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MUSLIMS AND ISLAMIC FUNDAMENTALISM IN MACEDONIA

ABSTRACT Despite the fact that Macedonia achieved independence in a peaceful manner in 1991, its position has been continuously challenged in political, economic and security dimensions ever since. One of them is Islamic fundamentalism. In a country with over 1/3 of the population being Muslims (and still growing) this issue becomes a potential danger in the security dimension. Using a descriptive analysis method, the Author aims to highlight the specificity of Islam in Macedonia and to define the potential or real danger of Islamic fundamentalism in the country.

Key-words: Islam, Wahhabism, Macedonia, Fundamentalism, Islamism, Muslims

INTRODUCTION

With the disintegration of the Yugoslav Federation in 1991, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia became the youngest independent post-Yugoslav state. Its independence was achieved by peaceful means contrary to other post-Yugoslav republics such as Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Slovenia or later Kosovo.

But Macedonia inherited three major problems: by all indicators this country was economically least developed of all six former Yugoslav republics; the Macedonian people, who as the last people in the Balkans came to a recognition of their own nationality and country (except Kosovo's Albanians), has still been challenged by foreign aspirations (dispute with Greece over its name and state symbols, denial of the Macedonian nation and language by Bulgaria being rooted in the era of Todor Zhivkov has continued after the fall of Communism and since 1994 the so-called "linguistic dispute" has

been revived); in a period of time even its Macedonian-Serbian borders were being disputed. In other words, the geostrategic position of Macedonia in the Balkans has been very unfavourable.

The Balkans' religious landscape is complex and often confusing. The fact that the region's Muslims by no means constitute a homogenous body of believers further complicates this multi-faceted landscape. Macedonia is a good example of the fact. But since its independence Macedonia has faced an increasing threat of Muslim fundamentalist ideas and actions attempting to intimidate the mainstream Muslim population and take control over the legitimate organs of the Islamic Community (IVZ) of Macedonia. Due to other serious political and economic challenges in recent years, successive Macedonian governments as well as local and foreign observers have overlooked this threat and therefore allowed the fundamentalists to expand their activities undisturbed.

This paper, by using a descriptive method of analysis, aims to identify and discuss the position and specificities of Muslims of Macedonia as well as the issue of Islamic fundamentalism and threats related to this phenomenon in the country.

MUSLIMS IN MACEDONIA

Macedonia has a very heterogeneous ethnic structure with the share of Muslim population in its total population of one-third. The last 2002 population census¹ shows that there are 674,015 Muslims in Macedonia which states 33.3% of Macedonia's population – Albanians: 509,083 (25.17%); Turks: 77,959 (3.85%); Roma: 53,879 (2.66%); Bosniaks: 17,018 (0.84%); Egyptians: 3,713 (0.184%); Muslims: 2,553 (0.13%).² The largest national minority group of Muslim faith in Macedonia are Albanians while probably the smallest group (their number is only estimated at around 15,000) are Torbeši, a group of Macedonian Muslims who are Macedonian by origin and Muslim by faith. They were Slavic Orthodox Macedonians who converted to Islam throughout the period from 16th to the second half of 19th century. They are officially recog-

¹ The next census was planned for 2011 but never came to realization. The fiasco was a result of increasing tensions between the two major partners in the government, the VMRO led by Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski and the DUI of Ali Ahmeti. The issue was essentially ethno-political: the Albanian political fraction insisted on a census methodology that counted many Albanian emigrants, some of whom may not have returned to the country for many years. This way, Albanians tried to maximize their numbers, Macedonians opposed and the process stopped. Assessing the number of citizens (and the weight of different ethnic communities) in Macedonia still is a sensitive and highly politicized issue. R. Karajkov, 'Census Fails in Macedonia', Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso, 20 October 2011, at <<http://www.balcanicaucaso.org/eng/Regions-and-countries/Macedonia/Census-fails-in-Macedonia-105372>>, 1 February 2014.

