

The Long View

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Method not Madness: On the Discourses of Genocide



**Sahib Mustaqim
Bleher**

Trump, Machiavelli, and
Irrationality in Politics

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Is Bektashism Becoming a Tool
of Israel Against Islam, Iran, and
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**Imam Achmad
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The Race Against
Racism

Linda Hyökki

Framing Muslim Converts:
Culturally Divergent,
Convergent, or Exceptional?

In the Name of Allah, the Most Beneficent, the Most Merciful

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Nareen Sheikh Jamal al-Lail, 2025.

The idea that Donald Trump is an out of control political oddball has become a commonplace of media presentation. Ever since his re-election to the Oval Office, the erstwhile celebrity businessman has hogged the political spotlight by disrupting the global economic order via a regime of tariffs against trading partners and turning on its head US foreign policy vis a vis Ukraine. Proudly pursuing a populist nativism, the US president has revelled in throwing into disarray his country's enduring relationships with friends and foes alike. This has given rise to a narrative of the fearless gun-slinging American cowboy who will let nothing stand in his way to achieve and maintain political hegemony.

However, according to **Sahib Mustaqim Bleher**, the author of the first piece in this edition, not all is as chaotic as it would seem. Behind the headlines there is a method to the apparent madness, informed by Machiavellian ruthlessness and unscrupulousness, that seeks to restore flagging US global supremacy. Having realised that it cannot defeat Russia in the proxy war over Ukraine, Washington has sacrificed Kiev to focus its attention on West Asia, where the Hamas breakout from Gaza in October 2023 ran a coach and horses through decades of US policy and the assumption that Zionism had triumphed and the Palestinians had finally been defeated.

Framing US policy in terms of a neo-colonial enterprise fused with Zionist supremacism, Bleher sees the "Hamas jailbreak" as a defining moment in global politics, one in which the US has lost control and in which its reaction is being dictated by external forces.

In fact, the resistance has hurt the US/Zionist alliance so much that it has decided that soft power is no longer sufficient to subdue the Palestinians and only military might can defeat them. Cue the genocide and the oft-stated intention of ethnically cleansing the native inhabitants to complete what the axis failed to achieve pre 1948 and in 1967. This is indeed their final solution.

The ongoing Israeli genocide has lifted the mask on many things but few more revealing than the cooperation and complicity of Muslim nations and actors. A lesser known aspect of this is the support that the current government in the tiny Balkan state of Albania is providing to the Zionist state. A majority Muslim nation, Albania is ruled by a regime that has co-opted the heterodox Sufi order into the country's polity, with the Prime Minister Edi Rama going as far as declaring at the UN on September 23, 2024, the creation of a sovereign Bektashi state in Tirana along the lines of the Vatican. This has coincided with a much longer love-in for Israel and a consequent severing of diplomatic relations with Iran alongside a wider attack on traditional Sunni and Shia Islam.

Olsi Jazexhi questions whether Bektashism, is being weaponised by the state to advance US and Israeli interests, key among which is to sow division among Muslim states. Certainly the evidence points in that direction. Albania hosts a base for the anti-Iranian revolution MEK opposition group. In September 2024, when Israeli President Isaac Herzog visited Albania, he reportedly had a special meeting with the self-proclaimed World Leader of the Bektashis, Baba Edmond Brahimaj (Baba Mond). On October 4, 2023, Munir Kazmir, Vice President of the American Jewish

Congress, visited the Continental Hospital owned by the Bektashi World Headquarters. On October 7, 2023, when Hamas attacked Israel, Baba Mond sent a message to the Israeli embassy condemning Hamas and expressing support for Israel. Throughout the 18 months that Israel has committed genocide in Gaza, the Bektashi World Headquarters has not once condemned Israel.

The alliance between Albania and Zionism, arguably the most violent expression of white supremacism, is perhaps not as unlikely as it appears. Emerging as a reaction to Ottoman domination, Albanian nationalism has always been imbued with a racial separatism that seeks to identify with western Europe, even if Europe is reluctant to reciprocate. Viewed through this lens the newfound affinity of the ruling regime with Israel may be ideological as well as opportunistic. It is ironic that in seeking to identify with a West that it sees as civilisationally superior, Albania finds itself sharing a bed with the most barbaric regimes on earth, regimes that are still wedded to notions of white supremacism.

The third essay in this issue is by the late great South African imam and civil rights activist, **Achmad Cassiem**. It unpacks the concept of Zionism as racism through an Islamic cognitive frame. Although it was written 25 years ago, the analysis is even more relevant in an age where we see Israel, the embodiment of Zionism, trying to exterminate a whole people on the basis that they are an obstacle to the realisation of a racist philosophy. Drawing on his experience and involvement in the struggle against apartheid in South Africa, Imam Cassiem draws parallels with the Zionist movement while also identifying the differences. He concludes that "anti-racism is the only genuine, authentic, potent and revolutionary antidote for the poison of racism." Racism and anti-racism cannot co-exist. "We have to combat racism and racialism in all their forms. From an Islamic point of view this is not the point of being tolerant but the point of principle."

Our final essay departs from the tragedy in Palestine to look at, amongst other things, how racism is impacting the growth of Islam in Finland. Increasingly, academics across Europe are seeing Islam as not purely a function of migratory processes, often themselves occasioned by geopolitics, but also an indigenous phenomenon owing to the rising number of conversions. Homing in on her native Finland where Muslims constitute approximately 2.3% of the total population, **Linda Hyökki** identifies the challenges and opportunities associated with a burgeoning convert community. Converts can serve as a cultural bridge between "foreign" Muslims and "native" non-Muslims but nevertheless often suffer the same exclusionary dynamics as Muslims from migrant backgrounds. They can also, deliberately or inadvertently, instrumentalise their cultural proximity to mark themselves as more authentic and therefore more acceptable to in a society where Islam is still largely portrayed as hostile and alien, thereby exacerbating Islamophobia and racism.

The bridges that need to be built between oppressed people require conversation, understanding, respect for differences, and above all a focus on the main narratives and infrastructure of oppression that we are all subjected to. Let's keep those conversations going.

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Trump, Machiavelli, and Irrationality in Politics

Through belligerent rhetoric, imperial manoeuvres, and a policy of strategic chaos, **Sahib Mustaqim Bleher** contends that Trump's America is less an aberration than the clearest expression yet of Machiavellian rule by a wealthy elite. But Trump's chaotic politics represent not just the ruthless logic of empire — they also signal its slow unravelling, where Machiavellian ambition collides with growing resistance and ideological blindness.

Following a theatrical election campaign, as soon as Donald Trump took office for his second term, he started ruling by executive decree, apparently shaking up America to repair years of alleged neglect under his predecessor, senile genocidal Joe Biden, in order to Make America Great Again and put America first. The turbulent weeks which followed and reverberated across the globe made it seem that once he had become the outlaw turned sheriff, Trump was that proverbial lone ranger shooting from the hip. I'd like to argue, however, that there is method to his madness and that this change of ruling style — from democratic pretence to bold dictator — indicates an important shift in American politics itself.

After scratching their heads for several days, commentators began to realise that Trump's negotiating style was deliberate and some remarked that he intentionally meant to confuse in order to create uncertainty and make it more difficult for others to plan their strategy. Trump's approach to doing business is familiar from the bazaar: ask for an exorbitant price at the outset and start heckling, preferably with the buyer surrounded by your intimidating crew who prevent him from simply walking away and

who tell him not to turn down such a good deal; eventually the buyer will walk away, paying an excessive price for the goods he didn't need or want but thinking he got himself a bargain. Since this approach has not previously been applied to international politics, it created shock waves and, so far, it has worked: the USA did not annex Panama, but Hong Kong owners CK Hutchison gave in and offered the ports at either end of it to BlackRock (or as CNN ironically put it: BlackRock agreed to buy it from them!). This, by the way, also gives us a hint whom Trump is really doing business for — rather than dismantling the deep state, he is one of its most aggressive agents.

Turning to USA's neighbours Canada and Mexico, as well as Britain ("our relationship is very special"), they had high tariffs imposed on them in order to be bullied into agreeing to bilateral trade deals they would not even have considered had they been sober. British prime minister Starmer is selling this as an achievement to the British people who are, supposedly, also mightily pleased with the extra billions given to Ukraine following the withdrawal of US funding. And on the US domestic front, laying off scores of workers in an alleged downsizing of bureaucracy is in-

tended to ensure that the remainder stop asking for their employment rights. However, it might eventually have the opposite effect with domestic politics heating up and derailing this coup d'état by the hidden American ruling class.

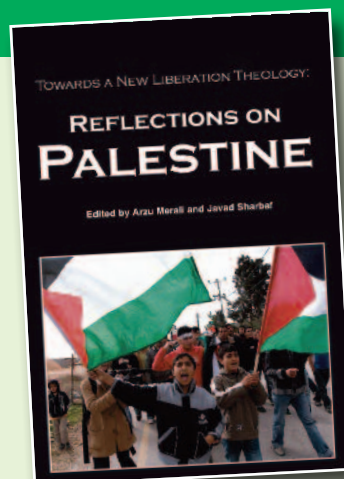
Trump's confrontational style wasn't limited to trade; the same aggressive, transactional approach shaped his dealings with military alliances and foreign conflicts, redrawing America's posture on the global stage.

Trump's offer to do a peace treaty with Putin, pulling support from Ukraine and showing short shrift to Zelensky sent shock waves around Europe where everybody had been jolly happy to wave blue and yellow flags in support of the American proxy war fought at the interface between Europe and Russia. Suddenly it dawned on them that they had all been let down. In reality, it was a sober admission by the United States that it could not defeat Russia and that, having sufficiently weakened it, it would allow it back into the fold of the self-styled international community — double-speak for the American sphere of influence. A deal was made where Russia abandoned Syria to American-sponsored jihadists for the benefit of Israel and was given a favourable set-

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tlement on Ukraine in return. Difficult to explain to the unsuspecting public, so who better to do the job than unpredictable Trump, giving Zelensky a dressing down for not wanting to leave the limelight so soon on this political comedy stage.

As for Syria, it is distressing to observe that so many Muslims in the West still refer to this sell-out or take-over as liberation and a blessed revolution. All the American-armed thugs, now terrorists with ties and high office, were ever good at was killing Muslims – not even a word of criticism of Israel which has since effectively annexed large areas of the country and benefited from the cutting of the supply line from Iran to Lebanon's Hezbollah. *Cui bono* or "by their fruits you shall know them" is sadly not an approach Muslims apply when falling for propaganda.

