

# RETHINKING ISLAMIZED BALKANS

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## **Abstract**

Could Islamized Balkans be a threat for European Union security? The foreign fighters phenomenon exists in Western Balkans countries but it is overestimated. The population in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Albania is majority Sunni Muslim, and in former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia 33% of Macedonian are Muslims. Balkans Islamism is westernized and not radical, because of Balkans history. The presence of Balkan foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq is not because of Sunni Islam (Salafi), but because of socio-economic condition of these countries. A low degree of development, high youth unemployment and low GDP per capita are responsible of the re-Islamization phenomenon and its radicalism. The European Union should cooperate with the Balkan States in order to fight this phenomenon and to prevent the future radicalization of the younger population. This work will analyse the Balkans Islam through the history and Samuel Huntington's theoretical analysis. The analysis of Samuel Huntington's Clash of Civilizations is necessary to understand how ethnic conflicts in Bosnia and Herzegovina and, also, in all Balkans are not guided by religious or ethnical difference, but from regional and international political projects.

**Keywords:** *foreign fighters; terrorism; Islam; Islamic State; Western Balkans*

## **1. Introduction**

The only European countries have a Muslim majority are located in the Western Balkans. The European security system has recently highlighted the jihadist threat in this context. For instance, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania and Kosovo are nowadays considered the cradle of the European jihadists and the Islamic terrorism's transit countries.

By analysing the spread of Islam in the region, it becomes clear that the real danger for the European Union are the wider socio-economic conditions of these countries rather than the presence of Muslims in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Albania and Kosovo and at a lower rate in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia<sup>1</sup> and in the Sandžak, between Serbia and Montenegro. This article will analyse the actual role of Islamic religion in the Balkans, trying to understand if its role has changed in the last years, especially after the 90s war in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo.

Prior to analyse the actual situation in Balkans, it may be interesting to explore a general prospective on Samuel Huntington's theory about post-Cold War conflicts.

The last part of the paper is dedicated to the idea of Balkanism, in order to explain why the phenomenon exists in terms of prejudice and common opinion of the Balkans.

## **2. Samuel Huntington's theory of ethnic wars**

The Islamic presence in the Balkans seemed to be one of the most relevant aspects analysed by Samuel Huntington in his main work *The Clash of Civilization and the Remaking of World Order* written in 1994. Samuel Huntington's theoretical legacy is based on the necessity to find a post-Cold War speculative approach to understand and forecast conflicts in light of ethno-cultural alignments and historical hostilities in the world. According to Samuel Huntington, after the collapse of the Soviet Union and its political experience of bound-place membership, turmoil and worst conflicts are moved by following ethnic motivations and not by geo-strategic ones. Nevertheless, Huntington proposes that differences between Western and non-Western countries, especially in Balkans, are based also on economic issues (Huntington, 1993, p. 30). In his work, Huntington identifies nine different civilizations that may be in conflict with one another: 1) Western; 2) Orthodox; 3) Islamic; 4) African; 5) Latin American; 6) Sinic; 7) Hindu; 8) Buddhist; 9) Japanese. The first mistake of Huntington's partition is not considering and taking in consideration the difference between Sunni Islam and Shia Islam, and the consequent fracture inside the Muslim political movements. The second, was to mainly pay attention to the polarized conflict between Muslim and not-Muslim populations (Huntington, 1996, p. 28), and not the geopolitical interest of the international actors. The third mistake is to categorize African continent as a *unicuum*. According to Giorgio Borsa, the

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<sup>1</sup>Here called "Macedonia".

geopolitical “areas of tension existing nowadays in the world are evident within the same civilization” (Borsa, 1997, p. 166). In the many examples regarding inter-ethnic conflicts, it is useful to consider Huntington’s theory out, Borsa proposed that the chances of conflict are reduced within the same civilization. Western Balkans and the disputed region between Armenia and Azerbaijan of Nagorno-Kharabakh are often used to explain inter-ethnic wars. This theory would show how the Crimean Peninsula is indicative of the divergences within states of the same civilization being solved peacefully. Huntington, in turn, said that “in 1991 and 1992 many people were alarmed by the possibility of violent conflict between Russia and Ukraine over territory, particularly Crimea. If civilization is what counts, however, the likelihood of violence between Ukrainians and Russian should be low” (Huntington, 1993, p. 38). The fact that both populations are Slavic, Orthodox and linked by age-old bilateral relations would have meant “virtually no violence between Russians and Ukrainian”. But the Evromaidan revolution and the 2014 crisis in Crimea refutes the Huntington theory.

