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**IMMIGRANTS FROM THE NEAR AND MIDDLE EAST IN  
BULGARIA**

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**Immigrants from the Near and Middle East in Bulgaria**

*And the time shall come when the West shall  
be pregnant with the East and the East shall  
be pregnant with the West...<sup>1</sup>*

At the end of 2001 the International Centre for Minority Studies and Intercultural Relations (IMIR) launched an interdisciplinary study under the working title '*The New Minorities in Bulgaria*.' Such a study was much needed considering the dynamic migration processes in the last 14 years, in which Bulgaria attracted new immigrants from different countries while the already existing immigrant communities increased tangibly. The study concentrated on people with long-term and permanent residence permits.<sup>2</sup> It did not cover foreigners with refugee status, although in the course of research the refugee issue inevitably cropped up as a potential source of new immigrants in Bulgaria.

*Preliminary data and working hypotheses.* According to the National Statistical Institute (NSI), the number of people who identified themselves as Arabs in the 1992 census was 5,438, and they presumably had legal status as Bulgarian citizens (naturalized citizens) or long-term residents. They are part of Bulgaria's Muslim minority, which in 1992 comprised 14% of the total population.<sup>3</sup>

The 2001 census found that Bulgaria's total population had declined by more than half a million, with the percentage share of Muslims decreasing from 14% in 1992 to 12.2% in 2001. This decrease came solely from emigration among the local Muslims (Pomaks and Turks), since the inter-census period unquestionably saw intensive immigration from the Near and Middle East.

Unfortunately, the data from the last census (2001) do not provide information about the immigration flows towards Bulgaria. It is not clear why even the more than 5,000 people who identified themselves as Arabs in the 1992 census do not figure in the 2001 data. The imprecise census-taking method becomes even more obvious from another survey of the NSI of 1 March 2001 where almost 19,000 persons from other countries took part in the internal migrations in Bulgaria (settling in different towns and villages). According to our working hypothesis, most of them came from the Near and Middle East and China.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Hadith quoted by a Muslim Rom member of the research team. Interpretation: This saying, which is attributed to the Prophet, foretells an age in which the West will be attracted by the values of the East and Islamic civilization and will embrace them, whilst the people from the East will be strongly tempted by Western civilization and will wish to live in it. But this will happen only after many ordeals, hostilities and conflicts in the battle for superiority.

<sup>2</sup> According to National Police data, at the end of 2001 the number of foreign citizens with permanent residence permits in Bulgaria was 43,630. Another approximately 24,000 were authorized to stay for up to one year. According to the respondents, the majority of them had lived in the country for several years prior to being granted permanent residence permits. All this gives us grounds to assume that the real number of foreigners residing permanently in Bulgaria is considerably larger than the official data.

<sup>3</sup> Zhelyazkova, A. Bulgaria, in: *A Guidebook on Muslims in the Wide Contemporary Europe*, Academia Bruylant, Louvain-la-Neuve, 2002, p.29.

<sup>4</sup> NSI, *2001 Census*.

Our team's attempts to achieve greater accuracy proved a tough task because the official figures on foreigners who arrive, stay and depart from the country vary and are based on different criteria. In all likelihood, the data from the Interior Ministry are the most accurate. For example, according to police data the number of long-term residents was 18,568 in 2000, rising to 24,000 in 2001. To this we must add 43,630 permanent residents. According to police data again, for example the number only of Syrians with long-term and permanent residence permits in Bulgaria approximated 3,000 in 2001, whereas that of Lebanese with permanent residence permits was 625. It remains unclear why the NSI does not collect and include such data in the national censuses.

On the other hand, a Foreign Ministry source claims that the Lebanese have registered more than 1,000 companies in Sofia alone, which suggests that their total number in Bulgaria is considerably higher than the figures reported by the Interior Ministry. According to the same source, there are probably around 3,000 Syrians in Bulgaria, or roughly as many as indicated by police data.

At the end of 2003 the International Organization for Migration (IOM) published a study that added another interpretation of the number of immigrants to the already available conflicting data. According to the IOM, the number of foreign citizens residing legally in Bulgaria with permanent and long-term residence permits approximated 60,000 in 2002, up from around 45,000 in 1994 (the IOM study traces the growth in immigration in the period year by year). The same study also examines the national structure of permanent and long-term foreign residents in Bulgaria in 2002, where the largest number was of immigrants from Russia, 19,113, Syria, 1,780, Iraq, 390, Iran, 275, Afghanistan, 129 etc.<sup>5</sup> To judge from the different estimates, which are approximate, the number of legal immigrants is around 108,000: 3,600 naturalized, 40,000 with permanent residence permits, and 64,400 with long-term residence permits. Official records on asylum-seekers and refugees in Bulgaria started to be kept in 1991. The number of persons who applied for refugee status between 1994 and June 2001 was 7,029 from 66 countries: 4,394 men (62.51%), 252 women (17.81%) and 1,383 children (19.68%). The illegal immigrants in Bulgaria vary between 30,000 and 50,000.<sup>6</sup>

Due to the complete absence of research on the subject, our working hypotheses were very general and open:

- Immigration pressure in Bulgaria is growing steadily and is likely to soar around and after 2007, when the country is expected to join the European Union;
- The immigration flows are and will remain almost entirely from underdeveloped and Muslim countries: the Near and Middle East (Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, as well as Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan), the Maghreb (Northwestern or Arab Africa – Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia, Egypt), Asia, the Balkans etc.;
- At present there are no tensions between the indigenous population and immigrants, but the latter's potential increase might give rise to xenophobia, Islamophobia, racism and, consequently, social and employment discrimination, exclusion, ghettoization;
- The complicated situation around the terrorist attacks conducted by extremist Islamic movements in the world prompted us to assume that there might be

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<sup>5</sup> *Migration Trends in Selected EU Applicant Countries*, Volume I - Bulgaria, IOM, 2003, p.93.

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.pace-project.infp/html/bulgarian\\_report.htm](http://www.pace-project.infp/html/bulgarian_report.htm).

Islamic propagandists (with the status of legal or illegal immigrants) among the indigenous Muslim minorities in Bulgaria.

*Regulation.* The key law regulating the status of immigrants is the ***Foreigners in the Republic of Bulgaria Act*** (FRBA) from 1998. This law superseded the 1972 Sojourn of Foreigners in the People's Republic of Bulgaria Act, and has been repeatedly revised to ensure maximum harmonization with the *acquis communautaire*. To understand the full implications of the legal provisions discussed below, we must first note that according to the FRBA (Article 2), a 'foreigner' means any person who is not a Bulgarian citizen or any person who is not treated as a citizen of any State in accordance with the legislation thereof and holds an official document certifying this status. Second, it must be noted that there are three possible forms of stay of foreigners in Bulgaria: short-term stay, for up to 90 days; and long-term residence, which is subdivided into durable, for an authorized term of up to one year, and permanent, for an indefinite authorized term.

As regards employment of foreigners, the FRBA provides that those who have been granted a permanent residence permit are subject to employment under the terms and procedures established for Bulgarian citizens. Foreigners who have been permitted short-term or durable stay may also be employed, following the receipt of permission from the competent bodies of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (MLSP), but only by the employer and for the period of time specified in their work permit (Article 33). It is also noteworthy that the very wish to work under a contract of employment with the permission of the MLSP is a ground for granting a durable residence permit (Article 24). Foreigners working in the Republic of Bulgaria under a duly granted work permit have the rights and obligations of Bulgarian citizens unless the international treaties to which Bulgaria is a signatory provide otherwise (Article 5).

The latest Employment Act (January 2002) and an Ordinance (April 2002) have revoked the provision requiring the families of duly employed foreigners to have work permits for access to the labour market. Bulgaria is making progress towards ensuring freedom of movement for persons. The European integration process, launched after 1998 and scheduled for completion in 2007, has prompted the Bulgarian authorities to pursue a policy of tolerance and non-discrimination towards foreign citizens, granting them all individual rights and freedoms irrespective of race, ethnicity, religion and/or skin colour. Another relevant law is the ***Asylum and Refugees Act*** (ARA), enforced at the end of 2002. This law superseded the Refugees Act from 1999, and is also designed to harmonize Bulgarian legislation with world and European standards. The ARA regulates in a more consistent and coherent way the questions of refugees and granting of asylum, humanitarian and temporary protection. According to the ARA, persons who have been granted asylum or refugee status have equal rights on the labour market as all Bulgarian citizens. Similarly to other European countries, the restrictions concern some political and civil rights, such as the right to participate in general and municipal elections and in national and regional referenda, as well as to participate in the establishment of political parties and be a member of such parties; the right to hold positions for which Bulgarian citizenship is required by law; the right to be a member of the armed forces; and other restrictions explicitly laid down by law (Article 32).

Any foreigner who has been granted humanitarian status has the same rights and obligations as a foreigner holding a permanent residence permit in the Republic of

Bulgaria (Article 36). In other words, all persons falling in those categories have full rights to employment and to trade union protection.<sup>7</sup> This is also confirmed by the provision of Article 70 of the Employment Promotion Act (EPA), according to which foreigners with permanent residence permits as well as those who have been granted asylum, refugee or humanitarian status do not require preliminary permission from the Employment Agency in order to work. As regards those who have been granted temporary protection, they likewise have the right to work, but only under the terms specified by the Council of Ministers act granting them temporary protection. It is also noteworthy that the State Agency for Refugees is obligated to provide foreigners seeking, or who have been granted protection, help and assistance to adapt to the Bulgarian conditions; to organize Bulgarian language courses and vocational training courses; to assist for the integration of foreigners who have been granted protection; to develop independently or participate in the preparation of draft legal instruments and draft international treaties relating to the protection of foreigners, and to develop programmes for integrating the foreigners seeking or who have been granted protection in Bulgarian society (Article 53 of the ARA).

*Research methodology and team strategy.* The growing number of immigrants in Bulgaria and the processes of their adaptation are of scientific interest to ethnologists, sociologists, historians, economists. It is extremely important and exciting for field researchers to have the chance to observe directly the initial processes of formation and structuring of micro-communities that have their own specific features and internal regulatory mechanisms: how they react to the requirements imposed by the Bulgarian macro-community, how the macro-community in its turn reacts to their emergence, the levels of adaptation and integration, the extent to which the own cultural archetype is preserved or assimilated, the possible risks or latent tensions resulting from expanding multiculturalism.

This necessitated a comparatively longer period of empirical data collection:

In the first stage of the study, the *urgent anthropology* team<sup>8</sup> needed several months to form and elaborate a strategy before entering the immigrant communities from the Near and Middle East in Sofia and Plovdiv to conduct research under the working title ‘the Arabs as a new minority.’ The team conducted more than 50 interviews with immigrants who have been living in the country for a longer term and who were selected by random sampling. The majority of interviews were conducted with a single, and rarely with two or more respondents simultaneously. At the same time, a team member also established in-depth and longer-term relationships with members of the Arab community in Sofia, interviewing approximately ten people and taking part in several group discussions and thematic meetings. Experts in Arabic Studies, Islam and the Near East were also interviewed. This stage lasted, with several interruptions, from the end of 2001 to the end of 2003.

In the second stage, the ASA sociological agency joined the study by conducting a survey in 18 regional centres (100 interviews) and in Sofia City, where it interviewed 123

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<sup>7</sup> Notably, the superseded Refugees Act provided that during the procedure for granting refugee status the respective person had to perform work organized by the Agency for Refugees – a hypothesis that is absent in the corresponding provision of the ARA.

<sup>8</sup> Antonina Zhelyazkova, Valeri Grigorov, Donka Dimitrova, and Asen Mitkov, mediator/interviewer.

people, all of them from Near and Middle Eastern origins. The data from this survey are indicative and, moreover, only of the employed immigrants from the Arab countries. The interviews were conducted at the respondents' work place with standard questionnaires in April 2004 by ASA agency interviewers and IMIR anthropologists. Some of the interviews were conducted in the mosques in Sofia and Plovdiv.

Parallel with that, the research team collected stage by stage information from different specialized state and public organizations and agencies, such as the Interior Ministry, the Foreign Ministry, the Bulgarian Red Cross, and the United Nations High Commission for Refugees Branch Office in Bulgaria.

