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COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE WAHHABI MOVEMENT IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND THE WESTERN BALKANS

Abstract

This paper presents a comparative analysis of the Wahhabi movement in the Middle East and the Western Balkans, with a particular focus on the differences in institutional foundations, operational methods, and social consequences. In the Middle East, Wahhabism is an integral part of the political-religious order of Saudi Arabia, enjoying full institutional support from the state, including formal control mechanisms such as the religious police. In contrast, in the Western Balkans, Wahhabism represents an imported ideology without institutional backing, yet with significant influence from foreign actors and transnational networks. Its presence has caused ideological and organizational divisions within local Islamic communities, challenging traditional religious practices rooted in Ottoman heritage and Sufi traditions. Special attention is given to the security implications, including the potential for radicalization and community destabilization. The analysis demonstrates that, despite differences in the degree of institutional support and operational methods,

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Wahhabism in both regions possesses the capacity to significantly influence religious dynamics, social cohesion, and security trends.

Keywords: Wahhabism, Middle East, Western Balkans, religious fundamentalism, political-religious alliance, radicalization, security challenges, geopolitical influences.

INTRODUCTION

Wahhabism, as one of the most significant and controversial forms of Islamic fundamentalism, represents a key subject of interest in contemporary studies of religion, political science, and security. The reason for addressing this topic stems from its relevance to understanding the relationship between religion and the state in the Islamic world, as well as the influence that Wahhabi ideology exerts in spreading certain interpretations of Islam beyond its original context, particularly within transnational networks and the global Islamic community. It is crucial to comprehend how this movement, which originated in the 18th century in the heart of the Arabian Peninsula, evolved into a powerful religious and political ideology that laid the foundations of modern Saudi statehood and remains one of the primary sources of influence on Islamic communities worldwide.

This research is particularly relevant in today's geopolitical context, where issues of religious identity, ideological mobilization, and institutional control of religious life are gaining importance. The need to address this topic now arises from the continued global influence of Wahhabi thought, through missionary activities and the funding of various Islamic initiatives, which affect the configuration of Islamic communities and also present potential security risks in certain regions.

The paper is based on a multidisciplinary theoretical framework that encompasses religious studies, political science, and historical analysis, using a combination of methods: a historical-analytical method to understand the origin and development of the movement; a comparative method to analyze the relationship between religious doctrine and state institutions; and an interpretative approach in the examination of religious and legal sources, particularly Sharia regulations within the Hanbali school of Islamic jurisprudence.

The paper's structure follows this analytical approach. The first part examines the historical context of the emergence of Wahhabism and the teachings of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (محمد بن عبد الوهاب). The second part is devoted to the institutionalization of the movement through its alliance with the Saudi dynasty and the formation of the modern Saudi state, with a special focus on the role of the religious police (*hisbah*) and the implementation of Sharia law. The third part examines the global influence of Wahhabi ideology through missionary activities and transnational connections, while the concluding section evaluates the impact of Wahhabism on contemporary religious and social trends.

WAHHABISM IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Wahhabism, as a reformist movement that emerged in the 18th century on the Arabian Peninsula under the teachings of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, was from its inception an attempt to return to a "pure" form of Islam, free from what its followers perceived as innovations and idolatry. Through its alliance with the House of Saud, the movement became the foundation of a new politico-religious paradigm in the formation of the Saudi state, where Wahhabism is not only the dominant religious doctrine but also a tool for institutional social organization.

In the Middle East, Wahhabism is deeply embedded in the religious and political system of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, where it constitutes the ideological backbone of the ruling structure. Its influence is evident in the strict application of Sharia law, particularly through behavioral norms related to dress codes, prohibition of alcohol, gender segregation, and other aspects of both public and private life. In this context, state institutions and the religious police (*hisbah*) play a central role in overseeing and enforcing Wahhabi norms.

However, Wahhabism does not enjoy unanimous support across the Islamic world. On the contrary, it is frequently criticized by moderate Muslims as well as by Shiite and Sufi communities, who accuse it of intolerance, exclusivism, and a revisionist approach to theological tradition. One of the most controversial dimensions of Wahhabi thought is its militant potential. In the modern era, this ideological framework has played a significant role in shaping certain radical Islamic movements, whose actions are often grounded in exclusivity and aggressive interpretations of Islam (Čehajić-Clancy 2015). Particularly concerning

is the fact that Wahhabism promotes an intensely hostile attitude toward Muslims who do not adhere to its interpretation of Islam, often labeling them as *mushriks* (polytheists).

Due to these characteristics, Wahhabism is identified in numerous analyses as a potential security threat – not only within the Middle East itself, but also on a global level – given its influence on the radicalization of individuals and the transnational ideological networks that support extremist narratives.

