

Macedonian Muslims

Macedonia is a Balkan country that remained under the Ottoman rule for over five centuries (1371-1912). Having arrived in the Balkans in the 14th century, Islam retained its status as the dominant religion politically and culturally throughout the centuries that followed. [1] The dominance of Islam and Muslims in the region, which lasted until the late 19th and early 20th centuries, started diminishing with the Ottoman State's retreat from the Balkans. In addition, significant changes occurred in the demographic composition of the region as a result of the destructive effects of the Balkan Wars, as well as the first and second world wars, which, within less than a century, caused great damage to the Balkans. Especially under the communist regime of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, the Muslim population was badly treated and oppressed and, as a result, the presence of Islam in the social sphere diminished significantly. The Muslims who remained in the lands deserted by the Ottomans were either forced into exile or massacred, following which the Muslim population became a minority in the region.

According to official statistics, the Muslim population in Macedonia accounts for 34% of the whole population. However, the actual number is estimated to be much higher. Albanians account for 75% of Macedonia's Muslims, while Turks account for 13% and the rest is composed of Muslims of Macedonian and Slavic descent. The vast majority of Muslims here are Sunnis adhering to the Hanafi school of Islam. Additionally, there are also followers of the Bektashi and Khalwati orders in the country.

The Demographic Situation in Macedonia

The Republic of Macedonia [2], or, to use the name recognized by the United Nations, "the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia", is a southeastern Balkan country. Located at the crossroads of Asia and Europe, the country has been home to various cultures and nations over the centuries. As a result, it has a multicultural and multi-religious social composition. Bordering Greece, Bulgaria, Albania, Kosovo and Serbia, Macedonia claimed its independence from the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1991. According to the census of 2002, Macedonians account for 64.2% of the population of 2,022,547. The second largest ethnic group in the country, Albanians account for 25% of the country's population, while Turks account for 3.9%, the Roma for 2.7%, Serbs for 1.78%, and Bosnian and other small groups for 2.2%. [3] By 2009 the overall population had risen slightly to 2,050,671.

In compliance with the legal regulations of the European Union, every member and potential members have to keep regular censuses. However, due to their potential for upsetting the balance between minorities and majorities, censuses are a problematic process in the multi-religious and multi-national Balkan countries. The Macedonian census planned for 2011 was canceled after the official counting process had begun when the Census Committee collectively resigned out of fear that the Albanian population would falsify the results. Calls from the Council of Europe to conduct a new census in 2013 came to nothing due to insufficient state funds. [4]

Sources offer conflicting numbers regarding the religious affiliation of the people in this region where censuses are problematic. [5] According to official data, Christians affiliated with the Macedonian Orthodox Church account for 64% of the population; the second largest religious group is the Muslims, the majority of whom are ethnic Albanians, who account for 34% of the population. After Turkey, Kosovo, Albania and Bosnia-Herzegovina, the Republic of Macedonia is the country with the highest proportion of Muslims in Europe. The Muslim population in the country is composed of Albanians, who make up the majority, Turks, Bosnians, Romani, and Macedonian Muslims who call themselves Torbeši. The Macedonian population of Albanian origin mostly live in western and northwestern Macedonia, in cities bordering Albania and Kosovo. [6] Kumanovo, Tetovo, Kičevo, Prilep, Veles and Bitola are among the Muslim-majority cities, and there is a significant Muslim population in the capital city of Skopje. [7] Macedonian Muslims, also known as Torbeši, are Slavs who embraced Islam during the Ottoman rule. The Torbeši are recognized by the Republic of Macedonia as a different ethnic group from the Christian Macedonians. [8]

The Islamic Religious Union of the Republic of Macedonia and its Activities

The religious institution into which Macedonian Muslims have organized themselves is the Islamic

Religious Union of the Republic of Macedonia. [9] When the country was still known as the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, the Islamic Union of Yugoslavia was founded both to keep the Muslim minority under control and to enforce the provisions established by the Treaty of Berlin regarding minority rights. As in other constituent republics of Yugoslavia, the Islamic Union of Macedonia functioned in association with the Islamic Union of Yugoslavia until the dissolution of Yugoslavia. [10] Following independence, it was reorganized in 1993 as the Islamic Religious Union of the Republic of Macedonia. In accordance with the separation of state and religion according to the Macedonian constitution, the Islamic Union of Macedonia is independent in its dealings with religious education, publications and the management of property belonging to charitable foundations. With about a century of experience and a systematic structure, the Islamic Union of Macedonia is active in all cities of Macedonia with 13 muftis and the elected Reisu'l-Ulema at its head.

