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INTERNATIONAL ISLAMIC UNIVERSITY MALAYSIA  
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MUSLIM MINORITY IN MACEDONIA:  
A HISTORICAL ANALYSIS, PROBLEMS AND  
PROSPECTS

BY

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the  
requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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JUNE 2006

## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis examines Muslim minorities in Macedonia. It starts by providing an overall theoretical framework for the study of minorities problem, and continues by a portrayal of the historical development of the problems of Muslim minorities in Macedonia under different rules. Problems are identified and analyzed, and solutions to these problems are proposed. The study also discusses future prospects of the Muslim minorities in the Balkans in general and in Macedonia in particular.

The data for this analysis come from primary and secondary sources, namely archival documents, books, journals, periodicals, governmental and non-governmental reports. Semi-structured interviews were also utilized as supplementary methods of data collection and to examine the authenticity of published data.

The findings of the study show that religious and ethnic clashes are deeply rooted in the history of the Balkans. After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, Muslims suffered in many ways approximately for a century. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, first the nationalist and then the communist regime resulted in a more complicated society. External factors, mainly international organizations, such as the U.N., Council of Europe, and CSCE contributed to resolution of the problems and a reduction of the tensions between different religious and national movements. After the formation of the new independent Macedonian state, Muslims gained a better position than before even though there have been new tribulations in relations to their constitutional rights and their political, social, and religious rights. Macedonian Muslims are facing new challenges in the new independent state with a growing awareness of Islam as the main source of their identity and the element that sets them apart from others.

## ملخص البحث

هذه الدراسة تناقش أحوال الأقلية المسلمة في مقدونيا. و تحاول الاجابة عن هذه التساؤلات: ماذا تعني ان تكون المسلم في الوقت الحاضر في البلقان؟ ما طبيعة المعاملات بين المسلمين و بين غيرهم في مقدونيا؟ و ما أنواع المشاكل التي تواجه المسمين في مقدونيا؟ وكيف كانت معاملة النصارى مع مسلمين في مقدونيا؟ الاهتمام الأساسى لهذه الدراسة هو كيف كانت العلاقة السياسية الاجتماعية في البلقان عامة و مقدونيا على وجه الخصوص بين المسلمين و بين غير المسلمين خلال القرن العشرين، و المقارنة بين حياة الأقلية المسلمة و مجتمع غير المسلمين في فترات مختلفة تحت قوميات مختلفة و مختلف النظام بداية من القرن العشرين حتى الوقت الحاضر. ان البيانات الواردة في هذه الدراسة استمدت من مصادر أولية و مصادر ثانوية بالضبط: الوثائق المحفوظة، والكتب، والجرائد، والتقارير الحكومية وغير الحكومية، بالإضافة الى اللقاءات غير موسعة التي استخدمت كطريقة تكميلية لتجميع المعلومات المنشرة ولتحقيق والثبوت على صحتها و أصالتها. ان هذه الدراسة تلقى نظرة علمية تاريخية على مشاكل المسلمين، و فصول الدراسة الآتية تقدم لنا تحليلا تاريخيا لشبه جزيرة البلقان تحت اسيطرة الامبراطورية، و تطور المشكلة التي تواجه المسلمين في دولة مقدونيا الجديدة، و المشاكل التي عانت منها الأقلية المسلمة تحت اسيطرة مملكة الصرب و كواتيا و تحت اسيطرة الشيوعية. اضافة الى ذلك قام البحث بتحقيق المشاكل للأقلية المسلمة و طرح الاقتراحات المعينة، و أيضا فان هذه الدراسة قد تناولت مسألت المستقبل القريب والبعيد للأقلية المسلمة في البلقان على وجه العام و مقدونيا على وجه الخصوص. ان أهم النتائج التي توصل اليها البحث بعد الدراسة و التحليل هي: ان التعارض الدينى و الشعبى عميق الجذور في تاريخ البلقانى، فلقد عانى المسلمون لمدة قرن بعد سقوط الدولة العثمانية، أولا من القوميون و بعد ذلك من النظام الشيوعى أدى الى تعقيد المجتمع، وعوامل خارجية مثل U.N. الأمم المتحدة، C.E. المجلس الاوربى، وCSCE المجلس الأوربى للأمن و المعاونة كلها ساهمت بالمشاركة في اعادة محاولة حل المشكلات، والتخفيف من حدة لتوتر بين مختلف الديانات و الحركات الوطنية، و مما لا شك، أن المسلمون قد أكتسبوا وضع أفضل بعد استقلال مقدونيا، وذلك افضل عماكانوا عليه في السابق، و مع ذلك فقد واجهت المسلمين فيها اضطرابات جديدة تتعلق بالعلاقات والحقوق الدستورية مقارنة بالأغلبية، و فيما يتعلق بالتميز والتفرد لسياستهم ومجتمعهم و حقوقهم الدينية. وأخيرا، قدمت الدراسة عدة

