

**2<sup>nd</sup> International Conference on Islam and Higher Education (2<sup>nd</sup> ICIHE)**

**Theme: *The Empowerment of Muslim Communities in Private Higher Education***

**Venue: The Pahang State Foundation Complex (Kompleks Yayasan Pahang)**

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**Associate Prof. Dr. Mesut Idriz**

**(Gazikent University, Turkey)**

***"The Role of Endowment Foundations in the Private Higher Education in the Balkans: The Case of the Minority Muslim Communities"***

Ladies and Gentlemen,

AssalamuAlaykum and selamat pagi from the Balkan friends and Muslims.

First of all, I would like to thank and congratulate the organizers of this event the 2<sup>nd</sup> International Conference on Islam and Higher Education, and credit goes to International Institute of Advanced Islamic Studies (IAIS Malaysia), The Pahang State Foundation, IKIP International College, International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT) East Asia, and IDB.

Before going to the details of my presentation, I would certainly like to clarify a point here with reference to the sub-topic of my title, whereof: *The Case of Minority Muslim Communities* refers to the whole Balkan region and not to the independent countries of the Balkans. If we would consider it at the level of

countries *per se* then we encounter three countries that are Muslim majorities; and they are Albania, Kosovo, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the population of these three independent countries are majority Muslims. As for Macedonia, Serbia, Croatia, Bulgaria, Romania, Slovenia and Greece, on the other hand, their Muslim population is minority. Therefore, the Balkans in its totality with reference to Muslim population is considered minority.

However, geo-ontologically the Balkans falls at the crossroads between the heartlands of Turkey's Anatolia and Europe. Normally Greece, Slovenia and to some extent Romania try to avoid being placed within the socio-conceptual and contextual expression referred to as the Balkans. Nevertheless, all the countries within the historic peninsula are undoubtedly considered the Balkans.

When we speak about the higher education in the Balkans, we have to divide the topic into two: a) Pre 1990's and b) post 1990's higher education; this is particularly in reference to those communist-socialist ruled regions.

Before 1990's, higher educational institutions and universities in Former Yugoslavia (for those who are not familiar with it, Former Yugoslavia comprised of the following states: Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, Kosovo, Montenegro, Macedonia and Bosnia), Bulgaria, Albania, Romania and Greece were all state controlled and the curriculums were designed by the state appointed so-called scholar. In all these states, there was no single university where there was a department or faculty of Islamic studies and theological studies. Their response was that "any kind of religious and theological studies are not within the scope of their educational philosophy". They were unanimous on this matter. Some

universities did allow touching on some religious, legal and theological histories and discussions but under the faculties and departments of Law and Philosophy, respectively. The following universities are among the examples: University of St. Kliment Ohridski in Sofia, Bulgaria; University of Belgrade in Belgrade, Serbia; University of Zagreb in Zagreb, Croatia; and University of Prishtina in Prishtina, Kosovo. On the other hand, universities in Albania forbade it completely.

Some Muslim communities, under the auspicious support of the so-called *Mashikhat al-Islamiyyah* or *Riyasat al-Islamiyyah* (i.e. Islamic Union), managed to establish a kind of independent faculties of Islamic Theological Studies without being under the umbrella of any university. In other word, just a faculty on its own. Among them, Faculty of Islamic Studies in Sarajevo, Faculty of Islamic Sciences in Skopje, and Faculty of Islamic Studies in Prishtina. These faculties were funded by the public through aforementioned Islamic Unions and sometimes from the revenues of the *awqaf* properties which were inherited from the Ottomans.

However it should be re-emphasized again that the certificates obtained from these faculties were not accredited by their respective governments. As we mentioned earlier, “religious and theological studies were not and are not considered within the scope of their educational philosophy; hence, degrees were not recognized”. But, those certificates, on the contrary, were accredited and recognized throughout the world.

Related to this matter, I would like to mention two anecdotes from Macedonia. Couple of years ago, Prof. Dr. Galip Veliu, who was a professor at the

International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) and later in Fatih University in Istanbul, became the Director of Accreditation at the Ministry of Education of Macedonia. On his first day on duty, he discovered that more than 300 degrees belonging to the Muslims who studied in various Muslim countries, including Malaysia (IIUM in particular) were put aside for many years, some even more than 10 years as the dust have been accumulated on the applications which were submitted to be accredited by the Macedonian Ministry of Education. During his first board meeting, Prof. Galip asked the board members as to why those applications have not been accredited for so long. In response to his enquiry, he was told that the applicants are graduates of Muslim and religious institutions. So what, Prof. Galip replied? Prof. Galip continued saying that: Galileo Galilee, Emanuel Kant, Nietche, Albert Einstein and so on were all theologians, so do you think that their degrees should not be accredited and are not within the scope of your educational philosophy? All members kept quite. During his 6 months as the Director of Accreditation Department, he saved many students life by accrediting and recognizing all the degrees. In one occasion, he came across a few graduates of IIUM from the Faculty of ICT, where he asked them “how about these applicants?” And the answer was that those students are graduates from Islamic University, that “Islamic” in the name of university was also a problem. However, thank to Prof. Galip, this problem have been solved, hopefully permanently.