Another objective achieved through the proxy war in Ukraine was weakening Europe as a potential rival and this is now being accelerated by Europe plunging its nations into further debt in order to prop up military spending. The "cost of living crisis", the term chosen by the political and media establishment for the betrayal of their people will look benign once this latest race to armament takes effect. By the way, the fact that America is now holding direct talks with Hamas, albeit with little success, is an indication that Israel's genocidal campaign, too, was always an American war.

Effectively, the New America is applying Machiavellian power politics and has that unsatiable ambition for acquisition which Machiavelli claimed as the driving factor of human action. According to Machiavelli, when an opponent seems to be making an irrational move, one should be very suspicious, because this behaviour always hides some stratagem. For Machiavelli, morality has no place in politics, and neither does it for the American empire of today (if it ever did!). The ends justify the means, no matter how unethical they may seem.

What then are those ends? To understand American politics in our age, one needs to understand both its history as a

settler colonialist enterprise and the fact that its power structures have long been influenced by Zionism. This in turn requires a deeper understanding of Zionism as an ideology. As David Miller argued consistently since his dismissal from Bristol University was overturned as having

America, having weakened Russia and Europe now wants to turn its focus to China. China remains America's last and formidable opponent, outdoing it in both trade and political influence

confounded anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism, support for Zionism is deeply embedded at all levels of the political and social fabric of Western "democracies". The influence of the Zionist movement goes well beyond "mere" lobbying, formidable as this is in itself. Large sums of money have been spent to influence politicians and administrators. In this context, it is also worthwhile taking a look at multinationals (such as BlackRock) who have built business empires spanning everything from consumer goods to media networks, with budgets exceeding those of many nation states and thereby exerting immense political pressure as a result.

Many have not fully understood the true nature of Zionism and assume it is a political Jewish movement founded with the objective of protecting and saving Jews from persecution. In reality, there is nothing actually Jewish about Zionism. It started out in the 19th century as a secular movement

strongly opposed by practising Jews at the time. It developed into a Machiavellian movement (bereft of ethics or morality!) to establish the state of "Israel" – itself part of the ongoing recalibration of Western colonialism. According to the [World Jewish Congress](#), however, anti-Zionism is anti-Semitism because it "denies the historical connection of the Jewish people to the land of Israel".

Let's unravel that big lie taught in our schools now for more than a century. Theodor Herzl, the founder of Zionism, was born in Hungary; Chaim Weizmann, the first president of Israel, was born in Belarus, Benzion Mileikowsky, the current prime minister of Israel, having assumed the name Benjamin Netanyahu, was born in Tel Aviv as the son of a Polish immigrant. If you cannot see their historical connection to the land of Israel, it is because there isn't one. Nor are they Jews who simply returned to what once was their homeland a long, long time ago.

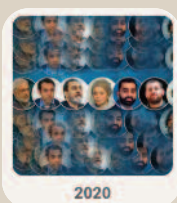
Back to the present day: America, having weakened Russia and Europe now wants to turn its focus to China. China remains America's last and formidable opponent, outdoing it in both trade and political influence, for example in Africa, turning the "Free Trade" doctrine on its head, for it was designed to allow America to trade freely across the globe, not its competitors. China was also mainly responsible for forcing the USA out of Afghanistan which they had previously taken off the Russians. China owns large parts of the American economy, including underwriting its debt, so much so that without Chinese support the dollar would collapse. China had to be scaled back.

Arguably, the Gaza jail-break of 7 October 2023 has catapulted American hegemony planning into a major crisis. All was going well, the Middle East had been pacified, two Iraq wars guaranteed continued access to oil, Russia's influence had been curtailed and Europe been prevented from becoming a serious player on the international stage. A second Trump presidency would bring back American unilateralism,

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disentangle it from international bodies and conventions, force its trade terms onto others through punitive tariffs and stem the advance of China both economically and politically. Suddenly, however, its attention had to turn to the Middle East again. Arab regimes had been happy to normalise with Israel in return for development promises, but the Palestinians, squeezed into ever less land where the lawn was regularly mown (an Israeli euphemism for regularly bombing Palestinians to keep them subjugated), simply wouldn't go away.

In meting out vengeance on an unprecedented scale, Israel inadvertently destroyed the carefully constructed narrative of victim state and only democracy in the Middle East with its enlightened people and the most moral army of the world and instead turned world opinion solidly against it. The cry of anti-Semitism at every turn when Israel was criticised became a hollow tune. Criticism of Israel was shouted from the rooftops without fear of repercussions when only a few years earlier the mere allegation of anti-Semitism had prevented Jeremy Corbyn from becoming prime minister in Britain. Suddenly, the influence of pro-Zionist narratives over people's minds was diminished, and worse even, it became evident how Israel could act with impunity, committing war crimes, breaking international law whilst retaining the solid support of Western politics and media. Finally, it had become apparent how deep the rot actually went. In spite of "all hell to pay" for Gaza, Israel, spurred on by America, could not eliminate what has become the buzz word of our times: Resistance.

Israel has become a serious problem for American ambitions. The world knows that having Israel as a neighbour is bad news. The world also knows that Zionists (and that includes the American government) don't keep promises. And thus, the carefully crafted "Grand Chessboard" of Zbigniew Brzezinski (who, as early as 1997, argued that control of Eurasia was essential to

maintaining American global supremacy, and that NATO expansion into Ukraine was essential in order to contain Russia and prevent it from forging links with Europe) may well become undone for purely ideological reasons, because the American Zionist elite can't get themselves to abandon that failed garrison that is Israel. And as a consequence, American policy is being dictated

American policy is being dictated by outside events rather than its own strategy, and its weakness is being exposed by non-state actors, from Hamas through Hezbollah to Ansarullah in Yemen. The shift from soft power to hard power in the American approach to global governance displays a loss of control which will only accelerate. As resentment builds, resistance grows

by outside events rather than its own strategy, and its weakness is being exposed by non-state actors, from Hamas through Hezbollah to Ansarullah in Yemen. The shift from soft power to hard power in the American approach to global governance displays a loss of control which will only accelerate. As resentment builds, resistance

grows.

The problem with tearing up the rule book whenever the rules don't work in one's favour is that others too, stop believing in and abiding by the rules. International law lies buried in the rubble of Gaza. International justice rings hollow. America can no longer portray itself as honest broker or mediator. Resistance, a word hardly heard spoken aloud until 7th October, has become a term of pride for every group fighting injustice irrespective of time and place – Arabs and non-Arabs, Muslims and non-Muslims, Europeans, Africans, Asians, South-Americans are all proud to offer resistance.

And this resistance poses a bigger threat to the American project than even China. America could salvage some of its reputation and regain some of its influence at the political level, having to rely less on military prowess in the process, by simply letting go of its colonial project that is Israel and continue subjugating the world from Washington. But this is the Achilles heel of Zionism, they are not smart, they are dogmatic. Trump is not the only irrational person in the game. And time will tell that by daring it all, they will lose the lot. The light at the end of this tunnel of oppression, which commenced with conquest and colonisation and culminated in genocidal obsession and the majority of people owning nothing nor being particularly happy, is shining ever brighter from here on in.

Sahib Mustaqim Bleher

was a founder member of the Islamic Party of Britain and served as its general secretary and education spokesman as well as editor of the party magazine 'Common Sense'. He is a professor of applied linguistics and translation and works as a commercial translator and interpreter through his own translation company in the UK. Amongst his work are the adaptations of the Qur'an translations of Muhammad Pickthall and Yusuf Ali into modern English and his own Qur'an translation into "plain English", all published by IDCI in Birmingham.

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Is Bektashism Becoming a Tool of Israel Against Islam, Iran, and Turkey in the Balkans?

Albania as a laboratory of socially engineering Islam continues, argues **Olsi Jazexhi**, with the normalisation with Zionism and the Zionist entity a key factor.

Prime Minister Edi Rama's declaration at the UN on September 23, 2024, of the creation of a sovereign Bektashi State in Tirana, is the culmination of a series of political earthquakes that have shaken Albania in relation to its orientation against the Islamic world and towards Israel. These changes began with the opening of the Israeli embassy in Albania in 2012, the hosting of 3,000 Iranian Mujahideen e Khalq (MEK) members in 2016, the expulsion of the Iranian ambassador from the country in 2018, and the severing of diplomatic relations with Iran in 2022. Albania's enmity with Iran and its alignment with Israel have been accompanied by attacks against Sunni and Shia Islam in the country.

This article examines the evolving role of Bektashism in Albania, particularly its alignment with Israel and its implications for relations with the Islamic world, Iran, and Turkey. It explores how Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama, in collaboration with Bektashi leader Baba Edmond Brahimaj (Baba Mondë), has pursued policies that distance the Bektashis from its traditional Islamic institutions while fostering closer ties with Israel. The article highlights key events, such as the establishment of a Bektashi state in Tirana, the hosting of the Iranian Mujahideen (MEK) organization, and the expulsion of Iran's diplomatic mission, as part of a broader strategy to align Albania with Israeli and U.S. interests. It also discusses the persecution of Sunni and Shia Muslims in Albania, the influence of Gülenists in the Albanian Muslim Community, and the Bektashi sect's shift from an Iranian-version of Shia Islam to a pro-Israeli stance. The article argues that these developments reflect a deliberate effort to create a "Shia-Zionist" Islam that serves Israeli geopolitical goals, while isolating the Bektashis from the broader Muslim world. Critics, including Turkish and Albanian analysts, view the Bektashi state project as a tool of Israeli influence aimed at undermining Muslim unity and countering Iran's regional influence. The article concludes by questioning whether Bektashism is being weaponised as a political instrument against Islam, Iran, and Turkey in the Balkans.

1. Edi Rama and the Bektashi State

On September 12, 2024, when Israeli President Isaac Herzog visited Albania, Israel was at the peak of its genocide in Gaza. Awaiting him were two Muslim clerics: Baba Edmond Brahimaj, a former military officer installed as the head of the Bektashi Community of Albania in July 2011, and Taulant Bicaj, the Gülenist deputy chairman of the Albanian Muslim Community. These two clerics did something no other Islamic cleric in the Muslim world would dare to do: they met with the president of a state committing genocide in the Holy Land.