توصيات مهمة من شأنها أن تزيل العوائق الاجتماعية في مقدونيا بين مختلف الأديان والجناس.

**APPROVAL PAGE**

**I certify that I have supervised and read this study and that in my opinion, it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

.....

**Sabri Orman  
Supervisor**

**I certify that I have read this study and that in my opinion, it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

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This thesis of Abdula Kazimoski has been examined and approved by the following:

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Chairman

**DECLARATION**

I hereby declare that this dissertation is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. I also declare that it has not been previously concurrently submitted as a whole for any other degree at IIUM or other institutions.

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Signature .....

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I am indebted to many people for the friendship and moral support that they have generously given me throughout my struggle to complete this thesis. It gives me great pleasure to record here my sincere gratitude and appreciation to these people.

First and foremost, I would like to thank my supervisor, Prof. Dr. Sabri Orman for his constant guidance and support throughout the years I have been working on this thesis. His insightful scholarship and meticulous accuracy were instrumental in shaping this work in its final form. Similar gratitude is due to my co-supervisor, Dr. Mesut Idriz. Without his guidance this thesis would not have come fruition. I know that I will never be able to adequately thank both of them to my supervisor and co-supervisor. Therefore, I pray that God may reward them in this world and hereafter.

Second, I would like to express my appreciation to Prof. Dr. Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, and Prof. Dr. Wan Mohd Nur Wan Daud. I will always claim that I was fortunate to be one of their students.

I also like to extend my appreciation to the authorities of IIUM and the Malaysian government, who made our stay in Malaysia pleasant.

I would like also to thank my friends Dzamal Plojovic and Hasan Sevil with whom I shared a similar ideology and the rest of the ISTAC students.

Finally, words are not enough to describe my indebtedness to my father Tasim Kazimoski. He has sacrificed much to make me who I am now. I am also grateful to my mother Mavmuda Kazimoski and my wife Sefada Kazimoska. They always impressed upon me the importance of acquiring knowledge.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AJCL	: The American Journal of Comparative Law
FYROM	: Former Yugoslav Republic Macedonia
IVZ	: Islamska Verska Zaednica-Supreme Islamic Head
JMMA	: Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs
Kingdom of SHS	: Kralstvo na Srbite, Hrvatite i Slovencite-Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes
OSCE (OSCE)	: The Conference of Security and Co-Operation in Europe
SFRJ	: Socialna Federativna Republika Jugoslavia - Socialist Federal Republic Yugoslavia
SKJ	: Sojuz na Kumunistite na Jugoslavia- Union of the Communist of Yugoslavia
U.N.	: United Nations

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

Following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the Balkans fell into conflict after five centuries of peaceful life. Oppression and aggression were experienced again but the main targets were Muslims as a minority, belonging to different ethnic groups, such as the Bosnians, Torbesh, Pomaks, and Gypsies. The structure of the Balkans became more complicated than before. Instead of finding solutions for a better life for the multi-religious and multi-ethnic communities, Balkan national-states developed xenophobia, prejudice, and set up a frustrated vendetta.

The Balkan Peninsula represents a bridge or a battleground of empires and cultures. The ancient Greeks developed the first great centre of civilization in the Balkans. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C. the Roman Empire appeared but was later (395 C.E.) divided into an eastern Byzantine Empire and a western Roman Empire.<sup>1</sup> In the 6<sup>th</sup> century, the Slavs started an invasion of the Balkans. From the 9<sup>th</sup> century until the middle of the 14<sup>th</sup> century the Balkan region was ruled by various empires such as the Byzantine, the first and the second Bulgarian Empires, and the Serbian Empire.<sup>2</sup> During these times, oppression was common in the Balkan region.<sup>3</sup> The various empires used violence and compulsion for the conversion of the Balkan people. In fact, as explicit evidence, the Code of Dusan confirms that the forced conversion (Slavianization) did not go smoothly.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> L. S. Stavrianos, *The Balkans since 1453*, (London: Hurst & Company 2000), 2-3.

