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Isa Bey Madrasa in Skopje- A Historical and Pedagogical Assessment

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Abstract

This study provides a historical and pedagogical assessment of the Isa Bey Madrasa in Skopje, established in 1469 within the framework of the Ottoman waqf system. The research aims to examine how the madrasa contributed to the institutionalization of religion-based education in the Balkans while preserving social belonging and cultural continuity. Using an archival-historical and comparative analytical approach, the study traces the transformations of the institution from its Ottoman foundation to its present form. Although educational activities were periodically interrupted by wars, political changes, and regime transitions, the madrasa was repeatedly restructured and managed to sustain its existence. Reopened in the 1984–1985 academic year, it continues today as one of the central institutions providing formal religious education in North Macedonia. Its curriculum combines classical Islamic sciences with social sciences, natural sciences, and language courses, reflecting a synthesis of tradition and modern pedagogy. However, issues such as the language of instruction, the right to mother-tongue education, social representation, and diploma equivalency remain ongoing challenges. Overall, the study reveals that the Isa Bey Madrasa embodies both continuity and transformation in the fields of religion, culture, and education in the Balkans.

Keywords: Isa Bey Madrasa, Skopje, Ottoman education, waqf system, pedagogy, cultural continuity, archival-historical analysis

Introduction

The expansion policy of the Ottoman Empire aimed not only at gaining new territories through military means but also at establishing a permanent system of governance and a sustainable cultural order in the conquered lands. In line with this strategy, the construction of religious, social, and educational institutions in newly conquered regions played a crucial role in maintaining both social stability and the continuity of state authority. Therefore, the establishment of educational institutions was considered an inseparable part of the Ottoman strategy of conquest. In the Turkish-Islamic urbanization model, the waqf¹ system emerged as a central element in the creation and sustainability of public structures. Mosques, masjids, madrasas, zawiyas², tombs, darüşşifas³, and other social service institutions were not only built through waqfs but were also financially supported by them, allowing these institutions to continue their functions for many years (Ergin, 1939; İnbaşı, 2018).

During the Ottoman period, education was primarily organized through official madrasas. Alongside these formal institutions, mosques, libraries, tekkes⁴, and zawiyas served as informal complementary spaces for learning. This reflects the multi-dimensional and comprehensive nature of the Ottoman educational system (Ayverdi, 1953).

Madrasas were not merely academic spaces limited to classrooms; they were comprehensive educational complexes that met students' needs for accommodation, nutrition, and research. Dormitories, libraries, baths, and kitchens were integral parts of madrasa structures (Akyüz, 2010). In the Ottoman tradition of conquest, building a madrasa alongside a mosque in newly conquered cities was seen as a strategic step, aimed not only at providing religious and scholarly services but also at training administrative personnel necessary for state governance (Miftar, 2022). Through this approach, both religious-cultural and political centralization were successfully established in the conquered regions. Existing scholarship on Ottoman madrasas can be grouped into three primary thematic areas. Studies focusing on architecture and institutional design (e.g., Ayverdi 1953; Akyüz, 2010)

- 1 An Islamic charitable endowment whose revenues are designated for public or religious purposes.
- 2 A small Islamic religious lodge or Sufi retreat, often functioning as a place for worship, education, and social service.
- 3 An Ottoman-era hospital and medical treatment center, often attached to religious or charitable complexes and funded through waqf endowments.
- 4 A Sufi lodge used for spiritual instruction, social gatherings, and religious education.

emphasize the structural features of madrasas and highlight their role as multi-functional educational complexes. Some scholars portray madrasas primarily as stable institutions of Islamic religious learning (Ayverdi, 1953; Akyüz, 2010), while others emphasize their adaptation to local and political realities, arguing that curricula and institutional functions evolved significantly in the post-Ottoman period (Hızlı, 2020; Hasan, 1992). This contrast reveals that the madrasa should not be understood as a static structure but as a dynamic institution shaped by shifting social and economic conditions. The second group of sources approaches the subject through the waqf system and administrative economy (Özgüdenli, 2012; Miftar, 2022), demonstrating how financial sustainability shaped educational capacity and social services. A third strand examines the pedagogical and intellectual dimensions of madrasa education, especially the balance between traditional religious sciences and rational disciplines (Hızlı, 2020; Hasan, 1992). However, these works generally treat the Ottoman period independently and rarely explore how these institutions adapted in the post-Ottoman context. By comparing architectural foundations, waqf-based administration, and pedagogical transformation across periods, this study contributes a more integrated and critical perspective, showing how the Isa Bey Madrasa combined historical continuity with modern educational reforms.

