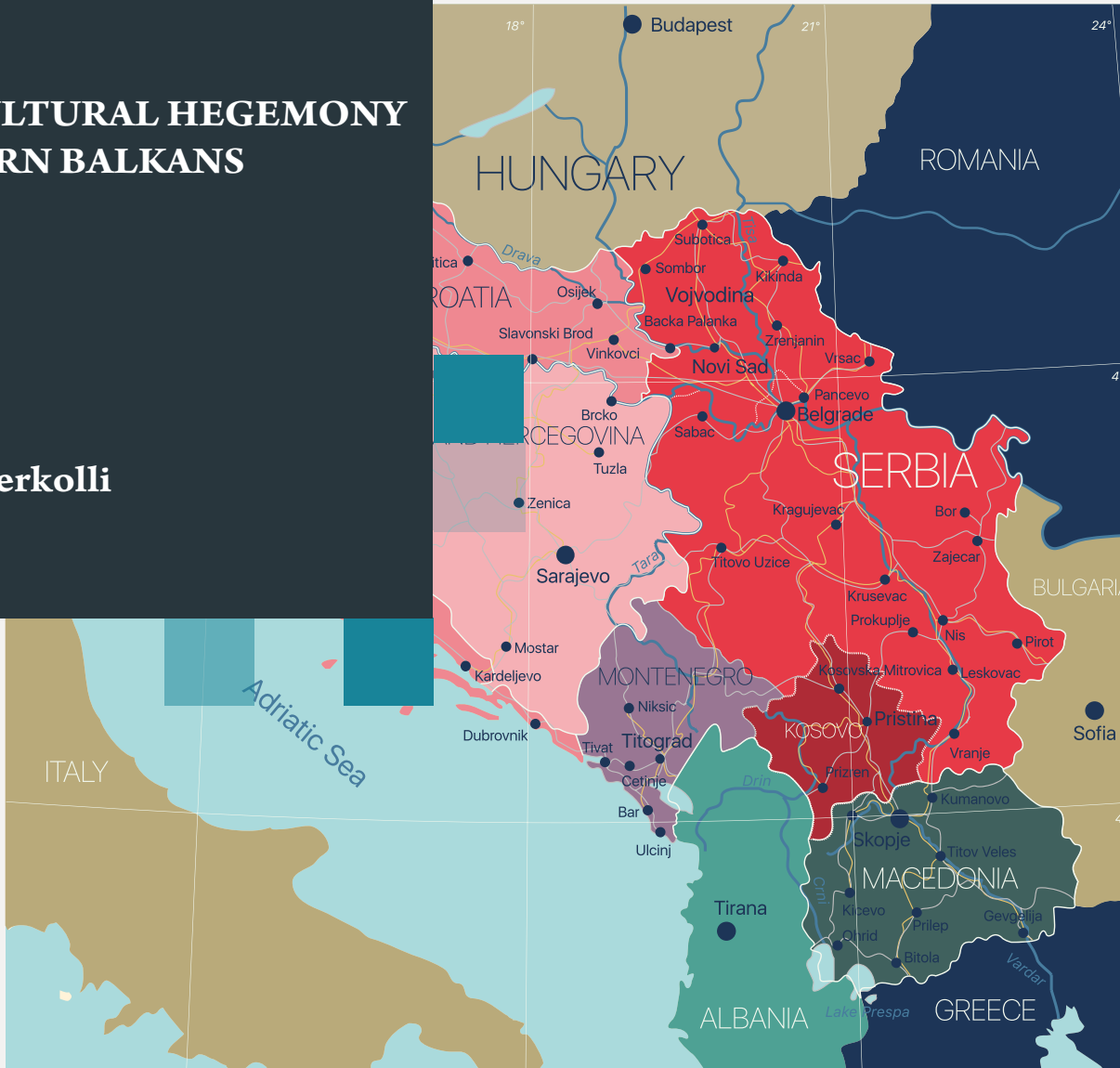




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## IRAN'S CULTURAL HEGEMONY IN WESTERN BALKANS

**Liridona Berkolli**





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## Iran's Cultural Hegemony in Western Balkans

Batı Balkanlar'da İran Kültürel Hegemonyası

نفوذ فرهنگی ایران در کشورهای بالکان غربی

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## SUMMARY

- The exportation of Shi'ite Islamic ideas and revolutionary discourse was the main focus of Iran's foreign policy.
- The exporting doctrine of the Islamic Revolution occupies a significant place in the foreign policy of Iran. Although it may have different articulations depending on the political wing which has executive power in this country.
- In Western Balkans, Iran has been focused on creating local intellectual elites who would be loyal to the policies of the Islamic Republic, as well as expanding the Shi'ite sect to gain dependent supporters.
- The main Iranian activities in Western Balkan were the opening of colleges, institutes of study, translation and publication of books and magazines.
- The cultural activities of Iran focus on the use of the Ottoman literary heritage written in Persian by Iran, the creation of more philosophical discourse on Islam, the great investment in the field of producing Shi'ite religious knowledge, the attempt to interpret heritage Islamic mystics of the Balkans as Shi'ite heritage.

