to 100000 people), and the Gorani, who speak a dialect similar to Macedonian, and live in southern Kosovo (20 to 30 000 people).

⁷ Sunni Islam has four basic legal schools (*madhhab*). The Hanafi *madhhab*, founded by Abu Hanifa in the 8th century was the official *madhhab* of the Ottoman Empire, and was the only one represented in the Balkans until the 1990s. The neo-Salafists (see note 24) are often considered to be close to the stricter Hanbali *madhhab*, founded by Ahmad ibn Hanbal at the beginning of the 9th century.

⁸ The *Bektashiyya* is a heterodox Sufi order that was well established in Albania, where its followers represented around 15% of the total population before 1945. Alevism is a popular religion, which exists in a number of rural regions of Anatolia and the Balkans, and in some respects resembles Bektashism. The Bektashi and Alevi share a special devotion to Ali, the Prophet Muhammad’s son-in-law, which has led some outside experts to mistakenly consider them as Shia Muslims.

⁹ Since the signature of the Dayton Peace Agreement in December 1995, Bosnia-Herzegovina is officially divided into two constituent entities : the Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina, often referred to as the “Bosniak-Croat Federation” since it is itself divided into ten ethnic cantons (five Bosniak, three Croat and two “mixed” cantons), and the *Republika Srpska* (“Serb Republic”).

¹⁰ See, among others, Ludwig STEINDORFF, “Von der Konfession zur Nation: die Muslime in Bosnien-Herzegowina”, *Südosteuropa-Mitteilungen*, vol. XXXVII, n° 4 (1997), pp. 277-290.

¹¹ See, among others, Nathalie CLAYER, *Religion et nation chez les Albanais XIXe-XXe siècles*, Istanbul: Isis (2003).

¹² Salafism is a school of thought that appeared at the end of the 19th century and wanted to break with blind imitation (*taqlid*) of religious traditions and to revert to the religion of the “pious ancestors” (*al-salaf al-salih*) in order to initiate a new effort at interpretation (*ijtihad*). Salafism has influenced both the religious reformist and secular nationalist movements that appeared in the Muslim world at the beginning of the 20th century and the neo-fundamentalist or neo-Salafist ones, whose influence grew from the 1970s onwards (see note 24).

¹³ Wahhabism became the official religious doctrine of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia when it was founded in 1932.

¹⁴ In 1993, the Albanian authorities refused to register the Islamic Democratic Union Party (PBDI). They did, however, tolerate the creation of the Union Party for the Rights of Man (PBDNJ), which originally represented the Greek minority in Albania.

¹⁵ See note 6.

¹⁶ See Xavier BOUGAREL, “L’islam bosniaque, entre identité culturelle et idéologie politique”, in X. BOUGAREL & N. CLAYER (dir.), *Le nouvel Islam balkanique*, *op.cit.*, pp. 79-132.

¹⁷ See Nathalie CLAYER, “The Issue of the Conversion to Islam in the Restructuring of Albanian Politics and Identities”, in Sylvie GANGLOFF (dir.), *La perception de l’héritage ottoman dans les Balkans*, Paris: L’Harmattan (2005), pp. 95-128.

¹⁸ On the “return of religion” in post-communist Europe see, among others, Patrick MICHEL, “Retour du religieux: la grande illusion”, *Projet*, n° 240 (Winter 1994-1995), pp. 66-73; Miklos TOMKA, “The Changing Social Role of Religion in Eastern and Central Europe: Religion’s Revival and its Contradictions”, *Social Compass*, vol. XLII, n° 1 (March 1995), pp. 17-26.

¹⁹ See Evan KOHLMAN, *Al-Qaida’s Jihad in Europe. The Afghan-Bosnian Network*, Oxford: Berg (2004).

²⁰ The name “*Handžar divizija*” (“Dagger Division”) comes from that of the SS division created in 1943 on the initiative of the mufti of Jerusalem, Amin el-Huseini, with the support of some political and religious leaders of the Bosnian Muslim community.

