

THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN'S APPROACH TO THE BEKTASHIS IN THE BALKANS: THE CASE OF ALBANIA

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Abstract

This study examines the approach of the Islamic Republic of Iran toward the Bektashis in the Balkans. Albania will be examined as a case study, and methods such as case studies, qualitative research, and base-case analysis will be used as the methodology. The article will explore the hypothesis that Iran is leveraging the Bektashis' love for the Ahl al-Bayt and their reverence for the Twelve Imams to exert influence over the Bektashis. The most fundamental finding of the study is that Iran, in line with its policy of exporting revolution and *Takrib-i Mezahib*, has been trying to influence the Bektashis in the Balkans, particularly their views on the Twelve Imams Mahdi. In this context, Iran is trying to create an impact in the Balkans by emphasizing that the Bektashis' idea of the expected savior, the Mahdi, is the Twelfth Imam Mahdi. However, it seems impossible for the Bektashis to completely abandon Sufism and accept Shiism as a school of jurisprudence, even though they respect the Twelve Imams. It can be said that Bektashism is a Sufi order whose socio-cultural elements are strongly felt, that it is positioned on a different line from traditional Shia jurisprudence in terms of its basic belief characteristics, and that it largely conflicts with the *Vilayat-e Faqih* system, which is the form of government in Iran.

Key Words: Mysticism, Bektashism, Islamic Republic of Iran, Balkans, Albania.

Introduction

Established in 1979, the Islamic Republic of Iran has a theocratic government, and one of the most decisive elements of its foreign policy is the export of the Islamic Revolution. The effects of this policy, guaranteed by the Constitution of Iran, began to be seen in the Balkans, particularly from the 1990s onwards. Albania, with its Muslim population, ethno-cultural diversity and Bektashi tekkes, has been a special focus of interest in Iran's foreign policy. The reason for the relevant interest is undoubtedly that the Bektashis have been influenced by Shiism in terms of their beliefs. However, the Bektashis are ultimately a Sufi school with strong socio-cultural characteristics. Therefore, Iran's efforts to exert influence over the Bektashis in the Balkans constitute significant challenges. Consequently, this study aims to investigate Iran's approach to the Bektashis in Albania, to reveal these difficulties and impossibilities.

Studies on the history, religious, sociological and cultural dimensions of Bektashism have generally been approached within the framework of the Ottoman Empire period, Turkish identity, and the concepts of Alevism and Shiism. It can be said that studies examining Bektashism directly in the context of Iran's approach are insufficient in terms of both quantity and quality. It is particularly noticeable that studies examining Bektashism through the themes of the Twelve Imams and the Mahdi are limited in the literature of theology, sociology, or cultural studies. Therefore, focusing on themes such as the Mahdi when examining Iran's approach to the Bektashis will fill an important gap in the literature. In this context, one of the original aspects of this study is that it reveals whether Bektashism has been influenced by Iran's approach to the Mahdi, especially as interpreted in political terms, and to what extent. Accordingly, this study will seek to answer the question: 'What is the likelihood of success for Iran's policies of exporting revolution and *takrib al-mazahib* in its approach to the Bektashis in the Balkans?' While seeking answers to this research question, the case of Albania will be examined, and methods such as case study, qualitative research, and base-case analysis will be used as the methodology.

The article will explore the hypothesis that Iran, acting on the basis of the Bektashi' love for the Ahl al-Bayt and reverence for the Twelve Imams, has attempted to convert the Bektashis to Shiism in line with its *takrib al-mazahib* policies, and in this sense has sought to spread the idea that the Bektashis' Mahdi is actually the Twelfth Imam Mahdi. However, it will be noted that this is complicated by the teachings and socio-cultural characteristics that the Bektashis have adopted from

Sunni Islam, as well as their respect and reverence for the companions and the four caliphs. In this sense, the difficulty or impossibility of Bektashism actually adopting and implementing Twelver Shiism as a fiqh school of thought will be emphasised. As the subject is broad in scope, certain limitations have been applied in this study. Accordingly, Iran's export of revolution and *takrib al-mazahib* policies has not been discussed in detail; instead, Iran's view of Sufism has been examined, and attention has been drawn to the commonalities between Bektashism and Shiism. In this respect, rather than focusing on foreign policy analysis, the study aims to provide a base-case analysis covering religious, sociological, historical and cultural dimensions.

In light of this information, the study first examined the place and importance of Sufi orders and tekkes in the Balkans, followed by an analysis of the emergence of Bektashism and its spread throughout the Balkans. In the next stage, the differences between Bektashism and other Sufi orders and its similarities with Shiism are investigated, followed by an examination of Iran's view of Sufism and the Sufi-Bektashi policies in the Balkans, as exemplified by Albania. The findings obtained in the study are discussed in the conclusion section and subjected to a final evaluation.