*The structure of the respondents interviewed by the urgent anthropologists may be represented as follows:*<sup>9</sup>

Country of origin:

Syria	22	Jordan	3	Egypt	1
Lebanon	7	Iraq	2	Iran	1
'Palestine'	3	Afghanistan	2	Pakistan	1

EDUCATION	AGE	SEX	RELIGION
Senior college 16	18-30 12	Male 39	Muslim 40
Junior college 7	31-40 19	Female 3	Orthodox Christian 2
Secondary 11	41-50 10		
Primary 8	over 50 1		

Intermarriage (with a Bulgarian woman) - 27

Permanently resident in Bulgaria

For less than 2 years	5
2-3 years	5
4-5 years	12
6-10 years	14
For more than 10 years	6

One of the important elements of all field studies is assessing the degree of credibility of the information obtained from interviews. By rule, this degree cannot be invariable. In the process of communication the information may be consciously or unconsciously manipulated and interpreted in different ways both by the respondent and the interviewer.

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<sup>9</sup> The actual number of focus interviews was larger, but not all were comprehensive enough to be of use in the statistical analysis.

The reasons for that may vary. It is known that in different circumstances – provocative questions, a sense of personal threat, presence of outsiders, lack of time, a language barrier or others – respondents are inclined to give inaccurate and even deliberately false information. In a number of cases, owing to lack of interest in the subject in question or lack of a personal opinion, interviewees may simply reproduce popular stereotypes without necessarily believing in them. In other cases respondents claim to speak for the entire community, advancing personal opinions and ideas that are not necessarily valid for the community at large. In surveying immigrant communities the language problem is of primary importance. The accurate assessment of these and all other factors is critical for an objective analysis. In this context, the following must be noted:

- All interviews with immigrants from the Near and Middle East were conducted in Bulgarian. The respondents' command of the Bulgarian language varied, but the majority were fluent and could express themselves articulately enough.
- The majority of interviews were conducted in the usual work place of the respondents: shops, restaurants, snack bars, market stalls, car repair shops, mosques. One of the problems in this type of interviewing is the respondents' impossibility to ensure a private place where the interview will not be interrupted by casual visitors. Due to the nature of their work, some of the respondents were eager to get the interview over as quickly as possible and to return to their chores. This often necessitated reducing the number of discussed topics.
- The interviews were usually recorded by hand with the respondent's consent. In some cases (at the interviewer's discretion) the interviews were not recorded but main parts of them were later written down or used in preparing the final analysis. The interviews were not video- or audiotaped since that might have been intimidating for the respondents.

On the whole, the fieldwork proceeded in the usual way. The initial fears of complicated problems in view of the specificity of the object of research and public sentiments following the September 11 terrorist attacks in the US proved unfounded in the first stage of the study. The respondents were comparatively willing to cooperate, and this facilitated the team's work.

By contrast, conducting the interviews and filling in the questionnaires proved much harder in the period after the war in Iraq and the deployment of the anti-terrorist coalition troops. The mounting international tensions associated with Al Qaeda's terrorist attacks closed up and in a sense capsulated the Arab immigrants in Bulgaria, especially those who had arrived recently and were still inadequately adapted to the local conditions, as well as some individuals who were devout believers/active practitioners and propagators of untraditional for Bulgaria strands of Islam. This made it necessary to recruit a Muslim who acted as an intermediary and mediator of the team.

*Historical overview.* Until the mid-1960s the number of foreigners from the Near and Middle East in Bulgaria was insignificant. In the early 60s the communist countries, Bulgaria included, launched a policy of recruiting students from the 'developing' world to universities, institutes and military schools as part of the 'ideological struggle.' As a result, from the mid-60s through the 80s tens of thousands of young people were admitted to Bulgarian institutions of higher learning. In this process special priority was given to the strategically important countries from the Near and Middle East. To regulate

the influx of foreign students, Bulgaria concluded agreements at different levels with a number of countries from the region. The large number of foreign students made it necessary to create a specialized Institute for Foreign Students (IFS) in 1965.

The profile and structure of this first wave of foreigners in Bulgaria were quite homogeneous. The overwhelming majority were people in their 20s who stayed for the period of their studies (that is, from three to seven years) and then left Bulgaria. Some, however, married Bulgarian girls and remained in the country. In the 70s and 80s, those mixed marriages produced a second generation of immigrants that had not only mixed anthropological and racial features but also a specific national and religious identity.

After 1989 the socioeconomic changes that took place as Bulgaria moved towards political democracy and market economy created conditions for a new, second wave of immigration from the Near and Middle East. The structure and profile of those new immigrants were considerably more heterogeneous. Besides the by then traditional group of foreign students, which decreased significantly in the 90s, a large number of small entrepreneurs and merchants arrived in the country. The data show that those new immigrants were not people who were 'desperate and destitute' in their home countries. The majority of them were middle-class: almost 10% were high-skilled professionals, more than 28% were university or school students, and more than 25% were private businessmen or craftsmen. Just 10% or thereabouts were unemployed back home and only some 6% were low-skilled.

The group of entrepreneurs and merchants consists of two distinct subgroups. Most had never been to Bulgaria before, knew hardly anything about the country and did not speak Bulgarian. They said that their first problem was the language barrier. Interestingly, almost all learned Bulgarian after their second year. They were mainly self-taught, getting some help from co-nationals who were fluent in Bulgarian. The second main subgroup is comprised of former students who had completed their studies in Bulgaria in the 70s and 80s. Their return to the country had nothing to do with their earlier studies. Most of them are now working as merchants and middlemen. Their good knowledge of Bulgaria and Bulgarian is a precondition for their easy adaptation.

Our observations that the Arabs learn Bulgarian fast and adapt easily to the new cultural milieu were interpreted by a respondent who is an expert in Arabic Studies as follows: 'Because of the specificity of their native language, it is easier for the Arabs to adapt swiftly to a foreign linguistic environment. Besides, as Muslims they view Christians through the prism of the Koranic tenet that the two religions are equal, that they have settled amidst "People of the Book" (*Ahl al-Kitab*). This helps immigrants accept the locals, i.e. the Bulgarians, as fellows. The idea of Islam is that it corrects, that it is nothing but a last corrective of Judaism and Christianity, with which it is essentially identical.'

As regards foreign language learning, another distinctive feature of the Arabs is also noteworthy. Their educational tradition is closely associated with memorizing. Because the most important thing for a Muslim who is capable of learning the Holy Koran by heart is to become a *hafiz* and to quote excerpts from the sacred text from memory throughout his life. **That is why one might say that the Arabs are arguably more inclined to memorize.** In this sense, Arab students in Bulgaria might initially have some problems in adapting to the Bulgarian educational system, which is based on a different



concept. Their culture is a culture of memorizing, a cultural of literal reproduction of the text, and they might find it difficult to adapt to the need of interpreting.

To quote our respondent expert in Arabic Studies again, here is how he describes the Arabic language: 'To put it in structuralistic terms, I think that Arabic has a plane of expression, with a difficult to grasp plane of content. For example, Arabic has thousands of words referring to camels but it does not have a term for "camel" in general. That is why Arabic is the language of poetry rather than of philosophy. As the sages say, if you put an Arab and a Greek in a beautiful garden, the Arab will write a poem in which each stamen of the flower will have its own name, while the Greek will start reflecting on the reasons for being, on metaphysics... On the verbal plane, Arabic is extremely rich – for example, *Lisan al-arab* (*The Arabic Language*), a 14<sup>th</sup> century lexicon, contains around four million words – but we Europeans need more content and that is why it is so difficult to translate. The miracle in Islam is linguistic, whereas the miracle for us Europeans is material. The Holy Koran is a Miracle because it is the Divine Word, it is the most eloquent possible that cannot be imitated either by man or by jinn – this is the Muslim concept of the Miracle, and hence the cult of words in Islam and the idea of words as deeds.'

Discussing the levels of dialogue between different peoples, religions and social strata, one of our respondents, a doctor from Morocco, underlined precisely the cult of words typical of Arabic culture: 'People must talk to each other until they fall in a trance!' Another respondent, who is from Iraq, defended himself against our reproaches that he was an inveterate atheist as follows: 'I've read all about the world religions, I've read the complete Hegel, Spinoza, Schopenhauer... I've tried to find God but failed. Where is He? I believe in two things that are written in the Holy Koran: "to speak beautifully and to do good".'

There was a similar cult of words in the culture of the Druids as part of Celtic culture. At their most extreme, the Druids refused to recognize the written word because they believed that this petrified the word, set it in stone, and did not allow it to develop. We have something similar in Islam – the revolt against Caliph Osman because he recorded the Holy Koran. He ventured to do something that no one before him had ever dared do because it was regarded as desecration of the Divine Word. The Sunna, the Hadith of Muhammad, started to be recorded a century and a half after the emergence of Islam and, moreover, after a century-long total and absolute ban on recording. Everything was memorized and transmitted orally. The oral tradition has its contemporary dimensions too, and that is why Arabic culture may be defined as mnemonic.

Perhaps this factor is important as a kind of predisposition towards the new cultural milieu. However, it must be noted that this certainly does not apply to the entire Arab world or to the Muslims from the different Islamic dogmatic schools. According to the team of anthropologists conducting the present study, high adaptability is typical mainly of the Syrians, Iraqis and Lebanese, but this might also be due to the fact that they are the largest and oldest Arab immigrant communities in Bulgaria.

The last few years have seen a considerable increase in the number of refugees, who have formed a new, significant group of foreign citizens in Bulgaria. Refugees, however, will be the object of a separate study. Insofar as our sample included some refugees from the Near and Middle East, we found that they do not have any financial resources of their own. By rule, they are employed as hired workers – vendors, shop assistants or porters in

the shops and at market stalls of co-nationals, and find it considerably harder to adapt to the new reality.

*Snapshot of the community.* Taking into account the only reliable data on the number of Arabs in Bulgaria, i.e. those immigrants who identified themselves as such in the 1992 census, and considering the dynamics of Arab immigration in Bulgaria as well as the percentages by periods obtained from the parallel collection of empirical data by the two teams of anthropologists and sociologists, **our team estimates that the number of legally resident and officially employed Arab immigrants in Bulgaria in 2004 approximates 17,000. Our hypothesis is that there are approximately as many Arabs with unregulated status in Bulgaria.**

The majority of immigrants from the Near and Middle East living permanently in Bulgaria are aged between 25 and 45, and they are mostly male. The average age of the Arab immigrants is 37.8 years.

Based on the evidence of the respondents, we have tentatively divided the arrival of immigrants from the Near and Middle East and the Maghreb into three periods: before 1990, from 1991 to 1997, and after 1997. Using the evidence provided by 223 respondents, we drew medians indicating the peak years in each of our three tentative periods: 1986, 1993 and 2000 respectively. This allowed us to trace the dynamics of the migration process: approximately 32% of the Arab immigrants came before 1990, almost 42% arrived in the second, and around 26% came to Bulgaria in the third period. Predictably, the average age of immigrants declines depending on the time of their arrival: from around 42 years for immigrants from the first, to 38 for those from the second, and 33 for those from the third period.

This also applies to the connection between time of immigration and family status: 81.7% of the pre-1990 immigrants are married, as against approximately 72% of those who immigrated between 1991 and 1997, and slightly over 44% of immigrants after 1997.

It is especially difficult to identify the profile of the immigrant community by gender, because by rule Arab women do not go to work whereas none of our respondents allowed us to interview his wife and children at home. Judging from 223 interviews from the indicative sociological survey as well as from 40 in-depth interviews conducted by the anthropologists, we are inclined to assume – and this is a very rough estimate – that just 4% to 10% of the Arab immigrants are women.

The largest group is that of the Syrians, who are approximately 52% of the ‘Arab’ community according to the anthropologists and more than 45% according to the sociological sample. There are also a considerable number of immigrants from Lebanon, 14%; Iraq, 10.3%; Palestine, 8.1%; and Jordan, 3.6%. Among the comparatively smaller immigrant communities are those from Pakistan, 0.4%; Afghanistan, 1.8%; Egypt, 1.8%; Iran, 4%; Yemen, 3.1%; Saudi Arabia, 1.3%. The percentage share of immigrants from the Maghreb is in the same range: Algeria, 1.3%, Morocco, 2.2%, and Tunisia, 2.7%; as well as Libya, 0.4% of the sample.

