

Exploration of Iran's Foreign Policy in the Balkans Region: A Case Study of Bosnia and Herzegovina

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Abstract

The Balkans, in a specific sense, refers to the collection of countries in Southeast Europe that gained independence following the collapse of the former Yugoslavia, most of which are on the path to membership in the European Union. The Balkans, with its great ethnic diversity, is the intersection of three religions: Islam, Catholic Christianity, and Orthodox Christianity, and regarding its historical background, it is considered a crisis-prone area next to the European Union. Iran has long-standing deep cultural ties with the countries of this region, and the Persian language has historically held significant appeal among the intellectuals of this area. However, undoubtedly, Iran's presence and role in the Bosnian crisis during the 1990s is considered the most significant involvement of Iran in this part of Europe. The present study aims to explore the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the Balkans region, emphasizing Iran's role in Bosnia. The results indicated that the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the Balkans is consistent with the constructivist approach in international relations, and this region possesses considerable potential in cultural, political, and economic fields for the development of relations.

Keywords: Balkans, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Constructivism, Foreign Policy, Islamic Republic of Iran.

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Exploration of Iran's Foreign Policy in the Balkans Region: A Case Study of Bosnia and Herzegovina

Introduction

When the developments of the early 1990s occurred and communism collapsed, and the Soviet Union faced disintegration, the Balkan region was not spared from the fallout of this crisis. The Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (comprised of the six republics of Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Macedonia, as well as the two autonomous regions of Vojvodina and Kosovo) faced fragmentation and independence movements, leaving a profound impact on this region. Since Serbia, which considered itself the mother and birthplace of Yugoslavia, was unable to provide logical responses to resolve the crisis, a bloody war engulfed the Balkan region.

Various variables can be discussed and examined regarding the roots and causes of the bloody wars in the Balkan region. We can categorize the variables or factors influencing the disintegration of Yugoslavia into two groups: Internal and external. The crucial internal variable was the inequality among ethnic groups in Yugoslavia, which primarily acted as the root of the emergence of ethnic and religious nationalism during the fifty years of communist rule in former Yugoslavia. The main external variable was the effects resulting from the collapse of communism and the change in the structure of the international system in the early 1990s, which largely increased the speed and intensity of developments in this region. However, aside from the roots and causes of the crisis, the issue of Iran's role in that crisis and afterwards in the Balkan region, especially during the Bosnian war, is presented as a concern for the researcher in the current study.

For centuries, before Bosnia's independence from Yugoslavia, Iran had entered the Balkans with its Iranian-Islamic culture and civilization, and Persian literature and art have a long-standing presence in this region. The Islamic Revolution of Iran in 1357 also led to greater familiarity among the Muslim nations of the Balkan region, especially the Muslims of Bosnia, with Iran. Undoubtedly, Iran's role in defending the Muslims of Bosnia during the bloody wars of the 1990s deepened the interests of Bosnian Muslims in Iran. After the war, Iran's role in the reconstruction of the devastation and in helping to preserve and strengthen Islamic identity in this region increased attention to this area of Europe in Iran's foreign policy.

Given the above introduction, this study aims to answer the fundamental question of 'How Iran's foreign policy toward the Balkan region can be analyzed from the perspective of constructivist theory?' The hypothesis of this research is based on the premise that the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran regarding developments in the Balkan region has been shaped by Islamic identity and culture over the

centuries, and the presence of Muslim populations in this region, along with shared history and culture, has meant that Iran has not merely been a spectator of developments in the Balkans but has engaged in a role beyond that of an observer. The Islamic Republic of Iran has not overlooked its historical and cultural resources in this region, which, in a way, are the identity components that have defined Iran's interests and strategic depth in the Balkan region generally, and specifically in Bosnia. This paper seeks to descriptively and analytically elucidate and explain the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran toward the Balkan region, focusing on Bosnia from the perspective of constructivist theory.

The structure of the current research is organized into five sections: Introduction, background of the topic, theoretical framework of constructivism, examination of shared identity concepts, and analysis of Iran's foreign policy toward Bosnia, and conclusion and summary. At the end, practical recommendations for the responsible institutions in the field of foreign policy regarding the Balkan region are provided.

1. Background of the Research

In reviewing the background of the research, despite the searches conducted, it must be acknowledged that there has not yet been a systematically organized scientific study that independently examines Iran's foreign policy in the Balkan region, and the notes and interviews published in the media on this subject are also very limited. Following the reviews conducted in parts of the studies mentioned below, Iran's foreign policy in the Balkan region has been addressed in some regard, of which the most significant are the following:

Shaykh al-Islami and Malayi (2019 AD/1398 SH) in a study titled "Cultural Diplomacy of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the Balkan Peninsula with Emphasis on Religion, Language, and Literature" addressed the relations between Iran and the Balkan region. The present study specifically examines Iran's cultural diplomacy in the Balkan Peninsula with a focus on the Persian language as one of the mechanisms for conducting public diplomacy and does not explore other aspects of foreign policy.