1. Sufi Orders and Lodges in the Balkans

In the Islamisation, Turkification and conquest of the Balkans, tekkes and zawiya played a significant role. Even before the Ottoman Empire arrived in the Balkans, it sent itinerant dervishes to the region and provided them with support, enabling the dervishes to develop the Balkans both materially and spiritually and facilitating the conquests (Barkan, 1993, 24; Bakırcı-Türkan, 2013, 147-148). Thus, over the centuries, numerous orders and their sub-branches, primarily Bektashism, Halvetism, Kadirism, Rufaim, Melamilism, Maulawism, Kadirism, and Naqshbandism, began to exert influence in the Balkans. It is known that Bektashi tekkes were concentrated in Albania, North Macedonia and Kosovo (Özköse, 2014, 228).

One of the most important reasons for the spread of Bektashism in Albania is that Albanians mostly served in the Guild of Janissaries, known as the Bektashi Order during the Ottoman period. However, with the abolition of this order in the first half of the 19th century, the influence of Bektashism in Albania began to increase further with the dervishes who migrated from Anatolia. In contrast, Bosniaks and other nations, due to their positions in the Ottoman bureaucracy and administrative ranks, began to gravitate more towards orders such as the Halveti, Naqshbandi, and Qadiri (Norris, 2006, 20). Some of the prominent tekkes in the region are: the 'Dimetoka Bektashi Asitane' in Greece and the 'Prizren Halveti Tekke' in Kosovo, which are the *asitanes* (the main lodge) of the Bektashis and Halvetis, respectively, where disciples complete the final stage of their education. The city of Prizren in Kosovo is considered the centre of Halvetism. In this context, the 'Kalkandelen Harabati Baba Bektash Tekke' in Macedonia also stands out as a tekke still heavily used by the Bektashis. In addition, Macedonia is mostly prominent for its Halveti tekkes. Unlike the Bektashis and Halvetis, other orders have for centuries regarded the *asitanes* in Konya, Istanbul and Bursa as their centres.

2. The Emergence of Bektashism and Its Spread in Anatolia

Haji Bektash Veli, the intellectual pioneer and namesake of Bektashism, was a Khorasan-born Islamic scholar and Sufi mystic. It is believed that this Sufi order was institutionalised by Abdal Musa, one of Haji Bektash Veli's disciples, after his death. In the 19th century, Naim Fraşiri, the Albanian national poet and Bektashi writer, argued that Haji Bektash Veli's lineage was based on the teachings of Imam Rıza according to Shiite doctrine and defended that Bektashism essentially followed Shiite doctrines and leaned towards Imam Cafer es-Sadık (Ziaee, 2010, 2). In this context, current debates regarding the identity of Haji Bektash Veli revolve around two main views: that he was a heterodox Turkmen baba or a Sufi adhering to Sunni understanding (Gündoğdu, 2012, 2-3). For this reason, examining the Iranian influence is extremely useful for understanding the heterodox structure of Bektashism.

During the 12th, 13th, and 14th centuries, the Iranian people, who were subjected to invasions by the Mongols and Timurids, developed a growing interest in esoteric teachings, which signified both sectarianism and inward-looking tendencies (Mohammesnejad, 2015, 106). Furthermore, those who migrated from Iran to Anatolia due to the Mongol invasion brought with them their heterodox sects and esoteric teachings. With these dervishes and saints arriving from Iran, the opportunity arose for

these teachings to spread throughout Anatolia and be nourished by the local beliefs (Seyman, 2006, 39). Furthermore, Zoroastrian and Mazdakite influences were transmitted to Anatolia primarily through the Oghuz, Hallaj, and Karluk tribes (Ocak, 1983, 51).

It is stated that early Sufi movements were divided into twelve fundamental orders. These are as follows: Qadiriyya, Sadiqiyya, Bedeviyya, Rifaiyya, Halvetiyya, Bektashi, Naqshbandiyya, Maulawi, Chishtiyya, Suhrawardiyya, Shazeliya, and Tijaniyya. Some of these hold an important place in Balkan Sufism. These are: Naqshbandi, Qadiri, Rifai, Halveti, Bektashi, Maulawi and Chishti. Although all of them are inward-looking movements that guide people to reach Allah, the more orthodox orders such as Naqshbandi, Qadiri and Maulawi have been more widely accepted by the people than the more Sufi-oriented orders such as Bektashi and Rifai, which are less attached to orthodox teachings (Hazen, 2008, 35-36). Although these orders have little to do with the political division between Sunni and Shiite Islam, some orders have become more inclined towards one of these teachings over time. In this context, it is noted that the Naqshbandi, Qadiri and Halveti orders follow the Sunni teachings that are dominant in the Balkans and Anatolia, while the Bektashi and Rifai orders lean towards the Shiite understanding of Islam (Hazen, 2008, 36; Kaya, 2003, 53).