**Keywords:** Cultural Hegemony, Western Balkan, Shi'ite Ideology, Islamist

## ÖZET

- Şii İslam düşüncesinin ve Devrim söyleminin ihracı, İran dış politikasının ana gündemini oluşturmaktadır.
- İran İslam Devrimi'nin ihraç doktrini, İran'ın dış politikasında önemli bir yer tutmaktadır. Fakat ülkede yürütme yetkisinin hangi siyasi kanatta olduğuna bağlı olarak doktrinin farklı yorumları ortaya çıkmaktadır.
- İran; Batı Balkanlar'da, İran İslam Cumhuriyeti'nin politikalarına sadık yerli bir entelektüel elit sınıfı yaratmaya ve Şii mezhebine bağlı destekçiler kazanmaya odaklanmıştır.
- Batı Balkanlar'daki temel İran faaliyetleri; okullar ve eğitim kurumları açılması, çeviriler, kitap ve dergi yayınlarından oluşmaktadır.
- İran'ın kültürel aktiviteleri çoğunlukla Farsça yazılmış Osmanlı edebî mirasının İran tarafından kullanılmasına, İslam'a yönelik daha felsefi bir söylemin üretilmesine, Şii dinî bilginin üretimine yönelik önemli seviyede yatırımlara ve Balkanlar'daki İslami tasavvuf mirasını Şii mirası olarak yorumlama çabalarına dayanmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Kültürel Hegemonya, Batı Balkanlar, Şii İdeolojisi, İslamcı

## چکیده

- صدور تفکرات شیعی و گفتمان انقلابی، محور اصلی سیاست خارجی ایران بوده است.
- سیاست صدور انقلاب اسلامی از جایگاه ویژه ای در سیاست خارجی ایران برخوردار است. هرچند که با توجه به جناح سیاسی دارای قدرت اجرایی در این کشور، نوع و نحوه گفتمان ممکن است تفاوت‌هایی داشته باشد.
- ایران در کشورهای بالکان غربی، بیشتر بر ایجاد نخبگان فکری بومی وفادار به سیاست‌های جمهوری اسلامی و همچنین گسترش تشیع برای به دست آوردن طرفداران وابسته تمرکز داشته است.
- افتتاح مراکز آموزشی، مؤسسات مطالعاتی، ترجمه و چاپ کتاب و مجلات از جمله فعالیت‌های اصلی ایران در کشورهای بالکان غربی است.
- فعالیت‌های فرهنگی ایران بیشتر بر استفاده از میراث ادبی عثمانی نوشته شده به فارسی، ایجاد گفتمان فلسفی بیشتر در مورد اسلام، سرمایه گذاری عظیم در زمینه تولید علوم مذهبی شیعی، و تلاش برای تفسیر میراث عرفای اسلامی بالکان به عنوان میراث شیعه متمرکز است.

**کلیدواژه ها:** نفوذ فرهنگی، کشورهای بالکان غربی، ایدئولوژی تشیع، اسلام گرای



## 1. Introduction

Several ideological groups and ideologies had fought against the policies of the Pahlavi regime in Iran, but it was the Islamists who in 1979 triumphed and succeeded in overthrowing Reza Shah Pahlavi. This overthrow was called the Islamic Revolution of Iran. After the installation of the Islamic system named “Velayat-e Faqih”, the leaders of the Islamic Republic of Iran began developing expansionist ideas, through which would extend the influence to other countries in the Middle East, especially across Islamic countries. In the course of time, they opened several organizations and educational-cultural centers through which they would spread the discourse of Islamist ideology as well as the Iranian narrative of Shi’ite Islam. Among these organizations has been the World Center of Islamic Sciences (Markaz-e Jahani Uloom-e Islami), Organization of Madrasas Abroad (Sazman-e Howzeha va Madares Kharej az Keshvar), Islamic culture and Communication Organization (Sazman-e Farhang va Ertebatat-e Islami), Al-Mustafa International University, etc. In addition to providing higher education of Islamic knowledge for non-Iranian students, these centers in many countries of the world have also opened their representative offices where they have organized educational, cultural, and Islamic knowledge activities. These organizations also opened their offices in the Western Balkans region. Using these organizations, Iran in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, Kosovo, Macedonia and Serbia has opened scientific and research institutes, high schools, published scientific books and journals and managed to send a number of students to Iran to study in various departments, especially students attending school for Islamic sciences in the city of Qom.

According to empirical data, Iran has managed to extend its hegemony in the state of Bosnia and Herzegovina more than in other countries of Western Balkan. In this country, it has managed to open institutes, associations, schools and other institutions, through which, is trying to extend its cultural hegemony. In like manner, they used such an approach in Albania, although the deployment of the MEK (Mujahedin-e Khalq) group’s members had influenced official Tirana to be more reserved towards Iranian institutions. Taking into consideration also the last year 2020, many of Iran’s institutions were closed by them. Iran has successfully opened cultural institutions also in other countries of the Western Balkans, especially in Serbia, Northern Macedonia, and Kosovo. In some countries, they opened these institutions directly, while in others, they implemented their programs through locals who have studied in Iran. Due to the fight against terrorism, the state of Kosovo in 2016 had shut down an Iranian organization and deported the only Iranian operating in this country. It is also worth noting that the target of Iranian influence in the Western Balkans is the tekkes and sects of these countries, which have operated for centuries, especially the Bektashi sect.