² 'Census of Population, Household and Dwellings 2002, Book X: Total population, Households and Dwellings – final data by settlements – Total population according to the ethnic affiliation, mother tongue and religion', State Statistical Office of the Republic of Macedonia, p. 334, at <<http://www.stat.gov.mk/Publikacii/knigaX.pdf>>, 1 February 2014. Other results: Eastern Orthodox (Macedonian Orthodox): 1,310,184 or 64.78%; Muslim: 674,015 or 33.33%; Catholics: 7,008 or 0.34%; other: 31,340 or 1.55%.

nized as a separate ethnic group by the Macedonian state, unlike their ethnic brothers the Pomaks in Bulgaria and Greece. Although having a slight Macedonian identity, they do not have a separate Torbeši identity neither. The 2002 census has confirmed the deep split within the Torbeši community in Macedonia: most of them claimed to be Macedonians of Muslim faith, but some identified themselves as Albanians, Turks, Bosniaks or simply called themselves – Muslims. Muslim sources in Sandžak (Serbia) claim that many of the present-day Torbeši are former Serbo-Croat-speaking migrants from Bosnia-Herzegovina and the Sandžak. Many of them went to Macedonia in order to take advantage of the 1950 emigration agreement with Turkey, but on their way, they decided to settle in Macedonia permanently.³

The Muslims in Macedonia are neither homogeneous in religious terms. The majority of them are Sunni Muslims, belonging to the Hanafiyya Islamic school. A minority of them, of which here are no official number, belong to six Sufi (Sunni) orders – the Helveti, Qadiri, Sinani, Rufa'i, Naqsh-Bandi, Malami. There are also some Bektashi, which are Shiite Muslims, although they have initially developed from Sunni Islam.⁴

There is also linguistic differentiation in Macedonia due to the fact that there are several ethnic groups professing Islam. Albanian speakers are the largest Muslim community in Macedonia⁵ (although some Roma also use the Albanian language; especially in the southern reaches of Macedonia the Tosk dialect of Albanian is the native language of several Roma (Gipsy) communities).⁶ The second largest language group are of Slavic languages dominated by Bosniaks and small groups of speakers such as Torbeši. Turkish is used mainly by the ethnic Turks and belongs to the so-called Balkan dialects of the Turkish language. Speakers of Roma languages should be mentioned as well, although the latter also speak Turkish, Albanian or Slavic languages. The Arlija dialect is spoken by the majority of the Roma in Macedonia, but there are also three other dialects – the *Dhzambaz*, *Gurbet* and *Bugurdhzia*.⁷

³ H. Poulton, 'Changing Notions of National Identity among Muslims in Thrace and Macedonia: Turks, Pomaks and Roma' in H. Poulton, S. Taji-Farouki (eds.), *Muslim Identity and the Balkan State*, London 1997, p. 93.

⁴ M. Koinova, 'Minorities in Southeast Europe: Muslims of Macedonia', Center for Documentation and Information on Minorities in Europe – Southeast Europe (CEDIME – SE), p. 18, at <<http://www.greekhelsinki.gr/pdf/cedime-se-macedonia-muslims.PDF>>, 1 February 2014.

⁵ The Albanians are divided into two different subgroups: Gëgs and Tosks. The Tosks live in southern Albania and northern Greece, while the Gëgs are to be found in the northern part of Albania. The Shkumbin river in central Albania serves as a natural barrier between the two tribes. The overwhelming majority of the Albanians in Kosovo, Montenegro and western Macedonia are also Gëgs. Geg society in Albania was traditionally based on a tribal structure. A. Babuna, 'Albanian National Identity and Islam in the Post-Communist Era', SAM – Center for Strategic Research, September-November 2003, p. 1, at <<http://sam.gov.tr/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/AydinBabuna.pdf>>, 1 February 2014.

⁶ E. Fraenkel, 'Urban Muslim Identity in Macedonia: The Interplay of Ottomanism and Multilingual Nationalism' in E. Fraenkel, Ch. Kramer (eds.), *Language Contact – Language Conflict*, New York 1993, s. 34 (*Balkan Studies*, 1).

⁷ V. Friedman, 'The Romani Language in the Republic of Macedonia: Status, Usage, and Sociolinguistic Perspectives', *Acta Linguistica Hungarica*, Vol. 46, No. 3 (1999), p. 6, at <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1023/A:1009662109189>>.