During the Israeli president's visit, Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama, in his speech, not only expressed his government's loyalty to Israel and its hostility toward Hamas, and indirectly Iran, but also invited Israelis from around the world to relocate from Israel and make Albania their home. Nine days after Herzog's visit, in an interview with *The New York Times*, Rama declared that his government had plans to create a Bektashi state in Albania. In the interview, the Bektashi state was described as a source of religious tolerance but one that would not be recognized by Iran.

Rama continued to push his bizarre idea of declaring a Bektashi state, and on September 23, 2024, he notified the United Nations of the creation of a sovereign Bektashi State in Tirana.

These declarations came after repeated attacks by the Prime Minister against Iran at the UN, defending the presence of the MEK terrorists in Albania. Rama mentioned the Bektashi state and the MEK before the Israeli lobby in the U.S., where Ambassador Deborah Lipstadt, the U.S. Special Envoy for Monitoring and Combating Antisemitism, decorated him.

2. Edi Rama Has Persecuted Muslims in Albania

Prime Minister Rama is notorious in Albania not only for the corruption of his governments but also for his hatred of Islam, Muslims, Iranians, and Turks. Unlike most Albanians, who come from a Muslim background, Rama's family is part of the Vlach-Catholic minority. In 2005, when Sali Berisha became Prime Minister of Albania, Rama attacked the head of the Democratic Party as an "Islamist" who was taking advice from people "sent by Gaddafi" (referring to

advisor Dritan Mishta, who had studied in Libya) or others "sent by Assad" (referring to Bashkim Gazidede, the former head of the Albanian Secret Service). Since September 11, 2013, when Rama became Prime Minister, he has repeatedly expressed hatred toward Albanian Muslims. Most of the ministers in his governments have been Christian. Some of his prominent advisors and friends include Maks Velo, Sandër Lleshi, Artan Shkreli, Ben Blushi, Fatos Nano, and Piro Misha—figures known in Albania for their hatred, Islamophobia, and xenophobia toward Muslims.

A few months after Rama became Prime Minister, his government ordered the arrest and imprisonment of dozens of Muslim believers across the country under the pretext of participating in the Syrian war. The police and the Ministry of Internal Affairs compiled lists of hundreds of Muslim believers, who were labelled extremists due to their religious and political beliefs. Under Rama's governance, the Ministry of Internal Affairs expanded the Counter-Terrorism Police Directorate with 104 officers—up from the previous 15. The Counter-Terrorism Police in Albania has been notorious in recent years for persecuting and harassing innocent Muslim believers. The arrests of Muslims, raids on mosques, and persecution by the counterterrorism police reached their peak in November 2016. At the request of Israel's Mossad, Edi Rama's government detained and mistreated dozens of Albanian and Kosovar Muslim believers across the country, falsely accusing them of planning a terrorist attack against the Israeli football team scheduled to play in Albania.

While targeting Sunni Muslims, in 2016, Edi Rama's government agreed to host 3,000 terrorist fighters from the Iranian Mujahideen-e Khalq (MEK) organization led by Maryam Rajavi. With the arrival of the MEK, Albania became a significant hub for MEK terrorism against Iran. From the Manza Camp and in collaboration with Israel's Mossad, the MEK launched successive attacks against Iranian presence in Albania, the Balkans, and Europe.

Responding to the demands of the MEK and Israel to expel Iran from Albania, Edi Rama's regime shut down all Iranian organizations, foundations, and schools operating in the country. The government froze the bank accounts of all Iranians living in Alba-

nia, except for those who agreed to serve the MEK's terrorist sect against their own country.

The peak of Rama's alignment with the MEK and Maryam Rajavi's sect came in 2018 when Albania expelled the Iranian ambassador and a diplomat, while allowing the MEK to [launch attacks from the Albanian territory](#) against Iran, organize disinformation campaigns, and attack Canadian, Albanian, and Iranian citizens who tried to leave or expose life inside the Manza MEK camp. For these attacks against Iran, Prime Minister Edi Rama was personally thanked by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and the U.S. government.

The attacks by Rama's government against Iranian and Shia organizations in Albania were paralleled by attacks against Sunni Islam. In 2020, Edi Rama's government [placed Imam Genci Balla in isolation](#) under the 41-Bis system¹, subjecting him to psychological torture, isolation, and denial of halal food. Another attack by Edi Rama's government against Islam during his tenure was his support for the Gülenist movement, which controls the Albanian Muslim Community, even though it was declared a terrorist movement by Turkey in 2016. Sunni Muslims have been excluded from the leadership of the Muslim Community, which is exclusively Gülenist.

Institutional attacks against Shia Islam in Albania culminated in 2022. In September of that year, Edi Rama's regime [severed diplomatic relations with Iran](#), closed the Iranian embassy in the country, and accused Iran without evidence of being behind the cyberattacks that hit Albania in July 2022. Rama's attacks against Iran were [supported and coordinated](#) with the U.S. and Israeli governments, which amplified his actions to fuel a massive disinformation campaign against Iran and its support for Palestine.

3. Baba Mondi, Isaac Herzog, and the Bektashi State Surprise

On September 12, 2024, when Israeli

President Isaac Herzog visited Albania, he reportedly had [a special meeting](#) with the self-proclaimed World Leader of the Bektashis, Baba Edmond Brahimaj. Baba Mondi's closeness to the Israelis has alarmed the Turkish embassy in Tirana. In March 2024, Turkish Ambassador Tayyar Kagan Atay publicly criticized Baba Mondi for his closeness to the Israelis, [publicly appealing](#) to him:

"We call on Baba Mondi to be cautious; Israel has killed more than 30,000 civilians."

But Baba Mondi, who [has been accused by Bektashi believers](#) of being a spy for the secret service and is [suspected of having criminal files](#) under investigation by SPAK (Special Structure Against Corruption and Organized Crime), has not distanced himself from his relationship with Israel.

A few days after the Israeli Prime Minister's visit, Prime Minister Rama and Baba Mondi announced the creation of the Bektashi state. According to former Albanian Foreign Minister Paskal Milo, the [goal of creating a Bektashi state](#) is part of a broader global approach and game in which Israel is a key player against the Muslim world. It is unknown whether Baba Mondi stands behind the creation of the Bektashi state or if he is merely a pawn in Israel's larger game against global Islam. After the news of the Bektashi state's creation was made public by Edi Rama, the World Bektashi Headquarters, which also seemed unprepared for this news, stated in a [media declaration](#) on September 22, 2024, that "they were not aware and were not consulted" about the creation of the state.

However, these declarations would change later when Baba Mondi shifted his stance and followed the Prime Minister's line.

4. Bektashism from the Turkish Gjëmë to the Iranian Revival

The news of the creation of the Bektashi state has stunned Albanian citizens as well as many Turks. Given that a large Bektashi

community lives in Turkey, where this sect of Islam originated, [Turkish media explained](#) this declaration by Prime Minister Rama and Baba Mondi as an Israeli project.

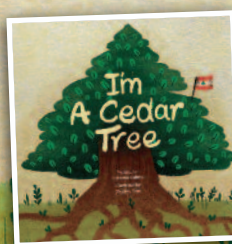
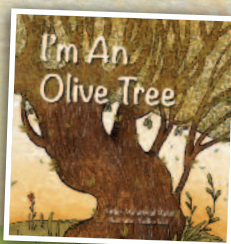
The Bektashi Dervish Order, which in Albania seeks to become a separate religion from Islam and be granted statehood, is a Shia-Sufi order practiced by a significant portion of Albania's Muslim population. This order is believed to have been founded by Haji Bektash Veli (d. around 1290), who lived in Anatolia in the second half of the 13th century. Bektashi legends claim that Haji Bektash Veli became the "patron saint" of the Janissaries during the reign of Sultan Orhan or Murad I. The sect played a significant role in the Islamization of Christians in the Balkans through the recruitment of Balkan people into the Janissary corps.

The *Muhib* of Bektashism and ideologue of Albanian nationalism, Sami Frashëri, claims that Haji Bektash Veli was a saint of Iranian origin from the city of Nishapur in the Khorasan region. After his death, Haji Bektash passed the order to Pir Balm Sultan (d. around 1520 CE), who organized the order and built the mother lodge (Pirevi) in Hacıbekta, Anatolia. Bektashism served as a religious order for the Ottoman military corps of the Janissaries. But in 1826, when Sultan Mahmud II destroyed the Janissaries, the Bektashis were also targeted. This blow to Bektashi theology is known as the "first *gjëmë* (calamity) of Bektashism." The second *gjëmë* came in 1925 when Turkish President Mustafa Kemal Atatürk banned all Sufi orders in the country, and as a result, the [Bektashis established their headquarters](#) in Albania in 1930. At the 1929 Congress of Prishtina in Skrapar, the Bektashis emphasized that they are a sect of Islam² which believes in the twelve Imams of Shia Islam, with [Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq](#) being their most important Imam.³ The connection of the Bektashis with the twelve Imams of Shia Islam can also be read in the Holy Decree given by Dede Ahmed Myftari to Dervish Reshat Bardhi on June 30, 1967, where Dede Ahmed states that the Bektashis [follow the line of Imams](#) from Imam Ali to Imam Mahdi through Hynqar Haji Bektash Veli,

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Seyyid Hussein Bahm Sultan, and the Dedes of Bektashism.

After the fall of communism and the revival of religions in Albania, the Bektashi sect was also revived. Being Shia in origin and anathematized as non-Muslim by Sunnis who were influenced by Wahhabism en masse after the fall of communism, the Bektashis built good relations with the Shia world. Shia, Bektashi and Alevi communities from Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Tajikistan, Iraq, Iran, etc., established relations with the Bektashis. In the post-communist transition years, the Bektashi community was massively sponsored by the Islamic Republic of Iran and Shia networks worldwide. Iranian institutions educated Bektashi children en masse, built lodges, and produced literature on Bektashism. Books such as *Qerbelaja* by Naim Frashëri, studies on Iranian literature and mysticism in Albania, Albanian Iranologists, and numerous conferences and publications were sponsored by institutions of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

The Islamic Republic of Iran [has supported](#) Bektashi *Babas*, dervishes, and *muhibs* by sponsoring their travels, pilgrimages, and education in Najaf, Karbala, Mashhad, Kufa, Qom, Tehran, and other global Shia centers. Baba Reshat Bardhi, Baba Edmond Brahimaj, and other *babas* were welcomed by personalities of the Islamic Republic, and Bektashism in Albania was revived with the help of Iranian sponsors. Many lodges in the country were reconstructed with Iranian money, and hundreds of Bektashi children were educated in Iran.

