

# American Foreign Policy Council

## MACEDONIA

### QUICK FACTS

Population: 2,087,171

Area: 25,713 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Macedonian 64.2%, Albanian 25.2%, Turkish 3.9%, Roma (Gypsy) 2.7%, Serb 1.8%, other 2.2% (2002 census)

Religions: Macedonian Orthodox 64.7%, Muslim 33.3%, other Christian 0.37%, other and unspecified 1.63% (2002 census)

Government Type: Parliamentary democracy

GDP (official exchange rate): \$9.676 billion (2009 est.)

Map and Quick Facts courtesy of the CIA World Factbook (Last Updated July 2013)



*Divisive ethnic politics, growing financial influence from Islamic states, and the development of an impressionable young generation of Muslims hostile to the West has sparked the rapid (if generally unreported) growth of Islamism in the Republic of Macedonia. As a social phenomenon that also has security repercussions, this is more significant here than anywhere else in Southeastern Europe, except perhaps Bosnia. In 2012, several volatile events confirm that the latent trend towards extremism is continuing.*

*After Macedonia's independence from Yugoslavia in late 1991, foreign Islamists soon made inroads with a large local Muslim population in what remains a small and economically underdeveloped country. Yet more pressing issues have continuously forced successive governments and observers, foreign and local alike, to overlook the Islamist threat, and thereby have allowed Islamists to expand their*

*activities in Macedonia relatively undisturbed. They have done so via a formidable infrastructure of official and semi-official NGOs, charities, and educational groups, as well as through the construction of hundreds of mosques over the past decade with funds from Saudi Arabia and other Arab states. Islamist involvement in ethnic- and religious-based politics, the increasing state-level influence of countries like Turkey and Qatar, and even conflict in the Middle East may lead to further conservatism and even radicalization. In recent years, fundamentalists' attempts to intimidate the mainstream Muslim population and take control over the legitimate organs of organized Islam in Macedonia have created a serious challenge to the country's historic, tolerant Hanafi and Bektashi traditions.*

## **ISLAMIST ACTIVITY**

Islamist activity in Macedonia is most widespread in areas where the Muslim population—the vast majority of whom are ethnic Albanians—is concentrated: parts of the capital, Skopje, the towns and villages between Kumanovo and Tetovo (near the border with Kosovo), and numerous towns like Gostivar, Debar, Kicevo and Struga located along the western border with Albania. However, ethnically-mixed areas exist in other regions of the country as well, such as in the central mountain massif south of Skopje. They too provide similarly fertile ground for Islamist activity.

The organization that officially represents Macedonia's Muslim population of 675,000 is the Islamic Community of Macedonia (ICM).<sup>1</sup> The ICM's leading cleric, known as the *reis-ul-ulema*, is presently Sulejman Rexhepi.<sup>2</sup> In July 2010, following a fight and near-riot in a Skopje mosque under Wahhabi control, Rexhepi admitted publicly that the ICM had lost its authority over several mosques in the capital.<sup>3</sup> And in September 2010 (following a fruitless private pleading with the United States ambassador four months earlier), he publicly called upon the U.S. and EU representatives in Skopje to help the ICM counter the growing influence of radical Islam in Macedonia.<sup>4</sup>

However, this plea has generally fallen on deaf ears; while international diplomats have for years been warned about fundamentalist threats to Macedonia's stability, most tend to take a cynical view, considering Islamic infighting to be little more than internal politicking between rival ethnic Albanian parties over property proceeds and other financial interests, and not as an issue of genuine religious extremism. Nevertheless, in Macedonia today, fundamentalist Islam (in the form of veiled women, men in baggy trousers and long beards, and increased public challenges to secularism) is unmistakably becoming more visible in daily life.<sup>5</sup>

While there is certainly some truth to the skeptics' charge of Islamism as

mere “business,” the violence involved in internal disputes is undeniable. A young and aggressive generation of foreign-trained Islamists continues to make serious attempts to take over ICM property and its leadership; this is logical, given that official positions also come with control over funds and assets, while providing access to both money-making and ideological opportunities. As a result, several violent confrontations have occurred since 2003, sparked by armed extremists seeking to install their candidates in Macedonia’s mosques, especially in the capital of Skopje.<sup>6</sup>

In short, rather than destroying existing Islamic institutions, today’s extremist faction simply wishes to take over authority nationwide, and to redirect official activities in a more fundamentalist direction. To accomplish this strategy, they are tactically manipulating the Western-based concept of “civil society” to conceal their true motives. Using the “legitimate cover” of various NGOs, charities and publishing entities, they participate in domestic and international conferences, political events, “human-rights” activities and various demonstrations.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, these radicals have expedited the goals of Saudi Arabia and other Islamic states by overseeing the construction of hundreds of foreign-funded mosques.<sup>8</sup>