Territorially, the majority of immigrants live in Sofia. According to the respondents themselves, few of their co-nationals have settled out of Sofia; those who have are mainly in Plovdiv,<sup>10</sup> Varna, Bourgas, Pazardjik, Pleven, Pernik, Veliko Turnovo, Yambol,

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<sup>10</sup> The study conducted in Plovdiv in March 2003 found that the number of Arab immigrants living permanently in the city is approximately 800 according to the respondents and 600 according to the

Blagoevgrad and several other cities. As the data from the sociological survey also show, there are immigrants from the Near and Middle East in around 23 of Bulgaria's larger cities. On the whole, the immigrants are headed for Sofia and the large urban centres, which have a well-developed commercial infrastructure. There is no noticeable tendency for Arab immigrants to try and settle in towns with large local Muslim communities. **In fact, the very opposite tendency may be observed: the Arabs avoid settling in towns where the censuses show there are compact groups of the Turkish minority.** To our surprise, the sociological random sample in Kurdjali included only a single immigrant from Jordan, whereas the number of Chinese immigrants was considerably larger. The same applies to Razgrad: three Lebanese and one Syrian from the sample had chosen to settle in a town with a large indigenous Muslim community, whereas in Haskovo there were two immigrants from Syria and Yemen (according to our sample). Immigrants who have settled in villages with a Muslim majority are an exception – for example, in the village of Surnitsa there are two teachers at the local Islamic school who are from Saudi Arabia and they are Wahhabis. There are also individual cases of immigrants who have settled in such villages because they have married a local Muslim woman.

As regards the choice of residential area in the respective city, 58.2% of the Arab immigrants live in all-Bulgarian neighbourhoods, 2.8% live in Turkish neighbourhoods, approximately 2% live among Roma, and around 37% are in mixed neighbourhoods (i.e. populated by Bulgarians, Armenians, Jews, Roma, Turks and other immigrants). At the same time, 67.6% of the Arabs claim that there are also other immigrants from different countries in their neighbourhood. The Arab immigrants assess the income level of residents in their neighbourhood as low, according to 25.7%, middle, 58.7%, and high, 15.6%.

Notably, 37% of the Arabs claim that there are other children of immigrants in the schools attended by their own children, which clearly shows a tendency towards an increase and steady dispersal of Arab immigrants among the Bulgarian majority.

In analyzing the choice of place of residence, we established that some Arabs have settled in Roma neighbourhoods where the majority of *Roma are Muslim and Roma who identify themselves as Turks*. Those cases are not typical – they can be found in Hadjihassan Mahala, Stolipinovo and Sheker Mahala in Plovdiv, in Pazardjik and probably in other Roma neighbourhoods in the country – and the purpose is to preach a particular strand of Islam. The missionaries are from the following schools: Wahhabiyah,<sup>11</sup> Habashiyah,<sup>12</sup>

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specialized police services. Our observations in Plovdiv suggested that there is also an indefinite number of illegal immigrants from the Near and Middle East. Some Syrian and Lebanese respondents claimed that the real number of Arabs in Plovdiv was around 1,500, of which the naturalized Syrians alone were 200. This claim also supported our hypothesis that the Arabs with an unregulated or illegal status are almost as many as the legal immigrants.

<sup>11</sup> Wahhabiyah, another term for the Hanabilah. The Hanbalite school is one of the four Sunni schools of religious laws. It was founded by Ahmed ibn Hanbal from Baghdad. This is the most conservative and intolerant school of Islam today, found mainly in Saudi Arabia. It was dominant in Baghdad in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, when the adherents to the other Shari'ah schools were subjected to fierce persecution. The followers of Ahmed ibn Hanbal are viewed by the other three schools above all as dogmatic theologians rather than as lawyers. (For details, see Чуков, В., Георгиев, В. *Философия и теория на ислямското право*, Sofia, ЛИК, 1997 and Мутафчиева, В., Желязкова, А. *Турция между Изтока и Запада*, Изд.Отворено общество, София, 1998 [Choukov, V., Georgiev, V. *Philosophy and Theory of Islamic Law*, Sofia, LIK, 1997; and Moutafchieva, V., Zhelyazkova, A. *Turkey Between the East and the West*, Open Society Press, Sofia, 1998].)

Nursiyah,<sup>13</sup> as well as Sufism.<sup>14</sup> Some of those missionaries – Arab immigrants from Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey, Somalia or Germany<sup>15</sup> – recruit from 100 to 1,000 followers, the majority of them Muslim Roma. Other immigrants have chosen to settle in a Roma neighbourhood because of the absence of prejudice – they are well received there and they can easily find low-paid workers or, in exchange for small incentives, followers and friends.

In this connection, our respondents said that in addition to the street and Roma neighbourhoods, the mosques are the main centres for theological discussions, debates and recruitment of adherents and converts to different Islamic schools, as well as a regular place and time for meetings of Muslim immigrants – at Friday prayer.

The largest Arab immigrant community in Bulgaria is the Syrian one – an average 48% to 50% of the respondents. Considering that the respondents in the anthropological field study were selected by random sampling, we may assume that the real percentage share of the Syrians living in Bulgaria is close to that of the respondents.

The reasons for this relatively large percentage of Syrians in Bulgaria are mainly two: the large number of students who completed their higher education in Bulgaria in the 1970s and 80s, and the geographical proximity of the two countries. These two factors also account for the significant presence of Palestinians, Lebanese and Iraqis.

The communities from the Middle East – Iranians, Pakistanis, Afghans – are smaller. The reasons for that are again associated with the two factors mentioned above: the number of students who completed their education in Bulgaria and geographical distance. Geographical distance is especially indicative. Almost all respondents said that they came to Bulgaria mainly by bus. The trip lasts 30 to 50 hours from the Near East, and 40 to 120 hours from the Middle East. Fewer than 5% of the respondents came by air.

*Matrimonial and family practices.* The high percentage of mixed marriages (more than 70% of the Syrian respondents) is indicative of the immigrants' desire to integrate into Bulgarian society. There are no conclusive data on the exact number of mixed marriages, but it is unquestionably very high. This conclusion is also confirmed by the low percentage of female immigrants from the Near and Middle East (around 10%), combined with the desire of single immigrants to find a wife or girlfriend as quickly as possible. Incidentally, cases in which in the course of their migration immigrants start a family in each of the countries where they stay for a longer time are not rare. We heard

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<sup>12</sup> Habashiyah: a Muslim faction that emerged in the 1980s and is named Al-Habashi or Al-Ahbash after Abdullah al-Habashi, an Arab born in Ethiopia who developed his doctrine in Syria and Lebanon. It incorporates ideas from Sufism, Shi'ism, Ismailism and some aspects of Mutazilism.

<sup>13</sup> Nursiyah or Nurism: an Islamic movement that emerged in Turkey in the 1950s. Founded by Bediuzzaman Nursi as a mass movement towards a return to the norms of Islam.

<sup>14</sup> Sufism: a mystic, semi-monastic strand of Islam. The Sufi orders appeared around the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century. The actual theory of Islamic mysticism (Sufism) emerged at the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century from Islamic sources, but under the influence of Christian hermitage and Hindu asceticism. In it one can detect elements of the ideas of Neoplatonism, Mazdaism or Buddhism. The development of Sufism in the Islamic world reached a point where it surpassed Christian mysticism by scope, influence and proliferation, and became a separate branch of Muslim philosophical-aesthetic, exegetic and artistic thought. For the Sufis the Shari'ah is an external form guiding the true believers towards a pious life and preparing them for the mystic path (*tariqa*).

<sup>15</sup> These missionaries do not follow the usual migration flows but arrive from the country from where they have been sent or where they preached before coming to Bulgaria.

such a story from a respondent from Iran: his father had come to Sofia as a political immigrant about ten years ago. He moved to Bulgaria from Germany. The father had a wife and one child in every country. Our respondent is the child from his father's marriage in Iran, and he has a sister in Germany and a younger brother in Sofia. His dilemma at the time of the interview was whether to go to Germany, where his stepmother was very ill and had invited him to go in order to take over the family business and look after his sister.

According to the respondents themselves, 'more than 95% of the Syrians in Bulgaria are married to Bulgarian women.' Even if it is inaccurate, this opinion is indicative of the desire of the majority of Syrian immigrants to marry a Bulgarian. They regard such a marriage as prestigious and desirable.

The rate of intermarriage is also high among the other immigrant communities from the Near and Middle East. However, the relatively small number of those included in the statistical sample does not allow calculating an exact percentage. This high rate of intermarriage typical of immigrants from the Near and Middle East may be explained, among other things, by the established cultural model in the Arab countries that a man should not remain single for long, and by the definite racial and anthropological preferences of the Arabs for women with paler skin and fair hair. To this one should add the incredible speed with which all immigrants learn Bulgarian. The processes of secularization and the lower degree of religiosity of the Arabs from Syria, Iraq and Lebanon determine the absence of any religious prejudice in intermarriage with a Christian woman. It is interesting that with the exception of three cases, in which the ethnic and religious status of the wife did not become clear (probably the wives were Roma), all other respondents said that their wife is Christian Bulgarian. The Arabs are not prejudiced against cohabitation and marriage with Roma women. In some cases they even take advantage of the Roma matrimonial tradition which allows early marriage for girls, and conclude a traditional marriage (a ritual marriage that is not registered in the respective official institutions) with girls aged 14 to 16. The custom of paying *baba hakki* for the girl is also close to the Muslim tradition – a form of purchasing the girl from the father. It must be noted that such cases are rare, and the majority of mixed marriages are with Bulgarian women.

To the reasons for intermarriage we might also add some immigrants' problems in marrying in their native country, usually for social (class, caste, clan, family) and financial (inability to afford the price of and gifts for the bride-to-be) considerations, which in some cases is also one of the motives for migration. In Arab societies, the requirements for marriage are so strict that a man simply cannot afford to marry before acquiring sufficient wealth and social status.

A female Bulgarian respondent who is an expert on the Near East claims that 'undoubtedly part of the immigrants come to acquire matrimonial experience in Bulgaria, because in their societies premarital contacts are not encouraged and in some countries they are even strictly punished. The reason why they come here and then stay on is, in some cases, the freedom of contacts with the opposite sex, sexual liberation as compared to their criteria and traditional experience.' Because in their societies a wife must be purchased and marriage is a deal with strictly defined intermediaries, rules and contracts, immigrants strive to avoid the requirements for marriage in Arab society. This is very often one of the first ethnic insults they get from their Bulgarian wife in family rows:

‘When you’re incapable of anything you Arabs marry us Bulgarians because we are ready to marry you for nothing – for love only!’

Considering the entirely obvious fact that mixed marriages in Bulgaria are only between Arab men and Bulgarian women, and not the other way round, the following must be noted. A Muslim Arab can marry a woman from another religion who is not necessarily required to convert to Islam. Muslims follow the old Roman principle that the child belongs to the father. The incontestable rule is that the children belong to the father and the mother has no rights to them in the event of separation or divorce. Islam itself is an anti-matriarchal revolution in the sense that the status of women before Islam was different, especially in Mecca. In Mecca women were highly respected, and in many cases they had a dominant role and crucial say in society. Medina was strongly influenced by the Judeo-Christian tradition – hence the extremely low and rightless status of women and femininity in principle. The Prophet Muhammad made a big compromise between Mecca and Medina over the social role of women.

Our respondent expert in Arabic Studies told us the following about the status of Arab women when we complained that we had failed to interview more than three or four immigrant women: ‘The woman is indeed largely a prisoner in her home. But the Arabs approve strongly of education. The majority of students in the universities in Iraq were girls. As regards the dowry, the family of an educated woman gets a much higher price for her. Admittedly, she rarely applies her education after marrying, but it has nevertheless raised her price. You mustn’t wonder that you didn’t come across working women among the immigrants, because it is a matter of honour for the man to look after his family and to provide everything. To allow your wife to work means that you are quite a failure as a man. They have a very strong sense of solidarity, so if your wife starts working this is a clear sign that you have been disowned by the clan itself, because clan solidarity and kinship must immediately be demonstrated if one of the members of the clan is in trouble.’