### 1.1. Scope of the Study

This study aims to mark the cultural hegemony of Iran in the Western Balkans, focusing on Kosovo, Albania, Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia. By identifying Iran’s cultural activities in the region, light is shed on the Islamic Republic of Iran’s efforts to build a Balkan intellectual elite that would prepare the area for the country’s cultural, political, and economic influence in this region. The study also seeks to highlight Iran’s role in



appropriating the region's Sufi heritage, as well as creating a narrative of Shi'ite political Islam among Muslims in the Balkan region.

### 1.2. Hypotheses

1. The Islamic Republic of Iran has made more significant investments in Bosnia and Herzegovina and has a more visible impact on it among the Bosnian Muslim people.
2. Due to the pro-American and pro-Western orientations of the Albanian states and intellectual elite, Iran has not managed to have a large spreading among the Muslim Albanians of Albania, Kosovo, Macedonia.
3. Iranian investments in the field of culture are focused on philosophy, theology, mysticism and education, so their impact may be shown slowly but affects in a much longer time.

### 1.3. Methodology

This study has applied a descriptive-analytical approach, focusing on data collection about Iran's cultural activities in the Balkan region. These data are read in English, Albanian, Bosnian and Serbian. Interviews and conversations with experts on cultural developments in these countries were also conducted. While the theoretical framework of the research is based on the export theory of the Islamic Revolution, on which is based Iran's cultural diplomacy.

## 2. Theoretical background

Powerful and consolidated states use cultural diplomacy as a gentle mechanism to achieve their political, economic, military goals, etc. Cultural diplomacy in its activities includes: "exchange of

ideas, information, art, language and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples in order to foster mutual understanding" (Lenczowski, 2008, p. 74). Therefore, cultural diplomacy deals with individuals of a certain society, so the object of its activities is not society as a whole. The Islamic Republic of Iran, as a culturally, politically and economically rich country in the Middle East region, has very few allies in the region and in the world, so it pays special attention to cultural diplomacy. Also, the Iranian authorities are aware of the rich cultural heritage of their country, therefore, they make every effort to use this heritage in the service of their state policies and interests. The pillars on which Iran's cultural diplomacy rests are (Simbar, 2018 pp. 47-67):

- Ancient Persian Civilization
- Nowruz Holidays
- Persian Language and Literature
- Islam
- Shi'ism

Various state organizations operate within Iran, which exclusively deal with the development and expansion of this country's cultural diplomacy around the world. But to better understand the cultural intentions of the Iranian state in other countries, one must first look at the theory of exporting the Islamic Revolution. It is true that the Islamic Revolution of Iran raised a kind of hope in some Muslims, who thought that through Islamic Iran, the Sharia of the Prophet Mohammad would begin to be applied, while in another group of Muslims, it raised hopes that an Islamic state would be created which would care for the rights and freedom of oppressed Muslims around the world. All these expectations were articulated by



the leaders of the Islamic Revolution of Iran themselves, headed by Ayatollah Khomeini, who said: "From what we say that our revolution should be exported to every country, it should not be misunderstood that we want to conquer other countries of the world. We want that what happened in Iran and this awakening that happened here and that the Iranians themselves distanced themselves from the world superpowers, the same to be realized in the people and other countries of the world."

The meaning of exporting the revolution is for all peoples to wake up and save themselves from the violence and oppression in which they find themselves" (Khomeini, 1989, p. 127).

On this idea of the head of the Islamic Revolution was constructed the theory of exportation of the Islamic Revolution of Iran, which according to the scholar Rouhollah K. Ramazani is defined as follows: "Exporting the revolution in a short period of time is a mechanism to protect the Islamic Republic and maintain its security, especially in the Persian Gulf region, while in the longer term, it is a mechanism to finally establish a world system under the umbrella of Islamic justice" (Ramazani, 2013, p. 54). On this idea, among Iranian ideologues and rulers, developed policies and various, often contradictory, narratives were constructed in relation to the content and ways of exporting the Islamic Revolution to other countries. In general, scholars have identified three main approaches to exporting the Islamic Revolution:

- The approach of the Iranian nationalists, according to whom the Islamic Revolution is acceptable only within the borders of Iran and should be kept away from its export

because it would arouse sensitivity in other nations and states;

- The approach of Iranian Islamist revolutionaries, who are of the opinion that the Islamic religion does not recognize geographical boundaries, so everything must be done, even the application of violence to spread the ideals of the Islamic Revolution and Imam Khomeini in the world;
- Balanced or realistic approach, which emphasizes that the Islamic Republic must first be developed and built from within and in this way, it can become a model for other countries of the world as well (Mohammadi, 2016 pp. 66-61).

Notwithstanding, to these approaches can be added a fourth Iranian cultural enterprise in the field of the export of the Islamic Revolution, which stands out from the readings and observations of the cultural activities of this country in other countries, especially in those of the Western Balkans. This approach relies on Iran's capital investments in the fields of education, science, theology, philosophy, through which efforts are made to create intellectual and cultural elites, especially religious, which would apply and disseminate the discourses and narratives of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Therefore, the Islamic officials of Iran are convinced that their revolution is Islamic, and since the religion Islam does not recognize geographical, ethnic, linguistic, racial borders, it must be applied to any place of the world. Thus, all activities and Iranian investments in the Western Balkan countries can be understood within the theory of exporting the Islamic Revolution.