Kerem Öktem notices a very important feature of this complexity: “This notion of linguistic fragmentation becomes even more pronounced in countries composed of two or three neighbouring linguistic groups. This reality not only curtails a ‘common sense of Muslimhood’, but also can actually fuel inter-ethnic animosities. Languages in the Balkans carry complex historical contingencies that play out differently in each country. Albanians, for example, often associate Gorani (Slavic) speakers in Kosovo and Torbeš (Slavic) speakers in Macedonia with their particularly unwelcome experience of Serbo-Croat rule in the two Yugoslavias. In Macedonia, good relations between the Turkish minority and the Macedonian state have tarnished the usage of Turkish, a language that had been the common idiom of the Muslim urban classes, the *Şehirli*, in cities such as Skopje (Üsküp/Shkup) and Tetovo (Kalkandelen) well into the 1990s.”⁸ Therefore when using the term “Muslims in Macedonia” (but this applies to the general context of Muslims in the Balkans) it should be used with great caution as it implies the notion of a “common Muslimness” or a collective identity bridging different languages traditions or historical origins.⁹ As a matter of fact, “being a Muslim” is often a very local affair and only one of many identities.¹⁰

However, this is just one side of the coin. The situation in Macedonia in a way is among the most complex in the Balkans. National identification of the largest Muslim groups, Albanians, remained firm while the national identification of minor Muslim groups continues to fluctuate. Visual confusion regarding the identity of the individual Muslim groups in the Macedonian case further warns that religion in the Balkans is of paramount importance to ethnic differentiation. The situation becomes even more complicated when we learn from the 2011 Pew report on global Muslim population growth trends that until 2030, Macedonia will experience a higher projected increase in number of Muslims to non-Muslims (5.4%) than any other European country. Pew expects that by 2030 some 40.3% of the total Macedonian population will be Muslim. This demographic trend will have severe political and ethnic powersharing and social implications as well.¹¹ In addition to that and despite the rights guaranteed by the constitution, tensions among ethnic minority groups are present in today’s Macedonian society. Causes for such tensions can be identified

⁸ K. Öktem, ‘New Islamic Actors after the Wahhabi Intermezzo: Turkey’s Return to the Muslim Balkans’, European Studies Centre, University of Oxford Press, December 2010, p. 9.

⁹ A. Светиева, *За преселбите на Балканските муслимани и за нашинците – Торбеши, Помаци и други (Турци) во Турција*, Скопје 2008, pp. 38-68.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

¹¹ ‘The Future of the Global Muslim Population: Projections for 2010-2030’, Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 27 January 2011, at <<http://www.pewforum.org/2011/01/27/the-future-of-the-global-muslim-population/>>, 2 February 2014. Other interesting data from the same source: in 2030, Muslims are projected to make up more than 10% of the total population in 10 European countries: Kosovo (93.5%), Albania (83.2%), Bosnia-Herzegovina (42.7%), Republic of Macedonia (40.3%), Montenegro (21.5%), Bulgaria (15.7%), Russia (14.4%), Georgia (11.5%), France (10.3%) and Belgium (10.2%). ‘The Future of the Global Muslim Population. Region: Europe’, Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 27 January 2011, at <<http://www.pewforum.org/future-of-the-global-muslim-population-regional-europe.aspx>>, 2 February 2014.

in the inherited mistrust and prejudices among ethnic groups. Tensions often arise between the majority and minority, but also between two or more minority groups. Moreover, the disintegration of the Yugoslav Federation in early 1990s, the fall of socialism as a political system, and most importantly the spread of wars and conflicts in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and finally Macedonia represent tectonic political, legal, and economic changes in the region. These conditions were exploited by various challengers¹², not only such as the vanguard Islamic radicals who promoted their ideologies but throughout the most effective nationalism of all “Balkans nationalisms” – the Albanian one. This gives rise to a new/old situation: interethnic turmoil in Macedonia in the period from gaining the independence to the present day, shows that the protection of national minorities – as it has been in the history of the Balkans throughout the centuries – is “essential to the stability, democratic security and peace” in the region. The process of rapid growth and ethnic homogenization of the Albanian population, with the “Kosovo experience”, has been rapidly evolving in the Western Macedonia. The process of political and separatist movement has become stronger, only to reach its peak in 2001, with the terrorist actions by Albanian extremists in the area of Tetovo, Kumanovo, Black Mountain of Skopje (Скопска Црна Гора). Under the guise of protecting minority rights, the so-called “Albanian Alternative” by permanent “broadening” of political demands, and armed actions managed to internationalize “the Albanian national question” in Macedonia.