Tribal structure exists in the Arab countries, but it is quite dispersed as a form of organization. Tribal organization was inherited from the pre-Islamic age, but it was non-homogenous even then – probably because of nomadism. It is claimed that Islam revoked it, replacing the tribal structure by the religious community, but in practice this is not the case. In fact, the present structure of society is not so much tribal as clan-based. Under Saddam Hussein priority was given to kinship in order to divide society, to trigger rivalry and conflict between the different clans.

As regards the attitude to sons, it is unambiguous. The firstborn child must be a boy, and Arabs are even named after their firstborn child: for example, Abu Hassan or Abu Ahmed, which means Father of Hassan or Father of Ahmed. Being, say, Abu Fatima – in other words, the father of a firstborn daughter – is considered offensive and humiliating. Our respondent expert in Arabic Studies quoted the Holy Koran, which says that ‘when a daughter is announced to one of them his face becomes black and he is full of wrath’ [16:58].

Hence it is clear that if a Christian man marries a Muslim woman, very rare as such cases might be, he *must* convert to Islam because of the principle that the child belongs to the father. According to Islamic law, the child de jure and de facto adopts the father’s religion at birth. That is why in the frequent intermarriage between a Muslim man and a non-Muslim woman the latter may keep her religion because that is irrelevant to the next

generations. But a non-Muslim man who marries a Muslim woman must convert to Islam so that his offspring will be Muslim too.

Considering the general concept of women in Muslim Arab societies, the status of the mother is quite interesting. The mother is regarded as sacred. Our team was told that an immigrant from Egypt had been killed several years ago because he had sworn at somebody referring to their mother. This Arab pre-Islamic cult of the mother is very popular in poetry and has survived to this very day, developed and promoted by Islamic tradition.

As regards primogeniture, the legal practice in Islam is fairer compared to that in the West European tradition. The eldest son is not privileged. The issue is regulated by the Holy Koran, where the inheritance is not divided by primogeniture but by sex. Daughters get less than sons. For their part, the sons inherit equally – unlike Europe, where all the land went to the eldest son. This, of course, resulted from the principle that in the West the land was the property of the individual, whereas in the East it belonged to the state treasury. Even in early Islam as well as in the early Ottoman period, the land was the property of the community. For example, part of the land in Iraq is very fertile, but when it was conquered during the reign of Caliph Omar he issued special orders against granting land because it belonged to the state treasury. Of course, there was a system of granting land as a reward for service or in lieu of a regular wage for army officials – the so-called *iqta* – but it was granted for a limited period only and was not hereditary. The legend goes that Caliph Omar bequeathed the Arabs land laws, which were designed to preserve their mobility and militant spirit. These laws do not allow the Arab to become attached to a piece of land, he must be free and feel at home only in the army camp.<sup>16</sup> In Islam this picture is very complicated, and Western historians have rather primitive notions of Islamic feudalism. The attitude to land and its allotment has nothing in common with Frankish feudalism in Western Europe.

The relationships in mixed marriages are peculiar. One of the issues that might lead to conflict in the family is the place of residence in the long term. In the course of the field study we interviewed a Syrian aged around 60, an ex-military officer, who had received a lump sum in dollars upon retirement with which he had started a private business in a better economic environment in Bulgaria in the early 90s. He married a Bulgarian who was almost 30 years his junior. They have two small children. His shop in the big market-place in Plovdiv was glutted with household appliances but there were few if any clients. He told us how rich he had felt with his approximately ten thousand dollars in the early 90s, when the steadily rising dollar against the lev had allowed him to expand his business. In 2002 his business declined – the state tightened controls and it was no longer possible to import goods illegally or dodge taxes, rent and utility bills soared, prices were rising and clients were decreasing. In this business climate he was thinking about returning to Syria, where he would at least have the moral support of his family and kinsfolk. After declaring that he was determined to return to his native country, he was distracted by a potential client and we had an opportunity to speak with his Bulgarian wife. Asked if she was ready to move to Syria, she looked at us and told us firmly: ‘I’ll never move to Syria. He only thinks that we’ll move there. There’s no way we’ll do that.

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<sup>16</sup> Желязкова, А. Разпространение на исляма в западнобалканските земи под османска власт, София, 1990, Издателство на БАН, с.30. [Zhelyazkova, A. *Proliferation of Islam in the Western Balkan Lands Under Ottoman Rule*, Sofia, 1990, BAS Press, p.30.]

I've been there, we've visited his family and I know what it's like. I'll never set foot again in this poor and primitive country.' Question: 'Is it you who make the decisions?' Answer: 'In their culture it's compulsory for the men to think that they are in charge and that everything is under their control. Of course, the main decisions concerning family policy and children are made by the women. But the men don't realize it.'

A female respondent aged 30 whose father is Lebanese told us how she remembers that ever since her early childhood the main arguments between her parents were about where the family should live – even if those arguments were theoretical only because there was no real opportunity for moving. This battle was permanent, with a variable outcome. Depending on who gained the upper hand in the family, which has another two daughters, and if the circumstances allowed it, they would live in Bulgaria for several years and then spend a long time in Lebanon. For unclear reasons, her sisters and she spent their childhood in Beirut during the war, and she has traumatic memories of bombing, shelling, destruction and fear. When her father, who is about 25 years older than her mother, grew old, he wanted to settle down permanently in Lebanon. This sparked the last, crucial battle in the family, which – predictably – was won by the wife, and the family finally settled down in Sofia.

Of course, this choice is not always in favour of the women. According to the consular section at the Bulgarian embassy in Beirut, the number of Bulgarians who are living temporarily or permanently in Lebanon is 210. Besides those who are registered officially, it is estimated that there are another approximately 500. The majority are Bulgarian women who have married Lebanese men and have kept their Bulgarian citizenship. Part of their children are also Bulgarian citizens. On the whole, the Bulgarian colony consists of two generations: Bulgarian women who settled in Lebanon in the 1950s and 60s, and those who came in the 70s and 80s.

It was interesting for us to find out if the first spontaneous insults in the event of a family row were ethnic-based. In the Bulgarian interethnic traditional practice, intermarriage with the indigenous minorities – Turks or Roma – is not tolerated because it is assumed, especially in mixed communities, that a silly family row between young spouses might spark interethnic hostility and upset the interethnic peace and understanding. The majority of our Arab respondents admitted that ethnic insults are a fact – when you really want to hurt your partner in a family row, ethnic labels are the most painful.

Interviewing a respondent who is an expert on the Near East, we decided to fill in the picture of family relationships by raising the issue of blood feuds. Question: 'What could cause a blood feud among the Arabs?' Answer: 'Anything might cause a feud, from a bad word to murder. The Arabs have a cult of words. In the pre-Islamic and early Islamic ages poetry had a virtual physical impact. Enemies would meet on the battleground, the poets would step forward and recite their satires against each other, then everybody would go home without spilling a drop of blood even though there was in fact a winner and a loser. The word is believed to have a physical impact, and that is precisely why the Arabs don't have our all too familiar curses and swear words involving sexuality in some way.'

One of the important principles in Islamic Arabic culture is that deeds are realized through intents. **A deed that has not been declared in advance as an intent is invalid. Whereas a declaration of intent necessarily leads to action** – this is a fundamental principle in Muslim law and jurisprudence. When a Muslim sets out on a pilgrimage he



declares that he is going on a pilgrimage to Mecca. If he does not declare it, the pilgrimage is invalid, it is not recognized by Allah. On the other hand, these words are so binding that a Muslim who has uttered them would rather die than return without making the pilgrimage (*hajj*).

The principle that actions are fulfilled through intents, that in this sense words have a physical impact, are valid to this very day. Question: ‘Does this mean that the Arabs rarely make promises?’ Answer: ‘Promises *are* made, but the promise has material power and it simply must be fulfilled. In Arabic, verbs have a form which we call *status energicus* – a specific affixation of the verb by which the speaker implicitly declares that he or she will do something. Once you have declared it in this way you are obliged to perform the action in question even if that means you might die. Saying “I’ll go to Mecca” or *Se el habbu* is very different from using *status energicus*: *La el habanna*. The double n in the ending signifies the oath, it intensifies the action itself and turns it into an oath that must be kept at any cost. As regards blood feuds, they are also an absolute imperative. It has been believed since ancient times that on the grave of the killed person there is a bird, which they call *hamma* or *sada*, that stands there, crying: “Quench my thirst!” (with the blood of the killer). This bird is believed to fly out of the head of the victim in some way, after which it perches on the grave and stays there, crying until the death is revenged.’ These are ancient pagan customs, but although it categorically condemns paganism Islam is in many cases a thin layer over ancient rituals. That is why the status of blood feuds has remained the same.

*In-group organization.* Judging from the responses of the majority of Arab immigrants, we concluded that the Arabs do not have a strong sense of solidarity, i.e. of belonging to one nation. Most respondents claimed that they have many differences that divide them and that is why they cannot act as a single organism or nation.

In the course of the field study, we identified a clear hierarchy in the assessments and stereotypes of some Arabs about others, depending on their geographical origin: 1. A division between Arabs from the oil-producing countries and Arabs from the countries poor in natural resources: ‘them lazy oil-rich Arabs’ and ‘us hard-working poor Arabs.’ 2. Stereotypes popular among the Arabs themselves and associated with ancient origins, hereditary regional and ethnographic characteristics, and education. The Lebanese are rated highest by intelligence, ancient history and culture. As one respondent from Syria – a doctor and prosperous businessman – told us, ‘the Lebanese are vastly superior to us.’ Another respondent noted that ‘them Egyptians are really vulgar.’

We asked our expert in Arabic Studies to explain this cultural hierarchy: ‘The Lebanese themselves, as well as the Palestinians, are reluctant to identify themselves as Arabs. They prefer going back to the Homeric age, to Achaean migrations that reached Lebanon, Palestine, Phoenicia, and perceiving themselves as Phoenicians. This attempt at self-identification with older cultures is typical of the entire Arab world. As the Iraqis say, “We are Assyrians, we aren’t Arabs but Assyrians”. Perhaps this comes from the contempt of foreign cultures for the Arabs. For example, let’s consider how a Persian would see the Arab historically: the Arab is an illiterate bedouin who will eat dry, burned desert plants and camel droppings in lean years, or even camel hair ground with blood. At its zenith in the Middle Ages, Arabic culture as such was itself largely the product of non-Arabs. It flowered in two regions: Iraq, which was actually on the territory of Persia,

and Spain, a melting pot of many cultures where we have top achievements of Islamic civilization which, however, is syncretic.’

As regards the Egyptians, they are lowest in the hierarchy. They are the menial workers, the Gastarbeiters of the Arab world. Egypt is under huge demographic pressure and exports labour on a massive scale. The common stereotypes about the Egyptians in the Arab and Muslim world depict them as greedy, unscrupulous and treacherous – in short, the very opposite of the Islamic norms. The Egyptians love calling themselves pharaohs, and the police officers who meet them at Baghdad airport when they arrive in search for jobs treat them as animals – they shepherd them towards a separate terminal, striking them with huge batons as if they were a herd.

According to another respondent who is an expert on the Near East, those who have the highest self-confidence in their own intelligence and culture among the Arabs are the Palestinians, even though there is a huge division between them: there are highly educated and there are extremely backward Palestinians. The Lebanese perceive themselves as descendants of the Phoenicians and as the brain of the Eastern Mediterranean. They look down especially on the Syrians, and have many jokes about the dumb and simple Syrian peasant and the clever Lebanese who outwitted him. The Syrians are the lowest paid foreign workers in Lebanon – they will take the hardest jobs for about US\$ 300 a month and accept to live in miserable living conditions.

