

Past and present of Islam in the Balkans: The case of Greece

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Abstract

Since the end of the Cold War era, there have been an increasing number of scientific studies about Muslims in Europe. Particularly in recent years, religious freedoms of Muslims living in non-Muslim countries started to attract more attention of scholars so as to understand how and to what extent Islam is incorporated within the majority culture. In this respect, this paper examines rights and restrictions of Muslims in Greece by exploring both legal and institutional framework of Islam as well as provision of rights in practise. It shows that Greece treats those Muslims living on its soil differently; the ones living inside Western Thrace have more religious liberties than their coreligionists residing anywhere outside of the region. This paper argues that Muslims in Greece have never enjoyed full autonomy in the realm of religious freedoms emanating from either international or Greek Law. Rather, Greece prefers to have the absolute state control over different issues of Islam across the country, thus limiting Muslims involvement in their own religious affairs.

Keywords: *Greece, Islam, Muslims, rights, Western Thrace, Athens, Dodecanese*

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Balkanlarda İslam'ın Dünü ve Bugünü: Yunanistan Örneği

Öz

Avrupa'daki Müslümanlar üzerine yapılan bilimsel çalışmaların sayısı Soğuk Savaş sonrası dönemden artmaya devam etmektedir. Özellikle son yıllarda, Müslüman olmayan ülkelerde yaşayan Müslümanların dini özgürlükler bağlamındaki hakları bilim insanlarının dikkatini celbetmekte ve bu da Müslümanların içinde yaşadıkları çoğunluk toplumu içinde İslam olgusunun ne derece yer edindiğini anlamalarına yardımcı olmaktadır. Bu bağlamda, hâlihazırdaki çalışma Yunanistan'daki Müslümanların dini hakların hukuki ve kurumsal çerçevesini incelemektedir, kâğıt üzerinde vadedilen hakların pratiğe ne derece yansıdığını sorgulamaktadır. Çalışmanın ortaya koyduğu sonuç, Yunanistan'ın kendi toprakları üzerinde yaşayan Müslüman gruplarına farklı davrandığı yönündedir: Batı Trakya bölgesi sınırları dâhilinde yaşayan Müslümanlar, bölge dışında yaşayan aynı dine mensup kişilere nazaran daha fazla dini özgürlüklere sahiptir. Bu araştırmanın temel argümanı Yunanistan'da yaşayan Müslümanların, tarihte veya günümüzde, uluslararası anlaşmalara ve Yunan hukukuna bağlı dini özgürlüklerinden tam anlamıyla faydalanmalarına Yunanistan tarafından izin verilmediğidir. Bunun yerine Yunanistan, dini otonomi alanına müdahale ederek bu alandaki kontrolünü daha da arttırmış, böylece Müslümanların kendileri ile ilgili dini konulardaki söz sahibi olmaları kısıtlanmıştır.

Anahtar kelimeler: *Yunanistan, İslam, Müslümanlar, haklar, Batı Trakya, Atina, Oniki Ada*

1. Introduction

Survival of Islam in Greece is an old phenomenon that goes back to the pre-Ottoman times. Yet, the primary reason for development of Islam and its coexistence with other religions is the Ottoman Empire that governed territories of today's Greece for more than five centuries. It was the Millet system through which all forms of non-Muslim faiths were provided necessary grounds for survival under the Ottoman regime. Revolutions all over the Balkan Peninsula led to wars of independence and formation of new nation states *vis a vis* the Ottoman administration. This change would actually sow the first seeds of minoritization of Islam across the Balkan Peninsula, including Greece. Thus, the status of groups under the Millet system was revered in a variety of Balkan countries; Christianity became the dominant faith while Muslims turned into followers of a minority religion, i.e. Islam.

In this framework, Orthodox Christianity has been the primary religion in Greece since its establishment as an independent country in 1830. Greek citizens followers of any religion other than Greek Orthodoxy started to be given various rights and liberties to practise their own faiths. Yet, as it is emphasized, Greece, together with Bulgaria, would start treating Muslims of the ex-Millet system as "second-class citizens" whose rights would be violated by Greek state authorities for the purpose of controlling them and their internal affairs, thus preventing any possible threat coming from Muslims against the state sovereignty.² Yet, among all minority religions in Greece, Islam has always ranked in the first place in terms of their followers since 1830.

In the immediate aftermath of Greece's independence, concentration of Muslims on Greek territories was highly low. The number of Muslims in Greece gradually increased after the annexation of territories lying in the north of the country.³ Greece provided a variety of liberties to Muslims living on its newly-acquired lands, which contributed for the protection and promotion of their religious identities as well. Still, many of the Muslims either feeling unhappy or threatened with new Greek administration fled their historical lands and found refuge in other regions under the Ottoman rule. Yet, the mandatory exchange between Greece and Turkey constitutes

² Stefanos Katsikas, "Millets in Nation-States: The Case of Greek and Bulgarian Muslims", 1912-1923, *Nationalities Papers*, 37/2, 2009, p. 177.

³ The regions with high Muslim concentration became territories of new Greece as follows: Thessaly (1881), Epirus and Macedonia (1913) and Western Thrace (1920-1923).

the most severe blow for the Muslim demography in Greece. During the Lausanne meetings, the two neighbouring countries decided to swap their co-ethnies across the Aegean Sea. As a result, almost half million of Turks living on Greek territories were exchanged with around one and a half million of Greeks living in the Asia Minor. This transfer of populations not only plummeted the presence of Muslims in Greece but also contributed to process of homogenization and Hellenization of Greece.

