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Legal Position of the Registered Islamic Faith Communities and Religious Groups in the Republic of North Macedonia

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Abstract

Background: The territory of the modern Republic of North Macedonia has historically been exposed to Judaism, Eastern and Western Christianity, Islam, and later to Protestantism. Islam came with the Ottoman Empire in 14 Century. The legal position of the religious communities changed rapidly within a Century. The Republic of North Macedonia is a self-declared secular multi-confessional state. While the Orthodoxy is the main religion, there are several Islamic groups registered.
Aims: The article covers the history of the religious landscape as well as the legal framework and practices of the state, especially toward the Islamic faith communities, and religious groups, after the fall of the Ottoman Empire in the states on the territory that is now the Republic of North Macedonia. Also is trying to identify the registered Islamic communities from publically available sources.
Methods: The research employs a combination of content and source analysis, the comparative method, and the observation method. The research necessarily adopts an interdisciplinary perspective. Historical analysis provides insight into the development of the religious communities; and legal analysis of the laws and other legal frameworks shows the legal position of Islamic faith communities in the states preceding modern Republic of North Macedonia.
Result: The Court Register of the Churches, Faith Communities, and Religious Groups has a total of 46 of which 13 are Islamic. The Islamic Religious Community is second biggest in the country.
Conclusion: The Islam in North Macedonia is not united but there are multiple Islamic faith communities and religious groups.

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INTRODUCTION

In (Jonovski, 2025) at length is given the legal position of the religious communities in the Republic of Macedonia concentrating mainly on the Christian history and heritage as it is the majority of the population. This article gives an overview of the legal position of the registered 13 (out of 47) Islamic faith communities and the religious communities in the Republic of N. Macedonia, as well as some introductory information available in public sources. Macedonia is a region situated in the south of the Balkan Peninsula in Southeast Europe. From 1395 to 1912, it was part of the Ottoman Empire. With the Balkan Wars (1912-13), Ottoman Macedonia was divided between its neighboring countries: Greece, Serbia, and Bulgaria. The part that fell in Serbia, in 1918, was incorporated into the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, later renamed Yugoslavia. After WWII in 1944, it became the Federal Democratic Republic of Macedonia. In 1991 gained independence as the Republic of Macedonia, and in 2019 added the prefix North (Nimetz, 2020), has historically been exposed to

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Judaism, Eastern and Western Christianity. Islam came at the end of the 14th Century, when Macedonia fell under the Muslim Ottoman Empire. Despite the interest in "religious war," the goal of the conquest was to dominate people and to advance Islam. The cities that surrendered were allowed to retain their religion; otherwise, they might end up enslaved or massacred (Ali et al., 2024). Many ruling families accepted Islam to save their wealth and position. The conversion took place in a coercive but more often voluntary way, as the Muslims had more privileges and fewer taxes than the non-Muslims. The majority of the Muslims in Macedonia are Sunni, as well as a small number of Shi'i Bektashi orders (DİKO, 2023).

In the Ottoman Empire, the peoples were divided by confession, not according to ethnicity or language. Therefore, it is quite difficult to determine the real number of the different ethnic groups that comprised the Islamic community in the Ottoman period. The Umma millet was regulating the affairs for the Muslims, as Muslims and non-Muslims were not treated equally. There were different rights, including the taxes. Furthermore, non-Muslims were also not allowed to join the military and the high-level state administration (Pandevska & Mitrova, 2019).

Macedonia belonged to Rumelia, the European province of the Empire. Sunni Muslims usually settled in the cities like Skopje and different versions of folk Islam settled more in the rural areas. They belonged to different Sufi orders (tarikates) such as the Helveti, Naksh-Bandi, Rufa'i, Qadiri, Malami, etc. The Bektashi, unlike the other Sufi orders in the Balkans, though officially Sunni, are to be regarded as essentially Shiite (Jahjai, 2020). The majority of the mosques on the territory of the present-day Republic of Macedonia were built in the 15th - 16th centuries. The most important are the Isa Beg Mosque, the Mustafa Pasha Mosque, and the Sultan Murat Mosque in Skopje, and the Aladzha Mosque in Tetovo. The Sufi orders' religious objects - *tekkes* (a headquarters of a Sufi order, inhabited by the *Sheyh* or the *Baba* of the dervishes) and *turbe*s (mausoleum of a Sheyh) - are the Helveti *Tekke*-Mosque in Struga the Bektashi-*Tekke* in Tetovo (Arici, 2024).