Given that after the 1990s, the Sunni Arab world focused on reviving Sunnism, while Turkey until 2002 neglected Islam in the Balkans and generally [refused to sponsor Bektashism](#) even after its return to the Balkans, Iranian sponsorship became one of the main sources that helped revive Bektashism and other tariqas in the Balkans, from Bosnia, Kosovo, Macedonia, and Albania.

5. Bektashism: from Iranian Shiaism to Israeli Zionism

The severing of relations with Iran was the culmination of a series of attacks that Rama's government undertook against Iranians in Albania. These attacks began in 2018 after the MEK's claim that Iran would attack the MEK and the Bektashis. The counterterrorism police froze the bank accounts of all Iranians who were not members of the MEK and expelled the Iranian ambassador from the country. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu personally thanked Edi Rama for these steps. The attacks against Iranians continued even in 2020 when the director of the Saadi Shirazi Foundation was expelled from the country, accused of being an agent, and the Foundation, along with the "Saadi" school, was closed.

[Iranian influence on post-communist Bektashi Islam](#) has worried Americans and

Israelis, as can be read in many writings by Western orientalis. After the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq and the weakening of Sunni Islam's influence as a result of the 'war on terror', Americans also attacked Shia Islam, which was seen as part of Iranian influence. In Albania, they experimented with installing the Gülenists at the head of Sunni Muslim Community, while working to distance the Bektashis from Iran and its version of Shia Islam.

While in Shia-Bektashi doctrine, Israelis are seen as a cursed and oppressive people against the Palestinians, Americans began working with the Bektashis in the early 2000s, building relations between the Bektashis and Israelis. In 2007, Baba Mondi was invited to Jerusalem, a visit [possibly sponsored by USAID](#).

Relations between the Bektashis and Israel [progressed further](#) after the opening of the Israeli embassy in Tirana in August 2012. At a time when the Bektashi Community's relations with Iran were very close, Israel began public relations with Baba Mondi. In February 2013, Baba Mondi [sought Israel's help](#) for his sect. After the embassy's opening, Israel began collaborating with a number of Albanians who had previously worked with Iran and the Islamic world. One example is [Professor Shaban Sinani](#), who in 2014 published the book *Albanians and Hebrews*, was promoted in Israeli media. For this book, Sinani was decorated with the "Gratitude of the State of Israel" for his monographic study (2014). Shaban Sinani is the perfect example of Israeli influence replacing Iranian influence. From 1995 to 2021, [Sinani worked for the Iranian Saadi Shirazi Foundation](#), initially publishing the *Shahnameh* in Albanian and later as the chief editor of the magazine *Perla*, which promoted Iranian-Albanian cultural ties.

Relations between the Bektashis and Iran were destroyed after the allocation of the MeK in Albania. This Iranian terrorist organization would build its paramilitary camp in Manza, Durrës. After their settlement the MeK were used by Americans and Israelis to weaken Iranian influence in Albania. Thanks to their pressure and massive process of disinformation against Iran, Albania [expelled the Iranian ambassador](#) and eventually closed the Iranian embassy in the country.

The first incident where the MEK served as an Israeli tool against Iran occurred on March 22, 2018, when the Bektashi community organized a congress on Imam Ali, to which two Iranian journalists were invited. The MEK used the [presence of the Iranian journalists](#) to claim that Iran was planning a terrorist attack in Albania against them. The [false news spread by the MEK](#), which blackmailed the Bektashi community and Iran, was disseminated by different MEK officials in Albania. This false flag terrorist incident, created by the MEK and [amplified by the Israelis](#), seems to be one of the last instances where Baba Mondi and the Bektashis organized an event in collabora-

tion with Iranians.

Baba Mondi's relations with Iran and Israel changed significantly after 2019. Israelis began [several visits](#) to the Bektashi World Headquarters. In July 2019, the Vice President of the American Jewish Congress [decorated Baba Mondi](#). In October 2019, Baba Mondi declared that the Iranian journalists he had invited [might have had other \(i.e., terrorist\) intentions](#). In December 2019, after Albania was hit by a powerful earthquake, [Israel sent a team from the IDF](#) to inspect the situation at the World Headquarters.

The collaboration of the Bektashis with Israelis continued even in 2020. In July, Baba Mondi and the Gülenist head of the Sunni Community of Albania, [participated in the inauguration](#) of the Holocaust Memorial in Tirana in the presence of Ambassador Noah Gendler.

In October, the Bektashi World Headquarters reported a meeting between [Baba Mondi and the Chief Rabbi of Albania](#), Yoel Kaplan. Baba Mondi's relations with Yoel Kaplan, [who was initially rejected by the Jewish community](#) of Tirana, became very intense, as we will see below. On October 30, Yoel stated that he had [created an international organization](#) called "Peace-Shalom" with Baba Mondi, which would work for peace and goodness.

In December 2020, Baba Mondi was [interviewed by journalist Benny Ziffer of Haaretz](#), who asked him, among other things, about the Bektashis' relations with Turkey and Iran.

March 2021, Mondi was visited by Israeli Ambassador Noah Gendler, where the Bektashis discussed possible Israeli investments in Bektashi assets and a visit by Baba Mondi to Israel [to meet with one of the rabbis of Israel](#), whose name was not specified. In May, Baba Mondi [hosted an iftar for Ramadan](#), to which Israeli Ambassador Noah Gal Gendler was invited. This iftar with the Israeli ambassador was [denounced in a public](#) letter by many Albanian imams, who denounced the Gülenist Imam Lauren Luli and Baba Edmond Brahimaj for hosting a "shameful iftar" with the Israeli ambassador. A few days after this denunciation, Baba Mondi met with an Israeli army colonel and the director of the American Jewish Committee, Avital Leibovich, where the [Bektashi World Headquarters declared](#): "Our friendship with the United States and Israel will be continuous, and the World Bektashi Headquarters has always its doors open to these friendly states."

In October, the World Headquarters was visited by former Israeli Knesset Deputy Speaker Hilik Bar, where Baba Mondi [presented to his Israeli guest](#) "several economic, cultural, and social projects that are feasible with the assets of the World Bektashi Headquarters, which further contribute to the economic and cultural development of both countries and shared beliefs."

In 2022, the Bektashis' relations with Israel and against Iran took a new direction. First, the visits of Iranians and Bektashi ac-

tivities with Iran disappeared from the website of the World Bektashi Headquarters (the year is unknown).

In July 2022, when Albania was hit by cyberattacks, Edi Rama's government began to sever relations with Iran. Initially, in July, the Albanian government cancelled a meeting of Maryam Rajavi's MeK [scheduled for July](#) at their paramilitary camp in Manza. In July, the Special Structure Against Corruption and Organized Crime (SPAK), at the request of the Special Prosecutor's Office, raided the offices of the anti-MeK Asila association in Tirana and by accusing 20 Iranians who had abandoned the MeK and were [refusing to fight against Iran](#), of "espionage in service of the Iranian regime."

Repeated cyberattacks [were used as justification](#) by Prime Minister Rama to sever diplomatic relations with Iran and close the Iranian embassy on September 7, 2022. A few days after the closure of the Iranian embassy, hackers from the group "Homeland Justice" [published the emails of Gledis Nano](#), the head of the counterterrorism police. In these emails, which the Albanian judiciary banned from publication, one could read how the counterterrorism police coordinated its attacks against Albanian Sunni Muslims, Palestinians, and Iranians in the country in collaboration with Israel's Mossad, the U.S. embassy. These emails documented the collaboration of the Iranian MEK with counterterrorism police against those Iranians who had deserted MEK and were refusing to fight against Iran on behalf of Maryam Rajavi's group.

After breaking with Iran and making unfounded accusations that Iran was behind the cyberattacks, in October, [Edi Rama's government sought Israel's help](#) to deal with the cyberattacks.

Meanwhile, in September 2022, [Baba Mondi participated in the welcoming ceremony](#) of the new Israeli Ambassador, Galit Peleg, to Albania. At this ceremony, Baba Mondi wished:

"success to Ambassador Galit in fulfilling her diplomatic mission in Albania and expressed his desire to further strengthen relations between the Holy Bektashi Order and the State of Israel."

Two months later, in November, Israeli Ambassador Gali Peleg visited the World Headquarters, where [she declared](#):

"The highest considerations for the Bektashis, the World Bektashi Headquarters, and especially for the World Grandfather, appreciating the mutual relations between the State of Israel, the Bektashi Community, and Albania over the years."

In December, Baba Mondi, together with Prime Minister Edi Rama, participated in the Hanukkah celebration with Chief Rabbi Yoel Kaplan.

In September 2022, when Prime Minister Edi Rama closed the Iranian embassy in the country, Ervin Karamuco, an analyst close to the counterterrorism police and Albanian secret service, recycled in the media the MEK's claim of Iranian terrorist attacks and [declared that](#) Baba Mondi and Pandeli

Majko had been targeted for assassination by Iran.

A few weeks after this declaration, on December 14, 2022, the Bektashi Community, in collaboration with other religious communities in the country, sent a letter to the President of the Republic of Albania, Bajram Begaj, and Prime Minister Edi Rama, where four religious communities—Catholics, Orthodox, Protestants, and Sunni Muslims—expressed their agreement that the World Bektashi Headquarters should enjoy a special international status⁴.

The Bektashis' relations with Israelis continued normally in 2023. In March, Am-

The Albanian Muslim Community is the only Muslim community in the world that has not condemned the genocide in Gaza. The Gülenists in the Albanian Muslim Community and the Bektashi World Headquarters, led by Baba Mondi, have regularly demonstrated their alliance and friendship with Israel, without showing any regret for the killings of Muslim children in Palestine.

bassador Peleg [thanked Baba Mondi](#) and declared that "relations between Israel and the World Bektashi Center will always be fraternal, for the good of peace and religious freedoms." On March 28, a delegation of Israeli students [visited the lodge](#). On March 31, the World Headquarters and the [Israeli embassy hosted an iftar](#) for Ramadan, in the presence of Ambassador Galit Peleg. In May, the Bektashi Headquarters [participated in the celebration](#) of the 75th anniversary of the creation of the State of Israel. Meanwhile, a day earlier, the Israeli Ambassador, with a group of clerics and businessmen, Tirana Mayor Erion Veliaj, and the Mayor of Meltepe-Istanbul municipality, Ali Kiliç, [surprised Baba Mondi](#) by celebrating his birthday at the Plaza restaurant in Tirana.

