

# REVIEW

BY

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On the Ph.D. Dissertation of

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Entitled

**“IRAN AND THE BALKANS – POLITICAL, ECONOMIC, AND CULTURAL  
RELATIONS (1990 – 2021)”**

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2.2. History and Archeology

*The following review is prepared in accordance with the decision of the Scientific Council of the Institute of Balkan Studies with a Centre of Thracian Studies, the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences of 13 January 2026 (Protocol No. 1, Item 1), concerning the opening of a procedure for the public defense of the dissertation submitted by Kaloyan Stoyanov Konstantinov for the award of the doctoral degree in Professional Field 2.2. History and Archaeology, Doctoral Programme “Modern and Contemporary General History,” entitled “Iran and the Balkans – Political, Economic, and Cultural Relations (1990–2021).”*

The dissertation submitted by Kaloyan Konstantinov addresses an important and timely topic concerning the political, economic, and cultural-religious relations between the Islamic Republic of Iran and eleven Balkan states, including Bulgaria. The dissertation comprises 377 pages and consists of an introduction, four main chapters, a conclusion, and a bibliography, followed by an appendix (referred to as an annex) containing a Memorandum of Understanding Between the Governments of the Balkan States and Iran. The structure corresponds well to the conceptual design and thematic as well as geographical scope of the study, indicating the author’s ambition to provide a comprehensive examination of the most important aspects of the bilateral relations between the Islamic Republic and the Balkan countries. The system of double numbering, however, is somewhat confusing, and the status of certain structural units is not entirely clear. For example, the section entitled “Iranian Foreign – and Balkan – Policy through the Lens of International Relations Theory” (pp. 263–267) seems to appear independently as Section No. 6 following Chapter IV. It probably represents an attempt to synthesize the preceding analysis from the perspective of International Relations (IR) theory, thereby linking it to the overall conclusion of the dissertation.

**The Introduction** (pp. 4–22) convincingly presents the Balkans as a region in which the Islamic Republic of Iran seeks opportunities to expand its geopolitical influence in Europe through a variety of approaches and channels.

The author emphasizes that Iranian foreign policy does not rely exclusively on *soft power* but also employs military and political activity, while another pillar consists of economic and commercial partnerships, diversified under the conditions of continuing international sanctions (p. 5). A particularly positive aspect of the author's approach is the emphasis placed on the cultural dimension of Iranian foreign policy and on the role of religion in international relations.

The chronological framework adopted by the author is logically justified. The study focuses primarily on the period of transformation in the Balkan countries after 1989. Despite the significant differences in the trajectories and experiences of transition in countries such as Bulgaria, Romania, Albania, and the former Yugoslavia, the end of the Cold War bipolar order provides a common historical turning point. At the same time, developments in Iran reveal an evolution from the sharp political confrontation that followed the Islamic Revolution of 1979 toward a more pragmatic and balanced approach to international relations. The upper chronological limit of the study is appropriately set at 2021, marking the inauguration of Ebrahim Raisi (2021–2024) as President of Iran. This allows the research to maintain a certain – although not always entirely sufficient – degree of historical distance.

The object of the study is the interaction between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the 11 Balkan states included in the scope of the research in the period following the end of the Cold War. Kaloyan Konstantinov does not limit himself to a purely descriptive analysis that merely records the nature of these relations according to their documentary chronology. Instead, he brings to the fore the dynamic development of political cooperation, economic partnership, and cultural-religious influence exercised by Iran in the Balkan countries in light of a range of national and international factors. In defining his research tasks, the author first seeks to outline the historical context of relations between Iran and the Balkans. He then proceeds to examine, within the theoretical framework of IR theory, the development of “Iran's shared foreign policy” (p. 9) from the early twentieth century to 2021, before finally presenting an analytical overview of bilateral contacts. Particular emphasis is placed on Iran's cultural and religious presence in the Balkans, which constitutes one of the central themes of the dissertation.