Mirhadi (2020 AD/1399 SH), in his research titled "The Impact of Islamic Extremist Groups in the Middle East on Political and Social Developments in the Balkan Region: A Case Study of Bosnia and Herzegovina," addressed the crises in the Balkan region from a historical sociology perspective based on five components: Identity, ideology, the political structure of the state, economy, and culture, while examining how extremist ideologies entered the Balkan region and Bosnia and how these groups influenced political and social developments in this area.

Exploration of Iran's Foreign Policy in the Balkans Region: A Case Study of Bosnia and Herzegovina

The present study does not delve into the issue of Iran's foreign policy in this region.

Parasttash (2018 AD/1397 SH), in a study titled "Politics and Government in Bosnia and Herzegovina," examined the political situation and the crises resulting from the complex structure of this country. The mentioned research emphasized the positioning of Bosnia in the sensitive, strategic, and transformative Balkan region, addressing some significant events in contemporary history such as World War I, World War II, and the developments during the Cold War in this area, as well as highlighting the role of key actors in the political and security arenas of this country. The current research has distanced itself from examining Iran's foreign policy in this region, focusing instead on Bosnia's political structure.

Shadaram (2017 AD/1396 SH), in a study titled "Examining the Evolution of the Persian Language and Literature in the Balkans from the Past to the Present," has sought to explore the history of literary and linguistic relations between Iran and the Balkans from the Ottoman Empire period to the present, examining the causes and ways in which the Persian language and literature entered the Balkans and its subsequent influences on the language, literature, and culture of the region.

Ghasemi (2009 AD/1388 SH) in a master's thesis titled "Analyzing the Foreign Policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran from the Perspective of Constructivist Theory," has extracted the identity variables involved in the foreign policy process of the Islamic Republic of Iran using constructivist theory and analyzed the behavior of Iran's foreign policy based on the application of this theory. The present study does not address the Balkans directly, but it can be relevant within the theoretical framework.

Mottaqi and Kazemi (2007 AD/1386 SH) in a study titled "Constructivism, Identity, Language, and the Foreign Policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran," have examined foreign policy as one of the crucial areas of research in the international arena and have considered constructivist theory as a framework for analyzing international politics and foreign policy with an emphasis on the identity of actors.

Khalaj Monfared and Vafai (2006 AD/1385 SH), in separate studies titled "The Balkans in the Mirror of Culture 1" and "The Balkans in the Mirror of Culture 2," have compiled and organized a series of articles on the social, cultural, and political structure of the Balkan Peninsula and the countries situated in this region. These studies have focused on the similarities among the nations of the Balkan Peninsula and, with an Islamic perspective; have described the situation of Muslims in these

countries, while also avoiding any entry into the realm of the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the Balkan region.

2. Theoretical Framework (Constructivism)

One of the vital theories in the field of international relations is constructivism, which represents a dynamic effort to provide a comprehensive analysis and a deep understanding of foreign policy through ontological and epistemological dimensions. This theory can be positioned in the meta-theoretical domain on a spectrum between naturalists, positivists, and post-structuralists, and in substantive discussions, it occupies a middle ground between the main currents of realism and liberalism (Moshirzadeh, 2015 AD/1394 SH: 139).

In the international arena, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War posed significant challenges to the theory of neorealism as a solution for explaining international relations and foreign policy. Developments such as the globalization of economy and culture shifted attention toward norms and ideas in the explanation of foreign policy. Since the early 1990s, constructivism has emerged as one of the main theories in international relations, emphasizing the constructed nature of international phenomena, which indicates that human actions and phenomena in the international system occur in an intersubjective space where identity, norms, and culture play an important role in the international arena (Hadian, 2003 AD/1382 SH).

Essentially, constructivists in international relations seek to reintroduce norms and domestic policies into the realm of international relations and have attempted to establish a logical connection between culture, politics, and society on one hand, and the identity and behavior of states in international political arenas on the other (Khezri, 2009 AD/1388 SH: 79). In a broad overview, the main ontological characteristics of the constructivist school can be summarized in three propositions as follows:

A) The Importance of Norms and Ideas: The first characteristic of constructivism illustrates the significance of normative structures and mental constructs alongside material structures (Adler, 1997). Proponents of the constructivist school believe that semantic systems determine how actors interpret their environment and their performance; therefore, the major characteristics of constructivism emphasize cultural and normative structures alongside material elements, to such an extent that in some cases, these ideas and norms imbue material elements of power with meaning and define the interests of actors (Ghavami, 2005 AD/1384 SH: 127).