### 3. Political relations between Iran and Balkan

The beginnings of the political-cultural relations between Iran and the countries of the Western Balkans should be sought after the Second World War. The leader of the former Yugoslavia, Josip Broz Tito, had managed to become an important player of the Movement of Non-Aligned Nations; hereby, he had established very close relations with the Middle Eastern states, including Iran ruled by the previous Pahlavi regime. These relations between Iran and the former Yugoslavia were mostly focused on the economic and military fields. At that time, Yugoslavia exported technological products to Iran, and many Yugoslav companies had participated in the construction of modern parts of the Iranian cities. Political relations between Iran and the former Yugoslavia were more of a realistic relationship, based on both countries' interests, without any intention of political or cultural influence on each other. Although Albania, during its Communist rule (1946-1990), had no diplomatic relations with the Iranian Pahlavi Regime (1925-1979), the communist leader of Albania, Enver Hoxha, is known for the support he had given to the Islamic Revolution of Iran and its leader Ayatollah Khomeini.

Albanian researcher Enes Sulstarova writes: "From Tirana's point of view, the revolution in Iran was positively assessed for its number of people that participated and its anti-imperialism, but the contribution of the religious factor in it was underestimated. It has served as proof of the revolutionary potential of the Third World and the sharpening of contradictions between peoples and oppressive classes. This interpretation served the National Party of Albania to confirm

its ideological stance at the time, which Hoxha considered valid for revolution around the world" (KOHA ISLAME, 2021).

Nevertheless, it should be noted that on the other hand, after the victory of the Islamic regime of Iran, in this country began a widespread persecution of communist exponents; therefore, Islamic Tehran did not show any closeness or interest in political relations with communist Tirana. Iran's relations with Western Balkans changed after the victory of the Islamic Revolution of Iran in 1979, the fall of the communist regime in Albania, especially after the beginning of Yugoslavia's disintegration. Nevertheless, Iran emerged strongly in the Western Balkans region during the Yugoslav Wars. Iran supported the Croats militarily and financially in the war with Serbia, particularly the Bosnians, by giving voluntary military forces to fight against the Yugoslav army led by Belgrade. Likewise, in post-communist Albania, conditions were created for diplomatic relations with other countries of the world, and Iran, like many other countries, used this opportunity to settle in Albania. Iran was aware that the Balkan region is populated by a large number of Muslims. Thus, they saw the Balkans as an ideal place for their strategic plans, extending its cultural, political, economic, and military influence.

### 4. Iran's cultural hegemony in Western Balkan

#### 4.1. Iran's cultural activities in Kosovo

As mentioned in previous articles, Kosovars' interaction with Iran has been more ideological and religious rather than economic or political. Kosovo, as a Secular Muslim majority country, has a large number of sect (tariqat) members.



By virtue of the fact that Kosovo's sectarians are declared as followers of the path of Prophet Mohammad's family (Ahl al-Bayt), the Islamic Republic of Iran in Belgrade adjusted its focus in Kosovo. This focus tightened after the installation of the Islamic Revolution system. The Center for Culture at the Iranian Embassy in Belgrade began translating religious literature and political-Islamic treatises into Serbian, which is dispersed to the cities of Kosovo. Furthermore, as part of this cultural activity, this Center began publishing in Serbian the cultural magazine "Nur"<sup>1</sup>, which they sent to every tekke, each sheikh, and likewise to the Muslim intellectuals of Kosovo and Macedonia. It should be noted that four issues of this magazine were also published in Albanian. "Nur" contained Shia-leaning religious writings by authors such as Morteza Motahhari, Mohammad Hossein Beheshti, Mohammad Javad Bahonar, etc. Unlike the simple and popular discourses of the religious leaders of Kosovo's mosques and tekkes, the discourse of these Iranian theologians seemed more sophisticated and more philosophically articulated to educate Kosovars. Several of these Muslim scholars had begun to take an interest in the Shia narrative of the Islamic religion. The ideological tendencies and leanings of these individuals were articulated and applied by Ayatollah Khomeini, the inventor and founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Thus, some of these Kosovars became so close to Khomeini's ideology that they settled, changing their religious beliefs and converted to Shia.

The Iranians in Kosovo would appear immediately after the war, this time through the humanitarian organization "Red Crescent Society of Iran" (Jamiyat-e Helal Ahmar-e Iran). This Iranian organization, in addition to humanitarian aid, after

the 2000th in the city of Pristina, had opened a Dental Office. But even this organization had not encountered any support from the Kosovar people, so for a short time, it was forced to withdraw from Kosovo. Afterward, the Iranians would continue with another organization, the "Cultural Association of the Quran", which was a representative of the "Organization of Madrasahs Abroad"; (Sazman-e Howzeha va Madares-e Kharej az Keshvar) until 2007. This organization continued with the representation of Al-Mustafa University after 2007. This cultural association's focus was on organizing courses for the teaching of the Quran, translating and publishing books on Islamic-Shia topics, and also organizing the Shia community in the city of Prizren. Quranic courses were held by the imams of these mosques, and for this activity, they got paid by the association. The main target of the association was the tekkes and dervishes of Kosovo, in addition to supplying them with Shia literature, they also maintained constant contact with some of the sheikhs. But during the conversations with some of these sheikhs, especially in the cities of Prizren, Gjakova and Rahovec, no influence of Shi'ism and Islamist narrative of Iran can be noticed.