3. The Difference between Bektashism and Other Sufi Orders

Sufi orders are often distinguished from one another due to the historical, sociological, and cultural traces they bear. Bektashism, in this sense, is distinctly separate from other Sunni Sufi movements because it is associated with the esoteric understanding of Islam. However, Bektashism shares many elements with other esoteric orders such as the Qizilbash and Hurufi orders. The Bektashis accepted many Hurufi doctrines and teachings and later spread them, particularly in Anatolia and the Balkans. Furthermore, works such as Fadlallah Hurufi's *Cavidanname* and Fereşteoğlu's *Aşkname* were very well received at Bektashi gatherings and especially in their tekkes. Bektashism was also influenced by Yesevism in terms of its origins. The most frequently mentioned community during the 13th-century Seljuk period was the 'Khorasan Saints,' who were mostly affiliated with the Ahmed Yesevi tradition. Among those who came to Anatolia during this period were Avşar Baba, Pir Dede, Geyikli Baba, Sarı Saltuk Baba, Burak Baba, Taptuk Emre, Abdal Musa, Horaz Dede, and Haji Bektash Veli, as mentioned in the *Vilâyetnâme* (Görkaş, 2000, 194-195).

The tradition of drinking and music seen in Bektashism today is also due to the influence of the Yesevi dervishes, saints and mystics who came to Anatolia later (Eyüboğlu, 2010, 291). On the other hand, while Yesevism is inward-looking, Bektashism is an outward-looking institution. Furthermore, while Yesevism adheres to the general principles of Islam regarding the creation of the universe, humanity, and God, these are not particularly relevant in Bektashism (Eyüboğlu, 2010, 388). On the other hand, although there are approaches that associate Bektashism with Naqshbandism, these views do not reflect the truth. This is because Naqshbandi Sufism is an institution strictly adhering to the principles of Sharia. Based on principles such as worship and *zikir*, this order embraces all the beliefs and rules of Sunni Islam. Furthermore, as with every order, although the Naqshbandis trace their origins to the Ahl al-Bayt, they do not hold the belief in and love for the Twelve Imams, which forms the basis of Shiite teachings. Musical instruments and alcohol are prohibited, and women must cover themselves according to Sharia rules (Eyüboğlu, 2010, 385).

Although the vast majority of the four hundred sects, including their sub-sects, trace their lineage back to the Ahl al-Bayt, they do not support Ali as caliph, arguing that the election was in accordance with Islam, the hadith, and the Sunnah. In other words, they adhere to the Sunnah, respect the Twelve Imams and the Ahl al-Bayt, mourn Kerbala but do not observe mourning rituals like the Shiites, do not follow the path of the Twelve Imams, and respect the Companions. All these characteristics also constitute the aspects that distinguish Bektashism from other orders. In other words, Bektashism, which accepts the path of the Twelve Imams, differs from other orders.

4. The Relationship between Bektashism and Shiism

The fundamental source of Sufism does not consist entirely of Islamic teachings. Throughout history, Sufi movements have been influenced more by cultural elements such as traditional beliefs, customs, and traditions. The mystical works of philosophers, which also encompass Iran's traditional Persian culture, have begun to form a belief and way of life separate from Islam, even though they contain some Islamic elements in form (Vatandaş, 2014, 184). Bektashism was influenced

philosophically by Suhrawardi's Illuminationism, while mystically it drew inspiration from the Melamism, Hurufism, and Kalenderism that emerged in the Iranian geography, and the Qarmatism that manifested in the present-day territories of Iraq and Bahrain.

The Ismailis and Qarmatians appointed Shiite missionaries or dais to carry out missionary activities to 'invite other communities to Islam'. During the 4th and 5th centuries of Islam, when theology, philosophy and Sufism were intertwined, Turkish societies also began to be influenced by different cultures, particularly Iranian mystical thought and esoteric teachings. During this period, the traditional Shamanism of the Anatolian Seljuks, the Timurid Empire, the Mongols and the Ilkhanids contained elements that could easily blend with Shiite-esoteric teachings. Shiite missionaries took advantage of similarities between certain aspects of Turkish Shamanism and 'Shiite-esoteric' teachings. The deification of Ali and the attribution of a status similar to that of the *Tengri* among the Turks can be cited as an example. In the Anatolian Seljuks and later in the Ottoman Empire, heterodox Turkmen tribes, Alevis-Bektashis, Khorasan Saints and Abdals began to display strong 'Shiite-Esoteric' characteristics over time, partly due to the influence of Shiite missionaries.