WAHHABISM IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

In the Western Balkans, Wahhabism emerged predominantly in the late 20th century, spreading primarily in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo*, North Macedonia, Serbia, Montenegro, and particularly in the Raška administrative district. Its penetration into the region is closely connected with the geopolitical influence of foreign actors, primarily Saudi Arabia and Turkey, which significantly impacted the transformation of the religious landscape and the internal dynamics within local Islamic communities. Although Turkey is neither the origin of Wahhabism nor an official supporter of its ideology, its geopolitical position, religious influence, and historical ties with the Islamic world make it an important factor in understanding how Wahhabism spreads and resonates throughout the wider region.

Wahhabism in the Balkans often clashes with traditional forms of Islamic practice, which are deeply rooted in Ottoman religious heritage and Sufi spirituality. Its presence has led to ideological and organizational divisions among believers, with traditional Muslims distancing themselves from new followers of Wahhabi teachings. In certain communities, Wahhabi groups operate informally as "religious police" seeking, through community pressure and the promotion of strict religious norms, to influence the behavior of believers, thereby directly challenging local customs and religious patterns.

Balkan Muslims remain inseparably tied to the fate of Muslims in other parts of the world, primarily in Turkey, as well as in the Middle East. The destiny of Balkan Muslims continues to be suspended between the states in which they live and the developments within the broader Islamic world. They themselves are not a homogeneous group; instead, they are

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* This designation is without prejudice to status and is in line with UNSCR 1244.

divided into four linguistic-ethnic groupings: the Slavic (comprising Bosniaks, Gorani, Bulgarian Muslims – Pomaks, and several smaller Slavic Muslim communities), Albanian, Turkish, and Roma (Dragišić and Janković 2014).

In addition to religious activism, there are also significant security implications, since certain Wahhabi networks in the Balkans have been associated with processes of radicalization and recruitment for foreign conflicts. Although the majority of members of Muslim communities in the Balkans follow moderate and traditional forms of Islam, over the past two decades, small but active groups have emerged that have adopted Wahhabi–Salafist interpretations. Certain individuals from these circles have been involved in processes of radicalization and recruitment for participation in foreign armed conflicts – for example, the Syrian civil war (since 2011), the Iraqi conflict (2014–2019), and the wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan (during the 1990s and early 2000s). Although these do not encompass the entire community of adherents, such cases contribute to the perception of Wahhabism as a potential factor of destabilization and a source of social tensions.

Table 1: Comparative overview of origins, influence, implementation, and social impact between the Middle East and the Western Balkans

	Middle East (Saudi Arabia)	Western Balkans
Origin and Influence	Original birthplace; state religion with strong political influence	Imported ideology, shaped under the influence of foreign actors (Saudi Arabia, Turkey)
Implementation	Institutional religious police enforcing strict Sharia law	Informal community pressure and religious "policing"
Social Impact	Deep social control, strict gender segregation, and regulation of public morality	Contesting traditional Islamic practices, generating internal communal divisions

Source: The author's elaboration.

THE WAHHABI RELIGIOUS MOVEMENT

Wahhabism is a fundamentalist Islamic current within the Sunni denomination, based on a strict and puritanical interpretation of the Qur'an and the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad. It originated in the 18th century in the Najd region of present-day Saudi Arabia, under the leadership of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703–1792). The movement was shaped as a reaction to religious practices that its followers considered deviant, particularly those stemming from Sufism and Shi'a Islam. According to their understanding, Islam over the centuries became burdened with superstition and innovations (*bid'a*), such as invoking the Prophet or saints as intermediaries, practicing magic and sorcery, and departing from the original methods of worship. Followers of Wahhabism rarely refer to themselves by that name, as it is associated with the personality of its founder, and they reject any notion of reverence toward a human above God (Allah). Instead, they often identify as *Salafiyya* ("followers of the ancestors") or *al-Muwahhidun* ("monotheists"), emphasizing loyalty to the teachings of the first generations of Muslims (*salaf al-salih*). Their goal is the "purification" of faith and a return to its original spiritual beginnings (Hoare 2007).

Wahhabi doctrine requires strict adherence to *shari'a*, with prohibitions on the consumption of alcohol, wine, and other stimulants, including tobacco. Modest clothing is prescribed for both genders, with women expected to wear traditional garments covering the entire body, while wearing silk and gold is generally forbidden. Likewise, music, dancing, loud laughter, and demonstrative mourning are also prohibited, especially in the context of religious rituals and funerals. In Saudi Arabia, the enforcement of these rules is entrusted to the Islamic religious police (*Mutawwa'in* – "The Authority for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice"). This institution possesses the authority to sanction violations of public behavior and modesty, including the prohibition of public mingling of men and women, improper dress, or conduct that deviates from prescribed moral norms. Punishments include corporal punishment, amputations, and executions, in line with the strict interpretation of *shari'a* law.