There are no statistics on the number of Shias in Kosovo, but it can be assumed that their number may not be over fifty. All these Shias are not organized under any particular association or organization, but according to our observations, it is noticed that they operate in two or three separate groups. Some of them have turned to the traditions of the tariqah, while some no longer accept to be identified as Shia. The most representative and present voice of Kosovo Shia in the Kosovar media is Ikballe Huduti, director of the International Research Institute "Naim Frashëri",

<sup>1</sup> See: <https://plus.sr.cobiss.net/opac7/bib/22740495>



operating in Pristina. Mrs. Huduti continues to be on trial over a statement she made on social media in which she expressed indignation over the assassination of Iranian General Qasem Soleimani and demanded revenge against the USA. After the opening of this lawsuit against Mrs. Huduti, even her Institute is almost non-functional.

#### 4.2. Iran's cultural activities in Albania

The first Iranian cultural organization in Albania was the "Saadi Shirazi" Cultural Foundation, which was established in 1995 in Tirana. The aim of this foundation was "to enliven the Iranian-Albanian cultural ties, to make known in Albania the traditions of the Iranian civilization and to serve the friendship between these two ancient peoples"<sup>2</sup>. As a representative of the Islamic Culture and Communication Organization in Albania, Saadi Shirazi Foundation, from the beginning until the last year, had managed developing very important cultural activities and establishing a comprehensive cooperation with Albanian intellectuals, scientists and academics. The scientific-cultural journal "Perla", a section of this Foundation, has become one of the most serious scientific journals in this country. Through this magazine, the Iranian Embassy and the Saadi Shirazi Foundation had managed to build cooperation links with many cultural and educational institutions of the country, but also with the most serious Albanian scholars, such as prof. Gazmend Shpuza, prof. Jorgo Bullo, prof. Shaban Sinani, prof. Muzafer Korkuti, prof. Emil Lafi, etc.

Among the many cultural activities of this Foundation was the publication of literary works of Albanian poets who had written in Persian.

Persian, as one of the three main languages of the Ottoman Empire, was used more in the poetic creativity of that time, therefore many Ottoman poets, including Albanian ones, wrote poetry in this language. Nevertheless, the Ottoman Empire's Persian did not carry the identity layer of the modern Iranian nation, which today carries the Persian language of Iran. So Persian had only a literary and mystical identity within the borders of the Ottoman Empire, ergo, reflected the poetic and mystical spirit of the Ottoman ethos. According to the leaders of the Saadi Shirazi Foundation, the Persian creativity of Albanian poets is identified with the current Iranian nationalist language and culture, and the Ottoman context of this creativity is completely avoided. Through such a narrative, without taking into account the cultural heritage of the Ottoman Empire in Albania, the Iranians make efforts to use the Persian creativity of the Albanians to create cultural ties and proximity between Iran and Albania, thereby extending their cultural influence in this country.

The Islamic Republic of Iran in Albania has also worked and invested in Islamic fields. Before the 2000s in Tirana, it had founded the "The Quran" Foundation, whose leaders came from the Organization of Madrasahs Abroad (Sazman-e Howzwha va Madares-e Kharej az Keshvar) and later from Al-Mustafa University. This foundation has organized courses for the teaching of the Quran in various mosques in the cities of Albania and for these courses, it has hired Albanian imams. In addition, this Foundation has published books on the exegesis of the Quran, but always through the prism of the Shi'ite narrative. The Quran Foundation had also opened a high school for girls, "Saadi College".

<sup>2</sup> For more information about this program and its activities see: <http://www.iranalbania.ir/files/ebook/711/Broshura%20Fondacion1.pdf>



The rejection from Albanian people and Iranians' slow progress forced the latter to continue their activities under local organizations. Thus, in 2005 the Iranians closed the Quran Foundation and, in its place, opened the Cultural and Religious Association "Flladi" (Breeze), which is led by Sheikh Vullnet Merja. The latter is a Shi'ite theologian educated in Beirut, Lebanon. The purpose of this association is "the introduction and recognition of the Ahl al-Bayt of the Prophet Mohammad to the Albanian-speaking Muslim believers. Among other activities is the live program on National Radio, which is broadcasted every Thursday"<sup>3</sup>. The content and authors of the literature published by this association are sourced from Shi'ite and the narrative of the broadcasted programs on National Radio is Shi'ite propaganda. It should also be noted that the Flladi association has a wide cooperation with the leaders of some Albanian sects, which provide them with Iranian Shi'ite knowledge and literature. This can also be read as an attempt to install the Shi'ite narrative of Tasawwuf and Islam in general. Within the cultural activities of Iran in Albania should be mentioned the Rumi Foundation, established in 2007. This Foundation is apparently founded to articulate a more philosophical and sophisticated interpretation of Iranian Islam. In his beginnings, he translated and published philosophical and mystical works by serious Iranian and Western authors, such as Sayed Hossein Nasr, William Chittick, etc., but then the ideological orientation of this institute takes a more radical direction, and it begins translating and publishing the works of a very extreme Iranian scholar such as Ayatullah Misbah Yazdi.