In Bektashism, love for Hz. Ali and the Ahl al-Bayt is strongly felt. The concepts of *tevella* (loving those who love the Ahl al-Bayt) and *teberra* (not loving those who do not love the Ahl al-Bayt) are at the forefront of Bektashism's core beliefs. Bektashis accept Ja'fari jurisprudence and also consider the Twelve Imams to be sacred. Bektashism contains a large number of old and new cultural-religious elements, such as Hurufism, Baba'ism, Ezoterism, Jaferism, Shiism, and Shamanism. Some common features between Bektashism and Shiism include the belief in *taqiyya*, the salawat of the Twelve Imams, the Muharram fast, and mourning. Furthermore, some Bektashis consider themselves followers of Ja'far al-Sadiq and argue that Bektashism is a Ja'fari sect or branch. These Bektashis define themselves as 'Shiite Muslims' and, in particular, 'lovers of Imam Ali.' Nevertheless, due to the pressures they faced in the late Ottoman period, they practised *taqiyya* and claimed to be Sunnis. At the same time, they opposed the '*zahiri* (literal)' application of the Qur'an, i.e. 'sharia', and resorted to an esoteric method of interpreting the Qur'an, speaking more of 'truth', "knowledge" or 'wisdom'. In many ways, the Bektashi lifestyle resembles Shiism, and an extreme love for the Ahl al-Bayt is evident. Images of Imam Hussein and other members of the Ahl al-Bayt, commonly seen in Shiite places of worship, are also frequently found in Bektashi tekkes.

The belief in *hulul* in Bektashism is also present in some radical branches of Shiism. In the context of the understanding of *hulul*, Bektashis believe that Allah manifested himself in the person of Hz. Ali. According to them, Allah appeared in Hz. Ali, and the 'mi'raj' is Hz. Muhammad following the path of Hz. Ali (Eyüboğlu, 2010, 140). Although this characteristic does not coincide with the Orthodox Shiite understanding, it is the same in radical Shiites and its Aliullah (*Ehl-i Hak*) and Nusayri branches. In addition, *Nad-i Ali* is a prayer recited in all branches of Bektashism, calling upon Hz. Ali for help (Eyüboğlu, 2010, 140). In Shiism, this is seen as 'Come to our aid, Ali!' Both Bektashism and Shiism place a strong emphasis on Hz. Ali and Kerbela.

5. Iran's View of Sufism and the Emergence of the Concept of *Irfan*

In Iran, philosophers such as Shahab al-Din Suhrawardi (12th century), Ibn Sina, Mulla Sadra, and Sadr al-Din Shirazi have been influential in the development of Islamic mystical culture and philosophy. In other words, Suhrawardi's Ishraqi philosophy in the 12th century and *Usuli* fiqh, reinforced by Muhammad Baqir Behbahani in the late 18th century, have influenced Iran's view of Sufism. Suhrawardi claimed that the only way to reach the truth was through a kind of spiritual intuition. According to Ishraqi philosophy, truth can only be attained through the heart and illumination. Similarly, according to Usuli jurisprudence, during the absence of the Imam, the Qur'an, Hadith, Ijma and wisdom and the *ijtihad* of *faqih*s are seen as sources of jurisprudence.

Following the consolidation of Usuli jurisprudence by Muhammad Baqir Behbahani in Iran, traditional Shiite teachings in the Qom basin gradually began to come under the influence of mysticism. During his education in Qom, Ayatollah Khomeini, influenced by the works of philosophers who played an important role in the spread of mysticism in Iran, took his views on the *Usuli-Irfani* line to a new dimension and put forward the Velayeti Fakihi Doctrine. In this doctrine, where esoteric views are strongly felt, Khomeini took the purification journeys of Ibn Arabi and Mulla

Sadra a step further, claiming that in the final stage of the jurist's journey to find God, he would acquire divine attributes and become ready to guide humanity.

In general terms, the mystical dimensions of Shiism in Iran have been equated with the concept of *irfan* (knowledge, intuition), which has a predominantly cultural aspect. Over time, influenced by the politicisation of Islam, the view of Sufism within Shiite thought has become increasingly negative. In other words, the Iranian reacted negatively towards Sufis and began to exclude them from society.