Nevertheless, the main topic of this paper is Islamic fundamentalism which (as noticed earlier) remains among the strongest challengers of the political and economic instability in this post-Yugoslav republic.

ISLAMIC FUNDAMENTALISM WITH THE “WAHHABI” FACE IN MACEDONIA

A theoretical explanation of fundamentalism can be found in Jeffery K. Hadden’s and Anson Shupe’s definition of this phenomenon: “Fundamentalism is the proclamation of reclaimed authority over a sacred tradition which is to be reinstated as an antidote for a society that has strayed from its traditional cultural values”.¹³ They further claim that there are three main types of fundamentalisms, namely theological, political and cultural fundamentalism. Theological fundamentalism highlights the relevance of traditional religious doctrines in private and public affairs. Political fundamentalism emphasizes the theological duty of followers to oppose worldly vices such as secularisation and modernisation. Cultural fundamentalism involves a comparison between groups of varied religions to emphasize the righteousness of the dominant religion. Gabriel

¹² A. Panovski, *The Spread of Islamic Extremism in the Republic of Macedonia*, Thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey 2011, p. 25.

¹³ K.J. Hadden, A. Shupe (eds.), *Secularization and Fundamentalism Reconsidered*, New York 1989, p. 92 (*Religion and the Political Order*, 3).

A. Almond, R. Scott Appleby and Emmanuel Sivan define fundamentalism as movements that “originate in reaction to secularization and the marginalization of religion, and they strive to create a religious alternative to secular structures and institutions.”¹⁴ To be considered fundamentalist, a movement must react and defend the religious content from erosion. Only after this necessary ideological characteristic – a reaction to the marginalization of religion – is present in the movement, can the additional characteristics be classified as defining, since it must manifest a sufficient number of these characteristics.

This would imply that Islamic religious movements in Macedonia would be considered as fundamentalist if they were a reaction to the secularization and marginalization of their religion. In regard to this ideological characteristic, the situation in Macedonia is very ambiguous. Most critiques come from senior representatives of Islamic Community in Macedonia (IVZ – Islamska Verska Zaednica). On several occasions they have blamed the government of Macedonia for neglecting the religion of Islam and for unequal treatment compared to other religions.¹⁵ However, it is inappropriate to categorize these critiques as reaction to secularism. IVZ is interested in as appearing to be a politically active and relevant institution seeking to obtain assets in the process of restitution. On the other hand, Wahhabi groups in Macedonia operate in secrecy, but publicly glorify the values of democratic societies. They often maintain close links with members of political parties. In both cases, it is more likely that critiques are aimed at ethno-cultural and property issues, rather than being reactive towards secularism and modernism, even less defending religion.¹⁶ On the other hand, western observers tend to consider Islamic infighting to be little more than internal politicking between rival ethnic Albanian parties over property proceeds and other financial interests, and not as an issue of genuine religious extremism. Nevertheless, in Macedonia today, fundamentalist Islam (in the form of veiled women, men in baggy trousers and long beards, and increased public challenges to secularism) is unmistakably becoming more visible in daily life.¹⁷

Wahhabism¹⁸ in Macedonia began to emerge after its secession from Yugoslavia. The first proponents of the movement in Macedonia were imams who returned from

¹⁴ G. Almond, R.S. Appleby, E. Sivan, ‘Fundamentalism: Genus and Species’ in iidem, *Strong Religion. The Rise of Fundamentalism around the World*, Chicago 2003, p. 90.

¹⁵ A. Panovski, *The Spread...*, p. 14.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ C. Deliso, *The Coming Balkan Caliphate. The Threat of Radical Islam to Europe and the West*, Westport–London 2007.