While the most outstanding achievement of Iranian cultural investments is observed in the leaders of the Bektashi sect, who in recent

years have begun to present their sect as part of Shi'ism. In the old Bektashi texts written in the Albanian language, but also in the classical texts of the members of this sect, there is no evidence that Bektashism was part of Shi'ism. Even when comparing the rituals and beliefs of the Bektashis with those of today's Shi'ites, one can in no way speak of the same identity of these two Islamic currents. Therefore, the identification of Bektashis with Shi'ism is contrary to theological and historical facts, and this may create space for the Iranian regime to further extend its presence in Albania.

#### 4.3. Iran's cultural activities in North Macedonia

Iran's cultural activities in North Macedonia begin with the above-mentioned magazine named "Nur", which was published in the Serbian language in Belgrade, meanwhile, four of its issues were published also in Albanian. The findings indicate that during the 90s, some Albanian intellectuals from Skopje and Tetovo were engaged in this magazine as well. These Islamist-leaning intellectuals were influenced by the messages of the Islamic Revolution of Iran and its Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini. In Tetovo was established a publishing house, named "Zehra", as part of the activities of these intellectuals. The main focus of "Zehra" Publishing House was translating and publishing the works of the well-known Iranian intellectual Ali Shariati. Ali Shariati has been described as an intellectual with Islamist and leftist persuasions, his ideas and intellectual activities inspired many young Iranians who managed to carry out the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Ali Shariati's ideas and books translated into Albanian have also had a significant impact on the spread and strengthening of Islamist

<sup>3</sup> For more information visit: <http://www.dritaehlibejtit.com/Rreth-Nesh.html>



orientations in the Albanian regions of North Macedonia.

The magazine "Nur" and the Publishing House "Zehra" had succeeded in sowing the seeds of Shi'ism in North Macedonia. As a result of their activities, the digital library "dielli.net" has been established. This library is one of the first Albanian digital libraries, since then, it is one of the crucial corpora of Islamic and Oriental literature in Albanian society. The vast majority of books and writings that can be downloaded free of charge are written by Shi'ite authors. Based on more detailed research, one can see that in its beginnings, the leaders of "diellit.net" have made available the work and writings of Iranian authors, such as Ali Shariati, Morteza Motahari, Sayed Hossein Nasr, etc., who in their discourses have a more intellectual profile. Afterward, in recent years, works, writings, and treatises of Shi'ite influenced by Ayatollah Khomeini in this library were located. Hence it can be said that the "dielli.net" library has been transformed from an Islamist and intellectual profile into a more theological and sectarian profile of Shi'ite Islam.

Recently, with the funds of Iran in Northern Macedonia, the Foundation for Culture and Science (GNOSA Foundation) (Media e Lire, n.d.) was established. This foundation was founded and is led by Numan Mustafa<sup>4</sup>, a young intellectual from Tetovo who lives in Germany. But this Foundation was established with the support of Akbar Eydi, who in the Shi'ite circles of the Balkans, is introduced and recognized as the representative of Ayatollah Khamenei, the Supreme Leader of Iran for the Balkan region. Akbar Eydi is a Shi'ite theologian

who has led the "Mulla Sadra Foundation" in Sarajevo, Bosnia, and Herzegovina for decades. Also, "GNOSA Foundation" also translated the lectures given by Akbar Eydi into Albanian during the month of Ramadan<sup>5</sup>. Moreover, GNOSA Foundation has published several books and articles by Iranian Shi'ite authors, such as Morteza Motahari, Mohammad Hussein Tabatabae'i, Sayyid Muhammed Rizvi, etc. As a part of this Foundation is the magazine "Mejdani," which is published four times a year and is mostly oriented towards Iranian Shi'ite authors. Shi'ite spirit and perspective of human-historical and social phenomena are remarked in most of the articles and writings of this magazine. The targets of this Foundation are the sects and tekkes of the city of Gjakova in Kosovo as well. GNOSA Foundation has organized several panels and seminars with tekkes and dervishes of Kosovo. It is noteworthy that the seminar "Karbala" and "Imam Hussein" held in the Bektashi tekke of Gjakova be mentioned here. In these seminars, the events and concepts of the tariqah are interpreted from the perspective of the Shi'ite narrative. Thus, events such as Karbala are explained more like a revolutionary and political occurrence than a mystical and spiritual one as it is interpreted in the tradition of the tekkes and dervishes of the Balkans. Furthermore, the representatives of the GNOSA Foundation in these seminars impose the Shi'ite perspective, even though it is known that in Balkan regions' tekkes, these events are read and interpreted in the metaphysical context, which has nothing to do with the ideological and sectarian one.

<sup>4</sup> See: <https://www.blogger.com/profile/15795910708637174146>

<sup>5</sup> See: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCGx0OLE2PeYo7ik353Kjh1ë>





#### 4.4. Iran's cultural activities in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Unlike other Balkan countries, Iran even nowadays continues having a wide presence in Bosnia and Herzegovina and so far has made large investments in the field of education and culture in general. In this country, some institutes and organizations led by Iranians are active, likewise some other local ones, which operate with donations from Iranians. The Iranian Cultural Center operates within the Iranian Embassy in Sarajevo. According to the author's research, this center conducts various cultural activities with Iranian and Shi'ite content. The scientific journal "Beharistan" is also published under the direction of this center (Beharistan, n.d.). The journal has literary, linguistic, philosophical and cultural content and is published twice a year. It is guided by Bosnian professors or intellectuals, but it also has Iranians in its editorial office. The journal is distributed in the scientific, university, cultural and religious centers of Sarajevo and the main cities of Bosnia.