During the Lausanne talks, Western Thrace was decided to be a part of Greece while leaving Eastern Thrace under the sovereignty of the newly-founded Republic of Turkey. Henceforth, the presence of Islam was fortified with around 120.000 Muslims who became citizens of Greece as of 1923. From the Lausanne Treaty until the annexation of the Dodecanese Islands in 1947, which also constitutes the final phase of Greece's territorial expansion started in 1830, Islam in Greece was represented by two groups of Muslims living in a compact mass on their historical lands; Turkish Muslims in Western Thrace and Albanian Muslims in Epirus. Based on the official census of 1928, the number of Muslims in Thrace and Epirus was stated as 103.000 and 25.000 respectively, constituting 2% of the overall population of Greece.⁴ Even though Albanian Muslims were forced to leave Greece by 1946 on the grounds that they had assisted Italian and Albanian forces during the Second World War, the number of Muslims would still increase with the inclusion of Muslims living in Rhodes and Kos islands of the Dodecanese in 1947. Still, the main contribution to demography of Islam came in the early 1990s with the arrival of immigrant Muslims primarily from different countries of MENA region, Southeast Asia and Balkans (Albania in particular). Thus, in the beginning of the post Cold War era, Greece turned into a host country of the EU for the Muslim immigrants seeking survival or a better future for themselves and/or their families. Till then, the inflow of immigrants has been contributing to the increasing number of Muslims living in different parts of Greece.

In the light of the abovementioned historical framework, it is useful to emphasize that there are two primary groups of Muslims living in today's Greece: Old Muslims composed of the autochthonous and historical Muslim Turkish minority inhabiting in the region of Western Thrace and the Dodecanese islands (Rhodes and Kos) and New(coming) Muslims comprised of Muslim immigrants with different ethnic origins living primarily

⁴ A. A. Pallis, "The Greek Census of 1928", *The Geographical Journal*, 73 (6), 1929, p. 546.

in urban areas across Greece and Muslims of Greek ethnic origin who converted to Islam (Greek Muslims). As it is explored in this study, from a legal point of view it is only the Muslims of Western Thrace who enjoy specific freedoms (including those in the realm of religion) provided only for minorities that emanate from bilateral and international treaties that Greece and ratified after its independence, the 1923 Lausanne Treaty in particular. All the rest enjoy the same rights provided for all citizens of the country and their Islamic identity is safeguarded primarily through general principles of the Greek Constitution and the Greek Law. As a result, there are fundamental differences among Muslims in Greece regarding enjoyment of religious freedoms and their religiosities. For instance, mosques are available at all districts inhabited by Muslims across the region of Western Thrace. However, despite unabated demands from the Muslims of the capital city, Greece still failed to construct an official mosque in Athens where hundreds of thousands Muslims live.

In this respect, this research proceeds in three main sections. The first part commences with exploring the fundamental legal basis for promotion of Islam in Greece. It focuses on main national and international obligations of Greece and questions to what extent such provisions contribute to survival of Muslims across the country. Second section focuses on Islam in Western Thrace and questions to what religious liberties of the two autochthonous Muslim Turkish communities in Western Thrace and the Dodecanese are protected by Greek state authorities. In this respect, this section reflects also upon institutionalization of Islam that is applicable only for these two groups of Muslims. The third section sheds light on religious freedoms of the two groups of New Muslims. It finishes with a concluding part where a general evaluation of Islam in Greece is presented.

While dealing with both Old and New Muslims of Greece, this research attempts to find answers to questions as follows: What is the legal framework that safeguards Islam in Greece? How does Greece manage the concept of Islam and Muslims on its national territories? To what extent and why Greece does treat differently to its Muslims citizens? What are the commonalities and differences between the Old and New Muslims of Greece? Having found answers to such questions, this study argues that Greece's treatment to its Muslim nationals varies depending on the community (New or Old Muslims) and places (inside or outside of Western Thrace). It asserts that Muslims in Western Thrace have much more freedoms in the realm of religion than any other group of their coreligionists

living outside Western Thrace. Therefore, Islam keeps being highly vivid in Western Thrace than any other part of the country. Yet, there are still many problems regarding protection and promotion of rights of Muslims inside and outside of Western Thrace, which altogether restrict the continuity of Islam in Greece.

2. Legal Framework

Greece's gradual expansion of its territories *vis a vis* the Ottoman regime enabled inclusion of Muslims under the sovereignty of Greece. In the immediate aftermath of the formation of Greece in 1830, the numbers of Muslims were highly limited. Even though Great Powers obliged Greece to protect rights of Muslims based on the Protocol 3 of 1830, no special law was driven by the Greek state.⁵ It was the Convention of Constantinople (1881) through which Muslims in Greece started to be given some specific rights.⁶ Thus, Muslims living in the newly acquired territories of Thessaly and Arta began enjoying from some rights emanating from this Convention. Balkan Wars ended with inclusion of Macedonia and Epirus regions in which a significant number of Muslims were living. Then, the need for further protection of their rights was depicted in the Treaty of Athens signed between Greece and the Ottoman Administration in 1913. Ranging from election of the Grand mufti to functioning of properties belonging to religious charitable foundations (*awqaf*), the 1913 Treaty of Athens stands as the first and the most comprehensive international text signed and ratified by Greece, which regulates a number of religious issues of Muslims in Greece in detail. Provisions of the Athens Treaty would later be put into practice and became part of the Greek national law under the Law 2345/1920.⁷ Before the 1923 Peace Treaty of Lausanne, Greece signed the Sevres Treaty in 1920 that provided special provisions for minorities of Greece. Article 14 safeguarded the continuity of family law with its traditional Muslim usage as well as full functioning of *awqaf*. Yet, compared to the 1913 Athens Treaty, it stood as a text providing rights for all minorities in Greece, not Muslims in particular.

The 1923 Peace Treaty of Lausanne marks a watershed for the Muslim Turks of Western Thrace since it marks the beginning of 'minoritization' of

⁵ Konstantinos Tsitselikis, "The Legal Status of Islam in Greece", *Die Welt des Islams*, 44 (3), 2004, pp. 403-404.

⁶ For the full text of the Convention see *Greek Official Gazette*, FEK' A, 14, 13.5.1882.