In politics, however, the relationship is the very opposite because Syria is the ‘big brother’ that dictates Lebanese policies. This contradiction provokes even stronger antagonism between the two Arab nations at the everyday level: the Lebanese are clever, cunning, well-educated and rich, whilst the Syrians are uneducated and poor, and deserve only the worst possible jobs. In other words, there is unquestionable subordination and stereotyping among the Arabs themselves, regardless of whether it is objective or not.

Arabs from the Maghreb also have high self-confidence as people belonging to an ancient and advanced culture. This is amplified by a broader cross-civilizational self-awareness that they are part of the Mediterranean cultures. Perhaps that is why our respondents from Morocco and Algeria were more critical towards Bulgaria and the other European countries to which they had to emigrate. One of our Moroccan respondents said that he had a brother in Italy and another brother who was working in France. His patron there demanded 7,000 euro to appoint him in the place of a chef, and eventually tried to fire him in order to take a new bribe from the next chef. This led to a series of frequent changes and new appointments in exchange for bribes. Another Moroccan respondent said that he had gone to Lille to study dentistry but couldn’t get used to the ways of the French: ‘They claim to have a world cultural mission but deep down they are uncultured. I can’t accept their arrogance and sense of superiority.’

To this we should add the natural hierarchization by religious denomination as, for example, in a multi-religious Lebanon where the Sunnis look down on the Shiites – Sunni families are better educated, whereas Shiite families are bigger but commoner, they live in the rural areas and are poorer. Christian Arabs, such as the Maronites and Greek Catholics, have extremely high self-esteem, but they have lately become economically weak and are the largest source of emigration to Western Europe, the US and Australia. There are also the Druzes, who are such a specific denomination or, rather, a spiritual

category, that they are virtually unimaginable for the surrounding Muslim communities. There are Druzes in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan.<sup>17</sup>

Viewed theoretically, this apparent diversity among the Arabs is a product of our European failure to understand the concept of the *umma*. For the Muslims, the *umma* is a community and it is essentially supra-national, but it is misperceived by the Europeans as a nation. It is another matter that among the Arabs themselves it is claimed that there is or should be a unified Muslim *umma*, but reality has led to the emergence of specific national archetypes as a result of historical or tribal territorial division, or specific cultural traits based on different historical experience and natural environment.

Territorially and politically, the *umma* is represented by the *House of Islam (dar-ul Islam)* and it is manifested at the local, national and regional level. At each of those levels Muslims must feel that they belong to it as an organization based on theocratic principles. The *umma* is guided by divine law and, in this sense, it is both a theocracy and a logocracy consecrated by Allah – a community that follows the Divine Word.<sup>18</sup> That is why a universal agreement (*ijma*) reached by consensus by the Muslim community is regarded as infallible because the Prophet himself said that ‘My people will never agree in an error.’ This does not conflict with the historical fact that political divisions emerged within the *House of Islam* as early as the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries. That is when the Arabs gave up a considerable part of their superiority but their language, as the language of the Koran, continued to be regarded as God’s chosen and to play a central ritual, administrative and cultural role. Persian language and culture also won significant ground. It is precisely in the politically fractured *House of Islam* that one can see the ability of its inhabitants to deepen their spiritual and cultural unity.<sup>19</sup>

Despite its relatively large size, the Syrian community in Bulgaria remains comparatively unconsolidated. The study shows that it does not strive towards compact settlement and cultural isolation. Almost all respondents stressed their desire for greater integration with the Bulgarians.

For the majority of Syrian respondents, participation in community meetings is limited to the celebrations of the national day at the Syrian embassy. Every year on that day an embassy representative goes to Plovdiv to organize a meeting of the small Syrian community (around 250 people) in the city. Besides lifting the national spirit, these regular meetings provide the Syrian services with an opportunity for control and impact over the immigrants. The activities of the Association of Syrians in Bulgaria, *Rupta Sutriye* and Organization of Syrian Students in Bulgaria are also under the direct control of the Syrian embassy in Sofia.

In practice there are no autonomous and independent immigrant public structures. That is why part of the Syrians, especially those who have more critical and oppositionist views,

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<sup>17</sup> The Druzes do not have written religious laws. They have rules that are passed on orally from one generation to another. In the 11<sup>th</sup> century they seceded from Orthodox Islam – they believe in reincarnation. A Druze must die so that his soul can be reincarnated in the body of another. The women are veiled, with white headscarves trimmed with lace. The traditional male costume consists of black trousers, a black waistcoat and white knitted cap. They are endogamous. A Druze who marries a foreign woman is considered to have excommunicated himself.

<sup>18</sup> История на религиите, София, 1999, Гутенберг, с. 269. [*A History of Religions*, Sofia, 1999, Gutenberg, p.269].

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. p. 254.

avoid attending the formal meetings. A far more popular form of contacts and interaction between co-nationals are the informal family and friendly gatherings that are attended not only by the Syrians but also by their Bulgarian wives. In this sense, the community has certain multiethnic and multicultural characteristics.

On the whole, the Syrians are very well integrated into the Bulgarian ethnocultural milieu. Statements such as the following are not infrequent: 'I now have more contacts with Bulgarians [than with co-nationals]; my family is here and my children are here; I feel more Bulgarian than Syrian; Bulgaria is my second homeland.'

The Syrian community in Sofia as well as in Plovdiv and elsewhere lives in different neighbourhoods in various parts of town. There is no visible effort to settle in compact groups in a particular neighbourhood or street. The majority of respondents live in rented apartments. The few who have bought an apartment have been married to a Bulgarian for a longer time and do so under pressure from her family. They said they prefer renting because of the low rents in Bulgaria. According to a popular Arab saying, 'a shop can feed the family,' so all the money available is invested in business. The logic of the Bulgarians that owning a home is a must seems rather impractical and economically inexpedient to the Arabs. The non-attachment of Arab immigrants to a particular home may suggest a latent sense of transience – a person who has once left his native country remains a potential emigrant for life.

By and large, the other bigger Arab communities – Lebanese, Iraqis, Palestinians – also have immigrant organizations, but the most common form of contacts are kinship networks, circles of friends or informal contacts between co-nationals.

Arab immigrants with higher education and prestigious occupations are likely to create various cultural and political associations, but they are formal only, do not function and the activities around them are usually limited to their constitution and registration in court. A member of our team is the co-founder, together with other Bulgarian intellectuals, of the registered in 2002 Association of the Arab Intelligentsia and Friends, which includes Arabs from different countries from the Maghreb and Near East. The purpose of the association is 'to promote the peaceful cohabitation of different cultures and communities by means of: organizing courses and seminars, assisting newly arrived foreigners from different countries for the purpose of their adaptation to and integration into Bulgarian society, and to facilitate Bulgarian society in interaction and contacts with incoming foreigners (investors, students, merchants, seconded officials), assisting and facilitating Bulgarian citizens who visit the Arab countries for various reasons, liaising with competent public authorities and nongovernmental organizations...'<sup>20</sup>

This association, as most of the others, has practically done nothing to date, but it demonstrates the internal need of the Arabs to integrate fully into their new homeland, their wish to be better understood as a cultural community and as individuals. There is a distinct desire among the well-educated immigrants to be accepted as part of Bulgaria's intellectual elite while serving as intermediaries between Arab Muslim culture and the local tradition.

*Arab immigrants about the Bulgarians.* The attitude of the interviewed foreigners towards the Bulgarians (as a community) is by rule very positive. The standard

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<sup>20</sup> Sofia City Court Judgement No. 1 dated 28 June 2002 in the matter of Company Case No. 5104/2002.

qualifications are, for example: ‘good people, friendly, nice, alert, open-minded, modern, normal people like us, warm like us, I like everything in Bulgaria.’

The comparison between the two cultures is also favourable for the Bulgarians: ‘Our people are more conservative, while the Bulgarians are Europeans.’ According to a boy of 14 from a mixed marriage (Syrian father and Bulgarian mother), ‘People here are more open, while in Syria they are more narrow-minded’; ‘in Syria they tell me that I’m a European.’

The respondents also respect the Christian Orthodox tradition of the Bulgarians. Almost all have taken part, in one form or another, in the celebration of major Orthodox festivals. ‘At home we celebrate the Christian festivals more – especially Easter, New Year, Christmas.’ The respect for the Christian tradition is a kind of demonstration of loyalty to the Bulgarian community, a desire for tolerance in relationships and for a high level of integration.

More differentiated opinions about the Bulgarians may be found mainly among the students. According to some, ‘living in Student Town is dangerous – I’ve been burgled several times.’ In cases of intermarriage, it is quite common for the Bulgarian relatives to demonstrate initial disrespect for the Arab and Muslim origins of the husband. One of the respondents complained that he’d heard his mother-in-law ask his wife, ‘Why on earth did you choose that gypsy.’ Another respondent married to a Bulgarian is adamant that there is no such thing as a happy mixed marriage, adding that ‘the cultural differences are an obstacle.’

Some of the respondents said that they have felt disrespect in various forms on the part of the Bulgarians because of their racial and cultural differences. ‘I might be wrong, but it seems to me that the Bulgarians are in a way racist towards people with darker skin. This racism isn’t aggressive but you can feel how they are discussing you behind your back.’ Another respondent added that, nevertheless, ‘the Bulgarians hate the Gypsies more than the Arabs.’ Incidentally, quite a few respondents said that the cases in which they had been treated contemptuously were in fact a matter of mistaken identity because the Bulgarians had mistaken them for Roma. Once the confusion was sorted out, the Bulgarians would apologize: ‘Sorry, pal, we took you for a *mangal*<sup>21</sup>...’ This attitude shocks the Arabs because they do not try to avoid the Roma, they have Roma friends and often employ Roma workers.

Assessing the Bulgarians as workers, some owners of restaurants and snack bars said that they are lazier than the Arabs and steal at every opportunity even though they receive a salary. At the same time, they admitted that no Arab from their countries would take such a low paid job. What is especially foreign to their mentality is the distanced attitude of the employed Bulgarians to the job they are paid to do. As a respondent employer noted, ‘When one of us is given a job we’ll become loyal to the boss well-nigh to the grave. We devote ourselves completely to the job and do our best even if the company might belong to someone else. That’s simply the way we are, the way we’ve been brought up. While the Bulgarians come to work and you can see they’re bored to death, they won’t make the slightest effort and don’t care about the employer’s prosperity as if it wasn’t in their own interest too... They are ready to leave the customer right in the middle of the deal or service because it’s time for their break...’

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<sup>21</sup> A very pejorative and offensive term for ‘Rom.’

Perhaps that is also why the immigrants from the Near and Middle East who have a private business employ not only Bulgarians but also co-nationals in 35% of the cases; around 16% employ workers from the local ethnic minorities, i.e. Roma and Turks, and another 15% employ other local immigrants.

Still, the findings suggest that despite some negative assessments the majority of respondents have a definitely positive attitude towards the Bulgarians. In the few cases where there are negative feelings, these are usually associated with a particular event or incident and are seldom transferred to the entire Bulgarian community. Most of the respondents said that they have not been an object of deliberate discrimination or xenophobia and think that the Bulgarians are very tolerant towards foreigners.

The Arab immigrants want to have Bulgarian friends and have actually established lasting friendships. When Arabs work in Bulgarian teams they are usually loyal to the respective institution or employer, and even more so to their fellow workers.

Asked whether their children have Bulgarian friends, almost 83% said they did: 'Most of their friends are Bulgarian.' The answers to the question, 'Where would you like your children to settle in future?' were similar: 56% of the respondents would like their children to settle in Bulgaria, against 28% who want them to return home and 16% who hope that their children will build their life in another country.

These positive feelings were also obvious in the attitude to our team and the interviewers: 63.6% of the respondents were well-disposed, 26.6% were indifferent, and just 9.9% responded reluctantly, refused to be interviewed or demonstrated their contempt. This may also be attributed to the level of adaptation, because immigrants from the first wave (before 1990) were the most responsive whereas the newcomers (around 2000) were the least responsive.

When a member of our team visited a family with three children – where the father is Palestinian and the mother is Iraqi – a surprise visit on Easter to bring them painted eggs and traditional Bulgarian Easter cake, he was amazed to see a bowl full of Easter eggs in the very centre of the table. Seeing her guest's confusion, the Iraqi woman smiled and explained: 'We do what you do. It's Easter and one must paint eggs. We did them together with the children. Please take two of ours and give them to your sons. With our best wishes for a happy Easter.'