The Shiites' opposition to Sufism has been acknowledged even by Iranian and Shiite writers themselves, and it has been stated that the conceptualisation between Iranian *irfan* and Sufism is generally based on historical and political reasons and has no scientific validity. This is because the strong esoteric characteristics of Iran's Velayeti Fakih system and its origins in Sufism/*irfan* culture make it difficult to explain the conflict between the Shiite world and Sufism. Although the two elements deeply influence each other and even intertwine, they can clash in many areas. The most fundamental areas of conflict are as follows:

- The concept of the Imam and the Mahdi in Shiism and the concept of the qutub, sheikh, or guide in Sufism are largely similar (Schimmel, 1975, 200). For this reason, there is a situation of having to choose between the Imam and the guide. This situation brings conflict with it.
- According to Shiite belief, the characteristics and powers found in the Twelve Imams are not found in anyone else. Therefore, those who embrace Shiite belief cannot also be followers of a tekke (Uludağ, 1993, 524). This situation brings with it a clear distinction.
- Although the *sema* and *zikir* rituals of Sufism are theoretically similar to the Ashura mourning and other mourning ceremonies in Shiism, they essentially create a contradiction because one expresses love for Allah and the other expresses love for Hz. Hüseyin.
- Both Sufism and Shiism attach great importance to the graves of saints or imams, respectively. For Shiites, these visits are considered virtuous deeds after obligatory acts of worship. During the ceremonies they hold at these sites, Shiites experience a state of ecstasy, as seen in Sufism (Uludağ, 1993, 524).
- It is known that the Imami Shiites attacked the Companions, especially the first three caliphs. Sufi orders, on the other hand, hold deep respect for the Companions. This keeps Shiites distant from Sufism. For example, Muawiya, whom Shiites despise and curse, is glorified and considered a saint by Sufis, which is another example of this.

Iran has refrained from directly emphasising these mystical aspects of Islam in both its domestic politics and its cultural policies abroad, instead seeking to highlight the works of Iranian philosophers on literature, language, history, art, medicine, mathematics and other positive sciences as an important part of Persian culture. In this context, Iran's cultural policies have indirectly emphasised mystical arguments and the understanding of *irfan*. Considering the effects that Sufism would have on society, the Iranian government aimed to use Islamic mysticism institutions under its control within the scope of cultural activities abroad. For example, the Iranian Islamic Mysticism Science Association, which aims to carry out activities in this field, was established under the Iranian Ministry of Science, Research and Technology. The association's objective is to improve the quality of scientific research in the field of Islamic mysticism and to disseminate work in this area. This institution conducts scientific and cultural research at the national and international levels with researchers and experts interested in the science of Islamic mysticism. It also organises conferences and other events related to Islamic philosophers and promotes Iran's understanding of Islamic mysticism by sending delegations abroad.

6. Iran's Sufi-Bektashi Policy in the Balkans: The Case of Albania

Anatolian Sufism and the Bektashi tradition laid the foundations for beliefs such as Aliyullahism and Ehl-i hak (Yaresanism) in Iran. Similarly, today in the Balkans, with the exception of some Alevi-Bektashi dervish lodges in Bulgaria, the Bektashi orders, particularly in Albania, Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, are among the examples reflecting heterodox Shia Sufism. The rate of affiliation with Sufi orders in the Balkans is highest in Albania, followed closely by Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Muslims constitute 56 per cent of Albania's population of 3 million.

Thirteen per cent of the Albanian population identify themselves as belonging to a Sufi order (PRC, 2026). The percentage of those in Albania who identify themselves as belonging to the Bektashi order is 2 per cent. Considering the country's population of three million, this corresponds to a Bektashi population of 60,000 (Progonati, 2016, 181). Although most of these individuals are not affiliated with a Bektashi shrine or order, they consider themselves to be Bektashi by birth.

Iran's activities in the Balkans through the Bektashi orders are well known. Iran has aimed to intensify its activities in Albania, where Bektashi shrines and dervish lodges are most concentrated. As in the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the fact that Muslims constitute the majority in the country facilitates Iran's activities. In this context, direct contact with the Bektashis is avoided, and activities are carried out mainly through cultural institutions. This may be due to the fact that Albanian authorities do not allow Iranian representatives to work freely in the region. However, Iran has long been accused of spreading fundamentalism and terrorism in the Balkans. For this reason, Tehran conducts its activities in the region mainly through social, cultural and humanitarian aid organisations.

Iran's activities in Albania trace back to Baba Rexheb, who played a leading role in the establishment and institutionalisation of the Bektashi order in the country. In his writings, Baba Rexheb demonstrated that Sufism is fundamentally closely related to Shiism. He rejected the influences of Shamanism and pre-Islamic beliefs and endeavoured to restore Bektashism to Orthodox Shiism. Baba Rexheb revived the Shiite dimension of Bektashism, which emerged in the 16th century with Balım Sultan, and this idea gradually gained acceptance among the Bektashis of Albania. His works written in Albanian, and especially his book 'Misticizma Islame Dhe Bektashizma', had a tremendous impact on the Bektashis as they were the only examples of their kind. This work follows a path quite different from the traditional Bektashi tradition, but more importantly, it has made Bektashism open to Iranian influence (Doja, 2006, 102). Therefore, Baba Rexheb's work from the 1950s onwards has played an important role in the emergence of this rapprochement between Iranian Shiism and the Bektashis today.