<sup>2</sup> Nevill Forbes, Arnold J. Tonbee, D. Mitrany, and D. G Hogarth, *The Balkans: A History of Bulgaria, Serbia, Greece, Rumania, Turkey*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1915), 18-44.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>4</sup> Pellumb Xhufi, "Albanian Heretics in the Serbian Medieval Kingdom", *The Truth on Kosova*, (Tirana: Encyclopedia Publishing House, 1993), 51.

The fact that all empires in the Balkans were in conflict helped the Ottomans to a great extent to subjugate them and extend their empire in the Balkans.<sup>5</sup> In 1371, the Serbian army was defeated at the battle on the Maritsa River. After this, the Serbs formed a huge southern Slav alliance which consisted of Serbs, Hungarians, and Albanians (although the Bulgarians refused to join). The alliance defeated the Ottomans but only for a short time. In the famous battle of Kosovo in 1389 the Balkan peninsula fell to Ottoman control.<sup>6</sup>

The Balkan people under the Ottoman rule took religion as their identity. Ethnicity was of less importance. That was because the Ottoman Empire considered that religion defined communal identity rather than ethnicity or language.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, the determination of ethnicity and belongingness was determined solely by religion. However, the main teaching of Islam was the equality of people as individuals. That was because the Ottoman Empire applied the *shari'ah* concerning the rights and obligations of both Muslims and non-Muslims providing everyone protection for their lives, honour and property.<sup>8</sup> As a matter of fact, under the Ottoman's policy freedom of culture and religion was granted to non-Muslims so the Christians were able to preserve many of their pre-Christian customs (*obijai*), beliefs and traditions.

Non-Muslims were socially organized along the lines of religious affinities and consisted of religious communities known as the *millets* system under the Ottoman Empire. Each religious community enjoyed the freedom to perform its religious activities. At the same time, each community also functioned as a kind of political entity which had judicial autonomy, the right to choose its own leaders and the right to

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<sup>5</sup> Nijazi Limanoski, *Islamizacijata i Etnickite promeni vo Makedonija*, (Skopje: Makedonska Kniga, 1993), 19-20.

<sup>6</sup> Forbes, Tonbee, Mitrany, and Hogarth, 46.

<sup>7</sup> Hugh Poulton and Suha Taji-Farouki, "Introduction", *Muslim Identity and the Balkan State*, edited by Hugh Poulton and Suha Taji-Farouki (London: Hurst & Company, 1995), 3.

<sup>8</sup> Mumtaz'er Turkone, "The Tanzimat Charter and Mehmed Sadik Rifat Pasha", *The Great Ottoman - Turkish Civilization*, edited by Kemal Cicek Vol. 3. (Ankara, 2000), 105.

solve its internal problems. So the realities and functions of every local organization differed according to its location and the period of its existence.<sup>9</sup>

In the Balkans, Christian Slavs enjoyed privileges and autonomy and were not restricted in terms of their social freedom. They had their social organization as a protector of their customs and traditions. As a result of the Islamic doctrine of tolerance, Christians and Jews were tolerated under the Ottoman Empire. They were not considered as first class citizens like the Muslims, but they did have certain advantages, for example, commerce was open to them. As a matter of fact, after *Tanzimat* (Institutional reforms) commerce was always a monopoly of the non-Muslims.<sup>10</sup> That was the result of the freedom and security of the non-Muslim communities. The success of the non-Muslim communities depended on how they were organized. For instance, Jewish traders had the greatest impact on commerce. They did not give any opportunity to other ethnic groups and religious communities to compete with them.<sup>11</sup> In the latest period of the Ottoman Empire, equality (*musavat*) between Muslims and non-Muslims, complete security of life, and human rights were recognized as much for non-Muslims as for Muslims.<sup>12</sup>

After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the issue of Muslim identity in the area of the Balkan states became problematic especially in regions such as Macedonia where the Muslims were a minority. However, the Christians in the Balkans did not reciprocate with the same rights to Muslims as the Muslims had given to them. The Balkan Christian societies easily denounced the Muslims as belonging to a false religion. As a matter of fact, Muslims in the Balkans, especially Muslim converts,

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<sup>9</sup> Tetsuya Sahara, *An Eastern Orthodox Community During Tanzimat: Documents from a Register of Bulgarian Society in Ruse (1860-1872)*, (Institute for the Study of Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa, 1997), 3-4.