⁷ *Greek Official Gazette*, FEK A'148, 3.7.1920.

Islam in one of the newly-acquired of Greece after the First World War. Articles between 37 and 45 are dedicated to rights of non-Muslims in Greece and those of non-Muslims in Turkey. Religious liberties of both minorities are safeguarded under Article 40, 42 and 45 in particular. From its adoption at the Greek Parliament till this day, the 1923 Lausanne Treaty has been the most frequently-attributed text not only by native Western Thrace Muslims themselves, but also Greece and Turkey while referring to human and minority rights in Western Thrace. Even though, Greece became party to various interstate and international institutions such as the EU, OSCE and UN where rights of minorities are under international protection, the Lausanne Treaty has never lost its importance and popularity at all levels regarding minority rights in Greece.

Liberties of Muslims in Greece are actually under the protection of the Greek Constitution. Nevertheless, no single article refers particularly to rights of Muslims in Greece. Rights such as freedom of worship, are protected under the Article 5 and Article 13 where the main principles of non-discrimination and equality is enshrined and any kind of religious-based discrimination is prohibited. Thus, compared to those rights enjoyed solely by Muslims in Western Thrace, they are far from being sufficient and effective for preserving fundamental characteristics of Islam in Greece.

Before finishing this section, it is useful to note that Greece officially recognizes the existence of only one minority on its national soil that is 'Muslim minority in Thrace'. Even though the Lausanne regime provides rights and responsibilities for all Muslims in Greece, it is only those Muslims residing inside the region of Western Thrace who can benefit from religious freedoms enshrined in the 1923 Lausanne Treaty. The rest of Muslims who live in different parts of the country are left out of the Lausanne measures and cannot enjoy from similar privileges of their coreligionists living in Western Thrace. This is because Greece adopts the principle of territoriality while interpreting the Lausanne Treaty of 1923. In this respect, those Muslims living in Western Thrace have the right to benefit from the special freedoms while Muslims living in other regions of Greece, including the ones who are still registered in Western Thrace but live outside of the region, can only enjoy from broader rights and principles enshrined in the Greek constitution and applied to all citizens of the country.

Providing the legal status and types of Islam in Greece, this research starts dealing with each group of Muslims separately in the next two sections. It underscores the reasons and consequences of the abovementioned differentiation of Greece in providing rights for its Old and New Muslims.

3. Old Muslims of Greece

3.1. Islam in Western Thrace

Members of the Muslim Turkish minority who live in Western Thrace are the most advantageous group of Muslims across Greece given that their religious and other types of freedoms emanating from their officially-recognized status by the Greek state plays vital role for the survival of Islam in that part of the country. This article does not aim to focus on various debates over ethnic or religious identification of the Western Thrace minority since it has highly been politicized. Suffice it to say here that Islam and Turkish ethnic identity has highly been intertwined in the context of Western Thrace since the Ottoman times. As of 2016, talking to members of the Minority one can easily spot how robust the ethnic Turkish identification is among autochthonous Muslims as well as their affiliation to Greek citizenship. This is one of the main reasons why this paper uses both types of ethno-religious and religious identification interchangeably while referring to the Western Thrace minority. Yet, this does not mean that all persons belonging to the Minority define their identities as Muslim Turkish or Turkish; some may express their ethnic identities as Pomak, Roma, Greek Pomak, Greek Roma, Muslim or Greek Muslim while some others may refrain from any kind of self identification for personal reasons.⁸

In the beginning of 1920s, native Muslims of Western Thrace were numbering around 120.000. Precise figures about the demography of Islam in Western Thrace are not available as of 2016 due to the lack of criterion of religion from the Greek censuses after 1950s. Yet, based on the most recent data provided by the highest regional Greek authority, the number of Muslims residing in Western Thrace had been estimated to vary between 140.000 to 145.000.⁹ The vast majority of Muslims are followers Sunni

⁸ For further discussions about the identification of the Minority see Tassos Kostopoulos, *Το "Μακεδονικό" της Θράκης: Κρατικοί σχεδιασμοί για τους Πομάκους [The 'Macedonian' of Thrace: National plans for the Pomaks]*, Bibliorama, Athens [In Greek], 2009.

⁹ Region Office of Eastern Macedonia and Thrace, 2011, <www.remth.gr> (accessed 21 July 2011). The same datum is not available anymore, [In Greek].

Islam; only a small group of Minority members belong to the Alevi/Bektashi sect.¹⁰

Since 1923, Western Thracian Muslims, compared to other Muslim communities in Greece, have always benefitted from main advantages of having a privileged status emanating from the official minority hood granted by Greece. They always had the right to freely practice their religion, establish and function their houses of worship, teach their holy book, Quran, and provide religious education inside madrasahs. Thanks to their status, Islam has found necessary grounds to flourish among the Minority and has been kept alive till this day without getting assimilated into the dominant Orthodox Christian majority culture of the country. Nevertheless, even if members of the historical Muslim community are provided a variety freedoms, there are a number of problems in the realm of religion that persist as of this day.

The first fundamental problem of Muslims in Western Thrace has to do with their religious representation. The 1913 Athens Treaty and the Law No. 2345/1920 regulated various issues about the Grand Mufti of Greece as well as that of the local muftis across the country. The office of Grand never existed in Greece mainly because the vast majority of Muslim Turks left the country as a result of the compulsory population exchange across the Aegean Sea during the 1920s. Since then, this issue has never been a matter of great concern for the Minority as well as the Greek state apparatuses.

The main problematic area regarding religious representation at the highest local level has to do with muftis, the way that they are defined as well as their judicial power. Being the highest local religious elites located in cities of Komotini, Xanthi and Didymoticho, the impact of muftis over interpretation of Islam and Minority members' way of thinking has always been of great importance. Muftis are not only on clergyman but also the highest Minority authority over functioning of religious schools, religious charitable foundations (awqaf) and mosques. As an Ottoman tradition, Muftis continued to be defined by Minority members after 1923. Along with their status as religious heads of Muslims, muftis also have the power of a judge in the application of Shari'a on matters of family law, e.g. Islamic marriage, divorce, inheritance.