¹⁸ Wahhabism started as a theological reform movement of revolutionary jihad. This movement’s goal was to urge (*da’wa*) people to restore the *tawhid* (ones of God, or monotheism) and disregard other practices. However, in 1929 Wahhabism was forcefully changed to a conservative religious movement whose goal was to uphold the loyalty of the royal Saudi family. The recent spread of Wahhabism was enabled by Ibn Baz. As a Saudi mufti and government scholar, he was in position to lead and develop policies for spreading Wahhabi beliefs. Under his leadership, the majority of Saudi clergy remained loyal to the royal family and its policies, despite considering democracy to be in contrast to their religion and monotheism. However, opposition movements, unsatisfied with the policies of the royal

Islamic studies in Saudi Arabia. Well-organized groups spread its influence throughout charities and charitable Islamic organizations of Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Pakistan and the United Arab Emirates. At first they were welcomed due to their benevolent causes. Soon it was discovered that many of the organizations and charities funded the spread of Wahhabi theology and terrorism. They have been investigated for their alleged Islamic extremism and money laundering but more importantly for recruiting jihad volunteers for “holy wars” where ever needed.¹⁹ Setting the Skopje Mufti Zenun Berishain 2000 directly led to the spread of Wahhabism in Macedonia. Although he was dismissed in 2004 due to various dubious business activities, he has kept under control several mosques in Skopje, and behind him is a well-organized group of supporters which caused severe tensions in the Islamic Religious Community of Macedonia, bringing it to almost complete disarray. Given that Berisha controlled all funding for the work of Islamic institutions in Skopje imams were forced either to abide by Wahhabi practices or lose their funding. Some clerics like Abdurahmin Yashari of the historic Mustafa Pasha Mosque claimed to have not received a salary for two years because he was not “loyal to Zenun Berisha”. Even later this situation afflicted other imams as “only the administrative workers and clerics on the side of the Wahhabis and Berisha were taken care of”.²⁰ The period since 2003 has been characterized by aggressive action of the Wahhabis and especially to other imams of the Islamic Community of Macedonia (for example, by beating Šaban Ahmeti, the chief imam of the Hudaverli mosque of Skopje). This situation has led to the resignation of Macedonia Reis ul Ulema Arif Emmini in June 2005 while supporters of Zenuni Berisha held him hostage. This situation was an unprecedented challenge for the Islamic Community of Macedonia in its history. It has settled down only after the election of Taxhedin Beslimi for Skopje chief mufti position. This apparent moderate made possible the election of Sulejman Efendi Rexhepi the head of the Islamic Community of Macedonia (Reis-Ul-Ulema) in September 2006. In 2010 he publicly requested help from authorities of political Albanians political parties and the international community in dealing with radical groups the Wahhabis and called for measures to stop the spread of radical Islam in Macedonia.²¹

So, the influence of the Wahhabis in Macedonia should not be underestimated in any case. The Yahya Pasha Mosque in Skopje remains their “headquarters” from where they continue a strong campaign in recruiting new followers, using the same meth-

family, started seeking to overthrow the regime in Saudi Arabia, and submitted a memo demanding a system reformation. Most of their opposition was arrested, but Muhammad al-Mas'ari found refuge in London and established a Salafist organization. Later, the group split in three different wings, one of which belonged to Osama Bin Laden. A. Moussalli, ‘Wahhabism, Salafism, and Islamism: Who is the Enemy?’, A Conflict Forum Monograph, American University of Beirut, January 2009, pp. 4-10, at <<http://conflictsforum.org/briefings/Wahhabism-Salafism-and-Islamism.pdf>>, 4 February 2014.

¹⁹ L. Napoleoni, ‘Sleeping with The Enemy’, The House of Saud – Follow The Money, 15 June 2010, at <<http://www.conspiracycafe.net/latte/index.php?/topic/26459-the-house-of-saud-follow-the-money>>, 4 February 2014.

²⁰ C. Deliso, *The Coming Balkan Caliphate...*, p. 84.