Another very influential and highly authoritative cultural center in Bosnia and Herzegovina is the Mulla Sadra Foundation, which has been operating in Sarajevo since 2003. This foundation is headed by Akbar Eydi, the representative of the Supreme Leader of Iran for the Balkan states. As can be seen in the website and statements of Akbar Eydi, this Foundation has clear intentions to convert the Bosnian Sunni Muslim people to the Shi'ite sect. Bosnian translations of Shi'ite religious books, especially books of Shi'ite hadith, their high-quality publication, their very rich portal and many other pieces of evidence prove that the Mulla Sadra Foundation makes capital investments in the field of Shi'ite theology and Islamic culture.

It should be noted that many publications of this Foundation have Islamist political content, which reflects the official Islamist ideology of Iran. It is interesting to note that this Foundation, although named after the Iranian Muslim philosopher Mulla Sadra, has so far translated and published more books by Ayatollah Khomeini and Ayatollah Khamenei than by Mulla Sadra.

But if the Mulla Sadra Foundation carries out Shi'ite cultural and theological activities, there is an even bigger and more powerful center in Bosnia and Herzegovina than this Foundation. This is the Ibn Sina Institute, which operates in Sarajevo, but the cultural, scientific and educational activities of this Foundation, in addition to Bosnia and Herzegovina, extend to Croatia and Serbia. The scope and impact of this Foundation is evident in every article, interview, or conversation with cultural specialists in Bosnia and the Balkan region. The activities of this Foundation are focused on "the study and research in the field of humanities and widening of cooperation in science, research and culture between Iranian and Bosnian scholars, thinkers and cultural-scientific institutes"<sup>6</sup>.

The Ibn Sina Foundation is known for the high quality of books it has published so far in the Bosnian language. Hitherto this Foundation has translated works by Iranian Shi'ite scholars and leaders of the Iranian regime, Ayatollah Khomeini and Ayatollah Khamenei, from Persian. The publications of this Foundation also show the works of Western scholars such as Henry Corbin, William Chittick, etc. As part of the Foundation's publications, two of its main journals must be mentioned. The scientific journal "Signs of the Times" (Znakovi Vremena) which is a very powerful and influ-

<sup>6</sup> See: <https://www.ibn-sina.net/index.php/en/about-us>



ential component in the scientific and cultural circles of Sarajevo and the region. Founded in 1997, "Signs of the Times" has always had well-known and influential scholars and scientists from Bosnia, the Balkans and Iran.

Recently, the Ibn Sina Foundation has also started publishing in digital platforms another political journal called "PIS Journal - Journal of politics and international studies" (Digitalni časopis-Politika i međunarodne studije). This magazine publishes interviews with local and foreign authors, as well as political articles of a political nature. Through this magazine, the Foundation makes an effort to install the official discourse of the Islamic Republic regarding the political developments in the Middle East, in the Balkan region and on the international topicality. What stands out from the publications of this Foundation is the study and publication of the mystical, philosophical and theological heritage of the Bosniaks, which was produced in the period of the Ottoman Empire. This Islamic cultural heritage is published in the name of the current cooperation of the Islamic Republic of Iran and Bosnia and Herzegovina and in the local public are served as services that Iran provides to Bosniaks. The research shows that Bosnian intellectuals value this Foundation and other Iranian organizations for their contributions to the revival of BiH's Islamic cultural heritage. Thus, all this makes the Ibn Sina Foundation a very powerful and influential component in BiH, but also in the entire Balkan region. Another Bosnian organization operating with the funds of the Islamic Republic of Iran is the Spiritual Heritage Foundation (Fodacije "Baština duhovnosti"), whose director is Amar Imamović, a Bosnian intellectual converted to Shia. This Foundation operates in the city of Mostar. Among the

goals of this Foundation are "to promote spiritual values, to revive the Bosnian Islamic spiritual heritage, to organize conferences and to publish books"<sup>7</sup>. Furthermore, with the funds of the Islamic Republic of Iran and in cooperation with the Iranian organizations of BiH, in Belgrade, Serbia operates the Center for Theological Science "Kom" (Centar za religijske nauke "Kom"). This center, which is also known by the name "Kom" for promoting the discourse of the madrasas of the Qom (a city in Iran), is run by Seid Halilović and his two brothers, Tehran and Muamer Halilović, who for years together with their parents have lived and studied in Qom. The Halilović brothers' strategy does not differ from that of other Iranian organizations.

Bosnia and Herzegovina in the Balkan region is known for its indigenous school of Islamic theology and it was the creator of Islamic theological discourse in the time of the former Yugoslavia, which then spread throughout the region. But according to research has done by the author, it can be concluded that this school of theology, currently, on the one hand, is seriously endangered by the Wahhabi narrative of the states of the Arabian Peninsula, which day by day is appropriating the mosques of this country. On the other hand, the Bosnian theological school is more sophisticatedly endangered by the Shi'ite spirit of the official discourse of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

## 5. Conclusions

The Islamic Republic of Iran in the Western Balkans, as in other countries in the Muslim-populated of Middle East, has made great efforts to export its Islamic Revolution. In the countries of the Western Balkans, Islamic Republic has made

<sup>7</sup> See: <https://www.bastinaduhovnosti.com/o-nama/>



large investments in the field of education, culture, theology and philosophy. Through these cultural investments, Iran worked on creating a local intellectual elite, who would apply political, religious narratives, discourses and geostrategic opinions that would be coordinated with the official ideology of the Islamic Republic of Iran. To enforce such an impact, Iran in the countries of the Balkan region has opened secondary education colleges, institutes for scientific studies. It has also published numerous books, scientific and political journals, launched sites and portals, and many other cultural activities.