¹⁰ The Tekke of Seyyid Ali (Kizil Deli) Sultan still stands as one of the most significant tekkes of the Alevi/Bektashi creed and it is located in northern part of the Evros Prefecture where the vast majority of Minority's Alevi/Bektashi followers live.

Until the death of the Mufti of Komotini in 1985, no major controversy had occurred between the Greek state and Muslims over issues about muftis and their offices across Western Thrace. Nevertheless, starting from the beginning of 1990s, Greece rejected the right of the Western Thrace Muslims to define their own and muftis and rather started to appoint them based on the Law 1920/1991.¹¹ Thus, the Law 2345/1920 that enabled the right to define muftis was clearly abrogated. The reason behind this policy change was stated as follows: Along with their religious power, Muftis had also judicial authorities over family law of the Muslims. So, similar to all other judges of the country, they needed to be appointed by the Greek state.

Contrary to this manner of Greece, members of the Minority rejected the appointment of muftis and rather continued to define their own muftis. For this sake, in the early 1990s those who were determined by the Minority as Muftis, i.e. İbrahim Şerif in Komotini and Mehmet Emin Aga in Xanthi were trialled and sentenced for usurping the authority of mufti. Even though they won their cases at the ECtHR against Greece,¹² nothing has changed for their acceptance as religious leaders by Greece. Henceforth, two types (elected and appointed) of muftis emerged in Western Thrace in the beginning of the 1990s still prevails. As of 2016, there is a total number of five muftis functioning across Western Thrace; one elected and one appointed in Komotini, the same for Xanthi and one appointed vice mufti in Didymoticho.

Looking deeper in this debate over the dyadic religious representation, it is obvious that rights and responsibilities of muftis increased in the passage of time after 1923. Yet, their judicial power, which is used as a pretext by Greece so as to appoint them, was not something new; Muftis kept functioning as public prosecutors of Sharia for decades from 1920s until the early 1990s. Therefore, this study argues that Greece's policy change for appointment of Muftis had more political and pragmatic concerns than their authorities on judicial matters in the realm of Islamic Law. In one way or the other, Greece actually sought to control religious liberties of the Minority through controlling Muftis, which will strengthen the overall state rule over of the Muslim Turkish minority.

¹¹ *Greek Official Gazette*, FEK A' 11, 4.2.1991.

¹² *Serif v. Greece* (14 December 1999-Case No: 38178/97)] <[http://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng?i=001-58518#{"itemid":\["001-58518"\]}](http://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng?i=001-58518#{)> (accessed 1 November 2015); *Agga v. Greece* (No.1-2) (17 October 2002-Case No: 50776/99 & 52912/99), *Agga v. Greece* (No.3) (13 July 2006 – Case No: 32186/02) and *Agga v. Greece* (No.4) (13 July 2006 – Case No: 33331/02) <[http://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng?i=001-58518#{"itemid":\["001-58518"\]}](http://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng?i=001-58518#{)> (accessed 1 November 2015).

In fact, limitations in the realm of Islam in Western Thrace are not restricted with representation of the Minority. Functioning of religious charitable foundations (awqaf) constitute another area of major controversy between the native Muslims and the Greek state. These foundations, the ones particularly based in major cities, are remnants of the Ottoman administration and constitute the backbone of social and religious life of Muslim Turks in Western Thrace because they own numerous immovable properties used for philanthropic purposes. It was the beginning of the 1967 junta regime when the dispute over functioning of these foundations arose. Muslims to these boards started to get appointed by the Greek state authorities, similar to what would happen with Muftis two decades later. Thus, Muslims right to define members of these boards was abolished. No voting has taken place at awqaf since 1967 even though the Law 3647/2008¹³ foresees elections for governance of religious endowments of Muslims in Thrace.

The main reason behind is similar to the abovementioned dispute regarding muftis. Given that awqaf in major cities of the regions, especially Komotini and Xanthi, had high revenues emanating from properties, administrative boards of these foundations had a massive impact and power over religious affairs of Muslims and autonomy of Islam in Western Thrace. Appointments to awqaf resulted in restricting Muslims' control of their own foundations. Thus, starting from 1970s until this day, awqaf lost many of their properties to Greeks or the Greek state since they lacked transparency and accountability.

Therefore, state control over these foundations was accomplished through the appointment of Muslims to these boards by Greece. Even though the military regime ended in mid 1970s and democracy returned back to Greece, no elections have been held since then. In fact, the Law 3647/2008¹⁴ foresees elections for governance of religious endowments of Muslims in Thrace. Yet, no step has been taken in the last six years. As a result, those Muslims appointed by the Greek dictatorial regime of 1967 keep functioning as members of administrative boards of awqaf in three major cities of the region.

Western Thrace is the only region in Greece where one can find functioning mosques. Unlike in other part of Greece, they are abundant across

¹³ *Greek Official Gazette*, FEK A' 37, 29.2.2008.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 29.2.2008.

the region (numbering more than 300) and available at each and every locality inhabited Muslims. Also, the call for prayer is echoed regularly, five times a day. Each mosque has an imam and a muezzin without whom collective praying is impossible. From 1920s until mid 2000s, a male member of the Minority registered as clergyman (either an imam or muezzin) were exempted from compulsory military service. However, this policy changed in 2005 by the Act 3421¹⁵ and Muslim clergyman also started to serve for the Greek army.

Mosques have also been functioning as places where basics of Islam and recitation of Quran is taught particularly to Muslim pupils under the name 'Kuran Kursu' (Qoranic Courses in English). Recently, such courses provided by imams under the term Quran Courses (*Kuran Kursu*) increased across Western Thrace for both Muslim pupils and female Muslim adults. Almost all of them keep functioning under the auspices of the Elected Muftis' Offices in Komotini and Xanthi.