Beyond its religious aspect, Wahhabism has also become a significant political and social factor. As the dominant religious doctrine of Saudi Arabia, it shapes the institutional framework of the state, and its influence has spread beyond the Arabian Peninsula. In the Balkans,

particularly in the administrative district of Raška, the presence of Wahhabi groups generates tensions within Muslim communities, as their strict interpretation of Islam often clashes with local religious traditions rooted in Ottoman and Sufi heritage.

WESTERN–SAUDI ALLIANCES AND THE SPREAD OF WAHHABISM IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

The cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Western states, particularly during and immediately after the conflicts in the Balkans in the 1990s, had an indirect but significant impact on the spread of Wahhabism in the region. This phenomenon was the result of a complex interplay of geopolitical interests, security priorities, and humanitarian and religious engagement. During the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina (1992–1995), Western powers, including North Atlantic Treaty Organization [NATO] members, provided political and military support to Bosnian Muslims in their conflict with Serbian forces (North Atlantic Treaty Organization [NATO] 2024). Saudi Arabia, as an essential ally in this process, secured extensive financial and humanitarian aid, while also facilitating the arrival of foreign Islamic fighters (mujahideen) to the battlefield (Schlesinger 2011, 1). Through such cooperation, space was opened for the entry of Saudi-funded religious institutions, which, under the guise of humanitarian assistance and post-war reconstruction, promoted Wahhabi doctrine (Bougarel 2007).

Saudi investments in the reconstruction of mosques, madrasas, and Islamic cultural centers during the post-war period amounted to hundreds of millions of euros (Bougarel 2007). These institutions, with the tacit or implicit approval of Western powers focused on regional stabilization, became channels for the spread of a conservative, rigid interpretation of Islam – one that largely differed from the traditionally moderate, Ottoman-influenced Islam present in the Balkans. The inflow of money, weapons, humanitarian aid, and the military experience of several thousand fighters who had arrived impacted the local population, gradually transforming Bosnia and Herzegovina into what some observers described as an "Islamic state" (Dragišić and Janković 2014).

Western intelligence services were aware of the financial flows and networks that supported Wahhabi groups, but short-term military and political objectives often took precedence over the assessment of long-term ideological consequences. Such tolerance enabled the institutional

and social entrenchment of Wahhabi structures, which in some cases complicated post-war reconciliation and security stabilization. Geopolitical partnerships between Western states and Saudi Arabia – motivated primarily by energy security and shared interests in combating terrorism – simultaneously strengthened Saudi influence in the region. This diminished Turkey's ability to maintain its position as the leading religious authority among Balkan Muslims through its more moderate Sunni model, further intensifying religious-political competition. "Nevertheless, through its agency TIKA (Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency), Turkey, in line with its strategy, directs most of its resources to countries with a strong Muslim community and where Turkey believes its compatriots live. For that reason, the largest amount of funds is allocated to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Metohija, the administrative district of Raška, Macedonia, and Albania" (Kočan and Arbeiter 2019, 183).

Overall, the alliances between Western states and Saudi Arabia during the Balkan conflicts facilitated the penetration of Saudi financial capital and ideological influence. Although the primary goal of these alliances was to end the conflict and establish stability, the consequence was the long-term embedding of more conservative forms of Islamic practice, with significant social and security repercussions for the region.

WESTERN TOLERANCE AND THE PROMOTION OF WAHHABI TEACHINGS THROUGH SAUDI AID IN THE BALKANS

During the armed conflicts in the Balkans in the 1990s, Western states prioritized urgent humanitarian assistance to war-affected Muslim populations. Saudi Arabia, as an economically powerful Muslim-majority state, became a key partner in providing aid, rebuilding mosques and schools, and supporting refugees and orphans. Western governments welcomed this engagement, focusing on short-term stabilization and recovery rather than the long-term consequences for the region's ideological structure (Rmandić 2017).

Within the framework of political alliances, particularly with the United States and the European Union, Saudi Arabia was regarded as an important ally in supporting the Bosnian Muslim resistance to "Serbian aggression". This cooperation included facilitating the inflow of Saudi

financial resources and the operations of humanitarian organizations that played a central role in post-war reconstruction and social rehabilitation. During this period, the Western Balkans became a focal point of geopolitical competition among external actors, including Turkey, Iran, and the Gulf states. Concerned about the growing Russian and Iranian influence, Western countries tolerated and at times even encouraged Saudi presence, perceiving it as a counterbalance to rivals and as a means of preserving their own strategic influence.