On October 4, 2023, Munir Kazmir, Vice President of the American Jewish Congress, [visited the Continental Hospital](#) owned by the Bektashi World Headquarters. Meanwhile, three days later, on October 7, 2023, when Hamas attacked Israel, [Baba Mondi sent a message](#) to the Israeli embassy, where the Bektashi World Headquarters condemned Hamas and expressed support for Israel. Throughout the 18 months that Israel has committed genocide in Gaza and the entire world condemned Israeli crimes, and Iran and the Axis of Resistance came to the aid of the Palestinians, the Bektashi World Headquarters has not made any statements

in defence of the Palestinians or any condemnations against Israel. On the contrary, the Bektashis' relations with Israel continued as before.

During Ramadan/March 2024, when Muslims in Gaza suffered from starvation due to the Israeli blockade, the Bektashi World Headquarters [organized a Ramadan iftar](#), in which the Israeli Ambassador Galit Peleg participated. The portal Mexhlis.com denounced the meetings of the Gülenist head of the Albanian Muslim Community and the Bektashi World Headquarters with [Baba Mondi, writing](#):

"The Albanian Muslim Community is the only Muslim community in the world that has not condemned the genocide in Gaza. The Gülenists in the Albanian Muslim Community and the Bektashi World Headquarters, led by Baba Mondi, have regularly demonstrated their alliance and friendship with Israel, without showing any regret for the killings of Muslim children in Palestine."

In April, the Bektashi World Headquarters was visited by Israeli Tourism Minister Haim Katz and Ambassador Galit Peleg, where both parties called for the release of Hamas hostages but [said nothing about Palestinian prisoners](#) held captive by Israel.

6. The Bektashi State Welcomed by Israel

The Bektashi World Headquarters' relations with Israel continued normally throughout 2024. On September 12, 2024, Israeli President Isaac Herzog visited Tirana, [where he met with a Gülenist cleric and Baba Mondi](#), the head of the Bektashis. Herzog's visit and his meeting with Baba Mondi and the Gülenist deputy chairman of the Albanian Muslim Community, Taulant Bicaj, sparked massive online protests and reactions on the streets of Tirana. Imams and Muslim [believers denounced](#) Baba Mondi and the deputy chairman of the Albanian Muslim Community as collaborators with the Israeli genocide. But most of the attacks were directed against the Albanian Muslim Community, which is controlled by the Fethullah Gülen movement, [while criticism of Baba Mondi](#) and the Bektashis was secondary.

A few days after the scandal of Baba Mondi's meeting with the Israeli president, on September 21, 2024, in an [interview with The New York Times](#), Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama stunned both domestic and international public opinion by announcing the creation of a Bektashi state as part of the fight against extremism.

The Prime Minister's announcement of the Bektashi state was formalized during Rama's speech at the United Nations on September 22, 2024, where he notified the UN General Assembly of the transformation of the World Bektashi Muslim Center [into an independent state](#) within the capital city of Tirana "as a center of moderation, tolerance, and peaceful coexistence." Rama's declaration came parallel to his attacks against Iran at the meeting of the Movement to

Combat Antisemitism, where the [Prime Minister was decorated](#) by Ambassador Deborah Lipstadt, the U.S. Special Envoy for Monitoring and Combating Antisemitism.

Rama's declaration of the creation of the Bektashi state was met with outrage by Albanian public opinion. Muslim and civil organizations protested in front of the Albanian Muslim Community headquarters, [denouncing the Israeli genocide](#) in Gaza and the "Bektashi state." Lawyer Altin Goxhaj sued Prime Minister Edi Rama in SPAK⁵ for treason for creating the Bektashi state. He declared that the Bektashi state was a project of Zionist secret services aiming to divide Albania. He [declared that](#) they want: "To create a state for the Bektashis; a state for the Iranians [MEK]; a state for the Palestinians; and in this way, erase Albania."

Meanwhile, the leader of the Albanian opposition, Sali Berisha, [called the project](#): "a hostile attempt to divide the Muslim faith in Albania... a stab in the back of the Muslim faith in Albania... The creation of a state with extraterritoriality in the Tirana headquarters and 170 lodges as Edi Rama preaches is a terrible fragmentation of Albanian territory, which will never happen."

Former Albanian Foreign Minister Paskal Milo [declared that Israel may be](#) behind the idea of creating the Bektashi state:

"All this must have been a reason why the President of Israel, during his visit to Tirana, had a special meeting with Baba Mondi. It has not happened before that heads of state and government go and meet the Grandfather of the Bektashis. I do not know if it has ever happened, it has never been part of the protocol."

Milo added: "Israel is certainly interested because of its traditional enmity with the Arab-Muslim world. It is interested in Muslim communities not having unity. If there were united, it would always be to its detriment."

The Bektashi state provoked many denunciations from Sunni Muslims and even the Bektashis. The Sunni Muslim Community [issued a statement](#) distancing itself from the Bektashi state, writing: "In this context, we express our concern regarding public statements that speak of 'modern Islam' or 'Albanian Islam' or even an Islamic state within our republic."

The Bektashi state was also rejected by Baba Eliton Pashaj from the Albanian lodge in Detroit, who said that the Bektashi Community does not need a state and that Baba Mondi [violated the statute](#) of the World Bektashi Headquarters by making this decision.

The statements of Baba Eliton, who is well-connected to the Bektashi community in Turkey, show the division occurring within the tariqa. This division or heresy of creating a Bektashi state, besides being welcomed by Israeli circles, is causing concerns not only in Iran but also in Turkey, where the sect originated. The statement of Turkish Ambassador Tayyar Kagan Atay, in which he called on Baba Mondi to [distance himself from Israel](#), shows the official concern that Ankara has about these ties.

Turkish media [denounced the declaration](#) of the Bektashi state as a plot by Israel and George Soros. In fact, the Turkish administration's distancing from the Bektashi World Headquarters was first noticed in March 2024 when the [embassy organized a Ramadan iftar](#) with the Bektashi Headquarters in Elbasan and Haxhi Baba Ardit Selmani, who is known as an opponent of Baba Mondi's pro-Israeli line. Many Bektashis have started to privately label Baba Mondi as the Yazid of Bektashis.

The declaration of the Bektashi state finds Albanian Bektashism isolated from the Islamic world. Being distanced from Iran since the MeK incident of March 2018 and the recent friction with Turkey, has seen the Bektashis consolidate their ties with Israel.

Even Greek media concurred with the Turkish critique. *Protothema* [described Rama's efforts](#) to create the Bektashi state as a flirtation with Israel and linked to the decoration he received from the Movement to Combat Antisemitism in the U.S.

The declaration of the Bektashi state finds Albanian Bektashism isolated from the Islamic world. Being distanced from Iran since the MeK incident of March 2018 and the recent friction with Turkey, has seen the Bektashis consolidate their ties with Israel. In his diplomatic offensive for the propagation of the Bektashi state, Baba Mondi was accompanied by Rabbi Yoel Kaplan, with whom on January 16, 2025, he visited the Pope [to inform him](#) about the Bektashi state. Meanwhile, on October 13, 2024, the Israeli newspaper *The Jerusalem Post* published an interview with Baba Mondi [titled](#): "Religious leader of Albania: 'I consider myself a brother of the people of Israel.'" The article echoed the creation of the Bektashi "Vatican" in Tirana and portrayed the Bektashis as good Muslims who love Israel.

Conclusion

While Sunni Muslims have been persecuted for reasons ranging from sympathy for the Syrian war to football matches with Israel, and the organization controlling Albania's mosques has been placed under Gülenist control, Shia Muslims have been forced not only to distance themselves from Iran but now, Prime Minister Rama has declared that he will create a Vatican like - Bektashi state which will be hostile to Iran,

Hamas, Turkey and political Islam and friendly to Israel.

In 2023–2025, while Israel committed genocide in Gaza and most of the international community condemned Israel, the Bektashis of Albania sided with Israel. Isolated from the Islamic world, Baba Edmond Brahimaj, a former military officer and member of the Albanian secret service, has turned the Bektashi sect into one of the few currents in the Islamic world that dares to side with a genocidal anti-Muslim state like Israel.

The Chief Rabbi of Albania, Yoel Kaplan, who boasts of his participation in battles against Muslims in Gaza, is seen standing behind Baba Mondi in his meetings with the Pope or during his visits to Israeli institutions. Rabbi Yoel Kaplan is the strongest and the only cleric in Albania who supports the idea of the Bektashi state.

Many analysts, religious scholars and diplomats suspect that Israel is using the isolation of the Bektashis from the Islamic world to create a new Islam. A Shia-Zionist Islam, which will serve both Prime Minister Edi Rama for his political survival in the West with the support of the Zionist lobby, and Israel which desperately needs to create a new version of Islam which stands against the liberating Islamic theology which Iran, parts of the Muslim Brotherhood and Palestinians propagate and which seeks the liberation of Palestine from Israeli occupation and genocide.

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¹ The 41 bis regime, also known as the hard prison regime, was introduced [into Albania in 2018](#), modelled on the system of that name in Italy. These measures were formulated to deal with organized crime. Prisoners (including those on remand) affected by these measures, would have limited and supervised family visits, no or few visits from non-family; one phone call a month; all correspondence except with Om-budsmen, monitored, and a variety of other measures highly violating of basic rights or easily abused to violate a prisoner's rights.

² Kalicani, Selim. *Bektashizmi si Sekt Mistik Islam*. Tirana: [Publisher], [Year], 190–196.

³ Frashëri, Naim. *Fletorja e Bektashinjet*. Bucharest: [Publisher], 1896, 9.

⁴ Letër e Komuniteteve Fetare Drejtuar KM Edi Rama dhe Presidentit Bajram Begaj, 14/12/2022.

⁵ Special Structure against Corruption and Organized Crime (SPAK), *Struktura e Posaçme Kundër Korrupsionit dhe Krimin të Organizuar* is a judicial entity tasked with investigating organised crime in Albania.