Simultaneously, with an eye to expanding their influence and territorial control, Islamist groups are now turning their attention to areas where few Muslims live, in the south and east of the country. Since Muslims in these areas are mainly ethnic Turks and Roma (Gypsies), the Turkish government and various charities also see an opportunity here for development.<sup>9</sup> Turkey is very active through schools, NGOs and its international development agency (TIKA) in reaffirming the tangible signs of its Ottoman legacy in the country.<sup>10</sup> Under the current, pro-Islamist AKP government in Ankara, Turkey’s initiatives in Macedonia extend beyond simple cultural heritage preservation; Turkey also seeks to bring the country into the orbit of powerful international Islamic institutions to help fulfill its neo-Ottoman foreign policy of “strategic depth.”<sup>11</sup> Even despite setbacks to this policy in new conflict areas such as Syria, Turkey continues to press for closer political engagement and has become a highly popular country for Macedonian citizens both Christian and Muslim, gaining influence in education and even cultural areas as seemingly unimportant as popular Turkish television series that are broadcast into Macedonia. Indeed, after the wave of summer 2013 protests against the Turkish government in Istanbul and other cities, Muslims in Macedonia and other Balkan states led counter-protests in support of Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan.

The ICM has existed since former Yugoslav times as an official religious body and thus maintains specific rights and responsibilities. As a result, it remains

relatively visible. Pinpointing the activities of Macedonia's Islamic extremists, on the other hand, is usually difficult. Those elements tend to converge under the auspices of a variety of Islamic NGOs, charities, educational organizations and other entities deliberately kept out of the light of public scrutiny. Further, they also possess tacit sympathizers within Macedonian society, including businessmen, media bodies, security companies, and public institutions (generally, in areas with a large concentration of Muslims). Thus, certain individuals or groups that may not immediately seem to be associated with Islamism may actually be intimately involved with its expansion. Examples of such activities are numerous, and include the donation of funds by local businessmen for the construction of mosques, the printing of Islamist literature by local publishing houses, and other efforts of outreach and proselytization.

Islamist funding streams are similarly opaque. The official wealth of the ICM itself, in terms of funds, real estate and other assets, is neither publicly known nor discussed. Even less well-known is the total level of funding available to radical groups and the ways in which it is transmitted. Part of this has to do with established tradition, such as the custom of communal payments seen in the construction of village mosques; locals can simply donate anonymously, drop cash in a box, and so on. Even when police have managed to trace some funds to extremist groups abroad, authoritative figures have never been publicly disclosed. Nor do Islamists, despite their frequent calls for officials to show greater transparency, detail the provenance or amounts of their own funding.<sup>12</sup> As a result, investigators have had to work deductively and, to some extent, rely on anecdotal or comparative information.

In general, officials believe that Islamists in Macedonia (as elsewhere in the region) employ a creative combination of methods to move money. Police sometimes reference the use of Islamic students returning from the Gulf as cash "mules." Other financial sources include proceeds from narcotics trafficking or the sale of items ranging from plastic chairs to silver and gold. To escape attention from the authorities, Islamists sometimes eschew large bank transactions, instead breaking up payments and deposits into smaller amounts. Finally, funds also come in through donations from ideologically-minded businessmen, officials and Diaspora Muslims for religious projects such as mosques, schools and publications. These donations are not always a secret; indeed, the donating country or organization is often prominently displayed on the entrance of the structure in question, or in the beginning of a book. In what is perhaps a testament to the significance of this funding, the U.S. government has recently asked its Macedonian counterparts to dig deeper into investigations of financing to specific individuals on the extremist scene.

It is also widely believed, though difficult to prove, that poor Muslims are being paid to adhere to fundamentalist mores and dress the part.<sup>13</sup> Considering that monthly stipends for this behavior are said to exceed the average monthly wage (\$300-400), it is not difficult to see how even non-extremist Muslims can be drawn into a more fundamentalist lifestyle. In this light, Islamists are now eyeing the destitute and vulnerable Roma (Gypsy) Muslim population in particular as a “growth market.”

As discussed above, Islamist activity in Macedonia over the past fifteen years has been guided largely by outside interests, such as Saudi and other Gulf state charities, and proselytizers from Pakistani groups like Tablighi Jama'at or countries like Turkey and Malaysia.<sup>14</sup> Global Islamist NGOs registered locally or via Western Europe (the UK is a major hub) are often used as intermediaries. However, since the 1990s, relatively fewer suspicious charities have been allowed to register in the country, in comparison to Albania, Kosovo and Bosnia, due to a measure of resistance from Macedonian security officials.<sup>15</sup>

Specific Islamist activity has taken different forms. One key area is the strategic construction of mosques along major highways, high ridgelines, near pre-existing churches or in close proximity to other mosques. According to a detailed Macedonian newspaper investigation in 2010, over 300 mosques have been built in the last decade – 88 alone between Skopje and Tetovo, the main ethnic Albanian-majority city, in northwestern Macedonia.<sup>16</sup> At a cost estimated by the newspaper to reach \$1.5-\$2.5 million per mosque, the sum expended is staggering. According to the same report, Saudi Arabia alone has committed over \$1.2 billion over the past ten years to building mosques, providing education, and sending local Muslims on the *Hajj*.<sup>17</sup>

