

## Saudi Arabia in the Western Balkans

The Gulf States, along with other external players, have raised their profile in the Western Balkans in recent years. While most have set out on an economic quest, Saudi Arabia is considered to have a more ideological approach, seeking a strong role among the region's Muslims. In the 1990s Bosnian war, it provided significant aid for the Muslim cause and has stayed in the region to expand its influence, introducing stricter interpretations of Islam that are gradually taking root there.

### Saudi Arabia and the Western Balkans: an overview

Saudi Arabia [stands out](#) among the Gulf States with its ideology-driven approach to the Western Balkans. It emerged as an important player in the region in the early 1990s, during the war that followed the break-up of Yugoslavia. All of the Gulf States supported the Muslims of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) through a number of channels, but Saudi Arabia is considered to have reacted most swiftly and provided the most significant aid from the very outset of the war well into the next decade. The Saudi kingdom has allegedly spent hundreds of millions of euros for the Muslim cause, mobilising volunteer Islamic fighters, providing humanitarian help and facilitating clandestine arms transfers. A big chunk of the aid was dedicated to building and reconstructing mosques and Islamic schools (madrassas), but was not limited to this; efforts also focused on fighting poverty, improving the health system, and investing in education and culture. Researchers often point out that Saudi aid has come with conditions. The EU Institute for Security Studies' [2017 report](#) underlines that Saudi-funded mosques and schools facilitated the spread of the ultra-conservative doctrine of [Wahhabism](#) in the region.

### Saudi Arabia and Islam in the Western Balkans' Muslim-populated countries

Saudi Arabia's political, economic and cultural ties with the region mainly revolve around the [Muslim identity](#) of part of its population. It has sought to [export to the region](#) its state-sanctioned version of conservative Islam, Wahhabism, which has gradually infiltrated the already complex local [Islamic mosaic](#).

The Western Balkans' Muslims largely practice a moderate version of Islam, inherited from the Ottoman empire. The years of communist rule have further added a [sense of secularism](#): in Yugoslavia the term 'Muslim' was [related to a nationality](#) rather than belief, and in Albania, Enver Hoxha banned religion outright in 1967. It is this that [Saudi-led efforts](#) have tried to change, by introducing the Wahhabist doctrine and practice.

For historical reasons, Bosnia and Herzegovina, with its population [just over 50 %](#) Muslim, offers most insights into the revival of Islam and the dynamics between BiH's local [Islamic community](#) (IC), the region's highest representative body of Muslims, and Saudi-funded humanitarian agencies, Islamic preachers and fighters that have left their mark on the country. There are some claims that more conservative interpretations of Islam had already appeared [before the war](#), with the [Young Muslims](#) in 1941 and, in the 1970s, with the controversial ['Islamic Declaration'](#) of Alija Izetbegovic, who became BiH's first president in 1992. However, it is more commonly considered that they gained ground with the arrival of the Saudi-funded Islamic volunteer fighters that formed the [Mujahideen brigade](#) during the war. The 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement required foreign fighters to leave the country, but some remained in isolated rural areas of BiH.

Aid from the Saudi government, Islamic humanitarian centres and NGOs had a [very important role to play](#) in changing the character of local Islam. While [Turkey](#) also funded schools and mosques, the hundreds of Saudi-funded mosques were built in austere Wahhabi style, the most notable example being the [King Fahd Mosque](#) in Sarajevo. It was not only the outside look; what was preached inside changed too: these mosques brought ideology and social norms (e.g. conservative Muslim dress), not known in the region thus far. [Education](#), a prerogative of the Islamic Community, has also been affected. A parallel education system of Saudi-funded academies and madrasas, scholarships for Muslim studies abroad, and dissemination of free Islamic literature



has emerged. Moreover, a network of parallel religious institutions, called 'para-jamaats', has also developed, supported by alternative Islamic movements and groups which are not members of the Islamic Community. A [2017 Atlantic Initiative study](#) pays particular attention to this phenomenon, highlighting it as a serious social and security problem, undermining the IC's authority and facilitating the spread of radical ideas. In 2015 the Islamic Community [called](#) for the closure of the 'para-jamaats', but as they offer a wide range of public services, they have in fact been growing stronger.