<sup>10</sup> Hugh Poulton, *Top Hat, Grey Wolf and Crescent, Turkish Nationalism and the Turkish Republic*, (London: Hurst & Company, 1997), 46-47.

<sup>11</sup> Gorgi Dimovski - Colev, *Bitolski Evrei*. (Bitola: Drustvo za Nauka i Umetnost, 1993), 49.

<sup>12</sup> Turkone, 99-100.



have been oppressed by the Macedonians, Greeks, Bulgarians, Serbs, and Croats, and called terrorists and traitors, starting from the nineteenth century until today. That is because of the political struggle and conflict between different confessions that was intensified at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when the Christian societies in the Balkans became independent. The reason for the developing division into antagonistic religious groups, Muslims on one side and Orthodox Christians and Catholics on the other, was to make an ethno-religious group majority. Therefore, Muslims in the Balkans were exposed to assimilation, emigrations, and ethnic cleansing for more than a century. The Christian Orthodox agenda tried to obliterate Muslims in the Balkans. Some of the Orthodox Christian and Catholic writers had the task of publishing this agenda to stimulate the ethnic cleansing of Muslims from the Balkans. Ivo Andric in the Nobel Prize winning novel, *Bridge on the Drina (Most na Drina)* and Negos in his poem, “*Mountain Wreath*” (*Planinski Venec*) are two examples that stimulated aggression on the Muslims.

### **The Balkans**

The Balkans may roughly be described as a triangle bounded on the north by the mainland Europe, on the west by the Adriatic Sea, and on the east by the Black Sea, the Sea of Marmara, and the Aegean. The whole of the Balkan Peninsula is characterized by a mixture of religious and ethnic groups where the majority of the population are Christians. However, proceeding from the above assumption we must ask a fundamental question: In what way can the Balkans be defined as a region?

The answer is very complex and depends on the adoption of initial assumptions and methodological foundations. The name Balkans may be directly traced to the Ottoman conquest and is of Turkish origin. As Kostancik described it,

“the word ‘Balkans’ means mountains in Turkish”.<sup>13</sup> The geographical name “Balkan Peninsula” was introduced in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by the German geographer, A. Zeune. The previous names of the area were Turkish Europe, the Greek Peninsula, the Byzantine Peninsula, and the Illyrian Peninsula.<sup>14</sup> Present states of the Balkans are Romania, Bulgaria, Greece, Serbia, Montenegro, Croatia, Slovenia, Bosnia, Albania and Macedonia.

### **Macedonia**

The region of Macedonia was known by that name ever since the ancient ages, however, its borders underwent changes from time to time. It should be made clear that Macedonian’s traditional land covered about 25,900 square miles. About 50 percent lay in Greece and some 10 percent in Bulgaria, the rest occupied present day Republic of Macedonia, with Skopje as its capital. Macedonian’s boundary on the east was the lower Nestos (Mesta in Bulgaria) River and the western slopes of the Rhodope Mountains, which straddle the present Greek-Bulgarian frontier. On the north the boundary was marked by Siroka, Skopska Crna Gora and Sar Mountains, bordering present day southern Serbia and southern Kosova. The western boundary was marked by the Korab Renge and by the Ohrid and Prespa lakes, which today straddle the Albanian-Macedonian border.<sup>15</sup> The newly formed Macedonian state is a national state where the majority of the population are Macedonians also there are different ethnic and religious groups such as Albanians, Turks, Bosnians, Torbesh, Romas, Vlaches, Bulgarians, Greeks, and Serbs. It is necessary to note that Macedonia

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<sup>13</sup> Franciszek Golembki, “Balkan Studies: Selected General and Methodological Issues”, *Balkan Studies*, vol. 25 (1984), 151-152.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Pance Kirovski, “Prirodno Geografski Odliki na Makedonia”, *Istorija na Makedonskiot Narod*, vol:1, ed. By Aleksandar Stojanovski, (Skopje Institut za Nacionalna Istorija, 1969), p.9.

is internal part of the Balkan region. Therefore, what is true for Macedonia is equally true for the Balkan region as a whole. Hence more often this study uses the Balkan region it also refer to Macedonia, the reason being the two have a common history that geography cannot separate.