Exploration of Iran's Foreign Policy in the Balkans Region: A Case Study of Bosnia and Herzegovina

B) The Importance of Identity: The second ontological characteristic of the constructivist school suggests that identities are foundational for interests and actions in both domestic and international arenas. In other words, as Wendt claims, "Identities are the basis of interests." (Wendt, 1992: 389) Thus, understanding the position and role of identities, both in international politics and in domestic politics, is essential for analyzing issues and forecasting phenomena. Identities in any society have three main functions: First, identity tells oneself and others who you are and who others are. Second, identity implies a specific set of interests or preferences regarding the choice of action options in relation to the actions of others. Third, the identity of each state implicitly indicates that state's subsequent actions. Therefore, each state recognizes others in the international arena based on the identity it attributes to them while simultaneously reproducing its own identity (Tajfel, 1981: 255).

C) Reciprocal Interaction of Structure and Agent: The third ontological characteristic of the supporters of constructivism emphasizes how normative structures "Define the behavior of actors and the appropriate economic, political, and cultural activity patterns of these actors." (Boli, Meyer, Thomas, 1989: 12) According to Wendt, it is through reciprocal interaction that relatively stable social structures manifest, and it is based on this structure that identities and interests are defined by the agents. In other words, structure and agent influence each other in normative and identity dimensions, and the interests, goals, and behaviors of actors shape within this influence (Wendt, 1992: 406).

Among the three aforementioned points, the emphasis on the issue of identity in the realm of foreign policy can be considered the centerpiece of constructivism. Identity is a mechanism that provides actors in the international arena with a sense of self and a tool for understanding relationships with others in the external environment. Thus, identities encompass and define the characteristics and differences of actors, embodying a sense of similarity and difference from others and including the establishment of boundaries that separate one from others. Constructivism introduced identity as an independent directive in the foreign policy of states, and accordingly, states act in the international arena based on their definitions of themselves and others, and their identity is shaped through interaction with other international actors. Therefore, from the perspective of constructivism, the adoption of foreign policy based on each actor's identity in the international arena reflects the recognition of differences between various countries, stemming from an acknowledgment of the constructive role of culture and prevailing norms in shaping the goals and interests of states (Wendt, 1992: 403).

The Islamic Republic of Iran has organized its behavior regarding global developments based on the identity it has defined for itself against others (the dominator system) and its perspective on the changes and structure of the international system, in a manner grounded in identity. Identity is defined as the understanding of oneself and expectations from others, and it is based on this self-understanding that our actions toward others are defined (Imam Jom'e Zadeh et al., 2013 AD/1392 SH).

As one of the actors in the international arena, the Islamic Republic of Iran has taken varying approaches towards the Balkans since its inception, and given that Iran's foreign policy approach toward this region is primarily based on the development of relations with Muslims and is grounded in historical and cultural background, employing constructivist theory seems to provide a better opportunity for analyzing Iran's foreign policy in this region (Parhudeh, 2012 AD/1391 SH: 45).

According to the author, constructivism is a suitable method for understanding and analyzing Iran's foreign policy in relation to the Balkans, particularly Bosnia. This is because the role of identity-related and non-material factors such as religion, history, culture, and common interests in this area can be easily examined and explained. Therefore, to understand the importance and position of Bosnia in the formulation of Iran's foreign policy based on constructivist theory, we will first provide a brief introduction to the Balkans and Bosnia, as well as recent regional developments and political changes in this area.

3. Analyzing Common Cultural Constructs between Iran and the Balkans

Iran's cultural relations with the Balkans predate its political relations with the governments of this region. Even before the countries of the Balkans were established, Iranian culture had reached this area through the Persian language and Islam, leaving behind numerous works. Thus, it is natural that among the various religions and ethnicities residing in the Balkans, Muslims have a deep cultural and religious affinity with Iran. The various linguistic, religious, and customary similarities have fostered a closer connection throughout history. In this section, we will discuss the crucial common cultural components that have shaped a shared identity with the people of the Balkans and could serve as a basis for exploitation in foreign policy considerations:

3.1. Shared Language and Literature

Language, as the vital symbol of identity, encompasses a range of scientific, educational, religious, and historical dimensions. The Persian language was common among intellectuals in the Balkans until just a few decades ago, and numerous poets and mystics in this region composed

Exploration of Iran's Foreign Policy in the Balkans Region: A Case Study of Bosnia and Herzegovina

poetry in Persian. The book "History of Persian-Speaking Poets of Bosnia and Herzegovina" by Dr. Olivér Mujić, published in 1399, introduces Bosnian intellectuals who wrote their poetry in Persian (Mujić, 2020 AD/1399 SH).