After the, Balkan Wars (1912-13) and WWI (1914-18), Macedonia as part of Serbia was incorporated into the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (SHS) on 1 December 1918, later named Yugoslavia. Shortly after the creation of the Kingdom of SHS, on December 7, 1918, a ministry of faith was formed as a supreme body in charge of religious-political life in the Kingdom. The largest Religious community was the Serbian Orthodox Church of (SHS), which was unified on September 12, 1920 (Timotijevi, 2021). The Muslim population consisted of Bosnians and minorities Turks, Albanian and Roma. The Muslims in the SHS had two divisions, one for the Muslims in Slovenia, Croatia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, majority Slavic speaking, led by the *Reis ul ulema* in Sarajevo, while non-Slavic Muslims (Turks and Albanians) in Serbia, Kosovo, Sandžak, Montenegro, and Macedonia were led by the Supreme Mufti in Belgrade as the capital. The status of the Islamic Community in Yugoslavia was regulated by the Law of the Islamic faith community on January 30, 1930 (Novaković, 2022). The Islamic faith community in Macedonia was the second largest faith community, comprised mostly of Turks and Albanians with a small Slavic minority (Gjorgjevski, 2020). Skopje was the second center of the Islamic faith community after Sarajevo. Both centers had *Majlis* Islamic Consultative Assemblies, as well as the Supreme *Sharia* Court. Skopje had the Great *Madrasa* of King Aleksandar I (Kozlica, 2019). Albanians, the largest Muslim population, live in areas in the north and western part of Macedonia, bordering Albania and Kosovo. In Gostivar and Tetovo, close to the Albanian border, they constitute the majority of the population. The ethnic Turks live in the western and northwestern parts of the country, with a big concentration of Turks in Skopje, where big communities of Roma are also present. It happened that Roma are not well accepted by the Albanian Muslims, that will lead to establishing several Roma Islamic Religious Groups in the 21 Century. Most ilustratios case is with the Trizla Mosque.

The Islamic Religious Community of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, established in 1947 at the Great Vakuf Assembly in Sarajevo with the adoption of a new constitution, was organized into four regional councils: the Islamic Community of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, and Slovenia with its seat in Sarajevo; the Islamic Community of Serbia based in Priština; the Islamic Community of Macedonia headquartered in Skopje; and the Islamic Community of Montenegro located in Titograd

(now Podgorica). This structure reflected the federal character of Yugoslavia, balancing a central hub in Sarajevo with regional autonomy across the republics, in accordance with the main dogma was "Brotherhood and unity" of equal peoples (Zajz, 2019). It recognized Muslims as an ethnic group, the Bosnians (later called Bosniaks). Together with Macedonian Muslims, were the only Slavic Muslim groups (Begovic, 2025). The main institution for Muslims in Macedonia is the Islamic Faith Community of Macedonia. The Islamic Community has four main organizational bodies: the Institution of the Reis-ul-Ulema, the Executive Council (Meclisi Sura), the Financial-Legal Council (Meclis), and the Mufti's Offices. The Executive Council consists of 23 members and works in six main sectors: religious education, science and culture, information and publications, administrative, financial sector, and the sector dealing with the property of the vakifs (pious foundations) (Enis, 2025).

METHOD

The research adopts a multi-method and interdisciplinary approach, combining qualitative and comparative techniques to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter. Four primary methods are employed: content analysis, source analysis, the comparative method, and the observation method.

Content and source analysis: Primary and secondary sources including historical documents, legal texts, and scholarly literature are systematically examined to identify institutional developments. The Laws on the legal position of the faith communities in four State legal entities are researched: Kingdom of Serbians, Croats and Slovene (from 1929 Yugoslavia) (1918-1945); Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia (1945-1991); Socialist Republic of Macedonia (1945-1991) and Republic of (N) Macedonia (1991-2025).

The Commission of relation with faith communities and religious groups, have a publicly available register of all registered Churches, faith communities and religious groups. It only shows the name, address and the name of the responsible person. Three publications describe registered religious communities: "Directory of Religious Communities in Macedonia," (Адресар, 2004). "Religious Almanac of the Republic of Macedonia (Religious almanac, 2010), and "And They Are Here" This is a compilation of material sent to the Commission for Relationship with tha Faith Communities by the religious communities (И тие се тука, 2019). There are two articles about religious communities: "Religious communities in the Republic of North Macedonia" (Јоновски, 2022); "Overview of the Registered Faith Communities in the Republic of Macedonia." (Jonovski, 2024) and "The Legal Position of the Religious Communities in the Republic of Macedonia," (Jonovski, 2025). Some of the registered religious communities publish different materials, just a few of them publish internal information about them self.