In spite of the abovementioned freedoms, various problems about establishment and/or functioning of mosques in Western Thrace occurred some of which still continue to cause friction between the Minority and the Greek state authorities. Based on the Mandatory Law 1369/1938, all religions other than the Orthodox Greek Church needed to get permission from the local Greek Church authority for construction of their places of worship. From time to time, this caused controversy in case necessary permits for restoration of mosques or minarets were delayed by the local Orthodox bishop. In 2006, the authority of the local Orthodox bishop was transferred to the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs with the Law 3467.¹⁶ As a result, the local church lost its official say on matters about construction of mosques in Western Thrace. Nevertheless, the main dispute over the height of minaret which was not allowed to be taller than the nearest clock tower of the local church, i.e. not taller than 16 meters, continues for many years. As it is underlined,¹⁷ even though the General Building Regulations provided an exception to the maximum height of buildings constructed across the country for clock towers of churches, so for minarets of mosques as well, this never happened.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 13.12.2015.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 21.6.2006.

¹⁷ Konstantinos Tsitselikis, *Old and New Islam in Greece: From Historical Minorities to Immigrant Newcomers*, Martinus Nijhoff, Leiden; Boston, 2012, p.262.

Like the abundance of mosques and masjids, cemeteries number more than 300 and they are available for the needs of Muslims across Western Thrace. All matters regarding cemeteries in Western Thrace are fully governed by Muslims; no major intervention by Greek local authorities is observed. Yet, together with mosques, cemeteries located in Western Thrace cannot escape from being victims of Islamophobic attacks. Looking to Minority newspapers printed in Western Thrace, it is occasional to come across with news about targeting of Islamic monuments, primarily mosques and cemeteries, both inside¹⁸ and outside¹⁹ of Western Thrace.

As for religious education, Western Thrace is the only region in Greece where madrasahs keep functioning since Ottoman times. In 1925, there used to be 16 madrasahs across Western Thrace, most of which stopped functioning with the outbreak of the Second World War.²⁰ From the early 1950s until this day, there are only two religious schools at the secondary and lyceum level that provide secondary education. Both schools are closed during the Islamic holidays and Fridays. In the past, both religious schools functioned as institutions for candidates of local Muslim clergymen who would serve to satisfy religious needs of the Muslim Turkish community. In this respect, many of the courses taught at these schools were about Islam. Thus, many graduates of madrasahs used to function either as imams and muezzins across the region while only a few of them continued their religious studies further at universities located primarily in the MENA region.

However, with the beginning of penetration of Greek state in internal matters of these schools in the 1970s, the number of courses about Islam was decreased while the ones with non-Islamic content increased. As a result, even though their official status as religious schools remained the same, the main character of madrasah as a religious school was actually downgraded. This study underlines that both madrasahs have ceased func-

¹⁸ ‘Sümela ayini öncesi Batı Trakya’da çirkin provokasyon [Provocation in Western Thrace before the 15th of August ritual in Sumela/Turkey], *Azınlıkça*, 59, 2010, s. 38; ‘Yenicemahalle Camii’nde şüpheli yangın [A suspicious fire in Yenicemahalle Mosque], *Gündem Gazetesi*, 927, 24 Nisan 2015.

¹⁹ As of 2016, there are still a number of Islamic monuments across Greece. However, compared to the past, many of them do not exist any more. For more information see Ersi Mpouriskari, *The Ottoman Architecture in Greece*, Greek Ministry of Culture, Athens, 2008 [In Greek]; Neval Konuk, *Ottoman Architecture in Greece*, SAM, Ankara, 2010.

²⁰ K. G. Andreadis, *Η Μουσουλμανική Μειονότητα της Δυτικής Θράκης [The Muslim Minority of Western Thrace]*, IMXA, Thessaloniki, 1956, p.74.

tioning as an institution to prepare next-generation clergies (both males and females²¹) of the Minority for a long period of time.

Similar to madrasahs, all students attending to minority primary schools have the same opportunity to celebrate Islamic holidays given that their schools are closed as well. All other Muslim students enrolled at public schools do not have the same right since primary Islamic feasts are not fully included within the public holidays of the country. Still, they are exempted from the course on religion where basics of the Orthodox Christianity faith are taught. Recently, Greece introduced the Law 4113/2013²² which foresees the beginning of a new course about fundamentals of Islam available only for those Muslim students registered at public schools inside Western Thrace. But, debates about its application still causes friction between Muslims and the Greek state.²³

Having elaborated characteristics of Islam in Western Thrace, next section focuses on Islam of their co-ethnics in the islands of Rhodes and Kos.

3.2. Islam in the Dodecanese Islands

Like Western Thrace, Islam in Rhodes and Kos is an old phenomenon as well. Many Muslims from inner Anatolia were settled on the islands after the conquest by Ottomans while others arrived towards the end of the 19th century. Starting from 1912, the region of the Dodecanese was ruled by Italians for 35 years. In 1947, the territorial integration of Greece was completed with the annexation of the Dodecanese islands. Many of the islander Muslims are farmers while a small number of them either own shops or small businesses or deal with touristic activities. Similar to Western Thrace Turks, the overwhelming majority of them are absent from the Greek public sector. Muslim Turks of Kos live in a compact mass while the ones in Rhodes are scattered in different parts of the island.

²¹ Female students were first accepted to madrasahs in the beginning of the new millennium. See Ali Hüseyinoğlu, *The Development of Minority Education at the Southeasternmost Corner of the EU: The Case of Muslim Turks in Western Thrace, Greece*, PhD dissertation (unpublished), University of Sussex, Brighton/UK, 2012, pp.251-256.

²² *Greek Official Gazette*, FEK A' 24, 30.1.2013.