The Shiite clergy in Iran began to support the Bektashi communities that migrated from Türkiye to the Balkans, particularly after 1925. This was because supporting Bektashi Sufism, which was imbued with esoteric teachings, was seen as a very reasonable strategy for Shiites who shared similar teachings, such as love for the Ahl al-Bayt and Ashura mourning. In late 1993 and early 1994, the leaders of the Bektashi Order in Albania, Haji Dede Resat Bardi¹ and Baba Bayram from Tirana, received grants from Iranian officials for the education of students and financial aid for the community (Poulton, 1997, 126). However, the amount of aid remained limited, and no noticeable change occurred in the Bektashi community during that period. What is noteworthy at this point is that Bektashi activities were generally concentrated in the northern regions. At the same time, community leaders also emerged from northern towns (Poulton, 1997, 128). Today, Hacı Baba Edmond Brahimaj is the religious leader of all Bektashis worldwide.

The Bektashi community in Albania has shown interest in Iran's Twelver Shiism, which shares the same common characteristics with its esoteric-heterodox aspects. In return, Iran has aimed to increase its revolutionary export activities in the Balkans by establishing close relations with the Bektashis. Iran successfully translates Shiite publications through foundations and cultural schools, and also aims to spread Iranian culture and Islamic values through various media outlets such as IRIB television. In this way, Iranian officials are attempting to show that Albania is part of the Islamic world by reviving Bektashi Islamic culture, and in this context, they are financing and supporting all kinds of historical and sociological research. The main objective here is to link the existing Islamic culture in Albania with Iranian Shiism through Bektashism. Such a policy mostly has an ideological dimension, thus Tehran demonstrates that Albanian nationalism, which has its roots in Bektashism, can act in concert with Islamist ideology. In this way, Iran gains the opportunity to strengthen the traditional Shiite line of the Bektashis.

The sending of Albanian Bektashi dervishes to the city of Qom in Iran for religious education is one such policy. The aim is for the Bektashi *babas* to become more closely aligned with Iranian Shiism upon their return to Albania. In addition, Iran is attempting to promote Twelver Shiism by publishing books on Bektashism in Albania. Iran's policies of exporting revolution to the Balkans are

¹ Haji Dede Reşat Bardi (1935–2011) was the leader of the Bektashi community following Baba Rexheb (1901–1995).

mostly carried out through Sufi orders, particularly the Bektashis. For example, in addition to the Bektashis in Albania, the Halvetis, Rifais and other Sufi orders in the country are also able to cooperate closely with Iran. This is because Sufi-Bektashi orders, which need financial support to spread widely in the country, receive support from Iran. In return, they allow Shiite publications to spread within the order, gradually transforming ideologically. In addition, they inform young order members about religious education opportunities in Iran and help them obtain scholarships in the Tehran and Qom regions.

Such activities are deemed 'dangerous' by the governments of Balkan states, leading to the closure of many Islamic organisations and new-generation communities similar to Sufi orders, with those responsible being deported abroad. Radical movements and sectarian tensions that have gained strength in the Balkans in recent years have been influential in these measures being taken. In line with its policies of exporting revolution and promoting religious harmony, Iran has sought to establish close ties with Sufi-Bektashi orders in the Balkans since the 1990s and has acted accordingly. Iran's religious and cultural activities in the Balkans have been concentrated in Albania, where the influence of Bektashism and other Sufi orders is particularly strong. In this context, various foundations and associations have been established in Albania with Iran's support. Examples of these include the Iranian Sadi Shirazi Cultural Foundation, established in 1994; the Quran Foundation, established in 2000; the *Flladi* Association, established in 2005; and the Firdeusi Institute of Persian-Iranian Studies, established in 2010 in cooperation between Marin Barleti University and the Sadi Shirazi Foundation.

In this context, Iran has increased its contacts with Haji Baba Edmond Brahimaj, the leader of the World Bektashi community, since 2011. Bektashi *babas* have frequently been invited to Islamic and cultural events organised by institutions such as the Sadi Shirazi Foundation and the Firdeusi Institute. Iran's religious and cultural activities in Albania began to be restricted after 2013 due to the increase in radical religious terrorism and sectarian tensions in the Balkans, along with the Middle East. The activities of the Firdeusi Institute in Albania were terminated in 2013, and those of the Sadi Shirazi Foundation in 2015. Nevertheless, Iran continues its contacts with local organisations and the Bektashi community through its Embassy in Albania. Today, Iran has developed close relations with Bektashi leaders in cities such as Tirana, the capital of Albania, as well as Durrës, Elbasan, Berat, Fier, Tepedelen, Permet, Görice and Sarende. It can be argued that Iran aims to bring them closer to Ja'fari Islam in line with its *takrib al-mazahib* policy, taking advantage of their respect and reverence for the Twelve Imams and Ahl al-Bayt.