Aside from mosque construction, Islamists in and with ties to Macedonia continue to take part in extremist activities around the world. The infamous “Fort Dix Six” plot to attack a U.S. Army base in Ft. Dix, New Jersey involved three ethnic Albanian émigrés from Macedonia, and another from Kosovo.<sup>18</sup> In Switzerland, the popular referendum banning minaret construction began after an Islamist group led by another Albanian originally from Macedonia agitated in favor of such building.<sup>19</sup> During ethnic Albanian paramilitary uprisings in Kosovo and Macedonia in 1999 and 2001, respectively, Albanian Islamists openly sought to raise funds for the cause in Great Britain, Germany and elsewhere in Europe.<sup>20</sup> Although these revolts were generally secular, small numbers of foreign *mujahideen* are now known to have fought in both wars.

At the same time, Muslims from Macedonia, some of whom have studied

in radical *madrassas* in Pakistan, went on to join al-Qaeda's *jihad* against the United States and the Coalition in Afghanistan (an estimate published in the British media in 2010 put the number at approximately 50).<sup>21</sup> While the Macedonian government has been reticent to raise the issue publicly, lest it damage the country's international reputation, other governments have been less so; for example, during a joint press conference with Macedonian prime minister Nikola Gruevski in January 2010, Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman stated publicly that radical Islam in Macedonia and the Balkans is a major concern.<sup>22</sup> Ironically enough, this comment came only four months before three Muslims from Macedonia participated in the controversial "humanitarian flotilla" to break the Israeli blockade of Gaza, organized by the Turkey-based Islamic charity, Humanitarian Relief Foundation (IHH).<sup>23</sup> Along with Bosnia, Albania and Kosovo, Macedonia-born Muslims have also been reported as fighting in the ranks of the jihadi forces in Syria in 2013.

For years, security experts have warned about rising Islamism in Macedonia—albeit without arousing much attention. In late 2004, for example, French counterterrorism expert Claude Moniquet estimated publicly that up to 100 individuals linked to terrorist organizations resided in Macedonia, and that the country was effectively being used as a terrorist safe haven.<sup>24</sup> A year later, Macedonian intelligence officials disclosed that Malaysian proselytizers were regularly arriving to carry out missionary activities in Muslim towns and villages. The influx was a product of necessity; apparently, some of the visiting Islamists had either been expelled or feared being expelled from EU countries, due to political or extremist activities there.<sup>25</sup>

Since the 1990s, hundreds of young Muslims from Macedonia have also gone to study in Islamic states, such as Egypt, Syria, Saudi Arabia and Malaysia, while others have come into contact with radical Islam while working in Europe. Pakistan's Tablighi Jama'at movement has also sent large numbers of missionaries to Macedonia, and has brought hundreds of Muslims to study in radical *madrassas* in Pakistan. In turn, small groups of "believers" are said to be spending 3-4 months of the year in Afghanistan and Pakistan, while their families enjoy financial support from Islamist groups in their absence.<sup>26</sup>

An unfortunate long-term result of this trend has been the development of a "next generation" of local Islamists who have built their own networks. Not only are these cadres in constant contact via Internet message boards and direct electronic means, they also frequently travel throughout the region to spread, and to reconfirm, a message of religious conservatism and hatred of the U.S. and Israel. Occasionally these activities are publicly reported, but since much takes place in informal settings (makeshift mosques or private residences), the vast majority of such encounters remain under the radar.

At the same time, Balkan Muslims ensnared by radical Islam while working abroad have developed these networks further upon their return back home. For example, a two-year investigation of radicals in northern Italy by the DIGOS special police resulted in the detention of 29 Balkan Muslims, some of who were allegedly linked to al-Qaeda.<sup>27</sup>

In 2012, dramatic evidence attesting to these developing radical trends emerged with a series of protests, attacks on Christian shrines, and even information received by intelligence officials indicating that small groups of Albanian and Macedonian Muslims were joining the *jihadi* groups in the Syrian conflict. This last development is particularly concerning, as there is no way to tell how these fighters may act when they eventually return home after being immersed in such a radical environment.

The first such large-scale protest occurred in the Albanian-majority town of Struga, ostensibly in reaction to an annual carnival in the nearby Christian village of Vevchani. The carnival is traditionally light-hearted, poking fun at world leaders, social trends and general society. According to subsequent protesters, however, the ‘guilty’ participants at the event mocked Islam, provoking groups of angry protestors to attack churches in Albanian- and Macedonian Muslim-populated villages in western Macedonia, and to even stone a group of Christians on a bus. In a large and unprecedented protest in Struga, heavily-bearded men waving Albanian and green Islamic flags publicly denounced Christians. Although further investigation and input from intelligence officials revealed that there was a certain amount of local politics and financial interests behind the lurid affair, the demonstration of force actively confirmed the presence of extremists and their ability to organize violently on short notice.<sup>28</sup> Most troubling, perhaps, was that the whole incident became a high-level security concern. Top government leaders and foreign diplomats were forced to meet extensively and reaffirm their commitment to work together and overcome ethnic and religious differences.