Hence, it is interesting to analyse Huntington’s theory in the context of Balkan history. The Yugoslav wars, in particular the Bosnian conflict, are one of the most important examples used by Huntington to corroborate his hypothesis. Huntington wrote. “the relevance of the civilizational paradigm to the emerging world is illustrated by the events fitting that paradigm which occurred during a six-month period in 1993” (Huntington, 1996, p. 39), in particular “the continuation and intensification of the fighting among Croats, Muslims, and Serbs in the former Yugoslavia” (Huntington, 1996, p. 38). The Bosnian war, although it could be demonstrative of ethnic conflict, was not the only war in the former Yugoslavia to be considered. In fact, Huntington cites in the events of 1993 that demonstrate the civilization wars, “the failure of the West to provide meaningful support to the Bosnian Muslims or to denounce Croat atrocities in the same way Serb atrocities were denounced” (Huntington, 1996, p. 38).

In Bosnia and Herzegovina during the 1992-1995 war, Huntington supported the idea of a global conflict between ethnic powers and not between international actors with their own interests in the region. The cultural kinship is considered as the most important value to understand in comparison with the Bosnian war (Huntington, 1996, p. 28). He does not analyse the entire role played by Milošević and Šešelj’s power policies (Pirjevec, 2001; Bertalan and Nagy, 2015) and does not understand the necessity of Saudi Arabia and Iran to exercise hegemony in the region (Arsovska and Basha, 2012). The Soviet Union fall and the end of Cold War paved the way for a new geopolitical space in the world where the Balkans are still part of this space as geographically as politically. The rebirth of unified a Germany, the new role of European Union

after United States detachment from European issues, and the multipolar Middle East are the main reasons of the internalization of Bosnian war. In addition, Samuel Huntington forgot the Ottoman history of Balkans and the Islamic ideology of Ahl al-Kitab. Ahl al-Kitab is an Islamic rule derived from Pact of Umar formalized in 637 A.D. by Caliph II 'Umar ibn al-Khattāb. This agreement has been regulating the socio-economic relationships with non-Muslim religious communities subdued by Muslim since Islam first spread through the region (Cohen 2012, p. 31-33; Kennedy, 2016, p. 18-19).). From Ahl al-Kitab law derives another fundamental Islamic rule, that is, the dhimmi system. The word "dhimma", which literally means "protected people", guaranteed the protection of believers in the two Abrahamic monotheistic religions, Christians as Jewish, and their freedom of religion was guaranteed by Ottoman empire authorities (Malcolm, 1994, p. 55-56). The "dhimmi" is a collective name to indicate "the people of the dhimma", which refers the non-Muslim people in the country to follow the shari'a rulings. It is important to underline the history of Islam in Balkans in order to understand the connection between religions and the particular characteristics of the Islam spread historically out in the Balkans. Florian Bieber was right when he said that Huntington "presents a grossly distorted picture of Islam, especially in the case of Bosnia" (Bieber, 1999, p. 34).

Another aspect ignored by Samuel Huntington is the important alliance between Croats and Bosniaks. The relations between Bosnia and Croatia was basically confrontational and collaborative. In fact, Croats and Bosniaks were allied in order to fight the Serbian common enemy, but also enemies when the Croatian establishment tried to annex the Hercegovina, the South-Western region of Bosnia and Hercegovina. In spite of the attempt by the Croatian President, Franjo Tuđman, to split BiH off, as well as to politically destroy his historical enemy Slobodan Milošević, the political establishment of Croatia began to consider the Bosniaks as "Muslim-Croats", to support and defend these people. Here, the main Croat-Bosniak reason for fighting Serbs did not involve religious matters or features. The war was not based on religious differences. On the contrary, the ethnic hostilities displayed geopolitical goals to achieve stubborn nationalism (e.g., nationalistic propaganda) which seemed in time to be significantly increased.

