

The Balkans  
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# Indoctrinating Albanians Dynamics of Islamic Aid

'Albanians have been Muslims for more than 500 years and they do not need outsiders [Arabs] to tell them what is the proper way to practise Islam.' Mufti of Kosova, Rexhep Boja's recent retort to the efforts of Arab NGOs to impose their Salafi practices on Kosovar Albanians reflects a largely unappreciated phenomenon in the post-communist Balkans. The following exposes the questionable manner in which Western powers have compartmentalized their priorities in the region and how Saudi-based humanitarian agencies have filled in the vacuum. At issue is how Western policies of 'conflict resolution' have left 'ethno-religious' communities at the mercy of international, 'faith-based' organizations that, in turn, exploit the poverty and fragmented social conditions of – in our case here – Albanians.



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**Albanian refugees from Kosovo at a United Arab Emirates refugee camp in Kukes, Albania.**

As a result of policies that have basically deferred addressing rural Kosova's social and economic needs to organizations whose basic modus operandi is the religious indoctrination of the population, much of Kosova's rural society is being isolated from their fellow countrymen and the world at large. A result of such isolation is the increasing vulnerability of Kosova's Muslims to hostility emanating from those very Western governments that neglected to address their initial needs. It is therefore ironic that as self-proclaimed Western societies cower before the 'the rise of Islamic fundamentalism', their discriminatory policies towards Kosova's rural 'Muslim' population may prove to be directly responsible for the production of Europe's own 'Taliban', which in the future may indeed prove hostile to 'Western values and interests'.

## Future talibs?

The central problem is not doctrinal but socio-economic. After decades of discrimination and two years of war resulting in the murder of much of the adult male population in rural areas, Kosova's peasants are living in abject poverty.<sup>1</sup> Many rural communities in Kosova have, as a result, become more or less dependent on outside NGOs. The most active in rural Kosova has been the Saudi Joint Committee for the Relief of Kosova and Chechnya (SJCRKC), which has provided for the basic daily needs of over a hundred communities. While food, housing, and clothing are provided by the SJCRKC, its primary task has been education. The forced segregation of the sexes in schools, the

focus on young male education based on the memorization of the Qur'an, and little if any emphasis on what many would deem essential survival skills have attracted the suspicion of Kosova's indigenous Muslim and secular leaders.

As a consequence, open hostility towards Saudi efforts to control the content of the spiritual lives of Albanians, the destruction of many historical sites deemed to encourage 'idolatry', and other confrontations between indigenous forms of religious practice and what many see as 'Arab cultural imperialism' have become manifest. While small numbers of Albanians from the former Yugoslavia did go to study Islamic theology in the Arabic-speaking world (many travelled to study under the now deceased Albanian-born scholar, Nasir al Din al-Albani), the vast majority of Albanians had no previous cultural contact with the larger Islamic world. The recent influences from the outside, with their substantial aid packages, have clearly changed this. The nature of this change is creating an environment that pits local organizations trying to maintain local Islamic traditions, as personified by Rexhep Boja and the Albanian grand mufti, Hafiz Koçi, against those influenced by imported practices.

Despite their efforts, with little or no financial resources of their own and the neglect of interest among the members of Kosova's internationally imposed administrators, Kosova's leaders are incapable of providing an alternative to the Salafi educational practices that are being propagated in many parts of rural Kosova. The SJCRKC reported in late 2001 to have invested four million Saudi riyals in Kosova. Nearly half of that (about USD 500,000) had been spent to sponsor 388 religious 'propagators' (i.e. missionaries) in the immediate post-war period. What these propagators – whom I would call experts in post-conflict assessment – did was identify the communities most suitable to their agenda. While there are no official numbers published, at least 98 mosque complexes with and without accompanying schools have been built in rural Kosova as a result of their work.<sup>2</sup> One can draw comparisons to Afghan communities in the 1980s when large numbers of orphaned and single-mother families were also dependent on Saudi 'charity' in the border refugee camps of Pakistan. As with Afghans, rural Kosovars, dependant on the 'generosity' of others, have become vulnerable to 'foreign' doctrines and practices.