Another officially-recognized Muslim association in the Republic of Macedonia is the Bektashi Union of Macedonia, composed of Bektashi groups. While recognized by the state of Macedonia, the Bektashi Union is not a sub-group of the Islamic Religious Union of the Republic of Macedonia but is part of the World Bektashi Islamic Union headquartered in Tirana.[11]

With its area of religious activity revolving around mosques, which it considers to be basic public structures, the Islamic Religious Union of the Republic of Macedonia performs such fundamental duties as prayers, sermons and education, while also providing spaces for the performance of such ceremonies as religious marriages, memorial services, and so on. In addition, it organizes activities during Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha to enrich the religious life and awareness of the Muslim population. [12] The activities of the Islamic Religious Union of the Republic of Macedonia are concentrated in areas where Muslims constitute the majority.

The Islamic Union also caters to the educational needs of Muslims. The country's madrasahs, which are common in the Balkans and are similar to imam hatip schools, and the Theological Faculty at the State University were established under the Yugoslavian administration by the Islamic Union. The Isa Bey Madrasah[13] (1984), offering secondary education in the capital city of Skopje, and the Faculty of Islamic Studies (1997), offering higher education, are among the most important educational institutions. Providing education in Macedonian and Albanian, the curricula of these institutions also includes education in Arabic, Turkish, Ottoman Turkish and English. Previously funded by the Islamic Union since their establishment, these institutions have been functioning under the Macedonian Ministry of Education since 2010, and this has recently started becoming a subject of dispute.

There are about 600 mosques, small and large, which function under the Islamic Religious Union of the Republic of Macedonia. Quranic schools are active in regions where Muslims are concentrated and also contribute to the Islamic Religious Union in terms of education. Providing theoretical and practical education on the recitation of the Quran and on Muslim worship, Quranic schools are faced with such problems as the physical lack of places to meet and the shortage of trained religious staff. Through its newspaper entitled *Hilal* and other publications, the Islamic Religious Union makes an effort to meet the needs of Muslims in the country, be it by raising awareness or by providing education.

Problems Encountered by Macedonian Muslims

The Islamic Religious Union of the Republic of Macedonia is an organization that is recognized by the state, but cannot sufficiently represent the Muslims of the country. Within the Islamic Religious Union, Albanians make up the majority. The needs of the Turkish and Slavic Muslims are not sufficiently met by the union. For example, the scarcity of religious activity and trained personnel in the eastern regions where Turks are concentrated is one of the significant problems.

Experiencing financial problems, since the Republic of Macedonia gained independence the Islamic Religious Union has been demanding that the properties confiscated from charitable foundations during the Yugoslavian rule be returned. Mosques, madrasahs, dervish convents, clock towers and other historical monuments built within the territory of the Republic of Macedonia during the Ottoman era were confiscated by the government and it was made impossible for the Muslim population to make any use of these. Many Ottoman monuments, including clock towers and fountains, were reappropriated, with crosses later added to them.[14] The official representative of the country's Muslims, the Islamic Religious Union, and other Muslim foundations have repeatedly demanded the return of the monuments, but the administration has not taken any steps toward that end.

Constituting the majority of the Muslim population, the Albanians are the best represented in the Republic of Macedonia by the Islamic Religious Union. However, deprived of their right to education in their native languages, Turkish and Slavic Muslims cannot enjoy the same right to representation. It is noted by some historians that, under the Yugoslavian administration, the Muslim population which had historical ties with Turkey was intentionally directed toward Arabic countries instead of Turkey for Islamic education. [15] The claims that those who have received religious education in Turkey are not appointed as religious staff present another example of the unequal representation of Muslim populations.[16]