The methodology is well justified and combines several approaches designed to analyze the cultural, political, economic, religious, and military dimensions of relations between the Balkans and Iran. At this point the author could have clarified in somewhat greater detail what precisely is encompassed by his historical analysis, although it is nevertheless emphasized that the study traces the evolution of relations while taking into account their historical context. It seems to me that the author has developed an important research intuition, although at this stage it has not been fully articulated explicitly. Indeed, the dissertation repeatedly underscores – albeit without stating it directly – the significance of historical continuity and the necessity of identifying, through careful analysis, those long-term structural tendencies (in the sense of *longue durée*) that enable us to understand historical processes in depth, independently of the contingent political developments.

**Chapter One** (pp. 22–56) is entitled “Iran’s General Foreign Policy under the Pahlavi Dynasty and the Islamic Republic (1925–2021).” It examines the long-term trends in Iranian foreign policy during the rule of the Pahlavi dynasty (1925–1979) in order to highlight the major national and international factors that shaped and influenced it. The various stages of this policy are outlined, beginning with the efforts of Reza Shah Pahlavi (r. 1925–1941) to shield Iran from the emerging dependence on external powers, which during this period was associated primarily with the British Empire and the Soviet Union, but also with Germany, France, and the United States. His successor, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi (r. 1941–1979), however, inherited a dependent country that had to reorient itself under the new conditions that emerged after World War II. This led the Shah toward increasingly close cooperation with the West and especially with the United States, which together with the United Kingdom assisted him in 1953 in carrying out a coup that removed from power Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh – a political figure who enjoyed enormous popular support and pursued a nationalist political agenda.

The Shah succeeded in becoming the central figure in governance, but at the cost of violence and the strengthening of his repressive apparatus. For this reason, despite a number of achievements in his large-scale reform program and the modernization initiatives carried out during the so-called White Revolution in the 1960s, the population ultimately did not forgive either the repression or the excessively radical detachment of state policy, including foreign policy, from Iran’s Muslim identity. Since the establishment of the Safavid dynasty (1501–1736), this identity has been fundamentally shaped by Imami (Twelver) Shi‘ism. Unlike Sunni Islam, Twelver Shi‘ism places particular emphasis on the sacralization of the supreme religious authority, who stands at the head of the clergy as the “temporary” collective representative of the Twelfth Hidden Imam, Muhammad ibn al-Hasan al-Mahdi (b. 868), believed to have been in occultation since the ninth century AD and whose eschatological return is expected in the form of the messianic figure of the Mahdi.

The dissertation could have explored in greater depth these features of Twelver Shi‘ism, particularly the key doctrine of supreme authority (*marja‘ al-taqlid*), exercised through the institution of the Grand Ayatollah (*Ayatollah al-‘Uzma*). Such an analysis would have helped highlight the nuances introduced into this doctrine – and consequently into foreign policy – by Ruhollah Khomeini (1902–1989), which subsequently underwent further modifications under his successor, the Grand Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who served as Iran’s Supreme Leader (*rahbar*) from 1989 until 28 February 2026.

The role of Khamenei in Iranian politics over the past decades has been so significant that one may legitimately speak of Khameneism as a doctrine and social practice succeeding Khomeinism. The consolidation of the religious-political authority of the Grand Ayatollah as Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic under Khamenei is also linked to the fact that he bears direct responsibility for foreign policy, which cannot be conducted without his approval and guidance.

Despite these complexities, the dissertation successfully outlines the profound transformations that occurred in Iran after the Iranian Revolution, correctly identifying the leading principles associated with the rise of anti-Westernism: anti-imperialism, Islamic

solidarity, and the export of revolution. Kaloyan Konstantinov rightly observes that, from a certain perspective, the “new” ideology under Khomeini – and subsequently in its Khameneist continuation – was in fact influenced by earlier developments dating back to the 1950s. Khomeini, however, did not confine himself to rhetoric. He institutionalized anti-imperialism as a guiding principle of foreign policy (p. 31) while emphasizing the importance of Islamic solidarity – not necessarily limited to Shi‘ite communities.

Islamic unity has thus become a powerful imperative in Iranian foreign policy. Closely related to this is the issue of the Iranian-led “Axis of Resistance,” which includes not only Shi‘ite non-state actors and armed religious-political organizations such as Hezbollah in Lebanon but also Sunni movements such as Hamas, which governed the Gaza Strip. Through these networks, Tehran extends its influence throughout the Middle East, creating challenges not only for Israel but also for several Arab states.