The Race Against Racism

The late **Imam Achmad Cassiem**, leader of the anti-apartheid resistance group Qibla in South Africa, prepared this paper for Islamic Human Rights Commission to present at the UN World Conference Against Racism in 2001. Almost 25 years later his analysis of social breakdown based on hatred of the other exemplified in the cause of Palestine, as well as the Qur'anic alternative of social harmony resonate in a time of polarisation and genocide.

In the name of Allah, Most Gracious,
Most Merciful

*"And cover not Truth with falsehood,
nor conceal the Truth when ye know
what it is."*

[Quran 2:42]

I Introduction

The title of this paper, THE RACE AGAINST RACISM, indicates both the solution to the problem of racism and its various manifestations, as well as the urgency with which this problem should be tackled.

Humankind is facing a crisis: this means that they are in an emergency, a time of acute danger; it also means that they are at a turning point in their existence, a decisive moment.

The Palestinian people being part of humankind, are not exempted from this crisis but actually experience it more acutely. For them every moment is a decisive moment.

But perhaps it is better to say that humankind is facing a series of crises. For apart from the much publicized economic and political crises, we also face an intellectual crisis, a moral crisis as well as a spiritual crisis.

A universally accepted scientific principle is that in order to provide a solution, solutions or the solution to a problem, we must first identify the problem, and then formulate the problem correctly.

We can simplify our approach recognizing different types of problems. For example:

- (i) factual problems
- (ii) attitudinal problems
- (iii) conceptual problems

Factual problems are only resolved by placing the facts on the table. Attitudinal problems on the other hand, are not necessarily resolved by placing the facts on the table. Attitudinal problems can only be resolved by placing the facts on the table and educating oneself and others as to their nature.

Conceptual problems are problems of understanding. One may have the facts and the correct attitude and still not understand but they still remain pre-requisites for correct understanding.

Nobody questions or doubts what the practical implications of Zionism are; occupation of Palestinian lands; murder, assassination, torture, genocide, war, etc. All of it is well documented. All of it reads like a comprehensive encyclopaedia on oppression.

On this base we can then resolve the following:

- (i) Is Zionism the cause of the problem or is it simply the symptom of a bigger problem? If merely a symptom, then a symptom of what?

Colonialism, Imperialism, religious bigotry? etc.

ii) Is Zionism the cause of the problem or is Zionism merely a contributory factor to the problem; Zionism aggravates the problem? What then is the real problem?

The paradigm shift

What is the history of Human Rights?
What are Human Rights?

Who determines or legislates Human Rights?

What is the purpose of having Human Rights?

How can Human Rights be enforced?

Can we have Human Rights without Human Obligations?


What is the "true nature" of Human Rights?


On 10th December 1948 the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted and proclaimed the UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS. In the PREAMBLE the following clauses occur:

"Whereas disregard of and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind..."

MUSLIM UNITY

With struggles for liberation still ongoing around the world, the late **Imam Cassiem** provides some context for Islamic activism within all of them.





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Understanding Zionism as Racism

“Whereas it is essential, if man is not to be compelled to have recourse, as a last resort, to rebellion against tyranny and oppression, that human rights should be protected by the rule of law ...”

“Now therefore the General Assembly proclaims: The Universal Declaration of Human Rights as a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations, to the end that every individual and every organ of society, keeping this Declaration constantly in mind, shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms and by progressive measures, national and international, to secure their universal and effective recognition and observance..”

It is quite obvious that every single article of the thirty articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights has been violated by the Zionist regime in Israel. And in spite of this Israel remains a member of the U.N.

We can only assume that a different paradigm applies to Israel because more than 300 resolutions have been passed against Israel and none have been enforced.

Choice of paradigms

Paradigms are models or patterns of thought; they are also sets of rules and regulations which establish intellectual and normative boundaries; they therefore filter our incoming experiences and allow us to either be successful or unsuccessful in solving the problematics that face us.

Paradigms may have a positive effect or a negative effect on resolving problems. The Apartheid Paradigm had a negative effect on all facets of life; social, political, economic, military, intellectual, moral, emotional, spiritual, etc.

It is our contention that the Zionist Paradigm has an even more pernicious effect than the Apartheid Regime.

Humankind, generally speaking has three universal paradigms they can choose from:

(i) The whole of life is sacred and under the sovereignty of the Creator

(ii) Life is not sacred at all, and there is no being called the Creator.

(iii) Part of the life is sacred, and part is not sacred.

The Islamic Paradigm (Qur’anic Paradigm) asserts that the whole of life is sacred. The Creator is One (not a mathematical one but existential one) therefore His creation is one; humankind is one therefore there is one set of divinely ordained universal laws. Those that govern our involuntary actions we know in secular culture as science. For those laws that govern our voluntary actions, from an Islamic perspective are known as Shariah.

“We make no distinction between one and another of His apostles”.

[Qur’an 2:285]

Muslims therefore accept all the Prophets including the ones which the Jews say they believe in. It is therefore important to listen to Jews saying that we must not conflate Zionism with Judaism. Our struggle is not against Jews and Judaism but against Zionism.

It has been correctly observed that the main function of the dominant ideology or set of beliefs is to make the rule or misrule of the dominant class seem legitimate; and if it cannot be legitimised at least legalised.

It has also been correctly noted that social reality is distorted because it is constructed by the ruling class to maintain its dominant and privileged position.

The fact that we have a conflict of perspectives does not necessarily mean we have a conflict of interests.

“Truth alone makes free. There is no “why” in respect of Truth, for it is over intelligence, over freedom, our very being.” [F. SCHUON]

II What is racism?

Racism propounds that humankind is divided into many races, they are different and unequal, and one race is superior to the others. This is the case with Nazism, Herrenvolkism in South Africa, as well as Zionism.

It is clear that they rely on prescriptive definitions to underpin their ideology. It is our contention that we develop a better understanding of ‘racism’ if we distinguish it from ‘racialism’. Racism is statutory, based and enforced through the law by the judiciary, the police and the army.

Racialism is discrimination on the basis of race but not based on statutes - or enforced by law. It can only be overcome with an overdose of education and moral qualities.

It is self-evident that Nazi Germany, the Apartheid Regime and Zionist Israel are examples of racist regimes.

“It is my considered opinion that the State of Israel is a RACIST STATE IN THE FULL MEANING OF THIS TERM: in this state people are discriminated against, in the most permanent and legal way and in the most important areas of life, ONLY BECAUSE OF THEIR ORIGIN. This racist discrimination began in Zionism and is carried out today mainly in co-operation with the institutions of the Zionist movement.” [Dr Israel Shahak, *The Racist Nature of Zionism and of the Zionist State of Israel*; Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 5th November 1975]

Multi-racism

Multi-racism propounds that humankind consists of many races, they are different but they are equal. In what respects are they different, and in what respects are they equal? Discrimination still takes place on the basis of their differences

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and not on the basis of their equality.

Multi-racism is simply racism in camouflage. Multi-racialism is a non-statutory variety of discrimination based on race.

Non-racism

Non-racism is merely a disposition, an attitude, a negation of a racist attitude. Many otherwise clear thinkers fall into this conceptual confusion by saying - "We are non-racist, therefore all races are welcome".

"To say that race is a myth and that in our country there are no Africans, Coloureds and Indians, but only blacks, is to play with words. The main ethnological divisions of mankind are acknowledged by bourgeois and Marxist anthropologists and those from the so-called uncommitted world. People can observe them with the naked eye. Physical characteristics - the colour of the skin and the texture of the hair - can be observed by merely looking at a painting of Chaka and one of Napoleon, at Tambo and Dadoo, Kotane and Reggie September. In addition to the colour of their skins and the texture of their hair they differ in historical origins and in their culture and languages. What is a myth is the theory that there is a pure race, for miscegenation has taken place throughout the world since the dawn of history. It has also affected this country, and many leading white families who are so obsessed with the idea of racial purity are themselves of mixed blood. Science and experience have also shown that no race is inherently superior to others, and this myth has been equally exploded whenever blacks and whites are given equal opportunity for development. But race as such exists in the world, and in our country there is nothing wrong with using the terms African,

Coloured and Indian in appropriate cases.

"Linked with the above issue is the charge that, far from developing non-racial thinking, the Congress structure - which embraces separate organisations, for the four different population groups - entrenches racial thinking since it is a perpetual reminder that we differ from one another." [Nelson Mandela, *Reflections in prison*, edited by Mac Maharaj, Zebra and Robben Island Museum, 2001]

Aspects of affirmative action are also racism: for one has to affirm one's racial classification as introduced under the Apartheid regime, and by doing so one also affirms one's own stupidity. This is simply reproducing racism.

Many so-called non-racist positions in practice become multi-racist positions.

Anti-racism

Anti-racism is the only genuine, authentic, potent and revolutionary antidote for the poison of racism. Racism and anti-racism cannot co-exist; neither in the same physical space nor in the same intellectual and moral orbit. We have to combat racism and racialism in all their forms. From an Islamic point of view this is not the point of being tolerant but the point of principle. Because the creator is one, the Prophets are from one source.

These revolutionary positions are clearly discernible in the two primary sources of law in Islam, that is, the Qur'an and Sunnah (practices of the Prophet).

The Qur'an it is repeated, was revealed not for Arabs but for all mankind.

"O mankind! Reverence your Guardian Lord, who created you from a single person, created, of like nature, his mate, and from them twain scattered (like seeds) countless

men and women; - Reverence God, through Whom ye demand your mutual (rights), and (reverence) the wombs (that bore you): for God ever watches over you."

[Qur'an 4:1]

"O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise each other). Verily the most honoured of you in the sight of God is (he who is) the most righteous of you, and God has full knowledge and is well acquainted (with all things)."

[Qur'an 49:13]

In the Prophet's last sermon he specifically states:

"There is no superiority for an Arab over a non-Arab, nor for a non-Arab over an Arab; nor for white over black, nor for black over white. You are all the descendants of Adam (the prototype of human being) and he was created out of dust." (Circa 632 AD)

In this Hadith the Prophet (S.A.W.) clearly outlaws any claim to superiority on the basis of nationality, tribe, language or race. He also condemns reverse discrimination. This is said at the end of his mission.