Comparative method: By juxtaposing the experiences of Islamic faith communities across different political and legal contexts, the research highlights similarities and divergences in their status and treatment. This method enables the identification of broader historic and socio politic trends.

Observation method: Direct observation of contemporary practices and institutional structures provides a living dimension to the study. It allows the researcher to connect historical and legal findings with present realities, thereby ensuring that the analysis is not confined to textual sources alone.

Interdisciplinary perspective: The study integrates **historical analysis**, which illuminates the evolution of religious communities, while **legal analysis**, which examines statutory provisions, constitutional frameworks, and administrative practices. This dual lens clarifies the legal position of Islamic faith communities within the states that preceded the modern Republic of North

Macedonia, while situating these findings within their broader historical trajectory. Together, these methods create a layered framework that captures the complexity of religious and legal developments.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

After WWII, the People's Republic of Macedonia became Socialist, and the relationship with the religious communities was in line with the communist position toward religion as "opium for the masses" and an obstacle in building a new socialist society, following the example of the USSR. In 1944, a regulatory body was formed for the relationship between the State and faith communities, and until 1951 was part of the then Secretariat of Internal Affairs. From 1951, the Commission for Religious Affairs was an independent office. In 1977, it was renamed as the Republic Commission for Relations with Faith Communities, and from 2000 to the Commission for Relations with Religious Communities and Religious Groups ("KOVZ").

The legal position of religious communities in the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia was first regulated with the Law on the position of religious communities of 1953 (Spasenovski, 2026). The Law prescribed that all the religious communities had the same legal rights and citizens could freely establish religious communities, in 1961, a Decree on the execution of some regulations of the Law on the legal position of the Faith Communities was passed (Surlan, 2020). Among others, it defines the spaces for performing religious rites as a facility with its own entrance, which could be used only if there is no Musk or Church. This regulation was used against smaller communities that used facilities for their religious gatherings, not recognized by the State as a temple. The Law of 1977 is similar to the previous one prescribing more punishments It stipulates that there is no state Religious community/ faith. The religious communities were to be reported to the Ministry of Internal Affairs at the municipality where they were active. Religious communities had the status of natural legal entities. During this period (1977-87), several religious communities existed: Macedonian Orthodox Church, Catholic Church, Islamic Community, Jewish Community, Evangelical Methodist Church, Baptist Church, Church of God, Seventh-day Adventists, and Jehovah's Witnesses.

With the Independence of the Republic of Macedonia in 1991, the Constitution of the affirmed the state's secular character, thereby mandating a general and impartial approach toward religious organizations concerning their rights and obligations. The constitutional framework articulates a comprehensive commitment to the principle of equality, guaranteeing all citizens identical rights irrespective of their religious affiliation. Moreover, the state explicitly safeguards the freedom of religion, enabling individuals to exercise their faith either privately or in association with others. Following this principle, religious communities are permitted to establish educational institutions, foundations, and charitable organizations (Spasenovski, 2026).

The article 19 of 1991 Constitution states: "The Macedonian Orthodox Church, other religious communities and religious groups are equal before the Law." The constitution is singling out the Macedonian Orthodox Church and thus giving it a special place. The Law on faith communities and religious groups of 1997 prescribes that there are two types of religious communities: faith communities and religious groups (Borovska, 2019). The faith community is defined as a voluntarily organized, non-profit community of believers of the same faith. The religious group is a group of believers who do not belong to a registered religious community, which puts the religious group in a lower position. This is to distinguish between old "traditional" faith communities and new religious groups. And only a religious group could be registered, not a faith community. A "religious group" was a mandatory part of the group's name. It also prescribes that for one religion; there could be only one religious community Registration required 50 believers - citizens of the Republic of Macedonia, carried out by the government Commission of relation with faith communities and religious groups (KOVZ), thus acquiring the status of a legal entity. Activities by unregistered communities were subject to a fine of the equivalent of 1,000 to 1,500 Deutsch Marks. For religious rites in public places, prior approval from the KOVZ is required. Many of the articles of this law have been cancelled by the

Constitutional Court on October 28, 1998, like articles 10, 11 that regulated registration However, the KOVZ continued registering religious groups (Jonovski, 2025).