A second, more serious protest occurred in the capital, Skopje, on May 4, after a police press conference reported the apprehension of several Albanian “Islamic extremists.” The men had been apprehended after a massive police operation to find the killers of a group of young Macedonian fishermen; on Good Friday (April 6) the young men had been murdered execution-style, along with an older man who apparently witnessed the scene. The killings sparked the biggest manhunt in state history, dubbed “Operation Monster,” in which 600 police officers were deployed. At the subsequent protests that occurred in Skopje (with smaller ones in Tetovo and Gostivar), several thousand ethnic Albanian youth took to the streets, waving Albanian and Saudi flags and chanting “*Allahu Akbar*” and “death to the Christians.” Some were

seen wearing provocative shirts reading slogans like "Islam will dominate the world" and demanding the establishment of a Greater Albania.<sup>29</sup>

The protest originated at the historic Yahya Pasha Mosque, which has been under Wahhabi control for at least 10 years. Since the young protesters attacked the municipal office of the local (and ethnic Albanian) mayor in the Cair neighborhood of Skopje, security experts also read this as a sign that the extremists are now beyond the control of the ethnic Albanian political mainstream.<sup>30</sup> There were also reports of fights on public buses between Macedonian and Albanian youth and attacks by the latter on elderly Macedonians. The trial of the suspected gunmen arrested promises to have potent ethnic and political ramifications; it has already been deferred twice, and witnesses and family members of those killed were only able to face the defendants in court in December 2012 and January 2013.<sup>31</sup> Although police did not charge him with direct involvement, longtime Islamic radical Shukri Aliu, is believed to have ignited the protests by calling for an "Arab Spring" uprising targeting the government, and seeking the participation of *imams* throughout the country.<sup>32</sup> Aliu was extradited from Kosovo at the end of 2012 in connection with physical attacks on several *imams* near the village of Kondovo in 2005.

## ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

The greatest defining—and most complicating—factor relating to Islamism in Macedonia is its intimate linkage with ethnic identification and ethnic-based politics. Local attitudes toward Islamic groups, and Islam in general, are not rigidly defined and remain in a perpetual state of flux, as does the general sense of ethnic identification among different groups, Christian and Muslim alike. This unique situation arguably makes a true understanding of Islam and society more difficult in Macedonia than in any other country in Europe.

Nearly 70 percent of the national population of 2 million is composed of ethnic Macedonians, a Slavic people who speak a language similar to Bulgarian and Serbian. While most are Orthodox Christian, a small number are Muslim—holdovers from Ottoman times, when those who converted enjoyed special benefits. Ethnic Albanians, who comprise 25 percent of the population, are almost entirely Muslim, predominantly from the Gheg sub-group common to northern Albania and Kosovo. Other Muslim populations include Turks (four percent of the total population), Roma (around three percent), and about 17,000 Bosniaks.<sup>33</sup> However, a 2011 Pew report on global Muslim population growth trends indicates that up through 2030, Macedonia will experience a higher projected increase in number of Muslims to non-Muslims (5.4%) than any other Eu-

ropean country. Pew expects that by 2030 some 40.3% of the total Macedonian population will be Muslim. This demographic trend will have severe political and ethnic powersharing and social implications as well.<sup>34</sup>

The chronic polarization between ethnic Macedonians and Albanians intensified during the 2001 conflict, when Kosovo-led Albanians took up arms, allegedly for more rights and civic employment opportunities, in the so-called National Liberation Army (NLA). Under international pressure, a peace treaty—the Ohrid Framework Agreement—was signed shortly thereafter by leaders of the four major political parties existing at the time. The agreement stipulated a quota system for issues like public sector hiring, flag and language use, and so on. Thus followed a territorial decentralization that amounted to political horse-trading between the then-ruling coalition of the Socialist SDSM and the DUI, an ethnic Albanian party formed by the leadership of the former rebel group, the NLA.

The decentralization has institutionalized the ascendancy of Islam over large and territorially contiguous swathes of the population, particularly in northern and western Macedonia, where the majority of the country’s Albanian Muslims live. The artfully designed new municipalities of 2005 ensured that Albanian mayors would be elected for the first time in ethnically-mixed towns like Struga in the southwest, and that historically Turkish municipalities would also fall into Albanian hands. The Turks were rewarded, however, when two ethnically Macedonian Muslim municipalities, Plasnica and Centar Zhupa, were declared “Turkish.” However, this new situation also caused resentment within the larger Muslim community as Albanian nationalism was employed to change whole demographics. To win votes, Macedonian Muslim populations were (and are) told that they were “really” Albanian, since they were Muslim; at the same time, savvy Albanians were telling outside observers that they themselves were not particularly religiously observant, in order to avoid being perceived as radicals.