And at the beginning of his mission this is also key. It can be seen in the original companions of the Prophet e.g. Abu Bakr one of the richest Arab Quraishite merchants, Bilal, an Abyssinian slave, Ibn Zaid, a freed Yemenite slave and Shoaib, a Roman. On one occasion Abu Dharr al-Ghaffari, an Arab companion, called Bilal the "son of a black woman" and the Prophet immediately reprimanded him and made him apologize to Bilal. This is a clear demonstration of the principle of anti-racialism.

Racism does not merely cause or

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Understanding Zionism as Racism

contribute towards or aggravate violence, terrorism and oppression. Racism is an act of violence; racism is an act of terrorism, racism is oppression.

Is Zionism racism?

We cannot but conclude that it is. Orthodox Zionists state that one is only a Jew if one's mother is a Jew; Liberal Zionists state that one is a Jew when either the mother or father is a Jew.

Superiority is also claimed on the basis of being God's chosen race, God's chosen people.

III Is the Zionist state an apartheid state?

It is not merely an Apartheid State (i.e. a Racist state) it is worse; for the following reasons:

SIMILARITIES BETWEEN ISRAEL AND THE APARTHEID STATE

1. both are settler colonial states
2. both are supported economically and militarily by superpowers
3. both were established in 1948, that is after World War II and after the establishment of the United Nations
4. both were and are pro-West
5. both are nuclear powers and co-operated in this regard
6. both are member states of the United Nations
7. both are racist - Jews are superior to goyim; Whites are superior to blacks
8. both used religion as a moral base for their racist politics
9. both are chauvinistic and expansionistic
10. etc., etc.

Differences between Israel and the apartheid state

1. (a) The Apartheid State evolved over a period of around 300

years culminating in the victory of the National Party under Dr. D. F. Malan in 1948, who also happened to be the first foreign head of government to visit Israel.

(b) The Zionist State of Israel was imposed on a defenceless people over a very short period of time and culminated in the Declaration of the State of Israel on 15th May 1948 in broad daylight and under the spotlight of the United Nations.

(a) The Apartheid Regime did not claim that the United Nations created it, nor did the United Nations create it.

(b) The Zionist State of Israel claims it is the creation of the U.N. in accordance with Resolution 181 (II) of 28th November 1947. The truth of the matter is that Israel is not the creation of the U.N. The U.N. was faced with a de facto Israeli State - and criminally recognized it in violation of its own Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The following must be borne in mind:

(i) It is debatable whether the U.N. was in fact competent under international law to partition or otherwise dispose of the territory of Palestine against the wishes of the clear majority of its inhabitants.

(ii) The partition resolution did not by any means command general support outside the Arab world. It was adopted by a vote of 33 to 13 with 10 abstentions. The U.K. abstained.

(iii) Pressure was applied by the U.S.A. on China, Ethiopia, Greece, Haiti, Liberia and the Philippines. Greece alone did not succumb to its pressure.

(iv) At the time (i.e. 1947) the U.N. was far from being representative of the whole world community. We have no doubt that if it was put to the vote today, it will not be approved.

(v) Having adopted the resolution, the General Assembly of the U.N. did nothing effective to carry it out; neither did the Security Council nor any other unit of the U.N.

(vi) The British withdrew its forces. Arab armies intervened to support the Palestinians but were defeated. Israel ended up with 80 % of the territory instead of 57 % allocated to it in terms of the partition plan.

(vii) The creators of Israel were the terrorists of the Haganah, Irgun and Pamach.

(viii) Israel's ambassador to Pretoria, Uri Oren boasted a few years ago that 28 % of the soldiers who fought to establish the state of Israel came from South Africa.

We need to realize that all of these soldiers were classified white under the Apartheid Regime and were defenders and upholders and defenders of those who committed crimes against humanity (as defined by the U.N. General Assembly) were the very same forces who helped to establish the Zionist State of Israel.

Apartheid was declared a crime against humanity by the United Nations, this means that the Apartheid regime was part of an international crime syndicate which aided and abetted crimes against humanity.

It stands to reason that it was this same international crime syndicate which conspired, aided and abetted in the creation of the Zionist State of Israel, and subsequently in its defence.

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(ix) It is against this background that we must view the fact that in May 1949 Israel applied for admission to the U.N. On 11th May 1949 the General Assembly in Resolution 273 admitted Israel as a member.

3. (a) The Apartheid State's claim to the land is based on "we arrived here first; it was empty space." Yes, there was a lot of space but it wasn't empty.

(b) The Zionist state of Israel lays its claim to the land on the following basis:

History and the Bible provide the justification for the modern state of Israel. Although Biblical arguments are used to justify claims by Zionists these have never been accepted by any government or international body outside Israel. And for that matter not even by all Jews.

This is obvious in terms of the total Jewish population in the world which is approximately 14 million. There are more Jews living in the U.S.A. than in Israel. In other words, the Jews themselves don't believe in the prophecies which are supposed to be the foundation as well as the justification for the establishment of the Zionist State of Israel.

What was supposed to be the solution to the problem of the Jews in the diaspora has become their nightmare.

V Conclusion

There are four grounds on which Zionism deserves to be criticized and condemned.

1. The systematic deception which has been practised by the Zionists not only against the world's population but especially against the Jews themselves.

2. The pretension that Jews wherever they may live, owe allegiance to Zionism and the Zionist State of

Israel, and making Jews feel guilty for the atrocities committed by the Nazis. Why should the victims feel guilty?

3. The blatant disregard for the rights of others which Zionism has implanted. This disregard and violation is itself an act of injustice and a threat to peace. And the fact that this disregard is purportedly in accordance with religious principles makes it even worse.

4. The cruelty and injustice (massacres, genocide, assassinations, torture and general inhumanity and brutality) which the pursuit of Zionism has inflicted on the Palestinians.

The manifestation of Zionism we have observed since the 1940s to date is definitely not that of a national liberation movement to free Jews in the diaspora from Western and Christian persecution and to promote Jewish national renaissance.

The manifestation of Zionism we are seeing is that of a colonizing, expansionist, racist settler movement which is hell bent at dispossessing an indigenous population by any means necessary and supplanting them with Jews.

In the words of Golda Meir on 15th June 1969: "There was no such THING as Palestinians. It was not as though there was a Palestinian people in Palestine considering itself as a Palestinian people . . .

They did not exist." [Sunday Times 15/6/1969]

The Zionist State of Israel does not conform to international secular principles, values, norms and ideals. This is evident in its violation of every single article in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

But neither does the Zionist State of Israel conform to universal religious principles, values, norms and ideals.

Israel is a law unto itself; a rogue state

with the full backing of the U.S.A. to the extent that the world has been prevented from even discussing Zionism.

We sincerely hope that the respected international delegations as well as the South African delegations take a resolute stand against this monstrous political entity and do everything in our power to see that the Palestinian people are allowed to return to their usurped land and exercise their right to self-determination, freedom, justice and peace.

Justice precedes peace, for peace emanates from justice.

Imam Achmad Cassiem

was an anti-apartheid activists, imprisoned at the age of 17 on Robben Island. He suffered further imprisonment as well as banning orders under the South African apartheid regime. He led the resistance group Qibla, which worked broadly under the umbrella of the Pan African Congress, the Western Cape Division of which he led in 2005. He also served as its Secretary General at National level. He became an advisor to Islamic Human Rights Commission in 2001, when he joined its delegation to Durban, South Africa for the fourth UN Conference Against Racism. He passed away in 2023.

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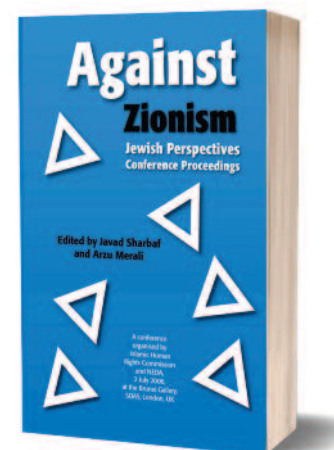


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Framing Muslim Converts: Culturally Divergent, Convergent, Or Exceptional?

Based on her PhD study of Finnish converts to Islam, **Linda Hyökki** argues that understanding anti-Muslim and Muslim experiences between those converted from the majority community and those from minoritized Muslim communities, have both overlap and key differences that need to be recognised.

Finland's Muslims are ethnically, linguistically, and culturally diverse, as in other European countries. Suppose one asks who Finnish Muslim converts are and their position within the wider Muslim community or Finnish citizenry. In that case, there are at least two alternative approaches. Firstly, one could provide a demographic description of the convert community and examine the gender balance between male and female converts, their social statuses, their age, and their religious background before they chose Islam as their spiritual path. But, in Finland, where citizens are not required to register their religious affiliation, it is impossible to define the convert community with statistics. The second way of going about the question of who Finnish converts are is to talk to the converts themselves and investigate the issue of their identities from the perspective of subjective experience with a qualitative research approach. By concentrating on the converts' descriptions of who they are and exposing how converts strive to acknowledge their value in society on an equal footing with their non-Muslim peers, a qualitative approach aids against treating Muslim converts as insignificant statistics.

The decision to choose Islam as one's religion seems to symbolize a step away from what modernism, liberalism and secularism entail. In this secular age conversion to Islam and belief in God is "(...) understood being one option among others" (Taylor, 2007, p. 3). Converts to Islam do not only have to struggle with being "religious" in a society in which religion hardly plays a role, but their choice of religion, Islam, is what causes more hate. When Samira became a Muslim¹, some of her friends had difficulty accepting the changes she incorporated into her life. While she was happy about how Islam gave her peace of mind and helped her to move away from a life of materialism, her friends found that her choice to become a Muslim was the cherry on top. As Samira recounted, she received questions such as: "But for this change, why must it be Islam specifically? Can you not come up with anything else?"

This question shows why Samira's spiritual path was considered problematic because she chose Islam, not another religion. It is precisely in these kinds of instances that the alleged cultural incompatibility of Islam with Finnish society becomes manifest and helps us to draw a connection between the

hostility towards religion per se and the lifestyle of the culture that this religion is perceived to represent. Following Irfan Ahmed's (2013) concept of *domophilia*, Samira becomes the cultural other who threatens the imagined homogeneous Finnish cultural identity.