²¹ See Evan KOHLMAN, *Al-Qaida’s Jihad in Europe*, *op.cit.*

²² See, among others, Jérôme BELLION-JOURDAN, “Les réseaux transnationaux islamiques en Bosnie-Herzégovine”, in X. BOUGAREL & N. CLAYER (dir.), *Le nouvel Islam balkanique*, *op.cit.*, pp. 429-472.

²³ See for example International Crisis Group, *Bin Laden and the Balkans. The Politics of Anti-Terrorism*, Brussels / Sarajevo: ICG (2001); Stephen SCHWARTZ, “The Arab Betrayal of Balkan Islam”, *The Middle East Quarterly*, vol. IX, n° 2 (Spring 2002), pp. 43-52.

²⁴ The terms “neo-fundamentalism” and “neo-Salafism” both refer to religious movements that demand a reversion to the religion of the “pious ancestors”, not as a precondition for a new effort at free interpretation (ijtihad) as for the Salafi of the early 20th century (see note 12), but rather as a mean to impose its formal and rigorous imitation. The term “neo-fundamentalism” is generally used for proselyte movements such as the *Jama’at-al-Tabligh*, whilst the term “neo-Salafism” is more often used for militant and “jihadist” movements.

²⁵ On the way in which this issue of “minority population” versus “majority population” status influences the debates on Islam in Bosnia-Herzegovina, see Xavier BOUGAREL, “Trois définitions de l’islam en Bosnie-Herzégovine”, *Archives des sciences sociales des religions*, n° 115 (July-September 2001), pp. 183-201.

²⁶ See note 5.

²⁷ See, among others, Nadje AL-ALI, Richard BLACK & Khalid KOSER, “Refugees and Transnationalism: The Experience of Bosnians and Eritreans in Europe”, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, vol. XXVII, n° 4 (October 2000), pp. 615-634; Val COLIC-PEISKER, “At Least You’re the Right Colour: Identity and social Inclusion of Bosnian Refugees in Australia”, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, vol. XXXI, n° 4 (July 2005), pp. 615-638.

²⁸ See György LEDERER, *Countering Islamist Radicals in Eastern Europe*, Camberley: Conflict Studies Research Center (2005), p. 8. Available at <<http://www.da.mod.uk/CSRC>>.

²⁹ See Alexandre CAIERO, “Transnational ‘Ulama, European Fatwas, and Islamic Authority: A Case Study of the European Council for Fatwa and Research”, in Martin VAN BRUINESSEN & Stefano ALLIEVI (eds), *Production and Dissemination of Islamic Knowledge in Western Europe*, London: Routledge (forthcoming).

³⁰ See Jeanne HERSANT, “La minorité musulmane en Thrace occidentale et l’intégration européenne de la Grèce”, in *Etudes turques et ottomanes – documents de travail*, n° 9-10, Paris: Centre d’histoire du domaine turc (June 2001), pp. 113-131.

³¹ Croatian law on the rights of national minorities draws a distinction between “autochthonous national minorities”, which were already present on Croatian territory during the Austro-Hungarian period (Serbs, Hungarians, Czechs, Italians, etc.), and the “new national minorities” coming from other parts of the former Yugoslavia and who settled in Croatia between 1918 and 1991 (Bosniaks, Slovenians, Albanians, Montenegrins, etc.).

³² The plan put forward by Kofi Annan, UN Secretary general, foresaw the reunification of Cyprus within a confederal and consociative framework, the return to the Greek part of the island of some territories currently under Turkish control, the departure of the Turkish settlers who came to the island after 1974 and compensations for the Greek refugees unable to return to their homes. On 24 April 2004, 64.9% of the electors of the “Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus” approved the Annan plan, but it was rejected by 75.8% of the (Greek) electors in the Republic of Cyprus.