In the 2001 war in Macedonia, the conflict was ethnic but it did not represent a fault line war, as defined in Samuel Huntington's theory. In the latest '90s, a paramilitary group called National Liberation Army (UÇK) was born in Macedonia. Different from the Kosovar one, the Macedonian UÇK militants' demands did not include secession and unification with Albania in order to achieve the political programme of Great Albania, but the recognition of more rights in Macedonia. The Ohrid Agreement, the document ending the

conflict is important in that it shows the desire for peaceful cohabitation expressed by the parties, even though the conflict was based on ethnic fundamentals. The conflict between Muslim Albanians and Orthodox Macedonians was not avoidable, according to Samuel Huntington's theory, because of the impossibility of peaceful cohabitation between two different ethnic group and religions, but in fact the real reason for the conflict included the critical conditions of marginalization of the Albanian population.

By taking into account the case of the Kičevo Municipality, in Western Macedonia, a survey conducted by Fatmir Dehari and Fiona Todhri pointed out that the integration of Albanian minorities within the labour market was not a success (Dehari and Todhri, 2015, p.45).

Despite this, the general peaceful cohabitation between Muslim Albanians and Orthodox Macedonian after the Ohrid Agreement explains that Samuel Huntington's theory is not relevant in Macedonia nor in the whole of the Balkans, as shown in the analysis of the Bosnia and Herzegovina war in 1992-1995.

In conclusion, Todorova criticizes Huntington, for claiming "that appropriates religious images to legitimize and obfuscate the real nature of geopolitical rivalries and boundaries" (Todorova, 2009, p 18). The reason of the Yugoslav wars is found in the collapse of the socialist system (Borsa, 1997, p. 166).

### **3. A brief history of Islam in Balkans**

In the Balkans, the spread of Islam alongside other religions is not a new phenomenon as it is in Western Europe the Islam has played a fundamental role in the culture of these countries for many centuries (Muhic, 2013). In 1389, in the Battle of Kosovo Polje, the Ottoman Empire began to conquer Balkan Peninsula ending on 15<sup>th</sup> June 1453 with the fall of Constantinople (Hösch, 2006, p. 41).

The compulsory conversion of the Slavic population to the Islam at the same time of the Ottoman invasion allowed Muslim religion to be established in these countries and the various coexistence of religious beliefs shaped the wider region in a different way, such as in Maghreb and Middle Eastern scenarios. The religious coexistence did not mean a religious and social integration between the different people of Ottoman empire. In fact, "at no time... was the Ottoman Empire a country with strong social cohesiveness or with a high degree of social integration. Not only was there no feeling of belonging to a common society but the population felt it belonged to disparate

(religious, social, or other) groups that would not converge” (Todorova, 2009, p. 163).

Even in Ustaša Croatia, a formal independent state during Second World War under direct control of Axis allied and led by Ante Pavelić, Muslim population of Bosnia and Herzegovina was not considered as an enemy. Even in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the two politicians and leader of Croatian Nationalism Ante Starčević and Eugen Kvaternik – founders of original Croatian Party of Rights – considered Muslim Bosnians “pure brothers by blood and language” (Hösch, 2006, p. 112). The same argument was taken by Ante Pavelić and Ustaša movement (Hösch, 2006, p. 132), that aimed its persecution and extermination policies mostly against Serbs, Jewish and Romani people (Hösch, 2006, p. 78). In this context, the Muslim population was still allied of Ustaša and took part in the Serbian, Jewish and Romani extermination (Hösch, 2006, p. 133).

From 1945 up to the collapse of Yugoslavian system, the history of Western Balkan shaped the sphere of religion as a personal aspect in private life, not at all public. This was clearly shown during the Enver Hoxha governance in Albania (Shtuni, 2015, p. 11). The same was in Yugoslavia, where the law indicated that “all religions are free but...a private matter for the individual” (Shenk, 2006, p. 7). In the same way, the raise of the Yugoslavian and Communist regimes in both Western and Eastern Balkans evicted all religions from the public life.