Although Western intelligence and diplomatic structures were aware that institutions funded from Riyadh often promoted Wahhabi or Salafi interpretations of Islam, the priority remained maintaining short-term stability and resolving the conflict. Fears of jeopardizing relations with Saudi Arabia – a significant partner in the energy sector and counterterrorism efforts – outweighed concerns about the potential for ideological radicalization.

Saudi Arabia converted economic capital into an instrument of soft power by financing religious, educational, and cultural projects. Western governments often interpreted these investments as a contribution to post-war economic recovery and the integration of the Balkans into European structures, even when accompanied by ideological conditions. Although some Western institutions pointed to the risks associated with the conditionality of Saudi aid – including the promotion of rigid religious interpretations – oversight and control mechanisms remained minimal. The urgency of reconstruction and limited local resources further complicated the rejection of Saudi funds, thereby enabling the more enduring entrenchment of Wahhabi influence.

Table 2: Factors that led to tolerance of the influence of Wahhabism

Factor	Western Justification for Tolerance/Promotion during the Humanitarian Crisis
Urgent need for aid and reconstruction	Priority on immediate stabilization and recovery
Geopolitical alliances	Counterbalance to Russian, Iranian, and Turkish influence
Short-term stability	Preference over ideological risks; focus on peacebuilding
Economic development	Saudi investments seen as beneficial for recovery
Strategic partnerships	Maintaining strong ties with Saudi Arabia

Source: The author's elaboration.

Western countries tolerated or indirectly promoted Wahhabi teachings through Saudi Arabian aid in the Balkans, primarily due to urgent humanitarian needs, strategic alliances, and geopolitical calculations. Although the long-term consequences of ideological influence were recognized, they were often subordinated to the immediate priorities of stability, reconstruction, and alliance management in an unstable post-conflict environment. Turkey, too, in the Balkans, usually relies first on the use of soft power (Alpan and Erdi Öztürk 2022).

Saudi Arabia systematically promoted Wahhabism as an instrument for strengthening its geopolitical position. The key mechanisms included:

1) Financing of religious infrastructure – Saudi charitable organizations invested in the construction of Salafi mosques, madrasas, and cultural centers, directly challenging the traditionally moderate Islamic practices shaped by Ottoman and Persian legacies. These institutions presented Wahhabism as the "pure" form of Islam, distinct from local religious traditions.

2) Economic influence – Gulf states invested in key sectors, including tourism, construction (e.g., the *Belgrade Waterfront* project), and agriculture, with economic cooperation often accompanied by religious and cultural influence. Trade exchange between Saudi Arabia and Serbia alone exceeded €400 million.

3) Exploitation of post-war reconstruction – After the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina (1992–1995), Saudi aid encompassed not only community rebuilding but also the construction of religious facilities that advanced Wahhabi ideology, capitalizing on weakened and disrupted social structures.

Is Islamist Radicalization Returning to the Western Balkans?

The recent crossbow attack on a Serbian police officer guarding the Israeli embassy in Belgrade has raised concerns that the war between Israel and Hamas – initiated on October 7, 2023, following Hamas's surprise assault on southern Israel – could once again trigger processes of radicalization in the region, given that this prolonged conflict has led to escalating tensions and a broader destabilizing impact across the Middle East. This raises the question – are these fears justified?

Traditionally, Islam has been practiced in Bosnia and Herzegovina and in the administrative district of Raška, a region in southwestern Serbia, with a character of openness and tolerance. For centuries, Sunni

Muslims coexisted with Christians and Jews, developing a distinctive form of European Islam. However, since the 1990s, this religious landscape has been exposed to constant external influences that have altered its dynamics. "The Western Balkans is of geostrategic importance to radical Islamists, who seek to gain control over this area, aiming to establish an Islamist base from which they could further operate toward Europe. Due to the large number of Muslims in this region, they believe that through the development of Wahhabi communities and the spread of radical Islam, it will be easiest to radicalize the population" (Mijalković and Baškalo 2024, 36).

Before the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina (1992–1995), Salafi and Wahhabi currents were virtually unknown in the Balkans. During the conflict, Bosniak Muslims received significant military and logistical support from Islamic countries, including the arrival of around 4,000 mujahideen from the Arab world. Many of these foreign fighters remained in the country even after the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement in 1995, bringing with them radical interpretations of Islam, which, in the post-war period, became a foundation for the spread of political Islam in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Political instability, together with socioeconomic difficulties of certain groups of the Bosnian society, does not lead to the growth of the Wahhabi community; however, they belong among factors that can potentially contribute to an increase of Islamic radicalisation in the country (Janková 2014, 4). "The presence of Wahhabis in Serbia, Montenegro, Macedonia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina represents the greatest threat to the stability of the Balkans" (Rmandić 2017, 393).