²³ For more information about this law see Ali Hüseyinoğlu, "Batı Trakya'da Dini Özerklik Bağlamında '240 İmam Yasası' [Religious Freedoms in Western Thrace and the '240 Imam Law']", *International Symposium on the Past and Present of Western Thrace Turks*, Türk Ocakları İstanbul Şubesi Yayınları, İstanbul, 2016, pp. 157-170.

As of this day, the number of Muslims in both islands is quite small; estimated to vary between 4000 and 6000. In the beginning of 1950s, there used to live approximately 20.000 Muslim Turks on both islands. However, around 10.000 of them migrated to Turkey²⁴ because they had no special freedoms like their coreligionists in Western Thrace and Greece never gave them an official minority status that would protect their distinct ethnic, religious and cultural characteristics. As for those who remained, many kept their silence for a long time; they would rather not to raise their voices against decades-long violations of their rights, including religious ones, by Greek authorities.²⁵

Regarding religious liberties of Muslims residing in both islands of the Dodecanese, there were many changes before and after its annexation by Greece. Under the Italian rule, a tripartite system was introduced for the administration of religious matters of Muslims composed of the Office of Mufti, the Muslim Community Administration and the Awqaf.²⁶ Being members of these local institutions, Muslims were actively involved in matters of their own faith. This triadic type religious administration continued after the annexation of both islands but it was gradually abolished after 1965. The Office of Mufti remains vacant from 1991 till this day while the one in Kos was abolished in 1938.²⁷ The Muslim Community Administration was also dissolved after the involvement of representation from Greek governments who started to have major say on functioning of Islamic properties in both islands. Thus, Muslim pious foundations stand as the sole official institution managing religious matters of Dodecanese Muslims.²⁸

Similar to those in Western Thrace, members of administrative boards of Islamic pious endowments in Rhodes and Kos have been appointed by Greece for a long time, which infringes the autonomy of Muslims over their own properties of awqaf. Thus, discussions persist about the way that

²⁴ Tsitselikis, 2012, op. cit., p103.

²⁵ Mustafa Kaymakçı, "Current Problems and Solutions Concerning Turkish Identity in Rhodes and Kos", Mustafa Kaymakçı and Cihan Özgün (eds.), *Turkish Identity in Rhodes and Kos*, Rhodes, Kos, and the Dodecanese Islands Turks Culture and Solidarity Association, İzmir, 2014, p.17.

²⁶ Ibid, p.4.

²⁷ Cihan Özgün, "Social, Economic and Cultural Life in Rhodes and Kos Turks", Mustafa Kaymakçı and Cihan Özgün (eds.), *Turkish Identity in Rhodes and Kos*, Rhodes, Kos, and the Dodecanese Islands Turks Culture and Solidarity Association, İzmir, 2014, pp.196-197.

²⁸ There are also two waqf properties in Rhodes owned and managed by families: Fethi Pasha and Melek Mehmet Pasha. Dilek Kurban and Konstantinos Tsitselikis, *A Tale of Reciprocity: Minority Foundations in Greece and Turkey*, TESEV, Istanbul, 2010, p.42.

these foundations are administered. As Gross²⁹ noted, appointed members of waqf boards in both islands of the Dodecanese have been criticized for lack of accountability and excessive sell of waqf properties to Greeks for a long time. In fact, the decreasing number of awqaf is something that is clearly spotted even by walking in central locations of both islands; shops nearby of mosques used as cafes, renovated mosques used as museums or cultural centres, etc.³⁰

Being a former Ottoman land, there used to be numerous mosques on both islands. But as of 2016, the total number of mosques on both islands is not more than 20 and only two of them function on a daily basis: Ibrahim Pasha Mosque in central Rhodes and Kermentes (Germe) Mosque in Kos. Still, while the former is not open for each and every prayer – open only for some daily prayers³¹ – the latter fully functions for all prayers five times a day. A few other mosques, e.g. Süleymaniye Mosque in Rhodes, Defterdar İbrahim Paşa Mosque in Kos, are normally kept closed and only opened for special days for Islam, such as Eid Al Fitr or Ramadan.³² All the rest are either used as museums or for public purposes such as cultural or health centers while demands for restoration of the rest old and dilapidated Islamic monuments continue to fall on deaf ears of Greek officials.

As for the teaching of Islam, there has been no bilingual schooling on both Islands since 1972 so as to serve for language and religious needs of Muslim school children. Therefore, all children of Muslims have no other option but attend to Greek public schools where education is only in titular language. However, similar to those in Western Thrace, all Muslim school children are exempted from the course of religion taught at their schools but there is no alternative course so as to teach them fundamentals of Islam. Therefore, it is only their families and mosques where they can learn more about their own faiths. Similar to Turkish schools, there used to be many madrasahs functioning for the religious needs of the Minority children. But, they were all closed in 1937 and they never opened under

²⁹ Andreas Gross, Rapporteur-Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights (PACE), "The Situation of the Inhabitants of Rhodes and Kos with a Turkish Cultural Background", Doc. 12526, 23 February 2011, p.6, <http://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/X2H-Xref_ViewPDF.asp?FileID=12646&lang=en> (accessed 5 January 2016).

³⁰ The author personally paid several visits to Rhodes in the last eight years.

³¹ Personal notes of the author, 8 July 2010, Rhodes.