In 2001 Macedonia faced an armed conflict which began when the ethnic Albanian National Liberation Army (NLA) militant group, formed from veterans of the Kosovo War and Insurgency in the Preševo Valley, attacked Macedonian security forces at the beginning of February 2001, and ended with the Ohrid Agreement, signed on 13 August of that same year ("2001 insurgency"). This also complicated the relationships between ethnic and also religious communities (Avirovic & Dragovic, 2019).

In the aftermath the constitution was changed and with Amendment VII, the article 19 of the constitution read: "The Macedonian Orthodox Church, as well as the Islamic religious community in Macedonia, the Catholic Church, the Evangelical-Methodist Church, the Jewish Community and others religious communities and religious groups are separate from the state and are equal before the law". This mentions 5 religious communities, and although the constitution says that all religious communities and religious groups are equal, a new de facto term is used the "Constitutional religious communities," which is widely used. A great effort is put into interreligious dialogue (Çeliku & Preston, 2024).

According to Spasenovski, based on the wording of Article 19, religious communities in the Republic of Macedonia could be put in three categories. The first is the Macedonian Orthodox Church Ohrid Archbishopric. The second includes the Islamic Religious Community, the Catholic Church, the Evangelical-Methodist Church, and the Jewish Community. The third category includes all other religious organizations, as "other religious communities or religious groups." This classification does not make any difference in the legal status, rights, or freedoms accorded to these entities. The categorization is rooted in historical context and reflecting the cultural and spiritual character of the Macedonian state, which is significantly shaped by the legacy of Orthodox Christianity, as embodied by the Macedonian Orthodox Church Ohrid Archbishopric (Spasenovski, 2026).

The last Law on church, faith community, and religious group is from 2007 (Ali et al., 2024). The Law prescribes that the registration is performed by the Court. The terms church, faith community, and religious group do not make any difference (unlike the 1997 Law did) and are simply chosen by the registrant. All religious communities, registered until the passing of the Law of 1997, had the right to be transferred to the single register of churches, faith communities, and religious groups, aligning their request to the new Law. Seventeen religious communities have been transferred to the new register and six "religious groups" registered by KOVZ after 1997 had to request new registration as if they were not registered at all. Also, several others, whose registration documents have not been accepted by the Commission, once the process of adoption of a new law was in sight. The law applied from May 1, 2008. All applications for registration for the first year have been rejected by the Court on various trivial grounds. The Court did not register them as a church, religious community, or religious group but as a "voluntary community of natural persons," and the name church is given in quotation marks together with the name of the church (Jonovski, 2025). This Law also allowed the Church, faith community or religious groups to organize education, apart from elementary (Ali et al., 2024).

Discussion

First, a Register was prescribed by the 1997 Law, which was held at the Commission of relation with faith communities and religious groups (KOVZ). The Register was not publicly available. In 2004, there were 25 registered Religious Communities and religious groups but with the 2007 Law, the register was transferred to the Court and was named as The Single Court Register of Churches, Faith Communities and Religious Groups (hereafter Single Register). The Law does not prescribe any role for the KOVZ, including the actual registration, apart from keeping a note on registered religious communities, which is publicly published on the KOVZ website. As of August 2025, there are 20 churches, 11 faith communities, and 13 religious groups, for a total of 44. Of those, one is Jewish, one Catholic, two Orthodox, 13 Islamic, 19 Evangelical-protestant, eight Restoration, one Eastern, and

two others (Table 1) (Jonovski, 2025). Here are presented all the registered Islamic religious, with info from publicly available sources. For those registered after 2019, there are hardly any publicly available sources, apart the Register at Commission for relationships with the faith communities and religious groups at their site.

Table 1. The number of registered religious communities by year

Year	Church	Faith Community	Religious group	Total	Islamic
2008	11	6	0	17	3
2009	2	0	5	7	0
2010	1	0	2	3	1
2011	1	0	0	1	0
2012	0	0	1	1	1
2013	0	0	0	0	0
2014	0	0	0	0	0
2015	0	1	0	1	0
2016	1	2	0	3	1
2017	1	0	2	3	1
2018	0	0	0	0	0
2019	1	0	0	1	0
2020	0	1	2	3	3
2021	2	0	1	3	0
2022	0	0	0	0	0
2023	0	1	0	1	1
2024	0	0	0	0	0
2025	0	1	2	3	2

As for the categories of religion presented in the census, some are general, like there is only one for Islam, although there were 11 registered Islamic faith communities. But for the Christians, there were more denomination-based, as Orthodox, Catholic, Evangelical-Methodist, but also some broader categories like Christian, Protestant, Evangelical. So, the majority of the census data could not be used to get the numbers for the 44 registered faith communities at the time of the Census.