Western Balkan wars between 1991 and 1999 have emphasized the importance of the Muslim religion in the entire region. The growth of ethno-nationalism have realigned historical allies from the Balkans, such as the Orthodox Russia and Serbia, as well as Saudi Arabia, Iran and Turkey with Bosniaks and Kosovars. The large number of foreign fighters from the Middle East, who already fought in Afghanistan, brought on the international scene the jihadist threat for national and human security issues, since most of them have been settled in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The migratory flows of Syrian refugees and asylum seekers as well as the global invocation to jihad from Islamic State made the level of attention to the phenomenon much higher. Bosnia and Herzegovina represented the battleground for those Middle East states which have been trying to influence the post-Yugoslavian space in order to take cultural control over. On one side, Saudi Arabia has financed and supplied with a wide range of weapons and military tools a foreign fighters’ battalion named “el-Mudžahid” (Dzidic, 2016), which fought alongside the Bosniaks – Muslim Bosnian – troops; on the other side, Iran has tried to establish its leadership in the country through the restoration of the State and the arms trade. Most likely, Muslims foreign fighters came also from Turkey,

Kuwait, Egypt, Syria, Sudan, Pakistan and Algeria. Other Middle East countries, which have taken part in the conflict by supplying weapons included Malaysia and Brunei (Pirjevec, 2001, p. 205). The Western powers decided to put a weapon ban over all Yugoslavia during the Slovenian war. The decision was taken in order to stop the spread of instability in the region (Pirjevec, 2001, p. 56). This ban favoured Jugoslovenska Narodna Armija (e.g., Yugoslav People's Army) and let the secessionist militias of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia gain weapons through the illegal trade, thanks to international powers.

#### **4. The current role of Islam**

Islam actually has a different role for each Balkans country (Bougarel, 2005, p. 12). Religion had an important role during the first years after Yugoslavia collapsed, throughout the ethnic conflicts and the state-building. This is due to the "religion [that] became deeply enmeshed with the re-imagination of new nation-states, changing borders and related conflicts during the eventful collapse of Federal Yugoslavia" (Elbasani, 2015). In analysing the individual States, it is very important to understand the difference roles of Islam both as a religious belief and its attitude inside the social and public life. Unlike other States with an Islamic majority, such as in Albania and Kosovo, in Bosnia and Herzegovina Islam is an ethnic discriminating factor. The reason lays in the ethnic composition of the countries. According to the newest Bosnian census, the first since independence, 50,7% of population is Muslim and the 50,1% is Bosniaks. The entire may be explained through the misleading ethnic balance in the country. The predominance of one ethnicity can change the balance of the country, and consequently the political weight of the ethnic parties according to the Dayton Agreement. This is because Bosnia can be considered as a con-sociational democracy (Kasapović, 2005, p. 8). Therefore, religion became a key factor in the Bosniaks identity building. In 2013, in the months before the census, a media campaign was made, based on the slogan "Bitno je biti bošnjak" (it is important to be Bosniak). In a video, made by Exit Media Film<sup>2</sup>, three people say the slogan «ja sam bošnjak, vijera mi je Islam, moj jezik je bosanski» (I am Bosniak, my faith is Islam, my language is Bosnian). Islam became an important factor in the Bosniak identity building. However, Islam is considered only a part of one's identity and not the whole of one's identity. According to Rodolfo Toè, Islam in the bigger cities was adopted by urban

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<sup>2</sup>The video can be seen on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cmd-WXoY6v8>.

middle class like a lifestyle. It can be considered as a status factor (Benazzo, 2015).

Kosovo and Albania are different. These two countries are mono-ethnic and the minorities are irrelevant in the political percentage. In Kosovo the 92,9% of the people are Muslim Albanians and only the 1,5% are orthodox Serbs. The Muslim population of Kosovo is composed of Albanians, Bosniaks and Gorani and are the 95,6% of the total. In Kosovo, religion became a discriminating factor during the independence war against Federal Yugoslavia, since “it was also part of a pragmatic strategy intended to secure ethnic and territorial preservation” (Shtuni, 2015, p. 11). To be Muslim in 1990’s meant be Albanian. Religion was used to strengthen the national identity. The same in Albania. The population is not divided into ethnic groups, but by religion. Despite the fact that 82,6% of population is Albanian, only the 56,7% are Muslims. These data show how religion is not a key factor in the Albanian national identity, but a superfluous discriminant in the state-building process (Elbasani and Roy, 2015, p. 460). Religion is not used nowadays as an important feature of the national identity, but as a personal fact. Analysing the radicalization of Muslims and their presence in Islamic State militias, we can understand how Islam in Balkans region has a secondary role in political and social life. During the 1944-1991 Enver Hoxha regime, religion was eliminated from political and public life, as in other Communist countries. In post-Communist Albania, religion took place in public life, but as in a secularized country as in pre-Communist era. The Albanian Muslim Association (AMC), the nationwide organization of Albanian Sunnis, embraced the Sunni religious school of Hanafi, which provides a moderate view of Islam (Elbasani and Saatcioglu, 2014, p. 463-466). This is amenable to Albanian secularism, inspired by the French value of secularization.