Due to these kinds of problems in the Balkans, the education has taken its negative course. Let me give you a short overview on the historiography of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, before I proceed with the post 1990s education in the Balkans. During the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, historians of the Balkan peoples have, on the one hand, evaluated centuries of Ottoman domination in a uniformly

negative and often hostile manner. They have pointed out that the Balkan people were cut off from the rest of Europe and from its important development adding that they were also prevented from developing their own civilizations and institutions. The historiography of this period during these centuries was interpreted in a nationalistic and often myopic view. On the other hand, some Western studies have been useful. However, these studies had one major drawback in the sense that they had no access to Ottoman sources or were linguistically unqualified to use them. In their reliance on previous studies, on each other, on the work of Balkan historians, and on available materials in languages they had familiarity with in Western European archives, these authors, nevertheless, managed to produce some good but very limited works. In the beginning of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century opinions began to shift. Historians of the Balkan peoples began to utilize their archives much more extensively than previously practiced. The result has been a much more scholarly and objective study, which has shed new light on the Ottoman period. In the West some qualified scholars also began to write based on these archive materials and their numbers have steadily increased. These works have occupied various journals and publications meant for the consumption of the old academic establishments.

It is no small wonder therefore, that major figures in the Balkan philosophy and history are not known among world scholars and researchers. The history of Islamic literature and thought remains generally confined to the Middle East, Iran, North Africa, Malay Archipelago and Urdu speaking world. Most writers do not include the Balkan world in their studies, except in rare passing remarks. Neither has the Balkans received its proper recognition as an integral part of

the Muslim world. In short, the entire field of knowledge requires a long overdue reconstruction.

Establishing Turkish educational institutions in the Balkans have almost two decades history in both pre-university and university levels. They managed to be well successful in secondary schools, so-called *colleges* (*kolej*), where the medium of instruction is in English, besides the local languages. The students of these schools are not belonging to a specific group or ethnicity, but open to all including the expats' children of the international companies and diplomats. These schools achieved to gain the confidence of both locals and foreigners by promoting the peace and tolerance as well as relatively balanced curriculum in comparison with the other schools. In this way, these schools became a number one choice of the people. Among them are: the earliest college built in 1993 after the collapse of communism namely Mehmet Akif then later renamed as Turgut Özal Colleges in Albania; many schools in various cities and towns of Bosnia and Herzegovina under the umbrella namely Bosna Sema Educational Institutions; Mehmet Akif Colleges, Gulistan Educational Institutions and International School of Prishtina in Kosovo; The International School of Bucharest in Romania; and Yahya Kemal Colleges in three different cities of Macedonia.

In higher education level, on the other hand, Turkish business companies navigated by both political players and neo-sufi movements, namely current AKP government of Turkey and the Fethullah Gulen movement, began to establish universities. Among the Gulen movement universities in the Balkans are The International Burch University in Bosnia, both Epoka University and Bedir University in Albania. Here, this newly established Bedir University

deserves special attention as it the first university in the Balkans that has a department of Islamic Studies under the Faculty of Human Sciences.

On the other hand, the universities established by Turkish companies navigated by the AKP members are The International University of Sarajevo in Bosnia and The International Balkan University in Macedonia. With regard to the last mentioned one, the first graduation ceremony was held few weeks ago in the presence of Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, where his wife Emine Erdoğan presented the scrolls to the graduates.

All these universities, the former and the latter, were established in the form of *waqf*, or to use the local legal terminology “foundation”. Their stories to become successful and ultimately enter the world standards of higher learning requires time, perhaps few decades, as it is the case with any other university in the world.

There are number of universities in the Balkans established by the Westerners under the umbrella of foundation. Among the Western supported and financed institutions are Southeast European University and FON University both in Macedonia, and American University of Prishtina in Kosovo. The universities established and backed up by the Europeans are going through similar processes and facing related stories as the Muslim Turkish universities, if not worst.

Before I conclude my presentation, I would like to raise two important matters to the audience here, to the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), and to the Gulf countries and Malaysia: First is an invitation and the second is an urge.

I invite Arab countries, particularly the Gulf region, and Malaysia or Malaysian entrepreneurs and higher learning institutions for that matter to establish either brand new universities or branches of their already existing universities in the Balkans as thus far only universities of Turkish origin are available in the Balkans.

Secondly, I urge OIC to establish a Muslim Erasmus program in order to strengthen the cooperation between the universities in the Muslim world. As Erasmus program in the West has shown great and positive results.

Thank you and wassalam.