One result of this political tug-of-war has been the rise of a new identity: that of the “Torbeshi.” Once used in a demeaning fashion, the name derives from the Macedonian word for bag (*torba*); historically, it insinuated that those thus classified would change their religion for whatever riches were given to them (by the previous Ottoman authorities). The ethnically Macedonian Muslims thus classified are typically the odd ones out in society: while they speak the Macedonian language of their Christian kin, they are Muslims like the Albanians. Fitting in with neither side, they are now turning to their religion as a defining factor, or else starting to identify themselves as Muslim Albanians. A planned 2011 census was deferred indefinitely because of the delicacy of ethnic and religious relations. It is common knowledge that whatever the final count

of any census will reveal, no one will agree about the legitimacy of the result.

This holds serious implications for Macedonia's future, as ethnic Albanian parties will continue to pressure the Macedonian Muslims of the western Mavrovo-Rostuse and Struga-area villages to declare themselves Albanians. This process of ethnic "conversion" directly expedites the dreams of Albanian ultra-nationalists who seek the federalization or territorial division of Macedonia along ethnic and religious lines. A further indication that the Albanian-dominated Islamic Community seeks hegemony over all believers (be they Turkish, Roma, Bosniak or Torbeshi) came with the comments of Reis Sulejmani in 2012 that there should be one national language (i.e., Albanian) in order to "reduce tensions" between Muslims.<sup>35</sup> However, there is evidence that the issue is becoming more religious than nationalist; for example, in August 2013 the ethnically-divided village of Oktisi near Struga saw unprecedented protests from Torbeshi Muslims against Christian plans to build a new church.

One victim of the growth of fundamentalist Islam has been the country's more peaceful Bektashi Order—a minority within a minority. Comprised primarily of ethnic Albanians, this more liberal branch of Islam is considered heretical by many Muslims worldwide; in Macedonia, they are particularly despised by Salafis, who condemn them as being even worse than Christians and Jews.<sup>36</sup> During and after the brief 2001 war, the country's main Bektashi shrine, the historic Harabati Baba Tekke in Tetovo, was vandalized and partially occupied by Islamic radicals associated with the NLA. Members of the order who have spoken out against the extremists have been threatened and, despite entreaties to successive Macedonian governments, the Bektashis still cannot register themselves as a distinct religious group.

In October 2010, the ICM controversially authorized a rival, so-called "Bektashi" order from the southwestern village of Zajas as the only legitimate such community in Macedonia.<sup>37</sup> However, the "real" Bektashis, led by the elderly Baba Mundi in Tetovo, are acknowledged by outside Bektashi organizations (and their worldwide leader, Haxhi Dede Reshat Bardhi). They have thus denounced the Zajas group as imposters hastily assembled to solve Macedonia's "Bektashi problem," and to thereby give the ICM future control over any properties claimed from the state under the denationalization process.<sup>38</sup>

On a broader level, the major social issue within the Muslim community is the apparently insurmountable gap between the younger and older generations of Muslims. Young Islamists, confident in their own studies in Arab states, tend to depict older leaders of Macedonia's Islamic Community as "communists" who do not understand Islam correctly, due to their different experience growing up in the former Yugoslavia.<sup>39</sup> Yet the perceived discrep-

ancy is rarely put to the test (say, through a televised theological debate); rather, it is generally carried out through violence and intimidation. Since intimidation is often carried out subtly and occurs within tight-knit communities, it is seldom reported.<sup>40</sup> For the time being, therefore, the primary victims of Islamist activity in Macedonia remain the country's Muslims themselves.

## ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

While none of the governments elected since Macedonia's 1991 independence have ever directly aided Islamism, neither have they acted to stop it. This is largely due to the need to confront larger issues, such as the poor economy and infrastructure, the Macedonia name dispute with Greece, and chronic nationalist demands from ethnic Albanians. But present and former officials attest that the state's non-confrontational policy is also due to a lack of confidence.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, since 2006 and especially 2010, the government's increasing focus on soliciting foreign investment from states like Qatar and Turkey has also increased its reticence, as it wishes to avoid doing anything that might disturb foreign Muslim patrons.

Islamists in Macedonia have, since the 1990s, cleverly disguised their true agenda under the rhetoric of human rights and "religious freedom." American and European diplomats have responded sympathetically, pressing Macedonian authorities to act on the Islamists' complaints. In particular, since the Clinton administration and its intervention in Bosnia, successive American administrations have sought to present its engagement with Balkan Muslims as a positive example to the wider Muslim world. This policy has only been reinforced by the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, which have stoked feelings of greater anti-Americanism abroad. At the same time, Macedonian authorities are hesitant to act against Islamist groups, out of fear of upsetting ethnic Albanian sensitivities.<sup>42</sup> Western diplomats, conscious of Macedonia's latent ethnic tensions, have never publicly called for a crackdown on Islamic extremists—a fact that has led successive Macedonian governments to fear that they will not receive political support from the international community should they take a more active stance.

Without a doubt, the masterstroke of Macedonia's Islamists has been their strategy of manipulating potent Albanian nationalism for their own ends. Well before the country's brief ethnic war in 2001, international diplomacy in Macedonia has been fundamentally driven, and conditioned, by the "Albanian issue." Islamist leaders are well aware that, because of the diplomatic need for political correctness, any religious initiative will be beyond reproach if it can be cloaked in the guise of ethnic grievances.