Operating in this context, as in other Muslim communities in Balkans, AMC is also influenced by European Union integration for two reasons. The first one is political. EU integrations is recognized as a goal by the population, so the Muslim community, organized in associations and political parties, interiorized the ideal of EU integration as a programmatic point of their election program.

The second reason is amenable to the moderate view of Islam. In fact, it has been noticed how EU accession criteria were supported by the Muslim community in order to gain more rights and higher standard of democracy (Elbasani and Roy, 2015, p. 464). This is functional in order to gain political advantages, in order to “liberalize the political system and put pressure on restrictive secular actors and institutional agreements” (Elbasani and



Saatcioglu, 2014, p. 462), according to the EU norms of the right to manifest one's faith.

### **5. Islamized Balkans**

The analysis of the presence of Bosniaks, Albanians and Kosovars in Syria and Iraq confirms our thesis. At this moment, Islam in Balkans is not a concrete threat for the European Union. In Balkans countries, in fact, there are a very low rate of foreign fighters, even if the population is almost all Muslim. According the CIA World Factbook and official census, in Bosnia and Herzegovina Muslims comprise the 50,7% of the population, in Albania 56.7% and in Kosovo 95.7%. Despite these percentages, the foreign fighters coming from these countries, in a time included between 2011 and 2015, are 380, 90 and 150 respectively: really low rates if compared to the whole Muslim population. In Macedonia, where 33,3% of the population is Muslim, only 12 foreign fighters have been known to have gone to Syria. According to The American Foreign Policy Council's World Almanac of Islam<sup>3</sup>, Albania, Kosovo and Macedonia are countries with a low jihadist activity. The number of foreign fighters must not only be compared to the whole population, but to the percentage of Muslims living in the country. The real meaning of this phenomenon can be understood comparing the number of foreign fighters coming from the Balkans and the jihadists coming from France and Russia, the two European countries with the biggest contingent in Syria. According to the CIA World Factbook, in Russia the foreign fighters represent the 0,012% of the Muslim population, in France the 0,029%. These percentages are lower in the Balkans, except for Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the foreign fighters seem to be the 0,021% of the Muslim population. In Albania, in fact, the jihadists are the 0,005% of Muslim population, 0,008% in Kosovo and 0,001% in Macedonia.

A socio-economic analysis of the situation is fundamental to clearly understand this radicalization and re-Islamization phenomenon. The real threat is neither Sunni Islam, which is always more westernized and modern, and nor the many Sufi communities of these countries. Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Albania, joining other Balkans' countries, adopted effective laws aiming to contrast the foreign fighters' phenomenon at least on the legal side. The target of these laws are both terroristic activities linked to

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<sup>3</sup>The American Foreign Policy Council's World Almanac of Islam is available at <http://almanac.afpc.org/>, accessed on 2016, November 29.

terroristic organization, for instance. joining a foreign military or paramilitary army (Azinović, 2015a, p. 60-82.).

Various studies showed how the ones who decide to leave for the Islamic territories are the social outcasts: most of them have a criminal past and no prospects for the future. The political and socio-economics conditions of these countries created a disenchanting young social class, could give legitimacy to the jihadist propaganda.

After the Dayton Agreements, Bosnia and Herzegovina found itself enchained by its own politics, unable to unify the different communities. Albania and Kosovo are in a different but similar situation: Albania, with its political scandals gave birth to a disillusioned generation while in Kosovo the state-building challenge is still going on, considering that it is not yet recognized by the whole international community and it is not member of the United Nations (Kursani, 2015, p. 59). Some socio-economic factor can help explain the difficulties these countries are facing.