Table 2. The number of adherents according to census of 2002, 2021, and *Religious almanac* 2010

Religion	Census 2002	%	Adreser 2010	Census 2021	%
Orthodox	1,310,184	64.78	2,000,000	847,390	46.04
Muslim	674,015	33.33	900,000	590,878	32.11
Catholics	7,008	0.35	17,391	6,746	0.37
Christians (no denom.)	15,862	0.78	904	242,579	13.18
Protestants	520	0.03		401	0.02
Evangelical -protestant				1,313	0.07
Adventists	487	0.02	5,000	428	0.02
Baptists	102	0.01	100	353	0.02
Evangelics	272	0.01	1,000	678	0.04
Evangelic- methodists	1,303	0.06	5,000	889	0.05
Pentecostals				295	0.02
Reforemed	28	0.00			
Jehowah Witnesses	1,105	0.05	1,100	1,137	0.06
Jewish Community	71	0.00	208		
Hari Chrishna	40	0.00	200		
Not given	433	0.02			
Atheists	3,524	0.17		8,764	0.48
Agnostics				2,174	0.12
Buddhists				1,221	0.07

Did not state	1,377	0.07		1,964	0.11
Unknown	6,216	0.31		894	0.05
Admin Sources				132,260	7.19
Total	2,022,547	100.00	2,930,903	1,840,364	100.00

So-called Constitutional Faith Communities

Out of the five "Constitutional" religious communities, 3 are Christian, one Jewish and on Islamic. The Largest is the Macedonian Orthodox Church - Archdiocese of Ohrid (Reg.C.Br.1/2008) which draws on its traditions of the Orthodox Churches that existed on the territory of the Republic of Macedonia, the Archbishopric of Ohrid (1018-1767), and Justiniana Prima (535-602). As an institution it started with the creation of the People's Republic of Macedonia in 1945, and building its structure and de jure recognition took some time and much effort. Formally, MOC was first registered in 1953 (Grambozov, 2025). In 1959, MOC was granted autonomy within the Serbian Orthodox Church. and in July of 1967, MOC was self-proclaimed Autocephalous. On May 9, 2022, the Patriarch of Constantinople accepted it into communion. On May 24, the SOC recognized the autocephaly of the MOC-AO, though this has not been recognized by all autocephalous churches. Regarding the number of Orthodox adherents during the last two censuses, in 2002 there were 1,310,195, and in 2021, only 847,790. It is not a rapid drop in adherence, but a problem with the census explained above. On the other side, it claimed 2,000,000 (Jonovski, 2024).

Catholic Church in the Republic of Macedonia (Reg.C.Br.2/2008) The Bishopric of Skopje was created in 1656. In 1924 was reestablished, but in 1969 when it merged with the Diocese of Prizren until 2000, Pope John Paul II separated them again. In the same year, the Apostolic Exarchate for the Catholic believers of the Byzantine rite (Uniates) in Macedonia was formed There are two Catholic Church dioceses: the Skopje bishopric for Catholics of the western rite and the Apostolic Exarchate for believers of the eastern rite (Naumovski et al., 2025). There are 16 Catholic churches and 8 monasteries.There are several women religious orders serving in Macedonia, Daughters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul, Eucharistic Sisters, and Missionaries of Charity, the order founded by St. Teresa of Calcutta (1910-1997) (Mother Teresa), born in Skopje, on both censuses, there are around 7,000 Catholics, or 0.36% of the total population (Krešić, 2021).

Evangelical- Methodist Church in Macedonia (Reg.C.Br.3/2008) The United Methodist Church (official title in English), is a part of the broader Protestant tradition, active in Macedonia since the 19 Century (Durak, 2021). It is an associate member of the Evangelical Protestant Initiative (EPI) of 11 evangelical protestant churches. The Church operates 13 congregations, 4 pastoral residences, and one center for social outreach. It places strong emphasis on spiritual education for children and youth, offering regular classes led by trained instructors. According to the censuses, there were 1,303 members (2002) or 889 (2021), while they claim 4,000 (Cacanoska, 2018).

Jewish Community in the Republic of Macedonia (Reg.Vz.Br. 2/2008) Almost all members of the Jewish community (Sephardic) in Macedonia, around 7,200, were killed in the Treblinka Concentration Camp in 1943. The sole survivors were mainly those who joined the partisans. By 1991, the Jewish community in Macedonia numbered only 120 members. Today, however, the community has grown modestly and includes approximately 250 members (Religious almanac, 2010). The census of 2002 gives 71 members.