This has allowed both the ICM and Islamist elements to press ever more aggressively to develop Islam in historically non-Muslim areas. For example, near the southern border with Greece and south of the city of Bitola, the ICM has demanded that a mosque be built in the tiny village of Lazhec. In response, members of the local Orthodox Christian community publicly voiced fears that the ultimate goal of Islamists is to drive the non-Muslim population out. They questioned why the desired mosque was planned for the Christian part of the village, far from the homes of the few Muslim Albanians there.<sup>43</sup> At the same time, ICM leader Rexhepi sought to bolster his image by assailing leaders in Bitola (which, like Prilep, is one of the towns most important to ethnic Macedonian Christian identity): apparently, an “offense against Islam” was being perpetrated in the city’s Ottoman mosque-turned art gallery in Bitola because a painting in it displayed the naked female form.<sup>44</sup>

By and large, the state’s efforts to confront Islamist threats have been disastrous. During the (pre-9/11) 2001 war, despite government attempts to the contrary, the Western media failed to demonstrate an interest in the participation of foreign mujahideen in the NLA. The following year, a police shooting of several Pakistanis was denounced by Western diplomats as a blatantly staged execution. Finally, in 2003, alleged Macedonian government assistance in “rendering” a foreign Muslim (a German citizen of Arab background) to the CIA resulted in a firestorm of criticism from European officials, who warned that such cooperation could endanger Macedonia’s EU aspirations, and condemnations from groups like the American Civil Liberties Union.<sup>45</sup> In October 2010, the European Court of Human Rights endorsed a lawsuit over the rendition against the Macedonian government. The lawsuit was presented by George Soros,<sup>46</sup> whose liberal Open Society Institute is the most powerful and pervasive funder of the “civil society” sector in Macedonia, with close ties to the major opposition party, SDSM.

More dangerous still, certain political appointees and elected officials on the local and national levels are known to be directly aiding Islamist causes. This support, driven by a variety of motives, runs the gamut from granting permission for NGOs to operate and mosques to be built locally, to high-level diplomatic assistance with Islamic donor countries and potential investors in Macedonia’s developing economy. Since being elected in 2006 (and re-elected in 2008), the country’s current center-right government has made attracting foreign investment its number one priority. Potential and confirmed investors include many from Turkey and Qatar, as well as non-Muslim (but non-traditional) states like India and Mexico. In order to maintain a positive image of the country before foreign Islamic investors, and to depict it as a stable and safe investment destination in general, the government is

reticent to bring up the topic of Islamism publicly—although some political and security officials are believed to be frustrated with this ineffective situation.

Nevertheless, while some seek more vigorous countermeasures, Macedonian leaders have traditionally been keener to appease and assuage when under pressure from outside. It is certain that given such a local reality, Islamists will gain a freer hand to accomplish more prominent goal in the state. This, together with the anticipated Muslim demographic surge, indicates that the Macedonian state's long-term identity will continue to be fiercely contested by its dominant ethnic groups.

## ENDNOTES

[1] The ICM's official website is [www.bim.org.mk](http://www.bim.org.mk). This acronym comes from the Albanian-language version of the name, Bashkesia Fetare Islame. Note that the institution is often referred to by its Macedonian name and acronym, Islamska Verska Zaednica (IVZ). International sources also refer to it as the Islamic Religious Community (IRC). All of these acronyms refer to the same official body.

[2] As in many other instances of local language spellings, this name has other variants; the more phonetic one, "Suleiman Redzepi," is often encountered in media accounts.

[3] Svetlana Jovanovska and Branko Gjorgeski, "Radical Islam In Macedonia Worries Western Observers," *WAZ/EU Observer*, July 8, 2010.

[4] "Macedonia: Moderate Muslims Seek Help Against Sect," Associated Press, September 20, 2010.

[5] The most comprehensive analysis of the developing Islamist trend in Macedonia, which includes the testimony of Western and local intelligence officers and the local Muslims themselves, is provided in Christopher Deliso, *The Coming Balkan Caliphate: the Threat of Radical Islam to Europe and the West* (Santa Barbara: Praeger Security International, 2007).

[6] The most infamous examples of Salafi violence date from the turbulent reign of former Skopje mufti Zenun Berisha, who used a sort of Islamist private guard to take over several mosques, impose preferred candidates for jobs, and generally assert his authority. Accounts of intimidation, beatings and attacks against moderates such as former *Reis* Arif Emini and former Skopje mufti Taxhedin Bislimi were widely reported in the local media. A comprehensive account of these events, citing some of the leaders involved, is given in Deliso, *The Coming Balkan Caliphate*, 82-86.

[7] Islamic NGOs in Macedonia include both international franchises such as El Hilal and local entities such as Merhamet and Bamerisija. Some belong to umbrella organizations such as the Union of NGOs of the Islamic World ([www.theunity.org](http://www.theunity.org)), which allows them to participate in a variety of events internationally, and thereby network with likeminded ideologues from Islamic states such as Yemen, Iran, Pakistan, Malaysia and Saudi Arabia.