Dr. Mujić states regarding the Persian-language poets in the Balkans: "We have poets who composed poetry in Persian; perhaps the most important among them is Sudi-yi Bosnawi, who wrote a commentary on the Divan of Hafez that has been published in Iran and is being taught. We had poets who wrote in Persian, whose works have not yet been translated into Bosnian and remain in Persian; in Bosnia, one can speak candidly about the heritage of the Persian language." (Mujić, 2020 AD/1399 SH)

Fawzi Mostari is a prominent example of these individuals and one of the most distinguished poets and writers from Bosnia, who composed works such as "Bulbulistan" in Persian, influenced by "Baharistan" by Jami. He also drew upon "Nafahat al-Uns" and "Tazkira al-Awliya" for the themes of his tales (Khaurich, 2018 AD/1397 SH).

Na'im Frashëri is another Persian-speaking poet from Albania in the Balkans, and his collection of poems titled "Takhayyulat" has recently been translated from Persian to Albanian (Cornis-Pope, 2004: 291).

The poem "Divan Karbala" is another work by Na'im Frashëri that discusses the bloody event of Karbala, the martyrdom of Imam Hussein, his companions, and the suffering of the Ahl al-Bayt (Qurbanpour, 2009 AD/1388 SH: 81).

There are also many Persian manuscripts in the Balkans; the Gazi Khusrev-Beg Library in Sarajevo, considered a spiritual repository for Muslims in the Balkans, houses thousands of manuscripts, including hundreds of Persian manuscripts. Among these is a 16th-century manuscript of Hafez's Divan, a manuscript of "al-Kashf wa al-Bayan fi Tafsir al-Quran" written by Abu Ishaq al-Nishaburi, and the oldest manuscript in the Balkans, which is "Ihya al-Ulum al-Din" by Imam Muhammad Ghazzali from the 5th century AH (Sabouri, 2022 AD/1401 SH).

Other manifestations of the presence of the Persian language in the Balkans include the numerous shared words and vocabulary with the languages of the region. Dr. Janita Khaurich, a Bosnian professor of Persian language and literature at the University of Sarajevo, states: "More than 1,700 Persian words are used in the Bosnian language, most of which have entered Bosnian through Turkish." (Khaurich, 2018 AD/1397 SH)

3.2. Shared Religion

Regarding the introduction of Islam into the Balkans, there are two general perspectives among scholars and historians. The first group often attributes the introduction of Islam in the Balkans to the Ottomans and believes that the spread of Islam in this region was accompanied by the oppression of Ottoman rulers (Taheri, 2016 AD/1395 SH: 44).

The second group posits that Islam entered the Balkans before the Ottomans, through the region's relations with other Islamic areas, including Iran.

Historians agree that the development and spread of Islam in the Balkans is a result of the long-standing presence (nearly 500 years) of the Ottoman Turks in this land (Parasttash, *Historical Roots of Islam in the Balkans*, 2014 AD/1392 SH).

Generally, it can be said that during the long Ottoman rule, Islam existed in this region on two broad levels: First, Islam as the official and unchangeable religion, which was situated within the political and religious hierarchy under the Ottoman government and caliphate, and second, Islam as a mystical approach among the masses, which primarily took shape within large systems or orders of dervishes in tekke (dervish lodges) (Bernard, 1993 AD/1372 SH: 560).

The Bektashi order in Albania has had a special affection for the Imams of the Shias, and for centuries, various dervishes from this sect have spent their lives in the proximity of the shrine of Imam Hussein and Amir al-Mu'minin (AS), with some of the graves of its leaders located in Karbala and Najaf (Qurbanpour, 2009 AD/1388 SH).

One of the religious symbols and Islamic religious emblems in the Balkans is found in the Tomorr Mountain in eastern Albania; this place is known as Mount Abbas Ali or the Footprint of Abbas Ali. Throughout the year, especially from August 22 to 25, it welcomes thousands of devotees and those interested in the family of purity and chastity from around the Balkans and across Europe. The tradition of bringing some soil from the grave of Abbas (AS) and sprinkling it on the summit of Tomorr Mountain, or creating an imaginary grave for him and establishing the first sacred Bektashi tekke in 1916, has led to the recognition of Tomorr Mountain as Abbas Ali Mountain, and every year, believers travel to this mountain to visit this site and offer sacrifices (Suhani, 2017 AD/1396 SH).

3.3. Shared Customs and Traditions

There are multiple shared customs between Iranian culture and the culture of the people in the Balkans. Particularly given the over 500-year history of Islam's presence in the Balkans, numerous customs have emerged honoring and revering the family of the Prophet of Islam (PBUH) in this region. One such custom is the Sultan Nowruz ceremony,

Exploration of Iran's Foreign Policy in the Balkans Region: A Case Study of Bosnia and Herzegovina

which, in addition to celebrating the arrival of spring, carries religious significance. In Albania, Bosnia, and Kosovo, March 22 is recognized as Sultan Nowruz and is a national holiday (Parastash, 2018 AD/1397 SH).