### **1.1 THE PROBLEM AND ITS SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS**

This study examines the position of Muslim minority in Macedonia especially as regards the religious and socio-political interaction between Muslims and non-Muslims. It must be pointed out that religious and ethnic identities became more prominent at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. After the First World War, three of the biggest empires with multi-national structures of population (i.e. the Austro-Hungarian, Russian, and Ottoman empires) disappeared. Thirty-two states were established out of the twenty-eight states that existed before the First World War. Some of the minorities were given their rights but others, such as the Macedonian Muslim minority, were not. In general, Muslim minority in the Balkans became more and more oppressed and experienced difficulties in getting their religious and socio-political rights, especially in places where they were few in number. It is well known that Muslims in the Balkans live as minority in Orthodox Christian states. Muslim communities in Macedonia in their capacity as small ethnic groups with a different religion (Islam), distinct inner lives, specific religious and traditional practices, and different institutions from the Orthodox Christians, suffered individually and collectively. However, each Orthodox Christian state has a national territory and ethnic group. Therefore, they consider that the Muslim minority do not belong to their society. In this situation, Muslims face two problems as minorities: one is ethnic and the other is religious.

This being the case, this study tries to identify and analyze minority problems in order to contribute to their solution, and to draw attention to minority rights based on international agreements and through the agency of international bodies such as United Nations (U.N.), the Conference on Security and co-Operation in Europe (CSCE), and the Council of Europe. Therefore, this research will answer some important questions such as the following: What does it mean to be a Muslim in the contemporary Balkans? What is the nature of Muslims and non-Muslims relations in Macedonia? What are the problems Muslims face in Macedonia? What are the causes of the problems faced by Muslims in Macedonia? How deeply religion can in the Muslim population remain? How was the Christian treatment of the Muslim minority in Macedonia? How were the Muslim minority treated as religious and national minorities?

## **1.2 SIGNIFICANCE AND JUSTIFICATION**

Serious academic study focusing on the complexity of the ethnic and religious issues in the Balkans is needed. Muslim communities in the Balkans have been the subjects of comprehensive study and research, especially after the collapse of the communist system. However, more attention has been paid to the Bosnian and Albanian Muslims than to other Muslim communities in the Balkans, such as the Muslim minority in Macedonia. Thus, there are gaps in the research and this study hopes to fill the lacuna especially regarding the community of the Macedonian Muslims.

## **1.3 OBJECTIVES**

This research aims to: 1) examine socio-political and religious inter-communal relations in the Balkans in general and Macedonia in particular between Muslims and

non-Muslims during the twentieth century; and 2) To compare the life of Muslim minority in non-Muslim societies (Christian communities) in different periods under different national identities and different systems from the beginning of the twentieth century until the present day.

#### **1.4 METHODOLOGY**

This research on the Muslim minority in Macedonia concerns itself with a study of relevant historical events, social-political status, daily religious rituals, traditions, and customs based on appropriate comparative and analytical methods. This, in turn, requires a study of archival material, relevant books, journals, seminar papers and other available documents. The materials relevant to the present case are written in different languages, such as Macedonian, Bosnian, Serbian, Bulgarian, Turkish, Albanian and English. Therefore, a satisfactory level of familiarity with these languages is necessary for a proper utilization of this material. In addition to archival and library research, interviews and observations will also be conducted when necessary.

#### **1.5 LITERATURE REVIEW**

A number of scholars have done brilliant work on the political, social, historical and religious aspects of this part of the world. It is not possible to give a complete list. Some of the prominent authors on this subject are Hugh Poulton, Suha Taji-Farouki, Justin McCarthy, L.S. Stavrianos, Nijazi Limanoski, Vasilij Popovic, Bajrush Ahmeti, Mehdi Frasheri, Todor Trajkovski, Tetsuya Sahara, Christopher Cviic, Miranda Vickers, James Pettifer, Fikret Karcic, Ivo Balic, Will Gordon, H.T. Norris,

Aleksandar Matkovski, Aleksandar Stojanovski, H.A.R Gibb, Stjepan G. Mestrovic, and Gorgi Pulevski.