Conclusion and Discussion

The effects of Iran's policy of exporting its revolution to the Balkans began to be seen in Bosnia and Herzegovina in particular from the 1990s onwards. At the same time, the large number of Bektashi tekkes in Albania, Macedonia and Kosovo has been instrumental in Tehran's intensification of its religious and cultural activities in these countries. In this context, Iran's embassies and cultural attaché offices in Balkan countries mostly operate in close cooperation with religious institutions and organisations, muftis, charities, foundations, humanitarian aid associations, and other civil society organisations in these countries. One of the religious, cultural, and social structures with which relations have been established in this regard is the Bektashis.

Establishing close ties with Bektashi tekkes and *dedebabas*, inviting them to socio-cultural and religious organisations, supporting their publications, and developing partnerships in other charitable endeavours can be counted among Iran's main activities. Iran's goal with these activities is to emphasise the commonalities between the beliefs of the Bektashis, such as their love for the Twelve Imams and the Ahl al-Bayt, and the observance of the Muharram fast and mourning, and the Shi'a faith, thereby spreading the idea that the Bektashis are Shi'a by origin. However, this goal presents certain difficulties and/or impossibilities from a sociological, cultural and religious perspective. The most fundamental difficulty for Iran here is that Bektashism originated in Anatolia and the Turkish-Islamic geography, and therefore the characteristics of this culture have become fundamental tenets of belief over the centuries.

In addition, Bektashism shares fundamental references with Sunni jurisprudence, such as respect and reverence for the four caliphs and the companions of the Prophet. However, it aligns closely with the Shiite sect in terms of its love and reverence for Ali, the Twelve Imams, and the Ahl

al-Bayt. However, there are fundamental characteristics that distinguish Bektashism from both Sunni and Shia jurisprudence. These can be summarised as follows:

- The strong presence of socio-cultural elements in Bektashism that contain esoteric and mystical characteristics,
- The existence of positions such as *dedebabalik*, which act as representatives of Haji Bektash Veli, and in this sense, conflict with the position of imam (or *faqih* in Shiism), which is responsible for issuing fatwas in Sharia law,
- Pursuing the goals of attaining love for Allah, seeking divine truths, purifying oneself of bad habits, and reaching spiritual peace and human perfection, rather than dealing with worldly matters such as Islam's political dominance on earth.

Based on the above, it can be said that Bektashism is a Sufi order with strongly felt socio-cultural elements, positioned on a different line from traditional Shiite jurisprudence in terms of its fundamental beliefs, and moreover, it largely conflicts with the Velayat-e Faqih system, Iran's form of government. Indeed, according to Imam Khomeini's Velayat-e Faqih Doctrine, religious and political authority belongs to the 'Imams' descended from Hz. Ali. Accordingly, the Twelfth Imam, Muhammad Mehdi, has gone into occultation, and until he returns to earth to re-establish justice and the ultimate Islamic rule, Islamic governance has been transferred to fair *faqihs* acting as his representatives. The administration of the Iranian state and people also belongs to a fair, pious, courageous, prudent and managerial *faqih*, that is, to the position of leadership, in line with this system. This institution of imamate/jurisprudence conflicts with the authority of institutions such as the pir, murshid, sheikh, *baba*, *dede* and *dedebaba* in Bektashism.

In addition, the Velayat-e Faqih, ruling as the deputy of the Hidden Imam Mahdi, holds authority not only over religious and social matters but also over political matters. According to the Necef-based Shiite ulema view, *faqihs* lack characteristics such as the infallibility/sinlessness possessed by imams and knowledge about occultation. However, the Velayat-e Faqih system introduced by Iran elevates *faqihs* to the rank of the Imams, and this situation has led to debates in Shia jurisprudence, particularly regarding the beliefs of infallibility and occultation. Indeed, the Velayat-e Faqih possesses all the political authority of the infallible Imams in terms of implementation, elevating them to the same rank, and thus indirectly possessing infallibility and knowledge of occultation.

Although Imam Khomeini argued that the occultation cannot be revealed, that only Allah has knowledge of it, and that contact with Imam Mahdi is impossible during the 'Greater Occultation,' today, within the Shiite sect, (wrong) views have become widespread that the Velayat-e Faqih is infallible and has knowledge of the occultation. By way of comparison, Sufism is a journey in search of divine truths and realities belonging to the unseen realm that cannot be accessed through wisdom. In this respect, Bektashism follows the traditional Orthodox line that one cannot possess knowledge about occultation, which is one of the fundamental beliefs of Islam. However, Bektashis also share the same view as Shiites that the Twelfth Imam Mahdi has gone into occultation and will return to establish justice and the ultimate Islamic rule. Nevertheless, Bektashism is in conflict with the thesis that, as stated in the Velayati Fakih Doctrine, in the absence of Imam Mehdi, the *faqih* will have political authority on his behalf.