Another shared custom is the mourning rituals held during the first ten days of the month of Muharram. The Sufi orders in the Balkans consider the first ten days of Muharram to be a period of mourning. Dervishes typically refrain from drinking water during this mourning period and break their fast with a salty or bitter taste. On the day of Ashura, the tekke in the Balkans prepares a ritual dish made from legumes called "Ashureh" and distributes it among those in need (Qurbanpour, 2009 AD/1388 SH: 73).

3.4. Shared Culture of Resistance

The majority of people in Iran, Bosnia, and the Balkans recall the region's difficult war years in the early 1990s; however, the reality is that the phenomenon of resistance among Muslims in the Balkans dates back decades. After the departure of the Ottomans, Muslims in the Balkans faced tremendous hardship, and multiple instances of genocide against the Muslims in this region occurred. The largest example of the genocide of Muslims can be seen in northern Greece today (the Cham genocide) following the signing of the Lausanne Treaty in 1923, during which several hundred thousand Muslims of Albanian descent were massacred by Greek Orthodox forces. Subsequently, during the Marxist dominance following World War II in this region, violent confrontations with Muslims continued, and the Communists did everything they could to erase Islamic traces from this area.

However, the Muslims in this region resisted all these pressures and never abandoned their religious beliefs.

In other words, one of the notable points in the history of the Balkans is that due to various religious, sectarian, and ethnic inclinations, numerous wars have shaped its historical process, and unfortunately, according to statistics, Turkish, Albanian, and Bosnian Muslims have been the most significant victims of these conflicts (Taheri, 2016 AD/1395 SH: 42).

Shortly after the collapse of communism, in the early 1990s, bloody wars and widespread genocide against Muslims in the Balkans occurred, with over two hundred thousand Muslims massacred during the brutal wars in Bosnia and Kosovo.

Nevertheless, Islam has persisted in the Balkans, and today, regarding the lengthy resistance of these people, the pressure on Muslims in this region has somewhat eased, and the revival of Islamic life in the Balkans has taken on a new and vibrant character (Parastash, Historical Roots of Islam in the Balkans, 2014 AD/1392 SH).

One important aspect of understanding resistance in the Balkans is the interpretation of the event of Karbala that has shaped the cultural landscape of the region and has had a profound impact on Muslim poets in the Balkans, inspiring elegies and works mourning the martyrdom of Imam Hussein and his companions. These poems are still recited in tekke during the first ten days of Muharram and on the day of Ashura. The existence of numerous water sanctuaries (Saqqakhaneh) in the Balkans also serves as evidence of this, even though their numbers have significantly decreased today. Nonetheless, the presence of these water sanctuaries, in memory of the martyrs of Karbala, has created a deep impact on the spirits of the people in the Balkans (Qurbanpour, 2009 AD/1388 SH: 79).

One contemporary example of resistance in the Balkans is the issue of support for Palestine. The Muslim nations in the Balkans have long been advocates for the Palestinian cause and have established good relations with the Palestinian Muslims. Although a significant shift towards Western interests has occurred in this region after the disintegration of Yugoslavia, the general perspective of the Muslims in the Balkans towards the Israeli regime remains strongly negative. Every year, various programs are organized by Muslims in the Balkan countries, particularly Bosnian Muslims, to confront the occupation of Palestine by Israel. In the recent events surrounding the Gaza war, we also witnessed an unprecedented solidarity among the people of the Balkans against the attacks by the Zionist regime on the Muslims of Gaza across different countries in the region.

4. Analysis of Iran's Foreign Policy Towards Bosnia and Herzegovina

The foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran towards Bosnia can be examined in three periods: The first period is before the war in Bosnia, from 1357 to 1370, which was characterized by an understanding of the Muslim ethnic groups and limited support for the Islamic communities in the Balkans within the framework of the former Yugoslav state.

The second period encompasses the years of war in Bosnia, from 1371 to 1375, during which the Islamic Republic of Iran promptly recognized the independence of the newly established countries in the Balkans and voluntarily rushed to assist the Muslims in this region, especially the Muslims of Bosnia, significantly contributing to the defense of the oppressed Muslims in the area through comprehensive assistance. The third period can be considered after the end of the war and the Dayton Peace Agreement from 1376 onwards; during this period, Iran played a constructive role in the reconstruction of the war-torn areas

Exploration of Iran's Foreign Policy in the Balkans Region: A Case Study of Bosnia and Herzegovina

and the return of Muslim refugees and also had an effective role in preserving the cultural identity of the Muslims of Bosnia.