The respondents also have folklore dedicated with sad self-irony to the choice of Bulgaria as a new homeland. Asked how he had ended up in Bulgaria, a respondent told us a joke he had heard from a friend of his from Zaire: 'There was this plane flying over Africa and trailing a rope. So because we're monkeys we grabbed the rope and the rope tore over Bulgaria...'

One of our respondents from Morocco is so deeply attached to Bulgaria that he dreams of the time when the two countries will open up as much as possible towards each other in every way. He told us how he had looked in encyclopaedias for ages, trying to find a bird that migrates to Morocco in winter and returns back to Bulgaria in summer. 'Don't look for it,' a friend told him, 'it's you who are that bird!'

*Arab immigrants about Bulgarian public institutions.* The public institutions dealing directly with foreigners are the object of strongest criticism for misconduct. This applies especially to the Interior Ministry's passport service. The unanimous opinion is that by

rule officials at the passport service take bribes from immigrants. 'If you don't give them a bribe you won't get anywhere, they'll turn you back several times, every time coming up with something that's supposed to be wrong with your papers.'

Other criticized institutions are the tax and inspection services. In some cases officials from those services are said to have taken money unlawfully: 'Because we don't know the Bulgarian laws well they ask us to pay something and then it turns out that we shouldn't have.'

Another problem noted by respondents are the constant revisions in the laws regulating fees and taxes. A student said that when he came to Bulgaria six years ago he had to pay a university tuition fee of 5,000 leva plus US\$ 10 a year for every year of his stay in the country. He now has to pay 500 leva a year for his stay. 'The terms and conditions change virtually every day and I no longer know what I'll be charged next year.'

This is also one of the reasons for the absence of longer-term plans. Almost 36% of the respondents said that they haven't decided yet whether they will settle down in Bulgaria permanently: 'I don't know how long I'll be staying in Bulgaria – the laws change virtually every day. Right now we're required to appoint at least ten Bulgarians or otherwise they'll shut down our business.'

Another 5.4% intend to work in Bulgaria for some time and then move to another country, whereas 15% live and work in Bulgaria but plan to return home eventually. Still, the immigrants who have definitely chosen Bulgaria as their second homeland prevail – they are 43%.

The majority of respondents think that the Bulgarian public institutions do not have a discriminatory attitude against foreigners: 'There might be occasional cases, but this isn't a government policy.' Yet even so, the prevalent opinion is that Bulgarian institutions do not protect them effectively against the arbitrary actions of individual public officials. One of the demands in this respect is to introduce forms of control that will protect both Bulgarians and foreigners equally. 'They shouldn't treat us as if we were criminals just because we're foreigners. There might be criminal elements amongst us, but the majority are decent and good people.'

Ultimately, our impression is that the Arab immigrants definitely like and respect their host country, that they want to be loyal citizens of Bulgaria and that society would stand to gain from a positive institutional policy towards the immigrants who have chosen our country.

*Bulgarians about the Arab immigrants.* Establishing the attitude of the Bulgarians towards foreigners of Arab or Muslim origins living in the country was an important element of our study. For the purpose, we interviewed Bulgarians who happened to walk into the shops owned by immigrants or who worked and lived nearby. The accent in the questions was on the relationships between Bulgarians and foreigners living in the country, what the Bulgarians know about their culture, how they view their cultural differences, what they appreciate and what they don't accept etc.

The interviews showed that among the Bulgarians there are stable negative stereotypes about Arabic in particular and generally about Muslim culture and religion. The roots and reasons for those stereotypes are well known and can be traced historically.

Bulgarian society commonly perceives Islamic culture as 'primitive' and 'very different from Christian and Bulgarian culture.' The attitude to the inferior status of Muslim

women is extremely negative. Wearing yashmaks and headscarves is defined as conflicting with the secular Bulgarian cultural model. Seeing Muslim women wearing headscarves, two teenagers exclaimed: 'Just look at them, they're Taleban.' Referring to the terrorist attacks in the US, a Syrian woman said that the Bulgarians had very wrong ideas about the Muslims: 'Some Bulgarians asked me if it was true (it was supposed to be written in the Holy Koran) that if a Muslim killed four Christians he'd go to heaven.'

An important indicator of the level of acceptance of the *Other* is the attitude to intermarriage. The majority of Bulgarian respondents would not marry a foreigner of Arab or Muslim origins. Such a marriage is seen as non-prestigious and justified only if the spouse is well-off. In cases of intermarriage, the Bulgarian relatives by rule do their best to make the couples change their mind. Some of the foreign respondents married to Bulgarians admitted that they were hurt by the negative and even offensive attitude of their wife's family. According to others, they were at first frowned upon by the family but then things improved eventually: 'When my wife's family realized I was Muslim they turned against me, but then they eventually saw I was very religious and respected the Bulgarian traditions, and they calmed down and became friendlier.'

The high level of religious and cultural tolerance serves as an important factor for the conclusion and survival of mixed marriages. One of the questions to which the interviewed Arabs gave an almost identical answer was whether they celebrated Christian holidays. Not only those in mixed marriages but also part of the others underlined the fact that they celebrate both Muslim and Christian holidays and respect the Bulgarian traditions.

The interviews with Bulgarians showed that little if any distinction is made between the different Arab nations. The Bulgarians usually equate Muslims with Arabs: 'I don't know where they are from – they are Arabs.'

When the Bulgarians discuss not the Arabs as a community but a particular individual – for example, their Arab neighbour, shop assistant or owner of their favourite Arab restaurant – their attitude is completely different. They evaluate above all the concrete personal qualities of the individual, tending to ignore the common group stereotypes. The majority of interviewed Bulgarians think that 'the Arabs living in Bulgaria are good merchants, polite and considerate.' Many of the Bulgarians who walked into the Arab shops and restaurants in the course of the interviews turned out to be regular customers. They are also the group of respondents that has the highest opinion of Arabs.

The interviews showed the critical importance of distinguishing between group stereotypes and personal relationships. By rule, group stereotypes are formed on the basis of generalized clichés about historical events (real or mythologized) and superficial geopolitical knowledge. They are projected onto the contemporary dimensions of cultural and political confrontation, the idea of which is advanced by world philosophers and political gurus such as Samuel Huntington and his fashionable thesis about the *clash of civilizations*. Far healthier and more realistic as prospects for peace, multicultural coexistence and integration are the opinions and assessments of the *Other* which are based on personal cross-cultural relationships and contacts. In this case first-hand observations and personal experience play a leading role, and this invariably reduces the potential tensions that could lead from unfamiliarity or activation of defective group stereotypes to fear, exclusion/ghettoization and, ultimately, confrontation.



What is more important for our study is that irrespective of their positive or negative assessments of particular individuals or the group as a whole, all interviewed Bulgarians without exception realized and declared that they actually know little or nothing about the foreigners of Arab origin who live in Bulgaria. Thus their assessments and opinions are largely the fruit of particular public sentiments, moral views, outside influence and emotional attitudes. Another very important thing suggested by the interviews with Bulgarians is that these foreigners are not seen as a threat in any way – on the contrary, there is even goodwill towards them. This does not apply to the illegal immigrants who are regarded as criminal groups and have already caused some public concern and anxiety, without being nationally personified for the time being.

*Theoretical reflections.* The changes in global politics and economy are most obvious in the change in the general direction of migration – from the South to the North and, in particular, from the Muslim world to the West. Today the Algerians in France, the Indo-Pakistanis in the UK and the Turks in Germany are the second largest religious/ethnic group in the respective country. Dynamic globalization will accelerate migration movements. In a discussion on the subject of globalization, the mediator in our team told us an interesting thought, quoting the Prophet Muhammad (or the interpreting Hadith), and this became the motto of our study: ‘*And the time shall come when the West shall be pregnant with the East and the East shall be pregnant with the West* At present the East has become pregnant with the West, and the West is pregnant with the East...’

Today approximately one third of the world’s Muslims live as minorities in countries with a non-Muslim majority. This has changed the meaning of the term *Muslim world*, which no longer refers only to a particular geographical zone but has also become an important demographic factor in countries with a non-Muslim majority. A new interconnection has emerged between the Muslim countries in the traditional geographical zones of the Muslim world and their diasporas in other parts of the world. That is why it is impossible to make a categorical division between civilizations in the global era. Huntington’s division of ‘West and Others’ is neither true as a fact nor ethical as a norm.<sup>22</sup> Today European cities have Muslim populations and ‘Chinatowns’ that cohabit with the local white Protestants, Catholics or Orthodox Christians. It is too late to terminate those ‘pregnancies.’ The West must be ready to look after the offspring of this cohabitation, just as the East must take its share of the responsibility.

This is a new phenomenon in the history of Eastern and Western societies. During the Middle Ages and the Muslim Renaissance Muslims living on non-Muslim territories were an exception, whereas non-Muslims living on Muslim lands were commonplace. That is why there was a law on non-Muslims on Muslim territory – the so-called *dhimmi* – whose basic codes, modified and modernized, are respected to this very day even if only as a system of rules, taboos and a definite distance in interaction.

By contrast, a well defined and comprehensive law on Muslims in the Christian world has never been produced in any European country – in the past because of the philosophy of imperial, colonial and postcolonial superiority and arrogance, and at present because that would conflict with the democratic norms. Thus the West relies, in addition to some elements associated with personal practices, mainly on its immigration laws, legal norms

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<sup>22</sup> Davutoglu, A. The Interreligious and Intercivilizational Interaction in the Global Era: The Case of Turkey-EU Relations, unpublished conference paper.

on citizenship and naturalization, labour law, and the universally valid principles of human rights. Paradoxically, today Europe and the US are riven by the need of reformulating the status of their Muslim minorities and their integration into the overall hierarchy of social and public relations. Even within the most public-spirited and left-wing spheres of Western societies, such as the trade unions, there are incurable outbreaks of racism against immigrants who are involved in labour market competition. Distracted by the need to regulate constantly the chronic outbursts of fear of the 'shocking' cultural signs of Islam and the waves of Islamophobia, the West is oblivious to the fact that this problem has affected the Muslim world just as, or even more, deeply and dramatically. The fact that the Muslims are attracted by and find an alternative in the Christian lands, abandoning or suppressing their Muslim traditions and rules, is a new and big challenge to the Islamic world in terms of both theory and practice.

Our Turkish colleague Prof. Davutoglu has made a comparative analysis of the change in Muslim 'residence' in the West in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, identifying four phases in the status of Muslims resident in Europe: Phase 1: students and embassy staff; Phase 2: students and embassy staff; Phase 3: students, embassy staff, workers and immigrants; Phase 4: students, embassy staff, workers, second-generation immigrants, citizens and institutional development.<sup>23</sup> We must invariably bear in mind that these phases are yet to be continued...

It is entirely obvious that Prof. Davutoglu's simple scheme applies to Bulgaria too, where the phases in immigration from the Near and Middle East are identical. In Bulgaria, however, the phase of institutional development has not occurred yet owing to the fact that the number of immigrants at present is arguably insignificant.

The number of Muslim citizens in the West is growing fast, and this poses many national and international challenges such as political participation, social integration, cultural cohabitation, inclusion or exclusion, and ethnocentric reactions. Irrespective of the problems and challenges, the demographic and institutional presence of Muslims in Europe in particular and in non-Muslim countries in general is growing parallel with globalization.

On the other hand, a new geopolitical culture is emerging in the Muslim world. The fundamental characteristic of this new geopolitical culture may be summed up as 'pluralism versus ethnic or religious centrism.' The process is accelerated by the actual modernization of the Muslim world, invisible as the former might be for the Europeans and the US. The Western world seems to have been deaf and blind to the complex philosophical, theological and cultural anthropological debates within the transnational Muslim intellectual elite in the last 15 years. The Muslims need peace and quiet to reach new levels of modernization by their own ways and means. It was futile and selfish on the part of Western politicians to intervene brutally and to disrupt or escalate this debate, causing extreme radicalization of the participants in it through their reckless foreign policy. Especially considering that this was done at the very time when European and North American scholars were engaged in a parallel debate on the subject of the dimensions, capacities, philosophy, morals and boundaries of multiculturalism, naturally also in the context of the new Muslim minorities.