In order to extend their influence in Balkan's society, Iranian cultural centers have used several strategies:

After secession from the Ottoman Empire in 1912, the Balkan states in terms of Islamic theology failed to structure their theological schools, and nearly for one century, especially in Albanian areas, continued the classical Ottoman tradition of interpretation of Islam. The traditional theological school in the Balkans was challenged by the theological schools of Arab countries, especially the Wahhabi one, and thus a great gap was created among the Muslims of the region. After the 90s of the last century, this gap began to be filled by the Shi'ite narrative of Iran, which, in intellectual terms, was more sophisticated and more philosophical. By translating the books of Ali Shari'at, Morteza Motahari, Sayed Hossein Nasr, etc., Iranian organizations managed to spread a more articulated intellectual discourse about the Islamic religion in Western Balkan. Unlike the simple and popular discourses of the religious leaders of the mosques and tekkes of the region, Iranian theologian's discourse seemed more sophisticated

and more philosophically articulated to educated Muslims of Balkan. Consequently, a number of these educated Muslims had begun to be interested in the Shi'ite narrative of Islam. This interest was most present among those who also had Islamist leanings and thought about reorganizing the life of Muslims according to the rules of sharia.

Iranian research centers and institutes in the Balkans found a rich literary legacy written in Persian as well. Persian, as one of the three main languages of the Ottoman Empire, was used more in the poetic creativity of that time, therefore many Ottoman poets, including those of the Balkans, wrote poetry in this language. Studying and publishing these works, Iranian centers acquaint them to the public as common cultural aspects between Iran and the Balkan countries.

There is also a rich heritage of Islamic Sufism in the Balkan region. The cultural centers of Iran interpret the events and concepts of the Balkan sects from the perspective of the Shi'ite narrative. Therefore, events like Karbala are given more of revolutionary and political character rather than mystical and spiritual as it is in the tradition of tekkes and the Balkan dervishes. Also, Iranian cultural representatives in the Balkans, when it is about the heritage of Sufi culture, make efforts to impose a Shi'ite point of view, when it is known that in the tekkes of the Balkan region, these events are read and are interpreted on the metaphysical field, which has nothing to do with the ideological and sectarian one. In this way, they try to monopolize the interpretation of Sufi teachings and orient them towards the Shi'ite sect. This can also be seen in the Bektashi leaders of Albania, who have recently identified themselves as Shia.





It must be mentioned that Iran's attempts to spread cultural influence in the Balkans have also faced various obstacles and rivalries. For example, in terms of Islamist discourse, the Iranian Islamist narrative has been hampered by the extension and expansion of the Islamist discourse of the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt. Furthermore, the strengthening of Turkish Sufi discourse and its presence in Balkan society has succeeded in replacing the philosophical-mystical narrative of Shi'ism. Consequently, young people interested in such a narrative no longer feel the need to refer to Shi'ite scholars and religious authorities. It can be said that, from their beginning until today,

there is a big difference in the activities of cultural centers. In their beginnings, the Iranians were inclined to publish books by the most reformed Iranian theologians and intellectuals, such as Ali Shariati, Morteza Motahhari, Mohammad Behesh-ti, etc., whereas recently it has been observed that they are oriented to publish the works of the aya-tollahs of Qom, such as Mohammad Reza Golpay-gani, Makarem Shirazi, Mohammad Taghi Mesbah Yazdi. Currently, although there is a fading of Iranian cultural influence, thanks to its widespread presence in western states, this does not mean that it may be so in the future.



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“Tanıtım nüshasıdır, para ile satılamaz.”  
“Bandrol Uygulamasına İlişkin Usul ve Esaslar Hakkında Yönetmeliğin 5’inci maddesinin  
2’nci fıkrası çerçevesinde bandrol taşıması zorunlu değildir.”

## About İRAM

Due to its historical depth and material power, Iran is among the countries that have to be reckoned with in the domain of international relations. The deep-rooted historical relations between Iran and Turkey, border-sharing, and comprehensive business relations make it necessary for Turkey to understand Iran in a multitude of ways. Based on this necessity, the Center for Iranian Studies (İran Araştırmaları Merkezi, İRAM) was established as an independent think tank in Ankara with the purpose of informing the Turkish public and interested parties about Iran. With this in mind, not only does İRAM produce field research, reports, and analyses based on primary resources, it also provides language courses, internships/scholarship programs, support for projects and graduate theses, workshops, and expert seminars in order to meet the need for experts and researchers on Iran in various disciplines in Turkey. Offering a platform where academicians can share their research on Iran, İRAM also provides digital and printed publications on a wide variety of topics ranging from economy to domestic politics, international policy to security, and Shi'ism to society and culture.



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