²¹ ‘ИВЗ бара Власта да се Справи со Вахабитите’, *Утрински весник*, 20 September 2010, at <<http://www.utrinski.mk/?ItemID=1C03292BF7F419409EEBB63526468F44>>, 4 February 2014.

ods that were used in other parts of the Balkans (financial assistance, providing education, charities). Their movement remains conspiratorial (it is not centralized nor has a specific organizational structure) so it is difficult to accurately determine the specific forms of their action, although we know that the recruitment is done on an individual basis and involves mostly heads of families which have special meaning in traditional societies such as Macedonian.²² It is also noticeable that all the prominent proponents of Wahhabism in Macedonia and other Islamists are in some way related to Kosovo and the Islamic international associations.²³ Sources sponsoring radical Islam in Macedonia are mostly the same as in the region, and identical as in Kosovo.

When asked about the presence and potential threats of the Wahhabi actions in Macedonia, the Ministry of Internal Affairs in official statements explains that “the Macedonian security services are in excellent condition, do their job and follow all relevant activities [related to any terrorist threats – M.B.]” and therefore “the security situation in Macedonia is stable.”²⁴ Ivan Babanovski, a renowned security expert and retired professor of the Faculty of Security in Skopje, denies most of the Macedonian officials’ claims: “There are about 3,000 Wahhabis, mainly among the ethnic Albanian minority and Bosniaks in the region of Skopje, Tetovo, Struga and Kumanovo. Their operations are funded by donations from Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Syria and Iran” – he claims. “Their active camp in which they recruit mercenaries for the conflict in Syria is located between Jažince in northern Macedonia and Kačanik in Kosovo.”²⁵ This discrepancy between official statements and claims of experts is even more surprising if we remember that, in fact, in recent years Macedonia has had numerous serious problems with militant Islamists. In 2012, dramatic evidence attesting to these developing radical trends emerged with a series of protests, attacks on Christian shrines, and even information received by intelligence officials indicating that small groups of Albanian and Macedonian Muslims were joining the jihadi groups in the Syrian conflict. This last development is particularly concerning, as there is no way to tell how these fighters may act when they eventually return home after being immersed in such a radical environment.²⁶ After 2013 mass arrests of suspected Islamists who murdered five Macedonian citizens outside Skopje (the crime occurred in April 2012) which involved 800 police officers, the subsequent protests have occurred in Skopje (with smaller ones in Tetovo and Gostivar), when several thousand ethnic Albanian youth took to the streets, waving Albanian and Saudi flags and chanting “Allahu Akbar” and “death to the Christians.”²⁷ Police stated

²² Wahhabi teachings are not only widespread among Albanian Muslims in Macedonia but also among Muslims of Slavic origin such as Torbeši.

²³ O. Potežica, *Vehabije. Između istine i predrasude*, Beograd 2007, pp. 199-200 (*Biblioteka Chronogram*).

²⁴ V. Palaska, ‘Ima li islamizma u Makedoniji?’, Aurora, 25 August 2013, at <<http://www.aurora.hr/2455/ima-li-islamizma-u-makedoniji>>, 1 February 2014.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ ‘Macedonia’, American Foreign Policy Council’s World Almanac of Islamism, 17 September 2013, p. 7, at <<http://almanac.afpc.org/macedonia>>, 7 February 2014.

²⁷ Ibid.

that this action was a serious blow for radical Islamists who fought against NATO forces in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

On the other hand, AtanasPanovski in his “The Spread of Islamic Extremism in the Republic of Macedonia” explains that: “the most ideological and organizational characteristics of fundamentalist movements are absent in Macedonia, or present only to a low degree. In Macedonia, Islamic extremist ideologies are not a reaction to secularism and modernism, nor do they defend religion. The absence of this ideological characteristic differentiates them from fundamentalism. Although their characteristics are very similar to fundamentalism, it would be wrong to place them in this category. Thus, activities of Wahhabi adherents in Macedonia can be categorized as potential or marginal fundamentalism”.²⁸ He further explains that one of the most important characteristics of Wahhabism as an ideology is takfir, or excommunication. Its goal is to theologially purify the followers of Islam. It is obvious that Wahhabi ideas are first and foremost directed towards fellow Muslims and its leadership, and the latter toward the rejection of democratic rule by the people. In the case of Macedonia this idea serves well in regard to internal conflicts among ethnic Albanian Muslims. Their struggle for power and property has often been followed by violent incidents. However, the majority of Muslims in Macedonia prefer traditional Islam, represented by the Hanafi school of jurisprudence. It seems that adherents of Wahhabism in Macedonia pose a threat, but their existence depends on foreign funding and external support.²⁹ Öktem agrees with Panovski claiming that the “Wahhabi issue” in Macedonia (as well as in the Balkan region) is “a phenomenon which is a manageable security issue”.³⁰