4.1. The Pre-War Period in Bosnia (1371 - 1375)

After the victory of the Islamic Revolution, the leaders of the Islamic Republic of Iran called for neither East nor West and support for all Muslims. Imam Khomeini stated, "We must support the oppressed; we must strive to export our revolution to the entire world." (Ghafouri, 2007 AD/1386 SH: 77) Fighting against oppression is another core aspect of the Islamic Revolution's identity, which has manifested in Iran's foreign policy regarding developments in the Balkans. The confrontation with the global hegemonic system has granted Iran an independent identity, and thus, Iran's foreign policy has always sought to change the status quo in the region and the world, cooperating and forming alliances with anti-hegemonic forces, both at governmental and non-governmental levels (Mohammadnia, 2014 AD/1393 SH: 147).

At the beginning of the revolution, the emergence of the Islamic Revolution attracted the attention of some Bosnian Muslim intellectuals, despite the particular sensitivity of the communist Yugoslav government towards the relations of Yugoslav Muslims with Islamic countries. The Yugoslav government, considering the dominance of communist ideologies, prevented the Bosnian people from connecting with Iran and was even among the supporters of Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War. However, some Muslim intellectuals in Yugoslavia closely followed the developments of the Iranian Revolution with great sensitivity. Some of them were so influenced by the thoughts of the Iranian Revolution that in 1362, on the anniversary of the victory of the Islamic Revolution, they traveled to Iran and upon their return were prosecuted for this act in a court case known as "The 1983 Sarajevo Process" and were sentenced to long prison terms (Akbari, 2005 AD/1384 SH: 257).

On Esfand 1, 1367, the then President of Iran (Ayatollah Khamenei) embarked on an official trip to the two countries of Yugoslavia and Romania with a high-ranking delegation. The president took this opportunity to include a one-day visit to Sarajevo, which was considered the center of Muslims in Yugoslavia. Ayatollah Khamenei remarked about his trip to Sarajevo: "During my presidency, I went to Yugoslavia. While visiting that country, I said we wanted to visit Bosnia and Herzegovina as well. The preparations for the trip were made, and we went to Sarajevo. I spent one day walking in the streets of Sarajevo, and the people, who had heard that the president of the Islamic Republic had arrived, were gathering in groups; men and women, moved by the spirit of Islam, were crying and clapping." (Khamenei, 1994 AD/1373)

In summary, it can be said that the occurrence of the Islamic Revolution was a turning point in the understanding of Muslims in the Balkans about Iran. However, regarding the dominance of the communist government of Yugoslavia, the proximity and involvement of Western countries opposed to the Islamic Revolution, and Iran's specific situation during the war with Iraq, relations between Muslims in this region and the Islamic Republic did not flourish while the Yugoslav government was in power. In other words, although the Islamic Revolution provided an opportunity to introduce Iran to the Muslims of the Balkans, the Islamic capacity of the Balkans, especially Bosnia, did not become a priority for the foreign policy of any of the Iranian governments until the collapse of Yugoslavia. However, some specific actions, such as the visit of a group of Bosnian intellectuals to Iran and Ayatollah Khamenei's visit to Yugoslavia, gradually attracted the attention of Iran's foreign policy to the Muslims of Bosnia (Yugoslavia).

4.2. The Bosnian and Herzegovina War (1371 to 1375)

Simultaneously with the declaration of independence of the Bosnian people (March 1992), Serbian extremists (Chetniks), pursuing the idea of Greater Serbia, sought to seize Bosnian territory and eliminate non-Serb ethnic groups. As a result, they enacted policies of "Ethnic cleansing of Muslims" and carried out widespread massacres of Muslims in the country, marking the beginning of a great tragedy aimed at exterminating Muslims in the last years of the twentieth century. Extreme Croats (Ustaša) also entered the war in pursuit of greater interests and shares against Muslims. While both extreme Serbs and Croats received full political and military support from neighboring countries (Serbia and Croatia), Bosnian Muslims found themselves besieged and subjected to the most severe atrocities.

The severity of the crimes against Bosnian Muslims reached a level where it quickly spread the feeling among the Islamic world that Bosnians were being massacred solely for being Muslims and subjected to the cruelest atrocities, while the Christian world not only stood by as a witness to these crimes but participated in them as well. These events had a wide-ranging impact in Iran, generating a significant response among the people and turning Bosnia into a symbol of the oppression of Muslims (Aminian, 2005 AD/1384 SH: 185).