In many ways local resistance to SJCRKC has taken on the tone of general hostility towards Arabs that is being beamed across the 24-hour news programmes watched with great interest in Kosova. There is a growing sense among Kosova's urban population, for instance, that by being associated to the same faith as Usama bin Laden (there is no differentiation made between Salafi practitioners in Kosova – locals call them *muhajiddin* – today and Bin Laden), that Kosovars' long-term desires for independence are being in some way jeopardized. As a result, new political lines are being drawn in Kosovar society, reflecting

more than ever the rural/urban divide that has historically divided the Kosova population (Blumi 2001). In reaction, many among those who have become reliant on SJCRKC assistance feel persecuted, a condition that is politicized by some. Political Islam as it has emerged in other parts of the world, therefore, while still at its infancy in Kosova is transforming to fit local dynamics. One can follow in the Islamic Community of Kosova's (Bashkesia Islame e Kosovës (BIK)) journal *Takvimi*, the occasional debate over the merits of an Islamic party in dealing with the political and social issues plaguing Kosova today. Indeed, advocates for the creation of an Islamic party in general reveal a growing sense of political power in rural Kosovar society, one that is becoming more interventionist when it comes to influencing cultural mores and articulating a distinctive voice for rural Kosova.

## Albania

Interestingly, Albanians are not destined to take the 'Taliban' route. Indeed, Muslims in Albania have successfully thwarted the penetration of Wahhabi extremism in their communities. Unlike rural Kosova, parents in Albania always had a number of options for educating their children. This proves key. In Albania, not only are there dozens of schools that have been erected since 1990 by foreign Christian organizations that try to woo the population away from their 50 years of communist indoctrination, but a Turkish faith-based organization inspired by the liberal Fetullah Gülen has also opened a number of well-attended *dershanes* in Albania (Agai 2002; Balci 2002). Armed with doctrinal and sectarian alternatives, local Muslims in the Albanian-speaking regions of the Balkans prove, when given a choice, effective in staving off the indoctrinating efforts of outside interests. In Albania, as noted in interviews with the grand mufti of Albania and others, Arab Salafi organizations, while targeting Albania as a potential area of influence in the early 1990s, have all but abandoned the country, choosing to focus their resources on Kosova's rural population. Why this happened is significant in that Albanians in Albania clearly made a choice to not go down the Wahhabi route. Salafi organizations, eager to proselytize as other evangelical groups coming from the United States or their Greek Orthodox rivals south of the border, learned that Albanian Muslims, when armed with a choice between their brand of intolerant and rigid spirituality and others, preferred the milder track. This lesson could again be taught in Kosova if communities were given similar resources.

Among Albanian-speaking Muslims, the issues discussed here are particularly important as their self-perceived place in the world is now dominated by anti-Muslim sentiments. The sense of being unwelcome by Europe, of being persecuted and indeed blamed for events taking place in other parts of the globe by Americans is a common theme among self-identified Muslims today. This sense of exclusion is being used in some quarters to shift community loyalties away from Europe and the United

States. Such a sense of increasing isolation, as European, US, and non-denominational organizations continue to ignore the spiritual, educational, and cultural needs of local populations, breeds the right kind of resentment needed to produce a new generation of supporters of anti-Western causes. With more than 98 primary and secondary schools built throughout rural Kosova, the creation of a new generation of Albanian Muslims is underway. As the outside world has given free reign to Saudi-based organizations to set up orphanages, mosques, and schools, the results in the isolated regions of Kosova are already evident.

While many continue to resist the sectarian implications of these activities, others concede that the arrival of these proselytizing organizations are creating internal conflicts as people are drawn by promises of money, jobs, education, and indeed a new identity. Unless immediate attention is paid to providing an alternative for rural communities in Kosova, the spectacle of outside powers manipulating internal sectarian differences, as in Lebanon in the 1970s and 1980s, is a distinct possibility. It would be yet another tragic demonstration of Western short-sightedness that its failure to provide a few million dollars to rebuild the lives of hundreds of thousands of human beings would result in decades of conflict and instability. The economic stinginess and the cultural chauvinism that produces this neglect may come back to haunt Europe, ending any illusion that things have been made right in the Balkans over the last three years.

## Notes

1. According to the latest data produced by the international community, Kosova's rural population is the poorest in Europe, after Moldova and Tajikistan. Unemployment throughout the country is around 80 per cent, and upwards of 20 per cent of the population lives in abject poverty. See ICG, 'A Kosovo Road Map: Final Status' ([www.crisisweb.org](http://www.crisisweb.org)).
2. Consult the Official Saudi information website for news on activities of various Saudi 'charities' in Kosova ([www.saudinf.com](http://www.saudinf.com)).

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