The Islamic Religious Community of the Republic of Macedonia - Skopje (Reg.Vz.Br. 1/2008)

(Исламска верска заедница на Република Македонија) Operated as a part of the Islamic Community of Yugoslavia, and after independence as the Islamic Religious Community based in Skopje. There are about 600 mosques (Religious almanac, 2010). The Islamic Religious Community in the Republic of Macedonia relies its activity on the *Qur'an*, Circumcision, and its Constitution, as well as on the norms that originate from it. IRC is independent in organizing the religious life, in the *Wakufs*, in its administrative-financial activity, as well as in the other activities originating from this

Constitution. For the realization of the Islamic tasks, in the area of *ibadets*, this Community applies the Hanefi School of Law (Ali et al., 2024).

Islamic Religious Community has 13 muftis in: Skopje, Tetovo, Gostivar, Kumanovo, Debar, Kichevo, Struga, Ohrod, Shtip, Veles, Prilep, Resen and Bitola, Current Reis Ulema is Prof. Shaqir Fetahu ("Reis Ulemaja"). The Islamic secondary school "*Medresa Isa Beg*" continues the tradition of the *medresa* adherent to *Isa Beg Mosque*, built in 1475, and is one of the most beautiful mosques in Skopje. In 1936, Isa Beg Medresa began with regular work until WWII. With the academic year 1984/85, the educational process continued. Now, on the basis of the needs, the *Medresa* is enlarged with several additional classes for girls that are located in Skopje, Tetovo, Gostivar, as well as a class for boys in Stip. The Faculty of Islamic Sciences is the highest educational institution of the Islamic Religious Community. The need for such a faculty emerged right after the graduation of the first generation on the *Medresa "Isa Beg",* to continue with the studies. The faculty opened in 2000. The number of members is 674,015 (Census 2002) and 590,878 (Census 2021), around 33% of the total population, and self-proclaimed 900,000 (Enis, 2025).

Other Islamic Churches, Faith Communities, Religious Groups

The Holy Seat- of the Sufi Erenlers of the World in Macedonia - Skopje (Reg.VZ.Br. 4/2008)

(Света столица – на суфиските еренлери на светот во Македонија) It is an Islamic Sufi order that considers the son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad, Ali, as its founder. Teachings are based on the Tethis. It is present in Macedonia, Serbia, and Kosovo. Those followers of the teacher Sadedin Gjibavi (1230) and Agjuze Baba first preached in this region, and formed the first *teke* in Prizren. They are folowers of Sadii, one of the five Sufi orders. It existed in Macedonia as a religious community since 1995 as an "Islamic *tariqat* religious community in Macedonia." They are known by their rotating dance Dervan, wearing white tunics (И тие се тука, 2019). It is based in the Municipality of Shuto Orizari in Skopje, one of just few Roma municipalities in the world. Holidays they celebrate apart from Bayrams are Sutlan Nevrus 22 March birthday of the Imam Ali; and Muharem – then days Islam New Year.

Qadiri Religious Group "Dzennet" - Kumanovo (Reg.Rg.Br. 5-I/2008)

(Кадериска религиозна група „Џеннет") The Islamic community that studies the mystical teachings of the Sufi Abdul Qadir Gilani, who was born in 1077 in Iran. The Qadiris are one of the 12 Sufi orders, recognizable by their green clothes. It is a Dervish order among Roma people. In Macedonia, the Qadiri order began to operate in Kumanovo in 1993 (*И Тие се Тука*, 2019).

Ehlebeit Bektashi Religious Group of Macedonia – Kichevo (Reg.Br. 19/2010)

(Ехлибејтска бекташиска религиозна група на Македонија) interprets the Koran in one of seven ways. The founder was Haji Bektesh Veli from Iran, at the beginning of the 13th Century. They believe in the Ehlibejt as a basis for the Bektshism. Haji Bektesh Veli's main book is Makalat containing 4 doors and 40 makams. Their prayers are in tekkes (Kostovski, 2018) .

Ehli Sunnet Vel Dzemat (Trizla Mosque) – Prilep (Reg.Rg.Br.1/2012)

(Ехли суннет вел џемат (Тризла џамија) Islamic religious community of the Roma from Trizla a part of the city of Prilep. When the local Roma community wanted to build a Mosque, IRC was against it. So, the Local Roma population registered this religious group and started erecting the Trisla Mosque in 2012 (Jonovski, 2025).