All of these countries show a low Gini index. As reported on CIA World Factbook, "Gini index measures the degree of inequality in the distribution of family income in a country... If income were distributed with perfect equality the index would be zero; if income were distributed with perfect inequality, the index would be 100.": so it means that the profits are equally distributed as richness. According to the International Monetary Fund, Bosnia and Herzegovina is the 140<sup>th</sup> in the chart of countries classified by GNP per capita, Albania is 95<sup>th</sup> and Kosovo is 106<sup>th</sup>. These data put these states on the same level of Swaziland, Sri Lanka or Namibia. This means that wealth is not equally distributed, leading to a generally low standard of living.

Furthermore, as Vlado Azinović stated, "for younger generations of volunteer, particularly older teenagers and young men in their early 20s, joining the war in Syria is probably also motivated by the adrenaline rush it guarantees" (Azinović, 2015a, p. 41). The adrenaline factor is not due to religious aspects, but only to those related to young age and lack of internal prospects that cause a state of apathy and neglect in the Balkans youth. This can be seen also in Albanians, where foreign fighters are in between 21 and 25 years old (Shtuni, 2015, p. 14). These countries, in fact, have a high unemployment level, especially among the youth. Youth unemployment has to be strongly considered as one of the main factors leading to radicalism development. Unemployment can also mean a general dissatisfaction leading to religious or political extremism. Salafi communities, from where the majority of Bosnian foreign fighters come, are Gornja Maoča and Osve, in the eastern regions of Albania. According to the World Bank, youth

unemployment in Bosnia and Herzegovina is about 60%; in Albania, Kosovo and Macedonia is about 30%, 55% and 53% respectively. Far from biggest cities or capitals, youth unemployment and social exclusion rates are even higher. Here, as Rodolfo Toè says, inside isolated communities, economic aids and efforts deriving from Salafi elites get close to young generations according them a communitarian sense of Muslim brotherhood (Benazzo, 2015).

## 6. Why the Balkans?

In order to understand why Balkans are so misunderstood it is necessary to introduce the Todorova's concept of "Balkanism" and a correlated concept "Orientalism", by the Palestinian-American scholar Edward Said. Furthermore, in order to understand Balkanism, we need to introduce a brief explanation of the meaning of Orientalism. Said argues that the Orient is a particular, and stereotypical, manner that the Western countries have of viewing the non-western world. The way in which Orient is considered is different because of the singular background of the states. Said compared British and American view about Middle East: Britain was directly linked to this part of the world because of its colonial history, but the United States has a more abstract and harsh consideration of the area, a consideration also colored by the allied Israeli propaganda (Said, 1977, p. 26). Orientalism describes this part of the world as underdeveloped and inferior compared to West and provides for particular policies against Arab countries. One of the main vehicles of Orientalist propaganda is realized by journalists, that provide the concept to the normal people (Hetemi, 2015, p. 314).

The concept of Orientalism can be adopted in order to understand how Balkans are considered by Western countries, in an obsolete Cold War idea of the world – as an underdeveloped region and, as well, in a radical Islam forge. One of the discriminants is the Ottoman era. Indeed, "in the eyes of the writing west, the influence after the long period of Ottoman rule unquestionably tainted the Balkan peninsula, causing an irrevocable reversion to primitivity" (Kelley, 2012, p. 8). From 16<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> century many travellers wrote about their trips in the Balkans. In this context, the Western prejudice of the Ottoman Empire – and Balkans – arose (Todorova, 1997, p. 38-61). According to Todorova, the negative image of the Balkans results from the violence that occurred in 18<sup>th</sup> century, described by many travellers (Todorova, 1994, p. 462-463). In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Macedonian question, i.e. the national struggle for the independence led by the VMRO, "enhanced the reputation of the peninsula as a turbulent region and of Macedonia as the 'land of terror,

fire, and sword” (Todorova, 2009, p. 117). At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the VMRO insurgent organization struggled against the Ottoman rule to seek independence. This led to the Ilinden Uprising where the Macedonian rebels tried to establish the first independent republic, namely the Kruševo Republic.