Not receiving funds from the Macedonian state, the Islamic Religious Union claims that Orthodox and Catholic activities in the country are supported indirectly by the state. Indeed, the installation of crosses representing Christianity and of statues depicting Christian saints within the project Skopje 2014, proves that the claim is not without foundation.[17]

The return of property that once belonged to charitable foundations, an issue voiced repeatedly by Macedonian Muslims, is a manifestation of the Macedonian state's systematic policy of destroying Muslim culture. After all, the state's transformation of monuments that have a historically and culturally unifying role is proof of historical discrimination. In addition, the destruction, transformation, or insufficient maintenance of such important monuments as mosques and dervish convents prove that the state has serious shortcomings when it comes to protecting minority rights. For example, a mosque built by the Ottomans in Bitola in the 16th century was handed over by the Municipality of Bitola to the Association for the Protection of Urban Cultural Monuments in 1999, who turned it into a gallery. While all the petitions from the Islamic Union regarding this issue have remained unanswered, all previously confiscated property has been restored to the Macedonian Orthodox Church and the Macedonian Jewish Union without a problem.[18]

At the top of the most sensitive issues that trouble the Macedonian Muslims come the urban transformation plans which require damaging or destroying structures that represent Islam. One of the most outstanding examples of such actions was the installation of a large cross that is lit up at night on the top of Vodno Mountain, the most visible spot in Skopje, in 2001. At the same time, the inscription and the prayer niche that were part of a stone bridge built in Skopje by the Ottomans in the 15th century were intentionally removed and damaged. [19] Especially during the civil war period in 2001, many monuments that were considered a part of the historical heritage were damaged. In this period, a total sum of 58 buildings belonging to Muslims were damaged and 20 were rendered completely unusable. For example, again the minaret of the 15th-century Mosque of Kebir Mehmet Celebi and the gravestones in its courtyard were damaged during the construction of The Saints Cyril and Methodius University of Skopje, and the entrance and courtyard were taken over by the university campus.[20]

The Turkish-speaking Turks and Torbeši, who constitute an ethnic minority within the Muslim community, have not received a positive response to their demands for education in Turkish. [21] These communities are denied their constitutional right to receive education in their native language on the grounds that they are not ethnic Turks, which supports the idea that the tensions regarding the official census in the country are related to the issue of religious and ethnic minority rights.

Another problem faced by the Muslims in the Republic of Macedonia are missionary activities in the country. It has been claimed that the government supports Christian missionaries who are active especially in the impoverished eastern regions where Muslim communities constitute the majority. Indeed, the conversion of the Imaret Mosque in Ohrid into the Church of St Clement in 2002, and likewise the destruction of the Yeni Mosque in Bitola during excavations on the Church of St Gorki, on whose foundations the mosque was built, are signs that missionary activity is supported by the state.[22]

Certain events raising the tensions between Muslims and Christians in the social sphere have recently been on the Macedonian agenda. In 2012, during the celebration of the Vevcani Carnival, a group using Islamic symbols engaged in acts that reached a pornographic and outrageous level, in response to which the Muslims of Struga staged protests where tensions became visible. There were long debates in the country, with Islamophobic remarks being commonplace, but no apology or statement was issued by either the government or the religious leadership.

Conclusion

The Ohrid Agreement, signed in 2001 to end the insurgency of the same year, underlined the fact that the Albanian and Turkish groups who had been diminished to a minority position were principal and founding sections of the country's population. However, in practice, this change has caused positive developments only for the Albanians' right to representation. This agreement is not a sufficient guarantee for the peaceful coexistence of different nations and religions in the Republic of Macedonia, and needs to be revised in light of the issues that have arisen within the 10 years that have since passed.

The Islamic Religious Union of the Republic of Macedonia needs to adopt policies that include all the Muslim communities in the country and become an organization through which they can make their voices heard in social and political spheres. [23] On the other hand, although there are no constitutional obstacles, persons and attitudes that create obstacles for the Muslim communities need to be removed from the Macedonian state, and policies must be adopted to turn religious difference into richness for the survival of the country. [24]

[1] Florian Bieber, "Muslim Identity in the Balkans before the Establishment of the Nation States", 2000.