Some of the works most closely related to this research are the following: *Death and Exile, The Ethnic Cleansing of the Ottoman Muslims 1921-1922*, by Justin McCarthy discusses how many Muslims lived in the Balkans and how the population of the Balkans decreased in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. His main effort is to highlight the forced emigrations and deaths of the Muslim population caused by the harsh conditions caused by the Orthodox Christians.

*Muslim Identity and the Balkan State*, edited by Hugh Poulton and Suha Taj-Faruki covers the contemporary situation of the Turkish, Bosnian, Pomaks, Torbesh, Albanian, and Roma (Gypsy) Muslims. The authors provide very useful materials. However, some parts tend to be theoretically weak in grasping the complexities of the identity and national sentiments of the Muslim minorities in the Balkans. There are also certain questionable conclusions. Furthermore, the book does not present a particularly strong theoretical account concerning identity formation, the national question, and the future of Muslim minorities in the Balkans. The research should have been done in a historically and schematically comprehensive fashion.

*Islam in the Balkans: Religion and Society between Europe and the Arab World* by H.T. Norris discusses the relationship between the Muslims in the Middle East and the South-East European Muslims in the Balkans. The author covers general historical and religious studies of the Albanian, Bosnian, Bulgarian and Turkish communities in the Balkans. The main importance of the book is that the author sees that Muslims in the Balkans and the Balkans itself as a part of European continent represent a cultural bridge between two civilizations. The last part of his book is

dedicated to the future of Muslim communities in the Balkans, especially in those communities where the religious frictions are really founded in popular practice.

*Islamizaciata i Etnickite Promeni vo Makedonia* by Nijazi Limanoski concerned with a historical description of the Balkan societies for the past several centuries. The main concern of the author is the contemporary Muslim society in Macedonia, known as the Torbesh (Slavic people who embraced Islam). He studies the Torbesh based on their national identity, mother tongue, national customs, and folklore.

Amongst the sources that discuss certain aspects of this research is an international seminar, the first national conference in Albania after the collapse of the communist regime, which was held in July 1994 in Tirana. On The Role of Islam in post-Communist Albanian society. The seminar focused on a number of social issues which Albanian society is facing. The seminar also focused on the importance of spirituality in the past and in the present and historical values and the importance of cult objects in connection with the need for the preservation of Albanian traditions. The main aim of this seminar was to demonstrate the role of Islam, Islamic intellectuals, and Muslims in general after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire.

In order to contribute more to this specific topic this research will provide a detailed study of the lesser known Muslim minority in Macedonia, the Torbesh, Gypsies, Albanians and Turks, taking into consideration a strong theoretical account concerning the identity and future perspectives of the Muslim minorities, dealing with history systematically and comparatively, and in a fashion giving possible strategies for the betterment of the conditions of the Muslim communities in Macedonia.

Besides books, historical documents will also be utilized in the present study. Most of these historical documents are in Turkish *Sijils* (registers) covering a long

period of the Ottoman Empire are considered as a very rich source of material for research on the economic and socio-political life of the Muslims and non-Muslims in the Balkans. Some of these historical documents with commentaries were translated from Osmanli to Macedonian. Also some historical documents are in Serbian and Bulgarian. All these documents are available in the Macedonian State Archive (Drzavna Arhiva na Makedonia), in Skopje.

## **1.6 OUTLINE**

The research is divided into eight chapters. Chapter One is the introduction, discusses the statement of problem of the study, scope and limitation, significance, justification, objectives, methodology, and literature review. Chapter Two discusses the theoretical aspects of the minority problem. It examines the concept of minority as understood and promoted by different international bodies, such as the U.N., the CSCE, and the Council of Europe. Besides, it discusses the historical background of the protection of the rights of minorities, and an overview of contemporary minority problems. Chapter Three deals with the historical background of the Balkan peninsula, with Muslims and non-Muslims in the Balkans during the Ottoman Empire (1371-1912). It also discusses Islamization of the Balkan peninsula and the rights and status of non-Muslims in the Balkans. Chapter Four discusses social, political and religious rights of Muslim minority in the Balkans in the aftermath of the Ottomans under different political systems. Chapter Five deals with the Macedonian Muslim minority under the Communist System. Issues such as Muslim identity, the educational system, assimilation of Muslim minority, emigration of Muslim minority, and Islamic heritage such as masjids and *waqfs* constituted the core of this chapter. Chapter Six deals with Macedonian Muslim minority since the collapse of Yugoslavia in 1989 until the