³² "The problems of the Turks in Rhodes, Kos and the Dodecanese", A/HRC/30/NGO/94, Written statement submitted by FUEN, UN Human Rights Council, Thirtieth session, 7 September 2015, p. 4, <https://www.ecoi.net/file_upload/1930_1443084799_g1520229.pdf> (accessed 10 January 2016).

the Greek administration of the islands.³³ In fact, the course over Islam started to be taught at Turkish schools under Italian regime and continued until the closure of these schools in the early 1970s. Since then, Muslims of Rhodes and Kos have been deprived of their rights to get religious education as well as education in their own Turkish mother tongue. Only in recent years, imams of the two functioning mosques initiated Quran courses. However, the number of children enrolled remains highly limited. Thus, it becomes easier for many of the younger-generation Muslim children who have either poor or no education in Turkish to use the Greek language as means of communication between themselves.³⁴

4. New Muslims: Immigrant Muslims of Greece and Greek Converts

Having focused on both types of historical Muslims in Greece, this section explores religious rights of New Muslims of Greece. Given that they constitute the main demographical chunk of all Muslims across Greece, be it Greek citizens or non-citizens, this section starts focusing on religious rights of immigrant/newcomer Muslims and continues with the second category of New Muslims, ethnic Greeks who converted to Islam.

Demographically speaking, Muslim immigrants constitute the biggest group of Muslims in Greece. The vast majority of them arrived Greece after 1980s primarily from the MENA region, Southeast Asia and southern Balkans, Albania in particular. There are no official numbers but it is estimated that there are more than half a million immigrant Muslims living across the country.³⁵

This group of Muslims is generally settled in urban centres of country. The majority of them are either undocumented or not able to get Greek citizenship despite they have been living in Greece for decades.³⁶ Only a

³³ Written statement, Rhodes, Kos and the Dodecanese Turks Culture and Solidarity Association, OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting, 21 September - 2 October 2015, Warsaw, HDIM. NGO/0379/15.

³⁴ Bahadır Selim Dilek, "Through the Eyes of a Journalist: Forgotten Turks of the Aegean", Mustafa Kaymakçı and Cihan Özgün (eds.), *Turkish Identity in Rhodes and Kos*, Rhodes, Kos, and the Dodecanese Islands Turks Culture and Solidarity Association, İzmir, 2014, p.118. On the day of a religious festival inside the mosque, I also witnessed some school children sitting next to me who used Greek while talking to each others. Personal notes of the author, 8 July 2010, Rhodes.

³⁵ Anna Triandafyllidou and Hara Kouki, "Muslim Immigrants and the Greek nation: The emergence of nationalist intolerance", *Ethnicities*, 13 (6), pp.715-716.

³⁶ For instance, one of the interviewees highlighted that her husband did not manage to get Greek citizenship who was living in Greece for the last 25 years. Maria Louka, "Το Ισλάμ στην Ελλάδα [Islam in Greece]", *Bimagazino (To Vima)*, 18 October 2015, p. 34.

small number of them who arrived before 1990s managed to obtain Greek citizenship. Given that they do not reside inside Western Thrace, they are exempted from minority rights protection regime of the Lausanne Treaty similar to their coreligionists in Dodecanese. Even Western Thrace Muslims, who permanently live in Athens as a result of internal migration, do also fall under this category of Muslims.³⁷ Then, it is only the norm of citizenship that can protect their ethnic, religious and cultural identities under general principle of the Greek Constitution and the Greek Law. Nevertheless, as it is elaborated in the following paragraphs immigrant Muslims continue to be devoid of even fundamental rights for their freedom of religion, conscience and belief, which contradicts with liberties of their coreligionists in Western Thrace and the Dodecanese.

First of all, there is no single religious authority, e.g. Office of Mufti that regulates religious affairs of immigrant Muslims. It is only the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs that has a say on fundamental matters of Islam outside Western Thrace. Even if there are few associations belonging to Muslim immigrant groups such as Pakistanis, they fall far from pushing Greek state mechanisms to find solutions to long-standing problems of Muslims across the country except Western Thrace.

Second, the overwhelming majority of New Muslims live in Athens and Thessaloniki. However, as of this day, no official houses of prayers function in both cities. It is estimated that there are around 70 privately-owned places used as masjids (halls of prayers) in main Greek urban cities, primarily Athens and Thessaloniki.³⁸ Yet, almost all of them are makeshift mosques located inside garages, basements, storehouses or small shops owned by Muslims. In recent years, only three of these masjids were given the necessary official permission to function as houses of prayer for Muslim worshippers in Athens.³⁹ All the rest keep functioning as informal and invisible houses of prayers for Muslims which may constitute another source for growing scepticism of some Greeks towards this type of mas-

³⁷ For a detailed study about this group of Muslims see Dimitris Antoniou, "Western Thracian Muslims in Athens: From Economic Migration to Religious Organization", *Balkanologie*, IX, 1-2, 2005, 10-25. <<http://balkanologie.revues.org/index579.html>> (accessed 9 January 2016).

³⁸ Tsitselikis, op. cit., 2012, p.269. Antoniou gives the number of masjids in Athens to be around 20 for the early 2000s, showing a significant increase of Muslims and so masjids in the last 15 years. Dimitris A. Antoniou, "Muslim Immigrants in Greece: Religious Organization and Local Responses", *Immigrants & Minorities*, 22:2, 2003, p. 166.

³⁹ Tasos Telloğlu, "Νομιμοποιήθηκαν τρία τζαμιά στην Αθήνα [Three mosque have been already been registered in Athens]", *Kathimerini*, 22 November 2015.

jids and their attendants, thus strengthening their Islamophobic and racist attitudes towards Muslims and their makeshift mosques.

In fact, there are actually some Ottoman mosques that can be used as places of worship in many cities of Greece including Athens and Thessaloniki. However, Greece has never shown willingness to open them for Muslims as places for prayers. Rather, they are generally used for other public purposes. Nor Greece replied positively for various demands that came from authorities of Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey about letting them construct houses of prayers in Athens or restore and open the already-existing ones without any extra economic burden for the Greek economy. As a result, Athens still stands as the only European capital city without an official house of prayer for Muslims, be it locals or the ones visiting Athens; story of “the Athenian Odyssey of mosques” that started in 1880 has not finished yet.⁴⁰

Similar to mosques, newcomer Muslims do not also have Muslim cemeteries to bury those Muslims who pass away on Greek soil. Many of them who die are either sent to Western Thrace for Islamic funeral or to their own countries. Provided that it is economically too costly to send corpses back to their countries of origin, Muslim immigrants are generally buried inside Western Thrace. Similar to mosques, their demands for Islamic cemeteries in Athens and Thessaloniki continue to be ignored by Greek state mechanisms.