It seems that the breaking point of the Wahhabis and other radical Islamist groups was the 9/11 attacks in 2001 and the ensuing “war on terror”, where most actors with even the faintest connection to transnational Arab Islamic networks and Salafi forms of Islam were progressively squeezed out of the Balkans. Salafi and Wahhabi groups from Arabia had to withdraw as the U.S. took measures against the possibility of Al Qaeda launching operations from the Balkans. This situation resulted in all educational institutions of the Islamic community in the region being closed down due to a lack of funding. Elsewhere, Islamic communities lost funding at a time when they were most needed to maintain a grip on centripetal forces. The withdrawal of most Saudi funds, however, significantly disrupted the influence of Islamic actors from outside the region and limited their ability to induce a hegemonic shift in the way Islam was lived and experienced in the Balkans.³¹ Furthermore, he claims that the “hegemonic turn that would have destroyed the foundations of Islam in the Balkans – the Ottoman, mostly Hanafi heritage – and introduced a strict, conservative Salafism, has not taken place and is very unlikely to do so in the future. The established Islamic Unions of the Balkans are mostly in control of the majority of mosques and preachers, and the politi-

²⁸ A. Panovski, *The Spread...*, pp. 61-62.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

³⁰ K. Öktem, ‘New Islamic Actors...’, p. 18.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

cal elites seem to support local forms of Islamic practice, promoted as 'European Islam', 'traditional Islam' or simply 'our Islam'.³²

After the "Wahhabi intermezzo" (as defined by Öktem), Turkey enters the scene as a political and economic regional power. Regardless of the specific influence and penetration of Wahhabi (Arabic) and Iranian Islam in the Balkans during and after the wars in the former Yugoslavia, Turkey remained the "first to call" neighbour in the Islamic world to the Balkan Muslims. The Western powers (primarily the U.S.A) leave the Balkans to Turkey's attention and control because it is believed that Turkey's regional interests remain in the horizon of the general U.S. and western projections. In other words, in the eyes of the international community and states with major Muslim population such as Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Macedonia, Turkey is viewed as a country capable of promoting "moderate Islam" in the region.³³

CONCLUSION

Although affiliates of Islamic extremist ideologies such as Wahhabism can be categorized as potential or marginal fundamentalism, they still pose a threat. This is especially true when the worldwide concern regarding religiously motivated terrorism is taken into account. Unfortunately, this issue in Macedonia remains a taboo given the complexity of the Macedonian society.³⁴ There is no political capacity to cope with radical Islam for fear that the fight does not bring a political, anti-cultural or anti-Islamic phobia dimension. Even more, successive Macedonian governments fear that they will not receive political support from the international community should they take a more active stance. Without a doubt, "the masterstroke of Macedonia's Islamists has been their strategy of manipulating potent Albanian nationalism for their own ends. Well before the country's brief ethnic war in 2001, international diplomacy in Macedonia has been fundamentally driven, and conditioned, by the 'Albanian issue.' Islamist leaders are well aware that, because of the diplomatic need for political correctness, any religious initiative will be beyond reproach if it can be cloaked in the guise of ethnic grievances."³⁵

Another problem of the Macedonian state that affects the struggle against Islamic radicals is a poor economic situation on the country. In order to maintain a positive image of the country before foreign Islamic investors, and to depict it as a stable and safe investment destination in general, the government is reticent to bring up the topic of Islamic radicalism publicly.

³² Ibid., p. 22.

³³ Д. Танасковић, *Неоосманизам. Доктрина и спољнополитичка пракса*, Београд 2010, p. 86 (*Библиотека Појединачна издања*).

³⁴ Г. Атанасов, *Опасност од салафизмот на Балканот*, Радио Слободна Европа, 7 August 2012, at <<http://www.makdenes.org/content/article/24669123.html>>, 4 February 2014.

³⁵ 'Macedonia', p. 11.

These dimensions remain the fundamentals of the problem in Macedonia and a challenge to cope with in the upcoming years.

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