Prof. Davutoglu has brought greater clarity to the geography and demography of this civilizational diffusion by outlining several geopolitical zones. It is obvious that they are

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<sup>23</sup> Davutoglu, speech.

formed most visibly (but not only) on a linguistic basis. These zones may be classified as particular regional categories, each one of which is populated by approximately 200 to 250 million Muslims: 1. Turkish and Turkic-speaking Eurasian component from the Balkans to Central Asia (here I would add the Slavic-speaking Muslims and Muslim Roma from the Balkans); 2. Arabic-speaking Central Eastern and North African component; 3. Mostly Swahili- and Hausa-speaking sub-Saharan African component; 4. Urdu- and Bengali-speaking subcontinental Indian component; and 5. The Malay-speaking Indo-Malayan archipelago. There are also significant passages of geocultural zones such as the Persian-speaking Iranian zone between Eurasia, Central Asia and the Subcontinent, and Sudan between the Arabic and sub-Saharan component.

Almost all these geocultural zones have a geographical extension in the form of Muslim minorities in neighbour countries, and in the Western and Northern geopolitical zones. The second-generation (and in some places the third-generation) Muslim minorities in Europe and North America can create a new cultural axis in the near future in the form of Euro-Islam and American Islam. For example, in some parts of the US – in Missouri, Pennsylvania or Florida – a second generation of Muslim Bulgarians (Pomaks) from the Rhodopi Mountains is being born and growing up.

Bulgaria has the experience of the emigration of hundreds of thousands of people from the Turkish minority in 1989, who several years after settling down and adapting in the *mother country* realized that they are once again a minority, albeit among co-nationals and co-religionists, because they had brought a different cultural model. That is why they started calling themselves *European Muslims*, whereas one of the cities in which they settled down en masse came to be called by their fellow citizens, the indigenous Turks, *gâvur Bursa (infidel Bursa)* – so distinct were the cultural differences between these populations despite their common ethnic and religious origins.

In this context, it is also worth noting the special place of Turkey in this tangled web of newly developing relations between the East and the West.

Turkey's special geostrategic and geoeconomic position is strengthened by the fact that it has intercivilizational and interreligious influence in the age of globalization.

Turkey's geographical location and historical heritage (of the Ottoman Empire) faces it with major challenges in the age of global transformation. Those factors are shaping Turkey as a country of intercivilizational interaction, synthesis and confrontation between the East and the West, Islam and Christianity, Asia and Europe, tradition and modernity, the local and the global. Turkish culture is guided by two different and sometimes alternative combinations of values, institutions and way of life.

As the successor to the Ottoman Empire, Turkey was the boundary between the Islamic and Western Christian civilizations. The Ottoman Empire, which ruled Eastern and Central Europe to Vienna, dominated parts of Europe until the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Turkey has remained under the impact of this historical heritage despite the process of radical Western orientation. Its population is mostly Muslim, but there is an ambitious project for consistent secularization and integration into European structures. It would be wise for the whole Western world to encourage this long-term project.

The reality on the Balkans, however, includes the fact that in the areas of former Yugoslavia populated by compact Muslim communities, and especially those that lived through wars (for example, Bosnia), the influence of non-traditional for the Balkans strands of Islam has grown tangibly. Instead of the moderate Islamic and pan-Turkic

propaganda from secular Turkey to the former Ottoman Balkan provinces, in Bosnia, Sanjak, Albania, Macedonia and Kosovo there is a visible and invisible reorientation from the Hanafite school and mainstream, typical with its soft syncretic forms, Islam towards the unquestionable influences from Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries. Although this is not recognized and admitted by local Islamic theologians, the Balkans are being invaded by the schools of the Hanbalites and the Shafiites. The profile of Balkan Muslims, especially in various parts of former Yugoslavia, is changing towards models of isolation and religious capsulation, which is a source of strong concern for the local Christian majorities and creates conditions for interreligious suspicions and latent Islamophobia that sooner or later might surface.

In the last five years Bulgaria, according to one of our respondents, has also been targeted by different *mazhab/mesheb* (schools) and there are intense theological debates between the traditional for the country Hanifites and the newcomer Shafiites and occasional Malikites. Asking what a typical day at the mosque was like and were religious issues discussed between prayers, we learned that: ‘The Koranic rules are observed only in the mosque in Sofia. Everybody prays and contemplates regardless of which *mesheb* they belong to – this remains an intimate secret of the believer. If you feel the need to ask something or to get a particular case explained to you, you ask your question and only the imam is authorized to answer according to the Hadith and the Koran. In all other towns there have been theological debates in the past few years between the representatives of different *cemaats* and strands, which distracts believers from behaving properly in the mosque, i.e. from reflecting on the essence of Islam and on the unique rightness of the Hadith. In the mosques in the provincial towns, if you ask a question you are immediately surrounded by everybody present and eagerly offered the interpretation of their particular shaykh – which is against the rules.’

Our Muslim team member qualified this as follows: ‘This is bad, but this is also good because the Prophet, may He rest in peace, has said: “The time shall come when my community will divide into 73 *cemaats* [sects and communities], and among them only one shall be saved while the others shall die”. This time has now come and the end of the division is in sight because the *mesheb* will soon become 73 and then the deviation from the Sunna and the Koran will end.’

*Religiosity of the immigrants.* This was undoubtedly one of the most delicate and difficult to establish and analyze questions in the present study. The reason is that the respondents themselves and, generally, the Muslim immigrants in Bulgaria differ by their attachment to Islam and observance of Muslim customs and rituals. They also differ by their sympathies and allegiance to the different schools and strands of Islam, as well as by their contradictory attitude to and assessment of the system of religious rules under which they have been brought up and which they have left as emigrants. Naturally, this whole complex of external factors and internal spiritual states that gravitates around faith and denomination is very intimate, and it was extremely difficult for the sociologists to extract frank answers from the respondents by means of the usual questions. This made it necessary for the anthropologists to conduct longer observations and apply a specific approach by including a representative of the target group in the team and by participant observation.

A considerable part of the Arab immigrants have a sense of relief, which they admit rarely and reluctantly, that they have left behind the strict religious rules, norms and restrictions in their family milieu and generally in their homeland. They enjoy the newly acquired freedoms, their own liberation from the dogmatic norms after settling in Bulgaria. Of course, all this has not only a moral but perhaps above all a pragmatic effect. This liberation from an entire system of complex rules that presuppose restrictions in every single aspect of business and private life and, consequently, far fewer personal, material and social gains, is unquestionably one of the factors for the choice of the host country.

The primary data on the declared religious affiliation of Arab immigrants in Bulgaria are the following: 84.9% are Muslim, 6.4% are Christian, 7.8% of the Arabs in Bulgaria identify themselves as atheists, and 0.9% say they belong to other religious denominations. The analysis of those figures by period of immigration in Bulgaria suggests some interesting conclusions. For example, it becomes obvious that the highest percentage of atheists, 10%, are among the earliest immigrants, i.e. those from the first group who came before 1990 – the majority of them were students who were admitted to Bulgarian universities as part of the policy of ‘socialist solidarity with the fraternal peoples.’ In a sense, their atheism may also have another explanation, because the percentage of those who lived in the capital of their home country, i.e. the most modern and largest population centre, before emigrating is highest precisely among the first wave of immigrants from the Near and Middle East – almost 48%. The highest percentage of atheists precisely among the first wave of immigrants cannot be explained by the fact that they have lived longest in communist atheist Bulgaria, because the second largest percentage of immigrants who identify themselves as atheists, 7.1%, are from the third wave, which peaked in 2000. Those of the immigrants from the second wave, 1991-1997, who say they are atheists are the fewest, at just 4.5%.<sup>24</sup>

These findings are supported by the answers to the question, ‘Do your children study your religion?’ once again broken down by year of immigration in Bulgaria. An average of approximately 40% of the Arab immigrants in Bulgaria answered in the affirmative. Of them, the majority – almost 54% – immigrated to Bulgaria between 1991 and 1997, followed by immigrants from the first wave (before 1990), 31.1%, and just 12.5% of those who came after 1997 (however, the number of those among them who are married with children is also the smallest).

Here is what we were told by a Syrian respondent, a doctor by training who currently owns an Arab restaurant in Plovdiv, on the subject of religious adaptation and compromises with faith in the new milieu: ‘I came to Bulgaria as a medical student in 1984. There were 223 of us, 220 boys and three girls. Just 25 of us have remained in Bulgaria, and we all have Bulgarian wives. All the others went home. Upon graduating, I worked several months as a doctor in Kurdjali for 90 leva a month, and I couldn’t afford even my transport fare. My father and my brothers [he has eight brothers and two sisters] in Syria are all into the restaurant business. I was the only one to emigrate. I considered myself superior to my brothers and wanted to become a doctor. I like Bulgaria because there is no discrimination here. I’ve been to Switzerland and Germany, and it’s much worse there in this respect. I am a religious Muslim. I don’t go to the mosque because I sell alcohol and this is a *haram* [sin]. I have no right to go to the mosque and to interact

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<sup>24</sup> These percentages are calculated on the basis of the average percentage share of atheists, 7.8%.

with the pious believers.’ The respondent explained that it was a question of ethics on his part to excommunicate himself from the community of pure believers after accepting the rules in Bulgaria and making a living by selling alcohol. He told us how his mother had come to visit him in Plovdiv. She was delighted when he showed her around his restaurant, approved her son’s achievements, and then suddenly spotted the bar and the bottles of alcohol. She pointed at them and asked, pale with fear: ‘What’s that?’ He was forced to lie to her and explained that this was the Bulgarian way, the Bulgarian custom and tradition, but he didn’t charge for the alcohol served in his restaurant. This comforted the mother to some extent, but our respondent fell in the trap of another grave sin for Muslims, lying to your mother.

This story severely upset and angered the Muslim member of our team, who called our respondent a hypocrite: ‘Islam can never be a setback for anybody. No matter which part of the world you live in and what the local rules are, if you’re a Muslim you know how to behave, how to live and what rules to follow. He’s simply a Muslim by origin but not by essence...’

A respondent from Morocco said that he had come to Bulgaria a pious Muslim. But he could not get used to the cold weather. He turned to other immigrants for advice and was told that he should eat meat and, especially in winter, pork. But his religion banned pork, didn’t it? He phoned his father because he felt unwell and didn’t know what to do. His father thought about it for a while and then advised him: ‘Say *bismillyah* and eat pork if the climate requires it, Allah will forgive you.’

Conclusions about the level of religiosity and abidance by the Islamic tradition after emigrating to the host country can also be drawn from the discussions about the place of the woman in the family. Here the respondents’ answers were almost identical, with a difference of 1% to 4% between the three immigration waves. On average, 41.2% of the Arabs said that the most important thing for a woman is to bring up the children, 14.7% thought this is to look after the house, 27.9% noted that a woman should do what she believes is the most important (for the home and the family), and just 16.2% considered that she should work equally with the man.

The children in the families of 54.7% of the Arab immigrants consistently study the traditions, rites and history of Islam and of the ethnic group/clan, probably also of the native country. At the same time, almost 62% of the immigrants make sure that their children learn their native language. For the same reason – a desire to preserve the national tradition, language and customs – around 10% of the immigrants try to send their children to a school where there are more students of the same nationality (i.e. some schools at embassies or the three Sofia schools offering Arabic language courses), 18.2% choose private schools, and 1.2% leave their children to study at home. A total of 10.3% of the immigrants take the most drastic approach, deciding that their children will not study in Bulgaria to prevent their assimilation and loss of Muslim virtues because of the country’s secular educational system. These are probably also the immigrants who plan to return to their home country eventually.

The implications of these data are not as dramatic as they might seem at face value, because the majority of parents, almost 42%, send their children to the school that is closest to their home, while another almost 19% want to send their children to the best possible Bulgarian school. Those who turn to private schools do not really have a very

big choice and may select one of the standard foreign-language teaching private schools, which conform to the requirements of Bulgaria's general educational system.