The leader of the Islamic Revolution stated in this regard: "The Bosnian people have become targets of the attack and ruthless cruelty of the Serbs solely because they are Muslims and adhere to Islam. The indifferent stance of European and Western governments towards the shocking crimes of the Serbs, along with the direct and indirect encouragement of the aggressors, speaks of the enmity of global tyranny

Exploration of Iran's Foreign Policy in the Balkans Region: A Case Study of Bosnia and Herzegovina

against Islam and a nation that has raised the banner of Islam. It seems that a crusade has been launched against the Muslims of Bosnia and Herzegovina." (Khamenei, 1992 AD/1371 SH)

The collapse of communism in the Balkans created the conditions for Muslims in this region to return to their faith; it return to self-bring forth a new identity for Muslims. What worried the West, and what formed a common ground for them in confronting Muslims, was the Muslim ethnic majority in the Balkans, the potential for the crisis to spread to other countries, the establishment of connections between Muslims in the Balkans and Islamic countries, and most importantly, the relationship with Iran, which played a central role in resisting oppression in the Islamic world (Akbari, 2005 AD/1384 SH: 266).

On the other hand, the Bosnian War was one of the first crises in the Islamic world at the beginning of Ayatollah Khamenei's leadership and after the end of the war with Iraq. This crisis undoubtedly led to the second consensus among Islamic countries in facing an international crisis, following the issue of Palestine. Based on its constitutional principles of supporting oppressed Muslims worldwide, the Islamic Republic of Iran rushed to aid the Muslims of this country and provided significant assistance to Bosnian Muslims, which numerous witnesses and experts have described as extensive, comprehensive, and decisive (Parastash, 2021 AD/1400 SH: 15).

The leader of the Islamic Revolution regarding Iran's assistance to the Muslim people of Bosnia said: "We are very concerned about the Muslims of Bosnia and Herzegovina. They are Muslims and our brothers. Of course, we have fulfilled our duties regarding these Muslims as much as we could. The Islamic Republic has provided them with comprehensive support of all kinds." (Khamenei, 1992 AD/1371 SH)

Therefore, Iran's foreign policy during the Bosnian crisis was shaped based on support for the oppressed and Muslims in the Balkans. According to the religious principles outlined in the constitution, Iran's foreign policy has taken it upon itself to defend the Muslim nation of Bosnia at various levels. Iran was the only country that did not accept any considerations or pressures in international organizations against Bosnian Muslims and played a key role in the Islamic Conference Organization to mobilize the Islamic world in defense of Bosnia (Akbari, 2005 AD/1384 SH: 260).

As a result of this support, in addition to the people of Bosnia, who witnessed Iran's role in their defense firsthand, Bosnian political officials frequently referenced Iran's contributions and expressed gratitude for its support. For example, during a meeting between Mr. Aliya Izetbegović, the then President of Bosnia, and the leader of the Islamic Revolution in

Azar 1376 in Tehran, he explicitly stated: "The Muslim people of Bosnia will never forget the vital assistance of the Islamic Republic of Iran during the difficult times of struggle and resistance. On behalf of my people, I sincerely thank Your Excellency, the government, and the nation of Iran for the effective help you provided us." (Izetbegović, 1997 AD/1376 SH)

As stated, Iran's presence and involvement in the events of the Bosnian War in the early 1990s and its support for Muslims in the war, which witnessed horrific crimes against them, played a significant role in transmitting the concept of resistance to the Balkans. The sacrifice of four Iranian martyrs in defense of Bosnian Muslims will forever be a reminder of the resistance against the West's overreach toward Bosnian Muslims in history.¹

4.3. The Post-War Period in Bosnia and Herzegovina (1376 to 1390)

The bloody and merciless conflict in Bosnia, which resulted in nearly two hundred thousand casualties and close to one million refugees, ended after four years with the signing of an agreement known as the Dayton Accords. This treaty, although it cooled the flames of war, led to the emergence of a strange and unique political structure that merely ended the war but did not bring an end to the crisis in the country and the Balkans. The war had displaced more than a million Muslims from their homes, and the return of Muslim refugees to their houses and the reconstruction of war devastation became the primary agenda of the government established after the war in Bosnia (Parasttash, 2021 AD/1400 SH: 21).

During this period, Iran responded to the Bosnian government's request by focusing on the reconstruction of destroyed houses and infrastructure, as well as taking essential steps to create employment and improve the living conditions of Muslims. The leader of the Islamic Revolution mentioned during a meeting with the members of the Presidency Council of Bosnia in 1383 regarding Iran's assistance to Bosnia after the war: "The Islamic Republic of Iran will share its valuable experiences in reconstruction and development with Bosnia and Herzegovina." (Khamenei, 2004 AD/1383 SH)

Iran's primary focus during this period was humanitarian assistance to the Muslim community in the country, particularly through the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran Reconstruction Center and the Jihad Construction Office in Sarajevo. Although these efforts gradually declined due to increasing Western pressures against Iran and

¹ . The four Iranian martyrs in the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina are: Abdullah Kalashek, Rasul Heydari, Sayyid Mohammad Hossein Nawwab and Behnam Niknam.