While the centuries-long presence of Islam on the European continent and its influence on the developments of Europe as a civilisation might go unnoticed due to the Orientalist framing of Islam as a foreign element (Berger, 2014, p. 30; Hedges, 2021, p. 130) the role of European converts to Islam in the formation of an *Islamicate* European heritage is even less talked about. Mass conversions in the Ottoman Balkans, Sicily, and Al-Andalus during the Middle Ages greatly affected the local populations becoming majority Muslim (Berger, 2014). Thus, Muslim converts are historically not seen as a new phenomenon in the European religious landscape, and even today, they are an essential part of making Islam known in Europe. Yet, choosing Islam seems today to represent an oxymoron of what modern Europe claims to represent in values and as an imagined homogeneous group of people in racial and cultural terms.



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Questions of belonging and un-belonging mark the presence of Muslim converts in European societies. Despite the historical intersections of Islam and Europe's civilisational developments, Islam is still largely considered an immigrant religion in Europe, incompatible with the latter. Amidst these debates, Muslim converts find themselves within a multifaceted debate regarding the question of how their identities as "German," "Danes," "Swedes," "Americans," "Finns," "Irish," and so on can intersect with their new religious identity (Carr & Haynes, 2015; Jensen, 2008; McGinty, 2006; Özyürek, 2015; Roald, 2004; van Nieuwkerk, 2004). I will shortly discuss the three main framings I encountered during my literature review, which are created by non-Muslims and the converts themselves when it comes to situating Muslim converts within the larger socio-political context of their societies.

Firstly, Islam and national cultural identity – or, for instance, belonging to the social category of *Finns* – are juxtaposed within the anti-Muslim racist discourse. This is what I call the cultural and racial divergence framing on Muslim converts, and it is externally produced. It deals with race, cultural practice, and values. Even the degree to which Muslim converts practise their religion plays a part in this process of othering. This framing also has gendered aspects, pertaining, for instance, to the ways in which Muslim women dress in public. In the extreme form of such racial othering, Muslim converts are considered "traitors" and outcasts, as was stated by the shooter of the Christchurch massacre in his manifesto:

"The only Muslim I truly hate is the convert, those from our people that turn their backs on their heritage, turn their backs on their cultures, turn their backs on their traditions, and become blood traitors to their race. These I hate."

The historical, social construction of Finnish society as White and the racial othering of Muslims as non-White serve as a

reference point for understanding how Finnish Muslim converts' Whiteness and Finnishness are disassociated from their religious identity. They can even be said to "lose their Finnishness" by becoming Muslims. Moreover, this question of belonging is reinforced by the idea that Muslim converts are radicalized and have a malicious agenda of committing violent attacks against non-

Converts are thus framed as mediators or "bridges between the Muslim community and the majority society" (Duderija & Rane, 2019; Roald, 2004) who can operate beyond the claimed otherness of Islam.

Muslims. Such a claim is reinforced within the general securitisation discourse on Muslims. In Germany, the media has played a significant role in spreading a "threat image" referring to converts (Özyürek 2009), and in Finland, a book on jihadism alleged that born Muslims were worried about the radical stances of converts towards religion that pictured them as "brainwashed." The question of conversion to Islam is framed as an issue of brainwashing and coercion, particularly in the case of female converts.

Secondly, as a solid contrast to the polarisation and fearmongering above is the idea of convergence between the local and Islamic cultures. Depending on how it is instrumentalized, it can have positive and

negative ramifications when positioning Muslim converts as part of the Muslim community. In the case of the former, it can increase awareness of the fact that the religious diversity of Finns is a cultural asset for society at large. The converts are thus seen as able to "break through established social, cultural, and political boundaries" (Özyürek, 2015, p. 5) since these boundaries have existed there to keep the Muslims with migratory backgrounds alienated from the majority society. Samira talked to me about how she contributes to her working environment in the field of social work with Muslim clients in a very particular way that benefits her colleagues and the work they do at large. Her socio-cultural knowledge as an "insider" in the Muslim community differentiates her from her colleagues.

"How much experience do they get when they have me as a cultural translator? The kinds of observations the head of that department can make ... and take them forward ... from the point of view of civic action when they came through a Muslim." (Samira)

Converts are thus framed as mediators or "bridges between the Muslim community and the majority society" (Duderija & Rane, 2019; Roald, 2004) who can operate beyond the claimed otherness of Islam. Converts I interviewed actively perform both identities, fusing religious norms with cultural practices and values. This fusion of identities shows that while they self-identify with the category of Finns, the converts draw from values and practices they consider part of their born culture that they find compatible with their faith's values and norms (Hyökki, 2022). This understanding finds resonance in the idea that Islam is a religion that can be accommodated in all socio-cultural contexts. At the same time, the religious practice is adapted into the *'urf*, i.e., local customs, of each geographic area if it does not conflict with the Islamic principles of revealed knowledge and God's command (Murad, 2020, pp. 208–209).



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However, cultural convergence can also be instrumentalized to otherize Muslims with a migratory background. The framing, then, which I call “convert exceptionalism,” forms a very peculiar way of juxtaposing Muslim converts and Muslims with a migratory background to promote the detrimental binary of the “good” and “bad” Muslim. The binary is fundamentally created externally to differentiate Muslims according to the degree of their visible religiosity, ending in conclusions such as “non-practising; secularized, integrated/as-similated,” and “practising; fundamentalists” Muslims (Akgönül, 2011, p. 36). The political meanings of these labels find use in global discourses surrounding the “War on Terror” and are based mainly on assumptions of Islam as a threat to Western values and followingly stigmatize practising Muslims as carriers of that threat (Downing, 2019; Mamdani, 2005; Topolski, 2018). Within this binary, the convert exceptionalism is constructed two-fold, both by converts themselves and others, such as researchers.

On the one hand, Muslim converts are claimed to contribute to forming particular “European Islam(s).” As one of the Spanish converts interviewed by Rogozen-Soltar (2012, p. 619) expressed, these strivings serve to “make Islam accepted” within the global political era of hostility against Islam and Muslims. While Islam and Muslims are constantly marginalized and demonized, Muslim converts find themselves in a defensive position. In a way, this position translates to the need to distance themselves from the immigrant Muslims to claim their *right to belong* in their born cultural communities despite their new religious identity. Thus, this form of convert exceptionalism occurs when converts position themselves as able to carve out an Islam that is more “palatable.” The German converts, for instance, interviewed by Özyürek (2015, pp. 32–33) would try to express their difference from the Muslims with a migratory background by explaining that their way of interpreting and practising

Islam would be closer to the European and German philosophical ideals of Enlightenment of rationalism and tolerance.

On the other hand, convert exceptionalism can also be produced by researchers and other commentators when looking into how converts converge their cultural and religious identities in their everyday lives. What concerns me is how researchers might choose to describe this ability with words that I would see as creating more binaries, such as “contributing to the development of Islam(s) in the West that is (are) indigenous rather than imported” (Duderija & Rane, 2019, p. 143). The words *indigenous* and *imported* are problematic for me here, as they put Muslims with a migratory background into a position of the spatial Other, from which they can never escape. It implies that they, unlike converts, cannot possess the skills to live Islam in a manner “suitable” to the local European contexts. This framing of Muslims with a migratory background as perpetual spatial and cultural others contributes to further issues I have observed to emerge from convert exceptionalism.

Lastly, in the attempt to distance themselves from Muslims of Arab, Turkish, etc. backgrounds, some Muslim converts claim that having no influence of family or tradition in *Islamicate* cultures, they can practise an Islam which is free of any cultural baggage. Striving for “pure Islam” is typical for the converts to Salafism (Inge 2017), who consider their way of practising Islam as following the Prophetic way and hence transcending any cultural practices that are mixed up with what is regarded as “religion.” However, converts who do not self-identify as *Salafis* claim to practice “authentic” Islam (Rogozen-Soltar, 2012; Vroon-Najem, 2019) and see themselves as even “better Muslims than immigrant Muslims” (Özyürek, 2015, p. 25). Such exceptionalism becomes problematic as it reproduces an Orientalist discourse wherein the Occident acts as “dominating, restructuring, and having authority” over the Orient (Said, 1979, p. 3). However, I

would argue that these new spaces they create for Islam to exist in various European geographies are not about “freeing” Islam from its association with Arabs or any other “Muslim culture” but rather serve the Islamic concept of *‘urf* as described above. There are not many “Islams” to be practised but a practice of one Islam depending on the local customs within the Islamic framework. Thus, within the critical paradigm of this thesis, I see it necessary to emphasise how researchers should critically investigate any exceptionalism and construction of binaries that serve in the larger context to categorize the types of Muslims into “good” and “bad” ones.

Muslim converts are a specific group whose experiences should be regarded from a particular perspective. Their lives are also affected by the hostile public and political debates surrounding Islam and Muslims in post-immigration societies. In their foreword of the newly published edited volume on Muslims in Finland, the book’s editors note that more and more Finnish Muslims have been born and raised in Finland, and there are thus fewer justifications to speak of Islam as the religion of immigrants (Pauha & Konttori, 2022, p. 5). However, such well-meaning acknowledgements do not compensate for the dire need for comprehensive studies on Finnish Muslim converts as part of the Muslim community in Finland. The normalization of Islam as part of Finland’s religious landscape must also be connected to studying Muslim converts. Larsson and Rautava (2010) have pointed to the fallacy of the history of Muslims and Islam in Europe as only connected to post-second World War migratory trends and call for consideration of the history of Tatar Muslims in the Baltic. I concur that academic discussions frequently ignore that historical mass conversions to Islam have marked European history. Today, Europe consequently houses *Islamic cultures not only in the Iberian Peninsula but also in the southeastern part of the continent* (Kari, 2002). Still, I would emphasise considering the conversion experience as necessary in

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the broader understanding of Islam in Europe.

Based on the observations about the sociological positions of Muslim converts, it is essential to note that when examining the experience of Muslim converts in Finland, concepts of “Finnishness” and race must be viewed from a different angle than when examining the experience of born Muslims with a migrant background. Even though the experiences of converts, for instance, on discrimination in the labour market, can overlap with those of born Muslims, as Karhunen (2022) showed, facets of anti-Muslim racism are still different in the everyday lives of converts. This is because, after their conversions, they are often forced to negotiate their own and others’ ideas of Finnishness – an identity marker with which they have been born.

Linda Hyökki

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¹ The name has been changed for anonymity. “Samira” was one of the women I interviewed for my PhD thesis on Finnish Muslim converts’ experiences on anti-Muslim racism, racialization, and recognition.



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