The dissertation outlines the context of a number of key challenges facing Iranian foreign policy after 1979. These include the devastating Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988), which significantly intensified anti-American sentiment in Tehran, the establishment of pragmatic relations with Russia, and the somewhat underdeveloped but no less important issue of the evolution of the anti-Israeli component of Iranian foreign policy. At the same time, Konstantinov accurately identifies the pillars of this policy in the Khamenei era, rightly accentuating the consistently proclaimed aspiration for “non-alignment and independence”—that distinctive form of Tehran’s “strategic loneliness” (p. 40). It seems to me, however, that the presentation of the two camps in Iranian politics as “principalists (conservatives) and reformists (liberals)” could be further refined (p. 41 ff.) by providing a more analytical account of the complex institutional structure of the Islamic Republic and the roles of its various governing bodies. Nevertheless, the Iranian presidents and the influence of international conflicts are presented with great care and expertise.

**Chapter Two** (pp. 57–146) of the dissertation, entitled “Politics and Diplomacy between Iran and the Balkans,” addresses directly the central theme of the study. Given the main focus, it includes a somewhat extensive narrative on key historical facts and processes from the pre-modern era that reveal the deep historical roots of Iranian political and cultural presence in the Balkans. Certain historical aspects related to the establishment of diplomatic relations between Iran (Persia) and the Balkan states are presented, including relations with independent Bulgaria (1897), which have been thoroughly studied for the period up to the late 1950s by Angel Orbetsov.

The dissertation appropriately analyzes the rivalry among three Middle Eastern centers of Islamic authority and thus influence over the Balkans: Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Iran. Important specificities within different Balkan contexts are also highlighted. Among them is the particular case of Albania, which granted refuge to one thousand members of the Iranian opposition movement People’s Mojahedin Organization of Iran (MEK), an Islamist political organization with socialist orientation. This development led to an unprecedented escalation in relations between Tirana and Tehran.

Among contemporary events, the author also discusses the attack in Sarafovo, widely attributed to Hezbollah, in which five Israeli tourists and one Bulgarian citizen were killed (p.

140 ff.). Here, the author could have provided a more analytical detail on the various perspectives and reactions, including their implications for Bulgaria's relations with Iran and Israel. Nevertheless, Konstantinov skillfully analyzes and categorizes Iran's bilateral relations with Balkan states, convincingly identifying North Macedonia, Romania, Slovenia, and Montenegro as countries that do not maintain particularly distinctive bilateral relations with the Islamic Republic (p. 144).

**Chapter Three** (pp. 147–210) focuses on economic aspects and is entitled “Bilateral Economic Relations: Between Sanctions and Oil.” In conceptualizing bilateral economic contacts between Iran and the Balkan states, attention is given to the ways in which these relations in various cases are linked to the oil factor under the conditions of an international sanctions regime. From the perspective of economic history and international relations, the author presents numerous data concerning countries such as Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Albania, and Montenegro.

**Chapter Four** (pp. 211–262) is devoted to religion, culture, and media as instruments of influence of the Islamic Republic. These domains relate to the soft power exercised by Tehran in the Balkans and are essential for understanding its influence throughout the region. Given the confessional composition of the majority of the Muslim population in Balkan countries—most of whom adhere to Sunni Islam—it is logical that Tehran does not focus exclusively on the spread of Shi'ite ideas. Iranian cultural policy therefore places particular emphasis on promoting the Persian language and culture, literary and manuscript heritage, translations of Persian literary works, exhibitions and concerts, and events related to calligraphic art and traditional crafts. The internationally recognized achievements of Iranian cinema also constitute an important component of this cultural policy, even though its productions are not always fully aligned with the prevailing ideology.

The multilayered nature of Iranian identity also allows emphasis to be placed on ancient Zoroastrianism and on the celebration of Nowruz, the first day of the new year. Research initiatives aimed at identifying Iranian lexical elements (words of Persian origin) in Balkan languages, as well as narratives about a shared ethnogenesis of Balkan and Iranian peoples, are also encouraged. Konstantinov carefully analyzes Iranian presence across the various Balkan states and outlines the spectrum of Iranian influence. It is strongest in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which is hardly surprising, but also significant in Serbia, which may appear unexpected unless the complexity of international relations and attitudes toward the West are taken into account.