While in Western Thrace sacred places of Muslims are occasionally targeted but not the Muslims themselves, in urban Greek centers, Athens in particular, both the Muslim immigrants themselves and their places of worship turn out to be main targets of racial, hate-motivated and Islamophobic attacks, primarily by members/supporters of Golden Dawn.⁴¹ Many of Muslim immigrants are undocumented and their proficiency with in Greek remains quite low. Such drawbacks of Newcomer Muslims, which do not exist for many of their coreligionists in Western Thrace and Dodecanese, increase their marginalization inside the Greek society. Although Greece has recently passed new legislation introducing stricter penalties for rac-

⁴⁰ Anna Triandafyllidou and Ruby Gropas, “Constructing Difference: The Mosque Debates in Greece”, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 35 (6), 2009, p.963; Tsitselikis, 2012, op.cit., pp. 265-269.

⁴¹ “Αφησαν κεφάλι γουρουνιού στην είσοδο του Ελληνοαραβικού Κέντρου [They left head of a pig in front of the Greek-Arabic Centre]”, *Kathimerini*, <<http://www.kathimerini.gr/788514/article/epikairothta/ellada/afhsan-kefali-goyroynioy-sthn-eisodo-toy-ellhnoaravikoy-kentroy>>, (accessed 17 October 2014).

ism and hate speech,⁴² many Muslim immigrants cannot escape from getting targeted based on their skin colour or faith.

After exploring the legal framework of Muslim immigrants as well as main issues in the realm of their religious liberties, next, this paper finishes with tackling the second group of New Muslims, i.e. Greek converts.

Known also as Greek Muslims, those ethnic Greeks converted to Islam constitute the smallest and least-visible group of Muslims across the country. In spite of the lack of official figures, one of the most prominent figures of this group, Anna Stamou, estimates that the number of ethnic Greek Muslims living in Greece is around 3.000 while there are many others who live abroad permanently.⁴³ There is almost no limited literature and academic studies regarding the Greek Muslims. Also, they actually became more apparent in the Greek media and online platforms only in recent years. A few of these Muslims are known to talk about ethnic Greeks choosing Islam online⁴⁴ while the great number of them prefer not to show their religious identities as well as their religiosities in the public sphere so as to avoid any kind of stigmatization and otherization by their Orthodox Christian coethnies. In fact, they also prefer to escape any possible pressures coming from their own close environment such as family members, friends, etc. or some state mechanisms. Therefore, given that they are very fluent in titular language since it is their mother language, then, unlike their immigrant coreligionists it becomes rather difficult to spot an ethnic Greek Muslim in case she/he does not indicate her/his faith in various ways such as (wearing headscarf/hijab for women). Furthermore, As Stamou notes, many ethnic Greeks who converted to Islam prefer to hide from their own parents and close friends in initial years since they want to escape from the “bombardment” of questions why they chose Islam and fundamental principles of it. Therefore, many of them tend isolate themselves temporarily from their own families and friends.⁴⁵

5. Conclusion

Religion has always functioned as one of the strongest glues keeping members of a given community together as a single and united body. For

⁴² Greece 2014 International Religious Freedom Report, U.S. Department of State, <<http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2014&dldid=238386>>, (accessed 19 January 2016).

⁴³ Interview (Skype) with Anna Stamou, 26 January 2016.

⁴⁴ Many information about Islam in the Greek language are available at <<http://greekmuslim.wordpress.com>> (accessed 20 January 2016); <www.islam.gr> (accessed 25 January 2016).

⁴⁵ Interview (Skype) with Anna Stamou.

smaller and disadvantaged ones, individual affiliations with a common religion even gets more significant since it reinforces the notions of unity and harmony among the community. Also, it is one of the means that enables community members to act together against any threat to their distinct characteristics.

As of 2016, Islam seems to survive in different parts of Greece. This study has shown that Muslims are not treated equally by Greek authorities. The ones who reside in Western Thrace are given more rights and opportunities to keep their religious identities alive than any other Muslim residing outside of the region even though they continue facing fundamental problems about enjoyment of their religious liberties enshrined primarily in 1923 Lausanne Convention. Compared to Muslim worshippers of Western Thrace, the other group of autochthonous Muslims living in the Dodecanese enjoy much less religious freedoms, which seems to be insufficient to keep Islam in these two islands alive. It is only the New Muslims of Greece for whom no special measures are provided by Greece. Although the principle of equality and freedom of conscience, religion and thought are safeguarded under the Greek constitution, both Muslim immigrants and ethnic Greek converts have been deprived of even basic religious rights; they have no right to establish and function official houses of prayers and Islamic cemeteries. Even though they numerically constitute the majority of Greece's Muslims, they suffer the most regarding enjoyment of Islamic freedoms across the country.

This study has argued that Greece insists on involvement of internal affairs of both types of Muslims across the country, thus leaving them to have only a little say over their own religious affairs. Since the independence of Greece, it has never been possible to talk about the existence of a dialogue and cooperation mechanism between the Greek state and its Old-New Muslims. As a result, Muslims have never had major say in decision-making mechanisms over matters of Islam across Greece. Equally important, nor any major collaboration within the Islamic community has ever existed since 1923. That is to say, Muslims who have a relatively privileged position keep showing both solidarity with issues of Islam across the country and sensitivity towards violation of rights of their coreligionists residing outside of Western Thrace. Nevertheless, a great number of them refrain from engaging actively and directly in struggles of New Muslims who keep demanding fundamental religious freedoms from Greek authorities.

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