Saudi Influence and the Development of Salafi Communities

Since the late 1990s, organized Salafi communities have emerged in certain parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the administrative district of Raška, some of which enjoyed open institutional and financial support from Saudi Arabia. Saudi funds were used to build mosques and cultural centers that promoted Salafi doctrine.

During the wars in Syria and Iraq, the so-called Islamic State attracted a portion of young people from the region, particularly those dissatisfied with socioeconomic conditions. Some of them traveled to conflict zones to join jihad. At that time, Bosnia and Herzegovina had one of the highest numbers of foreign fighters in ISIS (Islamic

State of Iraq and Syria) per capita in Europe. The majority of recruits came from the so-called "*Salafi villages*", which today remain under intensive surveillance by security structures. For now, the goals and mission of Wahabi in Serbia and Bosnia are not to any great extent compromised by their links to terrorist groups and individuals (Stanković and Milosavljević 2025, 171).

Wahhabi organizations in the Balkans, particularly in the administrative district of Raška, region of Serbia, and in the village of Gornja Maoča in Bosnia and Herzegovina, represent politically, intellectually, and ideologically like-minded structures that demonstrate a tendency to establish connections with international terrorist organizations, most notably Hamas. "The most famous example of an international terrorist organization is certainly 'Al Qaeda' (القاعدة), an organization that emerged during the Afghan war on the ideology of radical Islam and global jihad against Jews and Christians, to create a world Islamic state – ummah, based on Islamic religious law – Sharia" (Đorđević and Miljković 2025, 171).

After the military defeat of ISIS in 2019, the intensity of Islamist radicalization in the Western Balkans significantly declined. In recent years, Saudi Arabia has substantially reduced financial support for these communities. In January 2020, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (محمد بن سلمان آل سعود) declared that the Kingdom would no longer finance the construction of mosques abroad, and in 2021, he publicly stated that "ultraconservative interpretations of Islam are outdated" (Stojanović 2021, 26). Despite these changes, radical organizations still exist, and the 2024 incident in Belgrade – in which the attacker was a Serbian convert radicalized within one such group – serves as a reminder that security risks remain present, though largely under control (Milošević 2018).

THE IMPACT OF THE ISRAEL – HAMAS WAR ON POTENTIAL RADICALIZATION IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

Although one of the key sources of extremism in the Western Balkans has weakened in recent years due to the reduction of international support for ultra-conservative Islamic interpretations, new and complex factors are increasingly shaping the security and social context in the region. In particular, the ongoing war between Israel and

Hamas, which began in October 2023, represents a potential catalyst that could reactivate or intensify processes of radicalization within specific segments of society, especially among young Muslims.

According to assessments by security agencies and analysts, the current impact of the Gaza conflict on the stability of the Western Balkans remains limited. However, given the possibility of prolonged hostilities, the risk of ideological mobilization should not be underestimated. Young people, sensitive to issues of religious and national identity as well as social injustice, may become fertile ground for propaganda by radical groups who use the conflict as a symbolic basis for activism and recruitment.

The Gaza conflict, marked by a high number of civilian casualties and a humanitarian crisis, evokes strong emotional reactions and deep resonance within Arab and broader Islamic communities worldwide, including in the Western Balkans. The sense of injustice and suffering can serve as a significant motivating force, enabling radical groups to legitimize their activism and attract new followers, particularly in environments where economic and social conditions are unfavorable. Furthermore, social media and modern communication technologies facilitate the rapid spread of propaganda, increasing the reach and influence of radical messages. International and regional actors must pay special attention to preventive measures that include education, interfaith dialogue, and youth engagement to reduce the likelihood that the Middle Eastern conflict becomes a trigger for extremism in the Western Balkans.

In this context, it is essential to emphasize that the Western Balkans is a relatively complex space where interfaith relations are sensitive, and radicalization can be inspired by both external influences and internal social and political problems. A proactive approach and continuous monitoring of the situation represent key elements for maintaining stability and security in the region in light of the new challenges posed by this conflict.

Events in the Middle East contribute to the strengthening of radicalization, although it is challenging to identify the number of newly radicalized individuals precisely. The perception of the war in Gaza in the Western Balkans is often framed as part of a broader "global campaign against Muslims". The disproportion between strong Western condemnation of civilian casualties in Ukraine and the silence regarding events in Gaza creates an additional sense of resentment, reinforces anti-Western feelings, and fuels anti-Semitism.