Anyhow, the Balkans, in Todorova’s view, are not averse to Europe, but a peripheral part of the continent. In this case, the region is seen through the Orientalist prejudice – the Balkans are primitive, undeveloped, religious fundamentalists and violent countries – in spite of the entire region is geographically part of Europe and not of Middle East. This is the reason why Balkans are often covered by European media. In the journalism and common language and even in political analysis it is not unusual to hear or read the term “balkanization” (Todorova, 2009, p. 32-36), that means the disintegration of a nation-state system and the return to “the tribal, the backward, the primitive, the barbarian” (Todorova, 1994, p. 453). This term was coined during the Balkans wars and World War I, when most states in the Balkans region were independent from the Ottoman Empire (Todorova, 1994, p. 474). Balkanization “is most often used to denote the process of nationalist fragmentation of former geographic and political units into new and problematically viable small states” (Todorova, 2009, p. 32). Nevertheless, most Balkans states were born in the 19<sup>th</sup> century from Ottoman Empire dominions like Greece, Serbia, Montenegro, Romania and Bulgaria. After the First World War, Albania was added in Balkans puzzle (Todorova, 2009, p. 32). So, balkanization does not have an historical meaning, as the term could have had if had been created in 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The reason is, according to Todorova, because “the Balkans...have served as a repository of negative characteristics against which a positive and self-congratulatory image of the ‘European’ and ‘the west’ has been constructed” (Todorova, 1994, p. 455). Todorova still upholds the idea that “in the face of a persistent hegemonic discourse from the West, continuously disparaging about the Balkans, which sends out messages about the politicization of essentialized cultural differences (like in the Huntingtonian debate), it is hardly realistic to expect the Balkans to create a liberal, tolerant, all-embracing identity celebrating ambiguity and a negation of essentialism” (Todorova, 2009, p. 59). An example of this idea is in George Kennan’s introduction of Carnegie Endowment for International Peace book *The Other Balkan Wars*. In this work, the former US ambassador to the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia and ideologist of Cold War, claims that the containment theory upheld as rebirth of nationalism in former Yugoslavia was the reason of the Balkans wars, and not religion. Nationalism, in Kennan’s idea, “drew on deeper traits of character inherited, presumably, from a distant tribal past”

(Carnegie, 1993, p. 11). In the idea of West, the Balkans are still responsible of First World War, though Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria murder by *Mlada Bosna* (Young Bosnia) member Gavrilo Princip in Sarajevo in 1914 was just the *casus belli* (Todorova, 1994, p. 460; Todorova, 2009, p. 118).

The Islamist threat in Balkans is the last stereotype useful to keep alive the negative vision of the peninsula. The religious theme as a source of danger has emerged only after the Cold war. The Soviet Union and Yugoslavia collapse and the end of multipolar world, as the Francis Fukuyama claims, the end of history, required a new enemy, also a useful concept for NATO survival. The jihadist terrorism was identified as the new enemy of humanity, especially after 2001 and the George W. Bush war on terror.

In the fight against terrorism, Balkans are a part of Europe – as Todorova remarks (Todorova, 2009, p. 3-20) – and in Western idea, the Islamist threat is most dangerous in the Balkans than in the Middle East, because it is near to European borders and is part of the European integration project. But Islam in the Balkans is not the product of a recent immigration – as in France, Belgium, United Kingdom – but a process began more than five centuries ago.

## 7. Conclusions

In order not to underestimate the cultural and historical role of Islam as well as of Ottoman-Islamic heritage in the Western Balkans, it is generally necessary generally to understand the phenomenon not in terms of believers and religious minority groups. A larger picture needs to be taken in consideration through a problematic concern over the region. In my opinion, repressive policies seem to be non-functional, because they do not assess any prevention against radicalism and the consequent rise of transactional terroristic cells in the Balkans. Nevertheless, Europe should look at this region not as a threat but as a partner with which to more strongly cooperate. The cooperation would improve the European integration processes while raising the chances of keeping Europe and its neighbours in safer conditions. Moreover, this cooperation ought to be integrated with policies in the socio-economic fields, as the real danger is not the Islam itself, but the consequence of belonging to particular socio-economic and political sectors.

A difference among Muslim radicalization and terrorism must be pointed out because, on one side, both phenomena are surely connected each other though the Muslim community in the Western Balkans but does not come to necessarily impinge on the sphere of human security and international

cooperation with European Union, on the other side. Most likely, political analysts and European decision-makers often misunderstand the wider Western Balkans by describing it as a big black hole. In sum, improvements should be made from the countries aiming to circumscribe radicalization process and empowering intelligence and counter-terrorism national system. This, in fact, can prevent future radical events and securing the whole region.

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