Our final hypothesis based on our empirical findings is that the share of Arab immigrants who abide strictly by Islamic religion and traditional rites and customs, as well as of the adherents to some more radical strands and schools of Islam, is between 2% and 8% of the entire Muslim immigrant community. Those are the 8% of immigrants whose wives do not have a single female Bulgarian friend, 4.3% whose children do not have a single Bulgarian friend, 1.2% who teach their children at home, and 10.3% who might have chosen Bulgaria as their second country but nevertheless refuse to send their children to Bulgarian schools because they are afraid they will be exposed to influences that are unacceptable to Muslims

Last but not least, and with significant reservations, we will note that from the 223 respondents selected by random sampling and interviewed in April 2004, six were adherents to non-traditional for Bulgaria schools and strands of Islam (mainly Wahhabis, Nursis and Habashis), who were practicing as Islamic missionaries among the local Muslims – which is **2.7% of our empirical sample. It is quite likely that this might be the real percentage of Arabs who propagate more radical strands of Islam in Bulgaria.**

*Reasons for migration from the Near and Middle East.* The reasons for migration may be classified in two main groups: political and economic. In the course of the study we also identified a third factor for emigration, namely the demographic one – huge families that are incapable of securing decent standards of living or sufficient livelihood, which forces some of the sons to leave home in search of a livelihood abroad.

Some countries have high emigration rates in principle and they are due, among other things, to a long tradition of hereditary merchants. In them emigration is not limited to a particular period of, for example, political destabilization or economic stagnation. For instance, there has always been steady emigration from Lebanon and the Lebanese diaspora is recognizable anywhere in the world. After 20 or 30 years abroad, some wealthy Lebanese emigrants decide against returning home for good, but they build large houses in Lebanon and spend a couple of months there every year.

Still, the majority of Lebanese immigrants said they had moved to Bulgaria to escape the insecurity in their home country. Those are people who have traumatic memories of the civil war in Lebanon and openly admit that they are afraid of the tense situation in Iraq as well as of possible Islamic terrorist attacks on Lebanese territory.

Political reasons are the main factor for emigration for some of the immigrants from Iraq and Afghanistan. They are related to the totalitarian or fundamentalist regimes in their countries in the past, and the unclear political future and local resistance against the international military presence today. Political instability and civil wars have also had a significant impact on emigration flows from Lebanon and Palestine. For some of the respondents Bulgaria is a suitable place for acquiring a political status that would secure them greater freedom of movement. This group, which identifies itself as *political* emigrants, views Bulgaria as a possible stepping-stone to emigration to Western Europe and the US.

Despite the declared political reasons for emigration, there are almost always private, economic and social factors too. For the majority of *political* emigrants the lack of

economic prospects for development in their home countries is obviously the main and not infrequently the only reason for emigration. Others are clearly driven by a desire to build a safer and securer life for their families. In this sense, the definition of part of the immigrants as '*political* emigrants' is somewhat arbitrary.

The major factor influencing migration trends is the economic one. It may be examined in two directions: the socioeconomic situation and demographic processes in the countries from the Near and Middle East, and the socioeconomic processes in Bulgaria in the 1990s.

According to some experts, economic growth in the *developing* countries from the Near and Middle East is rather slow and cannot catch up with the fast population growth.<sup>25</sup> These trends are not expected to change significantly in the medium term. The level of modernization and production in most countries from the region is also insufficient and unlikely to speed up economic growth. The pessimistic economic forecasts are also based on the fact that there are a number of hotbeds of political, religious and ethnic conflicts, which increase the overall instability of the region. The Gulf War and the economic sanctions against Iraq have shown that the region can easily fall hostage to external political pressure with serious economic and social consequences. All this makes this group of countries extremely risky for investors and a potential source of emigration flows.

It is noteworthy that the overwhelming majority of the Arab immigrants in Bulgaria come from big cities or the capital of their respective country. Just 3.6% of the immigrants from the Near and Middle East are of rural origins. This naturally determines also their occupational profile prior to emigration – the majority of them were craftsmen and merchants, which are typical urban occupations.

It is expected that the tendency towards growing migration from the *conflict-torn and developing* countries in the Near and Middle East will remain in place in the next decades. The main direction of emigration will be towards countries with high living standards – the large oil-producing emirates, the Western European countries and the US. The difficult access to this group of wealthy countries will redirect part of the emigration flows towards comparatively poor countries which, however, have promising economic development prospects. This group consists mainly of the countries in Eastern and Central Europe. **Bulgaria is attractive for emigrants from the Near and Middle East because of some market advantages related to its geographical location and positive economic development prospects. Bulgaria also largely has the same comparatively low technological level and the same market tastes, and this is an important factor for the rapid adaptation of Arab merchants and entrepreneurs to the Bulgarian market.**

*Employment/occupation of immigrants.* Most of the immigrants from the Near and Middle East are employed in trade in foodstuffs (meat, confectionery) and clothes, the restaurant business, the car repair industry, and sale of car parts. The majority of respondents said that they are small merchants with little capital and limited opportunities. Back home they felt cornered by the big economic factors that have

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<sup>25</sup> The majority of respondents come from families with eight, ten or twelve children. For the majority of Syrian immigrants precisely this is the main reason for emigration.



monopolized the national markets, therefore their only way out was to look for foreign markets.

To achieve their economic objectives, the immigrants arrived in the country with their own capital. It is usually between US\$ 10,000 and 40,000, rarely more. By rule, a retail outlet is rented by several partners who pool their available capital.

As regards employment by sector, the situation is the following: 20.1% of the immigrants are employed in wholesaling, 46.9% in retailing, approximately 27.8% in services, and just 4.3% in manufacturing.

A more detailed analysis shows that the employment/occupation profile of immigrants from the Near and Middle East and the Maghreb corresponds to the visible picture in Sofia and the other bigger cities. High-skilled labour/services are performed by 9.7% of the Arabs; 7.2% have private businesses in trade in foodstuffs and coffee and the restaurant industry; 14.5% have private businesses in trade in clothes, footwear, bags, textiles etc.; approximately 14% have private businesses in trade in household appliances, white goods and electronic equipment; and around 10% carry on unclear business activities. A total 12.1% trade in car parts, 14.5% are employed in trade, 9.2% are chefs, 7.2% are employed in crafts and manufacturing, and just 1% are low-skilled labourers.

It is obvious that among the Arab immigrants there are no destitute or low-income groups – the majority belong to the middle or slightly higher income groups in Bulgaria.

We also asked the respondents if they were satisfied or disappointed with their present employment or occupation. Actually, a large part of the people with higher education, especially from the first wave of immigration, are now earning their livelihood in the sectors mentioned above and regret the fact that they have not found appropriate conditions in Bulgaria for professional realization as well-paid specialists. In this sense, the number of people who wish to perform high-skilled labour is three times higher than the actual figures noted above: approximately 27.4% wish to apply their training and perform high-skilled labour, and of them almost 51% are immigrants from the first wave. If those unfulfilled wishes (which are backed by diplomas obtained, in the majority of cases, in Bulgaria) are listed as actual occupations, the respondents feel they have not found professional realization as: agronomists, engineers, lawyers, doctors, dental mechanics, architects, archaeologists, military officers, foreign traders, journalists, economists, computer specialists, kinesitherapists, university lecturers, translators, etc.

Those unfulfilled wishes are an appropriate subject of reflection on the host society and its capacity and readiness to facilitate the integration of highly qualified immigrants.

This, of course, is also a question of worldview as well as of real policies. In the eyes of the Arabs who have graduated in the above-mentioned subjects, and in the eyes of their families and societies, they have qualified in prestigious professions that are paid adequately in their home countries. That is why the highly qualified immigrants cannot resign themselves to the humiliating pay of specialists in Bulgaria and prefer to start their own small business because it allows them to secure better living standards for their families. That is also why Bulgarian specialists are leaving Bulgaria in search of more adequate pay for their prestigious professions, including in the home countries of the immigrants in Bulgaria. These are paradoxes of the short-sighted employment policy in Bulgaria: there is something wrong (and it becomes very obvious in the present study) if you have Arab doctors and architects working as dealers in car parts in Bulgaria and

Bulgarian doctors and architects working as specialists in Arab countries far from their families, relatives and their traditional culture.

The assessment of the economic climate in Bulgaria in the last 14 years is based on the opinions of the immigrants from the Near and Middle East themselves. They said that they started their retail business in Bulgaria in 1990-1991. These years saw the beginning of privatization of state and municipal retail outlets, which cleared the way for the market entry of new private businesses.

Three periods may be identified in the process of the restructuring of the Bulgarian market: 1990-1995, 1996-1997, and after 1998.

According to the respondents, the first period was extremely favourable for trade. It was characterized by high turnover and profit rates, low tax expenditures, a relatively stable albeit declining purchasing power of the population, and weak competition. It was in this first period that the majority of foreigners employed in trade and services came to Bulgaria. Most respondents said they were particularly impressed with the low rent charged for retail areas and shops. At that time rents in Damascus were ten times higher.

The second period (1996-1997) is defined as a period of stagnation with a tendency towards declining turnover and profit rates. Two main factors for the deteriorating business climate are identified. The first is associated with the glutted market and general decline of the turnover rates of the individual merchants. The second is associated with the financial destabilization, shock of hyperinflation and subsequent slump in the overall purchasing power of the population, which was forced to drastically cut back on consumption.

The third period (after 1998) is defined by the respondents as a period of stagnation and decline of profits. Among the negative factors they noted the sharp increase in tax expenditures and government controls. The possibilities for double accounting and hiding real turnover and profits have been restricted significantly. According to the respondents, 'in the last three or four years trade in Bulgaria has slowed to a trickle.' Some are already contemplating looking for new opportunities in third countries, while others intend to wait until the business climate improves.

The expectations of the future are unclear: 'We're expecting the king [Prime Minister Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha] to do something so that the business climate will improve.' The majority of respondents declared that they could not make plans for the next one or two years because the laws are changing every month and taxes are rising: 'We are now working in the red and the way things are going we might well close down our business.' All this is among the reasons why the flow of immigrants from the Near and Middle East has been declining in recent years – which, however, is not a long-term tendency.

*Cultural forms of adaptation.* The male immigrants from the Near and Middle East in Bulgaria rarely demonstrate the cultural and religious traits typical of the Arab Muslim world. They dress in secular style, the same way as the Bulgarians, do not grow beards (some have moustaches only) or wear caps, and rarely hold rosaries.

Muslim customs are more strictly observed by the female immigrants. By rule, they wear a yashmak or its modern variant and a white headscarf, and henna the tips of their fingers for religious festivals. Among immigrant children, the traditional cultural and religious traits are barely or not visible at all.

The large-scale conversion to a secular dress style among the men is explained by the respondents themselves with their wish not to be different from the Bulgarians: 'If I live here I must dress like the Bulgarians, behave like them.' Unlike the women, which by rule stay at home and look after the children, the men work in the shops, market stalls or restaurants and interact mainly with Bulgarians. Another factor for the adoption of secular elements is the high percentage of mixed marriages. We should also note the comparatively weak religiosity of the respondents. Few of them observe the religious taboos on specific foods and alcohol, and fasting during Ramadan. Going to the mosque is not a key priority either. The self-identification as Muslim is above all an expression of cultural identity and origins, and it is not so closely connected with Islamic religious rules.

The growing flow of immigrants faces Bulgarian society with new challenges. A study of the processes of adaptation of immigrants and their acceptance by the host society, as well as a detailed study of their specific religious and national features with which they arrive in Bulgaria, are urgently required for developing responsible institutional policies related to their status and integration into the new environment. Such processes have been taking place with great intensity in the countries in Western and Northern Europe for more than half a century now, and these countries have gained rich experience in this respect. Bulgaria can use this experience to avoid many of their mistakes, and it can also draw on its own centuries-long tradition of multicultural and multiethnic cohabitation. Above all the country must not sit back and wait until the objective processes of migration lead to the creation of problem situations. Preventive action might prove to be not only more effective but also cheaper and, most importantly, could protect society against extreme forms of xenophobia and Islamophobia.

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