SOCIAL INJUSTICE AND STRUCTURAL DISCONTENT

Although the majority of Muslims in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the administrative district of Raška reject extremist ideologies and view them as an abuse of religion, socioeconomic factors remain a strong trigger for potential radicalization. The Islamic Community has clearly distanced itself from the terrorist attack in Belgrade, yet problems such as social inequality and unfulfilled promises of prosperity after the Bosnian war remain unresolved. "The principles of radical Islamic ideology and 'Puritan Islam', which increasingly found a foothold among the Muslims of the administrative district of Raška, particularly among the younger population, who were more susceptible to the influence of daily politics, propaganda, and intensive religious indoctrination" (Trifunović, Stojaković, and Vračar 2011, 272).

It is essential to note that the entire region experienced a profound social and economic decline during the 1990s, and the expected "catch-up process" with developed countries never materialized. The benefits of transition were reaped only by a small elite close to political structures, while the majority of the population faced marginalization, poverty, and living standards near the existential minimum. Young people, particularly affected by unemployment and lack of perspective, are leaving the region en masse, creating fertile ground for the acceptance of extreme ideologies – whether in the form of Islamist extremism or radical forms of ethno-nationalism.

Why did Wahhabism gain a foothold in the Balkans through regional geopolitical influences? The spread of Wahhabism in the Balkans is the result of a complex interplay of external geopolitical interests, post-war social vulnerabilities, and deliberately implemented religious-economic strategies. This process fits into the broader framework of competition among Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Iran for religious and political influence in the region.

Regional vulnerabilities and identity shifts

The socio-political context of the Balkans facilitated the entrenchment of Wahhabism. This was due primarily to the religious polarization caused by the war. The war in Bosnia and Herzegovina deepened Islamic identity among Muslims, increasing receptiveness to external religious narratives. In addition, intra-Muslim divisions

have contributed to regional vulnerability. Wahhabism occupied an ideological space within communities fragmented by war, positioning itself in contrast to the Turkish model of Hanafi Islam (sometimes perceived as overly pragmatic) and in opposition to the Shiite influence of Iran. Finally, permanent socio-economic crises played a major role. In regions such as the administrative district of Raška, Wahhabi groups attracted followers through social programs, including initiatives for the rehabilitation of drug addicts, where assistance was conditioned upon the acceptance of rigid religious norms.

GEOPOLITICAL COMPETITION OF EXTERNAL ACTORS

The Balkans have become an arena for an indirect clash of interests among key regional powers. First of all, there are Turkish-Saudi tensions. Saudi financing and the promotion of Wahhabism in the Western Balkans, particularly in Bosnia and Herzegovina, often collided with Turkey's efforts to promote a more moderate and traditionally grounded form of Sunni Islam through the Islamic Community of Bosnia and Herzegovina, rooted in the Hanafi legal school. These tensions were not solely of a theological nature, although the doctrinal divide between the rigid, restrictive Wahhabi teachings and the more flexible Hanafi approach constituted a central line of demarcation. Their background also had a significant geopolitical dimension: Saudi Arabia sought to secure its influence through financing religious facilities, educational programs, and humanitarian activities, while Turkey, relying on historical and cultural ties from the Ottoman period, developed its own network of influence via institutions of religious education, cultural projects, and political support. "The Gulf monarchy became significant to Balkan Muslims because of the Hajj, especially when students and clergy started to travel to Saudi Arabia in the mid-1990s and established a strong link. That is what compelled Turkey to take a more competitive stance, as it considered Southeast Europe its own turf" (Bechev and Erdi Öztürk 2022). This competition led to a struggle for ideological and institutional leadership over Muslim communities in the region, shaping the religious identity, social attitudes, and political orientations of the local population.

The limited reach of Iran also contributed to this. Although Iran attempted to promote Shi'a interpretations of Islam in the Western Balkans, its influence remained marginal due to the predominance of

Sunni populations and the deep historical and cultural ties of local Muslim communities with Sunni legal schools, primarily the Hanafi tradition. An additional limiting factor was the significantly greater financial power and institutional capacity of Saudi Arabia, which systematically invested in religious infrastructure, educational programs, humanitarian activities, and media projects. In contrast to the Saudi approach, which was more aggressive and structured, Iranian initiatives relied mainly on cultural diplomacy, scholarships for studies in Tehran, and limited humanitarian programs, which were insufficient to establish a stronger foothold within local religious and social structures. Moreover, geopolitical circumstances and Western sanctions on Iran further reduced its ability to engage systematically in the region, leaving its role peripheral compared to the dominant Sunni actors.