[8] Bojan Pancevski, "Saudis Fund Balkan Muslims Spreading Hate Of The West," *The Sunday Times* (London), March 28, 2010. Further factual details are cited in "Milijarda Evra Investirani Co Radikalniot Islam (Billion-euro Investment In Radical Islam)," *Nova Makedonija*, July 6, 2010.

[9] For example, in the year 2010 alone, some 80 Islamic students from Turkey were known to be studying at the *madrassa* in the eastern town of Stip—with an announced plan for increasing this num-

ber in coming years to 500, and eventually to 1,500. “Turski Studenti Go Sardisaa Stip (Turkish Students Occupy Stip),” *Dnevnik* (Skopje), December 28, 2010.

[10] For one example, Turkish State Minister Faruk Celik visited Skopje in December 2010 to mark the TIKA’s renovation of the magnificent 15th-century mosque of Mustafa Pasha. He also met with top leaders of the country’s Islamic community. See “Turkey Says To Continue Repairing Ottoman Arts In Macedonia,” December 21, 2010, [www.worldbulletin.net](http://www.worldbulletin.net).

[11] For more on the doctrine of “strategic depth,” developed by influential Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmed Davutoglu, see Ioannis N. Grigoriadis, “The Davutoglu Doctrine and Turkish Foreign Policy,” Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP), April 2010.

[12] For an example of this prevailing hostile attitude, note the comments of Islamic NGO leader Bekir Halimi to a journalist: “We are fully entitled to receive funding from both governmental and non-governmental sources from Saudi Arabia.” Pancevski, “Saudis Fund Balkan Muslims Spreading Hate Of The West.” The article also notes that Halimi “refuses to name the sources of his funding.”

[13] *Ibid.*

[14] Deliso, *The Coming Balkan Caliphate*, 73-78.

[15] For example, a former Macedonian counterintelligence chief, Zoran Mitevski, recounted that in 1996 U.S. diplomats accused him of being “undemocratic” when he blocked several terror-linked Saudi charities from registering in the country. Deliso, *The Coming Balkan Caliphate*, 81.

[16] “Milijarda Evra Investirani Co Radikalniot Islam (Billion-Euro Investment In Radical Islam).”

[17] *Ibid.* These figures roughly correspond with those given in Pancevski, “Saudis Fund Balkan Muslims Spreading Hate Of The West,” as well as with figures given to the author by Macedonian security officials.

[18] Three of the men involved in the plot, brothers born in the Albanian-majority town of Debar, were arrested for their role in the failed attacks on U.S. soldiers at Ft. Dix. Garentina Kraja and William J. Kole, “Brothers Behind Fort Dix Plot Were From Pro-U.S. Enclave,” Associated Press, May 10, 2007. When the AP journalists visited Debar, distant relatives of the accused men expressed their disbelief at the arrests. The large, Saudi-style mosque currently under construction in Debar had apparently not been begun at the time.

[19] Devorah Lauter, “Swiss Voters OK Ban On Minarets,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 30, 2009.

[20] Organizations such as the former “Albanian Islamic Society” in London, located near the notorious Finsbury Park Mosque, raised

money for fighters in 1999 and 2001. British media also reported that mosques in Britain frequented by Albanians were also being solicited for war donations. See David Bamber and Chris Hastings, "KLA Raises Money in Britain for Arms," April 23, 2000. When ethnic Albanians in Macedonia rebelled in 2001, Jakup Hasipi, a nationalist imam from the remote village of Slupcane in northeastern Macedonia, was dispatched to preach and solicit funds in Albanian Diaspora mosques, in European cities like Leverkusen and Hamburg. As with other leading Islamists, videos of this now-deceased *imam* delivering his sermons in such places are widely available on the Internet.

[21] Pancevski, "Saudis Fund Balkan Muslims Spreading Hate Of The West;" See also "Vahabisti Vrvuvaat Borci Za Dzihad Bo Makedonija (Wahhabis Recruit Fighters For Jihad In Macedonia)," *Vecer* (Skopje), March 29, 2010. These claims correspond with testimony made by different Macedonian security officials and local Muslims to the author since 2004.

[22] A summary of the foreign minister's statements are available on the website of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs ([www.mfa.gov.il](http://www.mfa.gov.il)).

[23] Goce Mihajloski, "Makedonskite Humanitarsi Se Vratija Od Israel (Macedonian Humanitarians Returned From Israel)," *A1 Televizija* (Skopje), June 5, 2010.

[24] Christopher Deliso, "Fissures In Balkan Islam," *Christian Science Monitor*, February 14, 2006.

[25] "Malaysian, EU-Rejected Islamists Penetrate Macedonia," [www.balkananalysis.com](http://www.balkananalysis.com), September 28, 2005.

[26] Deliso, "Fissures in Balkan Islam."

[27] "Wahhabis In Labunista Antagonize Locals, As New Details Emerge About Italian Arrests," [www.balkananalysis.com](http://www.balkananalysis.com), January 5, 2007. Two ethnically Macedonian Muslims were later expelled from Italy; classified DIGOS wiretap transcripts seen by the author indicate that they were in touch with Bosnian radical groups and were aiding the movement of Bosnian and Arab extremists into Macedonia.