[2] Greece says that the name of "Macedonia" is the name of the "Macedonian Empire" in ancient Greek civilization and refuses the usage of this name by the state of Macedonia today. The UN accepted the Macedonian Republic's name as "the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" (FYROM). The country which is recognized by a number of countries including Turkey as "the Republic of Macedonia" is recognized by all the European states as FYROM.

[3] For the 2002 official census results see. State Statistical Office, Republic of Macedonia official site: http://www.stat.gov.mk/pdf/kniga_13.pdf.

[4] Southeast Europe Times, "Macedonian census stopped due to irregularities", (October 17, 2011) http://www.setimes.com/cocoon/setimes/xhtml/en_GB/features/setimes/features/2011/10/17/feature-03.

[5] Southeast Europe Times, "Council of Europe urges Macedonia to conduct a census", (July 23, 2013) http://www.setimes.com/cocoon/setimes/xhtml/en_GB/features/setimes/features/2013/07/23/feature-01.

[6] Metin Hoxha, "The Problems of Muslims in Macedonia and Suggestions for Their Solutions", in the report prepared by Genç IDSB (Union of NGOs in Islamic), "The Analysis of Problematic Regions in the Islamic World", (February 2013).

[7] Erhan Türbedar, "Balkanlar'da Nüfus Sayımları ve Kimlik Tartışması", (TEPAV) Türkiye Ekonomi Politikaları Araştırma Vakfı, (March 2011), http://www.tepav.org.tr/upload/files/1300357213-6.Balkanlar___da_Nufus_Sayimlari_ve_Kimlik_Tartismasi.pdf.

[8] Ferid Muhic, "Muslims of Macedonia: Identity Challenges and an Uncertain Future", (October 2013) <http://studies.aljazeera.net/en/reports/2013/10/20131088412517496.htm>.

[9] Other than Macedonian Republic Union of Islamic Religion, there are some other civil society organizations which the Muslims organize around different areas such as Macedonia Ansar Culture and Cooperation Association, Bridge Culture Arts and Education Association, Macedonia Vision Association. There are also umbrella organizations such as Macedonia Union of Turkish NGOs MATUSITEB serving to the Muslims.

[10] Rifat Karamahmut, "Makedonya Müslüman Azınlıkları Dini Kurumları ve Çağdaş Sorunları" Ankara University,

MA Thesis in the faculty of Social Sciences, (Ankara, 2006), <http://pomaknews.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/makedonya-musluman-azinliklari-dini-kurumlari-ve-cagdas-so>

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid.

[13] There are other branches of Isa Bey Madrasah in the areas where the Albanians are the majority such as Kalkandelen, Gostivar and Istip.

[14] "Makedonya Maliye Eski Bakan Yardımcısı Maksud Ali: 'Türkiye kişiye endeksli politika izliyor.'", (May 2011), http://www.milligazete.com.tr/haber/Turkiye_kisiye_endeksli_politika_izliyor/197003#.U4aF3XKSzw4.

[15] Ömer Turan, “Makedonya’da Türkler”; Murat Hatipoğlu, “Dünden Bugüne Makedonya Sorunu”, Tarih ve Toplum,

Ankara: ASAM, 2002.

[16] Yeni Balkan Newspaper, Skopje: February 2, 2006.

[17] Erhan Türbedar, “Skopje 2014: The Awakening of the Macedonian Identity”, Türkiye Ekonomi Politikaları Araştırma Vakfı (TEPAV), (August 2011), <http://www.tepav.org.tr/en/kose-yazisi-tepav/s/2645>.

[18] Karamahmut, “Makedonya Müslüman Azınlıkları Dini Kurumları ve Çağdaş Sorunları”.

[19] Hilal Newspaper, Skopje: September 2002.

[20] Ibid, (November 2000).

[21] Turan, “Makedonya’da Türkler”.

[22] Karamahmut, “Makedonya Müslüman Azınlıkları Dini Kurumları ve Çağdaş Sorunları”.

[23] Ali Pajaziti, “Islam and Muslims in Balkan: Issues and Solutions”, The Analysis of Problematic Regions in the Islamic World, (February 2013).

[24] “Süleyman Baki: ‘Makedonya Müslümanlara kulak tikiyor’”, Haber5, (May 2012), <http://www.haber5.com/roportaj/makedonya-muslumanlara-kulak-tikiyor>.