Bektashi Religious Community - BRC With Its Seat In "Hadr Baba Tekke" -Kichevo (RCVZRG - 10/2016)

(Бекташиска верска заедница – БВЗ со седиште во „Хадр Баба Теќе“) It is a Bektashi dervish order founded by Haji Bektash Veli in the 13th Century in Anatolia. Today it has two seats, in Albania and Turkey. Hadar Baba came to Macedonia in the 14th Century, where he built the first *teke* in Makedonski Brod. It burned down during the Balkan wars and was moved to Kichevo, which is called *Hadar baba tekke* (Ali et al., 2024).

Tariqat Religious Group Sufi with Seat at Tekke - Skopje (RCVZRG 7/2017)

(Тарикатска религиозна група суфи со седиште во теќе) An Islamic Sufi group known for their loud and temperamental prayers, followed by stabbing with sharp objects. Their source is located in Shuto Orizari, mostly Roma Municipality (И тие се тука, 2019).

Islamic Faith Communities and Religious Groups Registered After 2019

World Bektashi Headship - Bektashi Chieftain in North Macedonia - Teke Harabati Baba - Tetovo (Светско бекташиско поглаварство-бекташиско дедовство во Северна Македонија - теќе Харабати Баба -Тетово) (RCVZRG 4/2023) It was previously registered as a Bekteshi Religious Communities in 2000, with 8 tekkes and 15 religious clerics. The Bekteshi community faced fierce opposition from the Islamic Religious Community the largest in the Republic of Macedonia, even after their registration. Long legal disputed continued over the ownership of Harabati Baba Teke – Tetovo (Islam et al., 2023).

The Tetovo Bektashi Community and the government remained at odds over registration. In January 2023, the Skopje Basic Civil Court extended the deadline for the group to resubmit its request, pending since 2000, but the community ultimately declined, citing legal requirements to adopt a new name conflicting with the already-registered Bektashi Religious Community (BRC). World Bektashi leader Hajji Dede Edmond Brahimaj later asked authorities to register the group under “World Bektashi Headquarters Bektashi Community of North Macedonia.” The community said its unregistered status limited property rights, including use of the Harabati Baba Teqe shrine. For the 11th year, it reported harassment from BRC-affiliated individuals occupying part of the complex. In August, police detained two Tetovo Bektashi dervishes, enabling BRC members to begin Ashura ceremonies at the shrine. Days later, police intervened when BRC and a splinter group tried to evict the resident dervish. Brahimaj also complained of online threats. Meanwhile, ownership of the shrine remained disputed, with appeals reportedly pending in the Supreme Court (U.S. Department of State, 2022).

For the other religious communities registered after 2019 there are hardly any public available information. The information is available in the Register on the webpage of KOVZ. Here are shown in order of registration:

1. Bashksia E Ehli Sunetit E Jematit - Kumanovo (Башкиа е ехли сунетит е џематит – Куманово) (RCVZRG 1/2020)
2. Kaderic Bedevis Religious Group Zakirije - Kumanovo (Кадериска бедевиска религиозна група закирије – Куманово) (RCVZRG 4/2020)
3. Islamic Salafi Community "Dar Al Hadith" from Skopje (Исламска селефиска заедница „Дар Ел Хадис“ (RCVZRG 8/2020)
4. Islamic Faith Union Foleja e Besimit Fetar Islam – Skopje (Исламска верска унија Фолеја е Бесимит Фетар Ислам Скопје (RCVZRG -2/2025)
5. Religious Group Elhun Sunneh Vel Eser - Veles (Религиозна група Ехлун Суннех Вел Есер) (RCVZRG 4/2025)

The IRC remained concerned about two registered groups it described as “suspicious Muslim organizations” a Salafi group in Skopje and an Ahli Sunnah Wal Jemaah group in Kumanovo. It asked

the government to de-register them or bring them under IRC authority, arguing they spread "radical views" inconsistent with local traditions. Both groups rejected joining the IRC (U.S. Department of State, 2022).

Implications

The findings of this study carry several important implications for both scholarship and practice. First, they demonstrate how the historical evolution of religious communities continues to shape their contemporary legal and institutional status, underscoring the need to interpret current frameworks in light of past trajectories. Second, the interdisciplinary approach adopted here suggests that future studies of religious minorities should integrate historical, legal, and sociological perspectives to capture the full complexity of their position. Finally, the study contributes to comparative scholarship by offering a model that can be applied to other regions where religion and law intersect in shaping communal identity.