[28] See Chris Deliso, "After Macedonia's Islamic Protests, Investigators Search for Significance amidst a Confusing Array of Motives and Clues," [www.balkananalysis.com](http://www.balkananalysis.com), February 13, 2012. Available at <http://www.balkananalysis.com/macedonia/2012/02/13/after-macedonias-islamist-protest-investigators-search-for-significance-amidst-confusing-array-of-motives-and-clues/>.

[29] "Macedonia protests signal surge of radical Islam," Euractiv, May 14, 2012. Available at <http://www.euractiv.com/enlargement/protests-macedonia-signal-radica-news-512663>

[30] Author interview with Macedonian security official, June 2012.

[31] Sinisa Marusic, "Macedonia Mass Murder Trial Witnesses 'Saw Gunmen,'" *Balkan Insight*, January 18, 2013. Available at <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/witnesses-saw-armed-men-at-skopje-s->

mass-murder-site.

[32] “Shukri Aliu Povikuval na Arapska Prolet vo Makedonijua,” (“Shukri Aliu Called for an Arab Spring in Macedonia”), Sitel TV, December 6, 2012, <http://www.sitel.com.mk/shukri-aliu-povikuval-na-arapska-prolet-vo-makedonija>.

[33] These numbers derive from the 2002 national census. The data is available in several PDF files on the official website of the State Statistical Office of Republic of Macedonia, [www.stat.gov.mk](http://www.stat.gov.mk). With the 2011 census postponed indefinitely, highly politicized showdowns over ethnic and religious affiliation are sure to increase in the months ahead.

[34] The Future of the Global Muslim Population: Projections for 2010-2030, Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life (2011). The relevant part of the report is available online at <http://www.pewforum.org/future-of-the-global-muslim-population-regional-europe.aspx>

[35] The comments were made after a controversy in which the Roma (Gypsy) minority in the Christian-majority city of Prilep built a mosque, against the wishes of the Albanian-controlled ICM. Aleksandar Pavlevski, “Islamic Leader Calls for Common Language to Reduce Tensions,” SETimes.com, November 29, 2012, [http://setimes.com/cocoon/setimes/xhtml/en\\_GB/features/setimes/features/2012/11/29/feature-03](http://setimes.com/cocoon/setimes/xhtml/en_GB/features/setimes/features/2012/11/29/feature-03).

[36] Author’s interviews with Islamist Muslims, Gostivar, Macedonia, May-June 2010.

[37] “IVZ Prizna Bektaska Verska Grupa Bo Makedonija (The IVZ Recognized A Bektashi Religious Group In Macedonia),” *Kanal 5 Televizija* (Skopje), October 21, 2010.

[38] “Koj Se Vistinskite Bektasi Vo Makedonija? (Who Are The Real Bektashi In Macedonia?),” *Deutsche Welle-Macedonian*, November 14, 2010.

[39] “Opasnost Od Radikalizam I U Makedonikija (Danger From Radicalism In Macedonia Too),” RFE/RL, September 11, 2010. In the author’s personal experience, the meme of “old Communists” (older, traditionalist Muslims) as being allegedly ignorant is a very pervasive one, and invoked frequently by Islamists in the country.

[40] Some examples include: physical attacks against clerics deemed to be in the way of Islamists and their goals; pressure for females to wear conservative religious dress; orders for moderate Muslims not to associate with Christians; injunctions against shopkeepers against selling alcohol; perpetuation of the archaic custom of arranged marriages for teenage girls; threats against young Muslims seen to be engaging in Western “hedonism;” violence against Muslim journalists seeking to report on any such issues, and so on.

[41] “Dali Radikalniot Islam E Sakana Po Bezbednost Ha Makedonija (Is Radical Islam A Threat To Macedonian Security),” *AI Televizija*

(Skopje), March 29, 2010.

<sup>[42]</sup> Ethnic Albanian political parties are of course included in every governing coalition, but they too must tread carefully when dealing with Islamists, since Islam is so basic a part of their own social and economic fabric.

<sup>[43]</sup> “Vo Lazhec, Ne Se Velat Nitu Dobar Den (In Lazec, People Are Not Even Saying Good Day To Each Other),” *Utrinski Vesnik* (Skopje), September 22, 2010.

<sup>[44]</sup> “Rezhepi: Bitolskata Jeni Dzamija Namesto Za Molitva, Cuva Zhenski Aktovi (Rexhepi: Bitola’s Jeni Mosque, Instead Of Being A Place For Praying, Displays Female Nudes,” *Kanal 5 Televizija* (Skopje), October 14, 2010.

<sup>[45]</sup> “Statement: Khaled El-Masri,” American Civil Liberties Union, December 6, 2005.

<sup>[46]</sup> Richard Norton-Taylor, “Macedonia Called To Account Over Extraordinary Rendition Case,” *Guardian* (London), October 14, 2010.