As a consequence of all of the above, in terms of *security implications*, since the late 1990s and early 2000s, Wahhabi groups have been actively operating in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Metohija, and the administrative district of Raška, where they gradually assumed the role of an informal "religious police" within local Muslim communities. Through religious sermons, street actions, and pressure on believers, these groups sought to impose strict, puritanical interpretations of Islam based on Wahhabi doctrine, thereby challenging existing traditional Hanafi and other local Sunni practices. Such an approach not only provoked deep ideological and theological divisions but also intensified internal Muslim tensions, leading to open conflicts within certain religious communities. Wahhabis began to appear in the administrative district of Raška in 1997 but became 'active' only after the fall of Milošević in October 2000 (Morrison 2008, 7).

These networks did not have an exclusively local character. Due to financial, organizational, and ideological support from abroad, they established an infrastructure that included religious centers, NGOs, humanitarian foundations, and clandestine cells for logistics and recruitment. Their activities contributed to the departure of a significant number of individuals from the region to battlefields in the Middle East, primarily Syria and Iraq, where they joined various jihadist groups. This process had direct security implications for the countries of the region, as it increased the risk of radicalization, transnational terrorism, and the return of battle-hardened fighters, posing a long-term challenge to both national and regional security.

Risk Assessment of Returnees

The return of individuals from Middle Eastern conflict zones to the Western Balkans represents one of the most serious security challenges for the region. These are persons who, during their stay in war zones, acquired significant combat experience, underwent ideological indoctrination, and built networks of contacts with members of transnational terrorist organizations. Returnees – particularly those who remain committed to radical interpretations of Islam – can act as catalysts of further radicalization within local communities, through propaganda, recruitment of new members, and provision of logistical support for potential violent actions.

Beyond the direct security threat, there is also the risk of so-called "silent influence", in which returnees, while avoiding open confrontation with the law, infiltrate religious, cultural, or humanitarian structures, using them as platforms for spreading radical ideas. This process is particularly problematic in environments marked by high levels of social marginalization, unemployment, and distrust in institutions, where radical messages can more easily find fertile ground. "The Western Balkans is the region with the highest concentration of returned foreign fighters in Europe, and the trend of returns is unpredictable and constantly increasing. Kosovo and Metohija tops the list, with 134 returnees per million inhabitants" (Mijalković and Baškalo 2024, 37).

Additionally, the phenomenon of the "second and third wave" – when descendants or close relatives of returnees continue their ideological legacy – represents a long-term challenge that requires coordinated measures by state authorities, religious communities, and civil society. Therefore, strategies to counter this risk must encompass a comprehensive approach: security surveillance, deradicalization and reintegration programs, as well as strengthening community resilience against extremist influences. "It is important to note that Serbia has a very harsh penal policy (compared to other Western Balkan countries). The range of prison sentences for terrorism-related crimes is large in Serbia, ranging from 7.5 to 11 years" (Đorić and Obrenović 2024, 17).

The long-term impact may be the convergence of geopolitical rivalries, post-war social and institutional vulnerabilities, and the targeted religious-economic expansion of external actors has led to profound and lasting changes in the religious, cultural, and socio-political landscape of the Balkans.

Erosion of Moderate Islam

Traditional Balkan Islamic practices, shaped by centuries of Ottoman and Sufi heritage, have been gradually displaced by more rigid and dogmatic interpretations systematically promoted by Saudi Arabia through its institutional, humanitarian, and educational infrastructure. This process has been particularly pronounced in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Metohija, and the administrative district of Raška, where, due to war devastation and the weakening of domestic religious institutions, external actors skillfully filled the resulting voids. Stricter forms of Sunni Islam, such as Wahhabism, not only altered ritual practices and the internal organization of communities but also influenced the transformation of value systems, social relations, and identity orientations (Marković 2017, 110).

In the long term, this transformation is not confined solely to the sphere of religious rites but carries broader socio-political consequences. Moderate Islam, which historically functioned as a factor of interreligious tolerance and social integration, is increasingly giving way to ideological currents that promote social segregation, political mobilization along religious lines, and resistance to Western cultural models. Unless adequately researched and addressed, this trend could deepen existing ethnic and confessional divides, threatening regional stability in the coming decades. "In comparison to that conflict, the potential new conflict between the Christians – the Muslims, could be increased with the activities of Wahhabi inspired Muslims against other Muslims" (Vascotto 2024, 131).