Research Contribution

This study offers a systematic and interdisciplinary examination of the position of Islamic faith communities in the states preceding the modern Republic of North Macedonia. By combining historical and legal analysis, it reconstructs the institutional development of these communities and clarifies their shifting juridical status. The integration of content, source, comparative, and observational methods provides a layered framework that bridges textual research with lived realities. The findings contribute to broader Balkan studies by situating Islamic communities within regional patterns of law and identity. Ultimately, the study advances understanding of the intersection between religion, law, and communal identity, while offering a methodological model for future interdisciplinary research.

Limitations

The research faced several limitations. First there are no much public information on many of the registered faith communities and religious groups. Many have hardly any about their group. This is a problem to identify the number of faith community adherents.

When trying to find the number of adherents to the faith communities, the usual tool, the census data, is hardly adequate. Due to the ethnic landscape of the country, the census in the Republic of Macedonia, from a clearly statistical operation, turned into a highly political issue. This could be seen from the cancelled census of 2011 and problems with the 2021 census, where 380,640 (some 20%) of citizens were not asked for their religious adherence, but the census data was made combining data from others registers, (citizenship, issued passports, bank accounts etc.) where there is no data on religious adherences. Also, the census includes data of self-reported non-residents. The majority of the self-reported non-residents were Macedonian Albanians (majority Muslims) living abroad due to the very strong campaign with the pretext of showing a higher percentage of the total population and thus earning more rights (especially employment in the public sector, not losing the 20% representation in some Municipalities to keep Albanian language in official use). While the Macedonian Diaspora refrained from the census with a strong campaign against it, on the pretext that taking part in the census means recognizing the new forcibly imposed name "North" Macedonia, making them North Macedonians. Data in (Table 2) (Jonovski, 2025).

For the adherent of the different Islamic communities and groups, census did not offer other category than Muslim, so there is no objective source to acquire the real numbers. Other limitation is the absence of peer-reviewed articles published in international journals on the subject of legal position of the religious communities in North Macedonia, or the Islamic faith communities and groups.

Suggestions

Building on the findings of this study, several directions for future research may be proposed. First, comparative analysis could be extended to include other faith communities in the Balkans, thereby situating Islamic communities within a broader multi-confessional framework. Second, interdisciplinary collaboration with sociology and anthropology could enrich understanding of lived religious practices and their interaction with legal structures. Third, longitudinal studies tracing the continuity of legal provisions into the modern Republic of North Macedonia would clarify the extent of historical influence on contemporary frameworks. Finally, applying the methodological model developed here to other transitional societies could test its adaptability and contribute to comparative scholarship on religion and law.

CONCLUSION

The Republic of Macedonia has historically been exposed to Judaism, Eastern and Western Christianity, Islam, and later to Protestantism. From the late 15th to the early 20th Century, it was under the Ottoman Empire propagating Islam. In the interwar period territory of the present-day Republic of Macedonia was part of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, later called Yugoslavia. From the formation of the People's Republic of Macedonia within the Socialist Yugoslav Federation, religion was not supported, and the religious communities were kept out of public life and suppressed. The government favored the Macedonian Orthodox Church as a tool in strengthening the Macedonian national consciousness.

The Republic of Macedonia is a self-declared multi-confessional, but secular state. According to its Constitution, all faith communities are equal before the law. However, the Constitution singles out five faith communities that use the term Constitutional faith communities. The biggest is the Macedonian Orthodox Church, and next is the Islamic Religious Community. The third is the Catholic Church. The other two constitutional faith communities are legacy one, the Evangelical Methodist Church has 1,000 adherents, and the Jewish Community only has 250 adherents.

The register of the Churches, Faith Communities, and Religious Groups has a total of 6 Faith Communities and 7 Islamic religious groups. Of those, four are with headquarters in Skopje, three in Kumanovo, and two in Kichevo and one in Prilep and Tetovo. The process of registration, apart from the first year, is quite easy, following the necessary steps described in the Law, and there is no minimum requirements for the number of members, provided there are Macedonian citizens.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

The author confirms sole responsibility for the conception, design, analysis, interpretation, and writing of this manuscript.

AI DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

The authors declare that this research was prepared, researched, written, and edited without the aid of artificial intelligence (AI) techniques.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare whether or not any conflicts of interest exist in relation to the study.

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