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Merdjanova's "Rediscovering the Umma: Muslims in the Balkans between Nationalism and Transnationalism" - Book Review

Paul Mojzes
Rosemont College, pmojzes@rosemont.edu

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Book Review


Reviewer: Paul Mojzes, Rosemont College

There are preciously few scholarly writings on Islam in the Balkan surveying the entire region. The Bulgarian religious studies scholar Dr. Ina Merdjanova, currently researching and teaching at the Irish School of Ecumenics at Trinity University in Dublin, provided both a unique and masterful book that will be indispensable to anyone wishing to get reliable information and thoughtful reflection on this controversial topic. The book uses an interdisciplinary approach, combining sociology, anthropology, and political science. It was supported by various fellowships which enabled her to do field research and interviews in all the countries of the Balkan peninsula and a number of libraries in the West.


In the first chapter Ina Merdjanova provides a short but helpful overview of the common Ottoman Empire tradition shared by all Muslims of the Balkans. From that common background one may surmise that Balkan Muslims are very cohesive among themselves and with the world wide umma, or Muslim community. But she discovered that the Muslims of

Bulgaria, Macedonia, Albania, Kosovo, and Bosnia & Herzegovina have had different historical trajectories since the advent of modern nationalism, that they differ linguistically, culturally, and most importantly in their aspiration on how to define themselves and with whom they have greater affinities. Thus, for instance, Islam in Bulgaria—and here Merdjanova’s work is particularly significant as Bulgarian Islam is not particularly well known—Muslims are a minority but divided among themselves in the larger community of ethnic Turks and a smaller community of Bulgarian speaking Pomaks who have a fairly flexible national identification. The majority are Sunnis but there are also Alevi who have Shi’a affinities as well as some Sufi orders. She points out that the Bulgarian government has made three different attempts to Bulgarianize the names and the religion of the Muslims, as early as 1912, in the 1970s, and the 1980s. Among the Albanian Muslims who are the majority of the population (about 70%) their national identity seems to prevail over the religious identity, whereas in Kosova, which has an even greater Muslim majority (over 90%), Islam as a religion played a greater role due to the rivalry with Orthodox Serbs over the destiny of the former province of Serbia which is the most recently proclaimed independent country of the Balkans. Islam in Bosnia and Herzegovina played a particularly significant role as it became the rallying point for nation-building in its transition to a Bosniak nation, which prior to the adoption of that name were called Muslims, as an ethnicity and muslims as a religion. Thus Merdjanova argues for the diversity of goals and identities of Muslims in the Balkans, which is a most helpful argument against those who create a myth of a “green corridor” whereby a uniform radical Islam is penetrating into Europe in order to Islamize the continent. The rigid Wahhabism and Salafi interpretations of Islam were not well received by Balkan Muslims except among a very miniscule minority.

In the second chapter the author examines the role of the linkage between Muslims from the Balkans and Muslims from the Asia and Africa. She provides a reasonable
interpretation of the influx of aid and even *mujahideens* during the wars in Bosnia & Herzegovina, and Kosovo, but also to the other Balkan Muslims at first from Iran, Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries, and how the Balkan Muslims later distanced themselves from this assistance as being too intrusive and even alien, and eventually gravitated toward greater cooperation with Turkey, with whom they share not only history but greater cultural similarity in the practice of Islam. Merdjanova points out that the *umma*—worldwide Muslim community as an idea—is not much embraced in reality.

As a feminist Merdjanova is particularly interested in the position of women. She points out that, of course, Muslim societies are patriarchal but that under the influence of Turkish Kemalism and later communism Muslim women entered the labor force, became educated, and were influenced by general feminist ideas. For a while the veil was legally prohibited. During the post-Communist period some Muslim women began wearing the more traditional long skirts and cover their hair, more so in rural areas than among urban dwellers. Some of the religious leaders advocated a return to more traditional passive roles of women as mothers and homemakers (as do most of the Orthodox and Catholic and evangelical Protestants—observation by Paul Mojzes), but Balkan societies are for the most part secularized. There is no serious call by Muslim leaders for a change because all the countries except Albania and Kosovo are majority Christian; hence a secular government is more advantageous to Muslims than one in which a church holds an established position. Merdjanova concludes, “A closer look at the realities in the Balkans shatters perceptions and ideological representation of Muslim women as a homogeneous, repressed, and voiceless minority, which often dominate literature on Islam and women. . . .those women’s lives demonstrate much more flexibility than is generally assumed.” (102)

The final chapter deals with the controversial question of whether there is “European Islam” (which she on purpose always places under quotation marks). This topic is dealt with
adroitly in a nuanced way arguing both for and against perceptions regarding the integration of Muslims in their own Balkan but also in Western societies. Can Westerners shake the image of the “archetypal Other” which taints the Muslims? Should Muslims completely assimilate to European values or retain a critical posture? Are immigrant Muslims from Asia and Africa responding to the challenges in the same way as the “indigenous” Muslims of the Balkans? She points out that the Balkan Muslims by and large look favorably toward European integration, expect that “joining Europe” will bring more advantages than disadvantages and that some Muslims, particularly Albanian and Kosovar, are particularly pro-Western.

The brief overview of the insights shared by Ina Merdjanova covers but a fraction of very perceptive observations, analyses, evaluations and conclusions about Balkan Islam by the author. I believe that this book will become a “must read” book not only because it is one of the very few that deals with the topic in a balanced way but because she does so with proper appreciation and empathy for the unique position of Balkan Muslims in regard to their position in Europe as well as being a part of the umma. Nothing in her book even remotely suggests the kind of alarmist warnings alleging that Bosnian and other Muslims of the Balkans harbor/nurture terrorist designs on the West as claimed in recent books written by Israeli and American intelligence agents mentioned in the footnote above.

Factual errors are so few that it would be petty to mention them. In a few places she uses Arabic or Turkish words without translating them, which will be an obstacle to those not fully familiar with Islamic terminology. Merdjanova’s English writing style is attractive, with a rich vocabulary. She displays complete control of difficult concepts and shows close familiarity with the diverse locations and cultures of the Balkans. College students and higher educated general readers as well as specialists on Islam and the Balkans will be able to use gainfully this valuable and important book.