Exploration of Iran's Foreign Policy in the Balkans Region: A Case Study of Bosnia and Herzegovina

the escalation of unjust sanctions, as well as pressures from Western powers on the Bosnian government, they played an effective role in aiding the return of war refugees to their homes.

Apart from the reconstruction of war devastation, forming the identity of the Bosnian Muslims and their desire to maintain an independent religious and political identity in this region of Europe was also of great importance to Iran. In this regard, Iran played a significant role in preserving Islamic identity in the Balkans. Actions such as translating and publishing valuable Persian books into Bosnian, organizing numerous cultural events, sending Quran reciters and memorizers during the holy month of Ramadan, and providing scholarships for Bosnian students at universities in Iran were among the measures taken to support Islamic identity.

Conclusion

As previously mentioned, the majority of the residents of Bosnia are Muslims, and these people have a sense of attachment to Iran regarding the cultural and historical commonalities stemming from their belonging to the Iranian-Islamic civilization. Iran has always defended the rights of Muslims in the Balkans, especially Bosnian Muslims, considering its ideological and value-driven nature.

The Shia population in Bosnia is very limited, and this country cannot be considered among Shia-majority nations; therefore, Iran's role in defending the oppressed Muslim people of Bosnia and its subsequent assistance during the post-war reconstruction period evokes the ideals of the Islamic Revolution and its leaders in supporting all Muslims worldwide, as well as the idea of Islamic unity regardless of whether one is Shia or Sunni in Iran's foreign policy.

In addition to the political sphere, a sense of solidarity and support for the Bosnian victims, irrespective of their Shia or Sunni faith, has emerged among various domestic groups and the general public in Iran since the time of the war in that country. The fate of these Muslims has been regarded as significant by the Iranian public.

To accurately understand Iran's foreign policy behavior in the Balkans, the present study examined these relations across three distinct historical periods. It was determined that whether in the pre-war period, during the war, or in the reconstruction phase and efforts to strengthen Islamic identity, Iran's foreign policy has always been derived from identity sources constructed from shared history, culture, and religion with the people of this region. In other words, the nature of the perspective and relationships formed with Bosnia indicates that the

cultural components of the Islamic Republic, which shape the identity of the Islamic Revolution of Iran and the system that emerged from it, have cast a shadow over forming the interests and orientations of Iran's foreign policy with this country.

According to the findings of this research, the Islamic Republic of Iran has sought to influence developments in the Balkans since the onset of the crisis in the region, and this influence and role align significantly with the components of constructivist theory. From this perspective, Iran perceives the Balkans as a region that shares numerous cultural and historical commonalities with Iran, and the notable presence of indigenous Muslims in this area provides substantial potential for developing relations across various cultural, political, and economic spheres.

However, Iran's foreign policy downplays geopolitical realities while emphasizing historical, cultural, and religious commonalities with the Balkans, viewing this region as part of the Iranian-Islamic civilizational sphere. Through this lens, Iran aims to utilize identity components to influence developments in Bosnia specifically and regional dynamics more broadly, striving to help the Muslims in this area achieve their rights.

Therefore, in line with the constructivist approach, it can be argued that the determining factor in the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran towards the Balkans is not objective and material factors, but rather norms influenced by Iranian-Islamic identity and interests. On the other hand, the special attention to these normative dimensions does not imply that national interests in this region are overlooked or considered less important; rather, the mentioned components are themselves pathways to achieving national interests in the Balkan countries. In this context, Iran's foreign policy towards Bosnia can be analyzed and justified not based on realist approaches but through a constructivist lens.

In conclusion, based on the analyses conducted in this research, two recommendations for foreign policy towards the Balkans, particularly Bosnia, are presented for the consideration of the responsible authorities:

First, the Islamic Republic has a significant and enduring record in the period of crisis, reconstruction, and the strengthening of Islamic identity in the Balkans, particularly in Bosnia. However, this record has been less documented and registered in history for various reasons, raising concerns that these actions—though they will endure in the presence of the Almighty—may be forgotten or face historical distortion over time. Therefore, it is recommended that the documentation and historiography of the role of the Islamic Republic of Iran during the

Exploration of Iran's Foreign Policy in the Balkans Region: A Case Study of Bosnia and Herzegovina

Bosnian War and the subsequent reconstruction period be prioritized and given attention by those responsible in the field of foreign policy.

Second, since the Iranian-Islamic identity components, such as shared religion, common history and culture, and support for the oppressed, are key elements for interaction with countries and nations in the Balkans, and these normative components operate beyond material variables like foreign trade volume and political exchanges, it is suggested that the responsible authorities place greater emphasis on prioritizing the Balkans in the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran, focusing on these Iranian-Islamic identity components.

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Exploration of Iran's Foreign Policy in the Balkans Region: A Case Study of Bosnia and Herzegovina

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