The spread of Wahhabism has significantly worsened relations both between Muslim and non-Muslim populations and within Muslim communities themselves. Wahhabi doctrine, with its exclusive interpretation of religious texts and emphasis on eliminating all forms of religious "innovations" (*bid'a*), often clashed with the more moderate and syncretic forms of Islam that had existed in certain regions for centuries. This ideological conflict gave rise to deep schisms between reformist currents that embraced modernist interpretations and traditionalist groups seeking to preserve existing practices. The consequences of these divisions extended beyond theological debates, frequently escalating into social, political, and security crises, fueling distrust and encouraging radicalization among different factions of the Islamic world.

Persistent External Influence

Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia, continue to exert significant cultural, religious, and economic influence in the region through a complex network of institutional and informal channels. This influence is manifested through the financing of religious communities, the construction or reconstruction of mosques, the sponsorship of studies at Islamic educational centers in the Middle East, and humanitarian donations. However, the lack of transparency in donation and investment processes, combined with the absence of effective oversight mechanisms, increases the risks of corruption and political dependency on foreign patrons. Consequently, this process may weaken the institutional capacity of regional states to independently define and implement their security and cultural policies (Vučković 2019, 46).

Overall, the Balkan foothold of Wahhabism did not emerge spontaneously but as the outcome of a deliberate and long-term Saudi foreign policy strategy, which systematically exploited post-war social fragility and institutional instability. This strategy – supported by substantial financial resources and ideological capital – found fertile ground in an environment burdened by ethnic tensions, economic insecurity, and identity crises. Additionally, geopolitical rivalries among major and regional powers turned the Balkans into an arena for religious and ideological competition, facilitating the penetration and institutionalization of Wahhabi influence. As a result, the region's religious landscape has been permanently altered, while new lines of socio-political division have emerged, with the potential to erode social cohesion and national security.

Considering the impact on regional security, the spread of Wahhabism has contributed to heightened security challenges in the region, fueling the radicalization of individuals and groups, which has often translated into terrorist activities and armed clashes. This ideological expansion – bolstered by foreign financial and logistical support – has weakened state capacities to maintain stability, undermined institutional control, and increased the risk of cross-border conflicts and the infiltration of extremist elements.

CONCLUSION

The comparative analysis of Wahhabism in the Middle East and the Western Balkans reveals that, although rooted in the same ideological matrix, its development and operation vary significantly depending on the distinct political and social contexts. In the Middle East – most notably in Saudi Arabia – Wahhabism is firmly institutionalized and integrated into the state structure, forming the foundation of the politico-religious order. Its strength derives from direct support by state apparatuses, including formal mechanisms of control such as the religious police, which allow it to exert broad societal influence and achieve normative dominance.

In contrast, in the Western Balkans, Wahhabism functions as an imported ideology without formal institutional backing, but with significant influence from foreign actors and transnational networks. Its activity is most visible in the sphere of ideological confrontation with traditional Islamic practices, where informal mechanisms of "religious policing" and social pressure serve as primary instruments for imposing rigid norms. Such dynamics frequently generate divisions within local Islamic communities and open pathways to processes of radicalization, creating an additional security challenge for the region.

Regardless of differences in organizational structure and levels of political power, Wahhabism in both contexts exhibits the potential to deeply transform the religious and social fabric of the communities in which it operates. While in the Middle East it reinforces an existing authoritarian-theocratic model, in the Western Balkans it represents a destabilizing factor that may undermine religious cohesion and regional security. For this reason, any analysis of Wahhabism must encompass not only its theological foundations but also the geopolitical, sociological, and security dimensions of its expansion and influence.

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КОМПАРАТИВНА АНАЛИЗА ВЕХАБИЈСКОГ ПОКРЕТА НА БЛИСКОМ ИСТОКУ И ЗАПАДНОМ БАЛКАНУ

Резиме

Овај рад пружа компаративну анализу вехабијског покрета на Блиском истоку и Западном Балкану, са посебним фокусом на разлике у институционалном утемељењу, методама деловања и друштвеним последицама. На Блиском истоку, вехабизам је интегрални део политичко-религијског поретка Саудијске Арабије, где ужива пуну институционалну подршку државе, укључујући формалне механизме контроле попут верске полиције. Насупрот томе, на Западном Балкану вехабизам је увезена идеологија без институционалног ослонца, али са значајним утицајем страних актера и транснационалних мрежа. Његово присуство изазива идеолошке и организационе поделе унутар локалних исламских заједница, оспоравајући традиционалне религијске праксе укорењене у османском наслеђу и суфизму. Посебна пажња у раду посвећена је безбедносним импликацијама, укључујући потенцијал за радикализацију и дестабилизацију заједница. Анализа показује да, упркос разликама у степену институционалне подршке и методама деловања, вехабизам у оба региона поседује капацитет да значајно утиче на верску динамику, друштвену кохезију и безбедносне токове.

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