Among the Bektashi order, the idea that the saviour Mehdi is Imam Mehdi, who became the fundamental belief principle of the Twelve Imam Shiism, is widespread. In this regard, it is understood that the Bektashis have been greatly influenced by the Twelver Shi'ism belief in the Mahdi rather than the Sunni conception of the Mahdi. Therefore, it is seen that Iran has attempted to influence the Bektashis in the Balkans, particularly through their views on the Twelver Shi'ism Mahdi, in line with its policies of exporting revolution and destroying sectarianism. In other words, Iran is attempting to exert influence in the Balkans by emphasising that the Bektashi belief in the expected saviour Mahdi is the Twelfth Imam Mahdi. However, it seems unlikely that the Bektashis, while respecting the Twelve Imams, would completely abandon Sufism and convert to Shiism as a school of jurisprudence. Therefore, it is understood that Iran's policy of *takrib al-mazahib* cannot be successful on Sufi orders in the Balkans, as seen in the example of Albania, and that it is very difficult for the Bektashis, who revere the Twelve Imams, especially Hz. Ali, to adopt, accept and practise Shiism as a fiqh sect.

Although traces of the Shiite school can be seen among the Bektashis, it can be said that they are fundamentally a Sufi order, that they are aware of Iran's goal of exporting revolution due to their approach to Sharia, and that it is unlikely that they would approve of it.

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Extended Abstract

One of the unique aspects of the study is that it reveals whether or to what extent Bektashism was influenced by its approaches to Mahdism, particularly as interpreted politically in Iran. In this context, the study will seek to answer the question: "What is the likelihood of the success of Iran's policies of exporting revolution

and Takrib-i Mezahib in its approach to the Bektashis in the Balkans?" While seeking an answer to this research question, Albania will be examined as the sample, and methods such as case studies, qualitative research, and base-case analysis will be used as the methodology.

The article will examine the thesis that Iran is acting thru the Bektashis' love for the Ahl al-Bayt and their respect for the Twelve Imams, attempting to convert the Bektashis to Shiism in line with its policy of Takrib-i Mezahib, and in this sense, trying to spread the idea that the Bektashis' Mahdi is actually the 12th Imam Mehdi. However, while this is done, it will be pointed out that the teachings and socio-cultural characteristics the Bektashis received from Sunni Islam, as well as their respect and reverence for the companions and the four caliphs, posed difficulties. In this sense, the difficulty or impossibility of Bektashism actually adopting and applying Twelve Imam Shiism as a school of jurisprudence will be emphasized.

Establishing close relationships with Bektashi lodges and their dedebabas, inviting them to socio-cultural and religious organizations, supporting publishing efforts, and developing partnerships in other charitable activities can be considered among Iran's main activities. The goal Iran aims to achieve throughout these events is to highlight the commonalities between the beliefs of the Bektashis, such as their love for the Twelve Imams, the Ahl al-Bayt, and the Muharram fast and mourning, and the Shia faith, and to spread the idea that the Bektashis are originally Shia. However, this goal presents certain sociological, cultural, and religious difficulties and/or impossibilities. The most fundamental challenge for Iran here is that Bektashism originated in Anatolia and the Turkic-Islamic geography, and therefore, the characteristics of this culture have become fundamental beliefs over centuries.

The effects of Iran's policy of exporting revolution to the Balkans began to be seen in Bosnia and Herzegovina in particular from the 1990s onwards. At the same time, the large number of Bektashi tekkes in Albania, Macedonia and Kosovo has been influential in Tehran's intensification of its religious and cultural activities in these countries. Iran's religious and cultural activities in Albania began to be restricted after 2013 due to the increase in radical religious terrorism and sectarian tensions in the Balkans, along with the Middle East. The activities of the Firdevsi Institute in Albania were terminated in 2013, and those of the Sadi Shirazi Foundation in 2015.

It can be said that Bektashism is a Sufi order whose socio-cultural elements are intensely felt, that it is positioned on a different line from traditional Shia jurisprudence in terms of its fundamental belief characteristics, and furthermore, that it largely conflicts with the Velayet-i Fakih system, which is Iran's form of government. Although traces of the Shia sect are seen in the Bektashis, it can be said that they are fundamentally a Sufi order, that they are aware of Iran's goal of exporting its revolution and they are unlikely to approve of it due to their approach to Sharia.