#### *Saudi foundations and charities providing aid*

Although Saudi Arabia was not the only donor to BiH (Iran, Turkey and others also helped), it has provided substantial financial support to educational, social and religious institutions as of 1992, the impact of which a [2013 European Parliament study](#) assessed as remarkable. According to the [Oxford Handbook of European Islam](#), no reliable information on the extent of this aid can be found; part of it was [allegedly](#) spent in violation of the [UN arms embargo](#) and part was unofficial aid from private donors.

In 1992, the Saudi Government created the [High Saudi Committee for Aid](#) to BiH (HSC), allegedly the largest single Muslim donor to BiH. It provided funds through several Islamic charities: the Muslim World League, Al Haramain foundation, the International Islamic Relief Organization, the World Assembly of Muslim Youth, Saudi Arabian Red Crescent Society, the Islamic Waqf Organisation and the Makkah Humanitarian Organisation. These are only a few of the 'as many as [245 charitable foundations](#)' (according to Bulgaria Analytica) that financed the spread of conservative Islam in the region. Their aid focused on social programmes for war refugees and orphans, and reconstruction of madrassas and mosques, as well as hospitals and schools. The educational and cultural activities also included funding for pilgrimages to Mecca. After the 9/11 attacks, Gulf foundations in the region came under scrutiny; many closed their offices, including the HSC, in whose premises NATO found materials suggestive of [terrorist intentions](#).

#### *The threat of radicalisation in the Western Balkans*

The spread of a more conservative form of Islam is believed to be one of the reasons behind the high number of foreign fighters from the region that have joined ISIL/Da'esh: between 800 and 900 according to [Europol](#) and the [Soufan Centre](#). Kosovo and BiH rank as [the top two](#) per capita contributors, with Albania fourth. Saudi Arabia has repeatedly [rejected claims](#) of being involved in radicalisation activities, and has pointed to several government-funded [deradicalisation initiatives](#). However, critics question their substance.

According to the Atlantic Initiative [study](#), mentioned above, the issue of radicalisation in the Western Balkans has not been thoroughly investigated. There is no single-cause explanation for its occurrence. This study and other sources argue that the region's low defence against radicalisation is largely due to its own dire context, in which weak institutions, corruption, and economic difficulties leave young people with less than bright prospects. Often 'immediate psychosocial needs' – a sense of belonging, purpose and inclusion – motivate them to join extremist groups [more than ideology itself](#). At the same time, while Wahhabism might not be a direct source of radicalisation, its conservative attitudes and beliefs, and [intolerance towards the 'unbeliever'](#) (Christians, Jews, Shiites), might legitimise the adoption of more radical views. Its teachings are considered to gradually challenge established values, and create the ground for radical/extremist ideas to flourish, facilitated especially by the 'para-jamaats', which explains why these have been referred to as 'hotbeds of radicalisation'. Some researchers highlight radicalisation as a [major security threat](#); others claim that reality is [less sensational](#), and there are [those](#) who point out that the main challenge actually lies not in radical ideology *per se*, but in its link with organised crime. If not immediate, however, radicalisation is widely considered a potential future threat, highlighting the need for prevention and creating better prospects for the development of the region.

### **Trade and economic relations with the Western Balkans**

The Gulf States' [rising economic interest](#) in the Western Balkans, whether driven by strategic and [religious motives](#) or simply [business](#) logic, has led to improved commercial relations, but also drawn [mixed reactions](#). Saudi Arabia has not been as expansive as other Gulf States in that respect, but has also made some progress. In early 2017, Saudi Arabia, BiH and Serbia formed a [joint trilateral committee](#) aimed at [increasing trade](#). The Saudi kingdom announced a broad investment scope. A 2017-announced building of a new complex in Serbia, worth €100 million, and the [Sarajevo City Centre](#) are examples of high-profile Saudi investments.

In an OCCRP and BIRN [investigation](#), Saudi Arabia was revealed as a [major customer](#) in increased [arms trade flows](#) with Western Balkan countries, and also some EU Member States. In a [2017 resolution](#), the EP called for an arms embargo on Saudi Arabia, due to its use of imported EU arms adding to Yemen's humanitarian crisis.

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