The data concerning the network of Iran-sponsored Mulla Sadra institutes mentioned in connection with Bosnia are particularly interesting and merit further analysis. Along this line, the author could enrich the archival record of events with reference to the Bulgarian–Iranian seminar “Mulla Sadra Shirazi and the Philosophical Dimensions of Religious Experience,” held on 20 January at Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski and organized jointly with the Iranian Philosophical Association. At that time, prominent Iranian philosophers were in attendance, and some of the papers were subsequently published in the Bulgarian scholarly journal *Philosophical Alternatives* (Issue 2, 2010). The Iranian scholars encouraged the publication of Western authors with a focus on Islamic mysticism and Shiism, such as Henry Corbin (not

“Henri,” as indicated on p. 223), not only in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In Bulgaria, Corbin’s *History of Islamic Philosophy*, translated by Alexander Veselinov, went through two editions.

Among the major events in this context in Bulgaria, one may also note the Bulgarian translation of the book by the contemporary Iranian-born philosopher Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Three Muslim Sages* (Sofia, 2001). The book was presented at the Euro-Bulgarian Cultural Center in Sofia, where the special guest was Ayatollah Mohammad Khamenei (b. 1935 in Mashhad) – the elder brother of the former Supreme Leader of Iran, Grand Ayatollah Ali Khamenei – and a member of the Assembly of Experts who held various key positions in the Islamic Republic. Currently aged 90, after withdrawing years ago from active religious-political engagement, Ayatollah Mohammad Khamenei has devoted himself to the study of Islamic philosophy and established the Mulla Sadra Foundation for Islamic Wisdom, which promotes research on Mulla Sadra Shirazi and his philosophical legacy.

These facts concerning Bulgarian–Iranian cultural relations and their role in bilateral ties should be included in any subsequent revisions of the present dissertation. At the conclusion of the dissertation, the paragraph dedicated to the media dimension stands out for its analytical depth and its important role in developing the academic argument. The analysis of the most popular Iranian English-language media outlets, controlled by the government in Tehran, in terms of their relations with Balkan states, is undoubtedly original and significant, including in its reflection of regional attitudes toward Iran.

In **Section 6** (pp. 263–267), also mentioned at the beginning of this review, Iranian foreign policy is examined through the lens of IR theory. Kaloyan Metodiev convincingly concludes that classical IR theories do not fully apply to the Iranian case, as Tehran formulates its foreign policy in close connection with domestic political processes, combining diverse ideological visions and concepts (p. 263). According to the dissertation, ideas from both constructivism and other currents such as Marxism and postcolonial IR theory are present. Original here is the conceptual periodization from the Balkan perspective, beginning with the Bosnian War and continuing through the signing of the Dayton Accords, among other developments.

**The conclusion** of the dissertation (pp. 268–279) is detailed and generally reflects the main findings and arguments of the study. A minor shortcoming lies in the repetition of some judgments and elements from the preceding text (including the restatement of the research object on p. 268), as parts of the dissertation’s structure are summarized once again before the author outlines what the chosen analytical approach might ultimately achieve.

**The bibliography** (pp. 280–333) is extensive and is divided into primary sources, scholarly literature, and online sources. Today, however, the use of easily accessible online sources may sometimes lead to the neglect of other, less easily discoverable online materials or archival documents.

**The dissertation summary** is prepared in accordance with the formal requirements. The six scholarly contributions are convincingly formulated and accurately reflect the content of the dissertation. **The three publications** attached on the topic of the dissertation also demonstrate the author’s already accumulated experience in writing academic articles.

## **CONCLUSION**

On the basis of the foregoing, my overall evaluation of the dissertation is **positive**. I consider that the submitted work meets the requirements for a doctoral dissertation and contains specific scholarly contributions to the study of the topic under consideration. For this reason, I strongly recommend that the esteemed academic jury award Kaloyan Stoyanov Konstantinov the doctoral degree (PhD) in Professional Field 2.2 History and Archaeology.

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