Before the Ottoman rule, Skopje had been under the influence of various cultures and states and had maintained its importance as a strategic center throughout history. Following the incorporation of Kosovo into Ottoman territories during the reign of Sultan Murad I, Skopje was conquered in 1389 during the rule of Sultan Bayezid I by Paşa Yiğit, who became known as the “Conqueror of Skopje” (Uzunçarşılı, 2011). Following Ottoman rule, the city acquired an Islamic-Turkish urban identity, adorned with mosques, madrasas, caravanserais⁵, and bathhouses, and became an important administrative center in the region.

Archival records and historical documents reveal that during the 15th and 16th centuries, there were twelve active madrasas in Skopje (Ayverdi, 1953). Among the prominent ones were Meddah Madrasa, Emir İsmail Madrasa, İshak Bey Madrasa, İsa Bey Madrasa, Sultan Murad Madrasa, Yahya Pasha Madrasa, Mustafa Pasha Madrasa, and Karlı Pasha Madrasa (Ramadani, 1998). These institutions served as centers of religious and scholarly education, not only contributing to

5 A large roadside inn used in the Ottoman and Islamic world to provide accommodation, food, and shelter for travelers and merchants, often supported by waqf endowments.

the dissemination of knowledge but also fostering the rooting of Ottoman culture and civilization in the region through the teaching of language, fiqh, and rational sciences.

Among these madrasas, one of the most notable examples is İsa Bey Madrasa, built in the 15th century. Structurally, it holds a unique position among the Ottoman religious educational institutions in the Balkans, designed to support both religious and basic social education. Its foundational aim was not only the teaching of religious sciences but also the strengthening of social dynamics and the reinforcement of religious identity. Thus, İsa Bey Madrasa should be regarded not merely as an educational institution but also as a carrier of cultural continuity and a central pillar in the construction of social identity.

The fact that it is the only madrasa in North Macedonia that has continued to exist under the same name from the Ottoman period to the present day, despite experiencing interruptions, gives the İsa Bey Madrasa special significance. Today, it continues to serve as a formal religious educational institution under the Islamic Religious Union of North Macedonia, playing a vital role in ensuring the continuity of religious services in the region.

This study aims to analyze the historical development and pedagogical role of the İsa Bey Madrasa within the broader framework of Ottoman educational institutions and their post-imperial transformations. The analysis is guided by a theoretical lens grounded in educational continuity theory and cultural transmission models. This approach allows the study to evaluate the İsa Bey Madrasa not merely as a historical building, but as a living institution that negotiated change, reproduced knowledge, and sustained communal identity across centuries. By employing the concepts of educational continuity and institutional adaptation, the study seeks to reveal how the madrasa functioned as both a transmitter of tradition and a mediator of social change. Although numerous studies have examined Ottoman madrasas from architectural or religious perspectives, few have focused on their pedagogical evolution and the continuity of their functions in the post-Ottoman Balkans. This research therefore fills a significant gap by providing an integrated historical-pedagogical evaluation supported by archival data and comparative analysis. However, there is still a lack of research that examines how Ottoman madrasas continued to function, transform, or adapt in post-imperial Balkan societies. This study addresses this gap by providing a historical and pedagogical analysis of the İsa Bey Madrasa from its foundation to the modern period. Accordingly, the central research question of this study is: How did the İsa Bey Madrasa preserve

Ottoman pedagogical and institutional features while adapting to post-imperial social and political environments?

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative historical approach based on archival material, waqfiyya records, Ottoman yearbooks, and institutional documents of the Islamic Religious Community. Secondary scholarly literature on Ottoman educational institutions and contemporary religious schools in the Balkans is used to support the analytical framework. A comparative reading of the Ottoman and post-Ottoman periods highlights institutional continuity and transformation. Additionally, a pedagogical lens—drawing on educational continuity theory and cultural transmission models—allows the curriculum, language policy, and diploma recognition debates to be evaluated within a modern secondary-education context. This mixed approach makes it possible to connect historical analysis with contemporary policy and pedagogical concerns.

Pedagogical Evaluation

The contemporary educational model of Isa Bey Madrasa demonstrates a shift from a purely classical madrasa structure to a hybrid form that integrates tradition with modern secondary-school pedagogy. The curriculum combines Islamic sciences with social sciences, natural sciences, foreign languages and technology courses, reflecting a multidimensional approach to student development. Practical components—such as leading prayers, public recitations, and community-based religious duties—function as applied pedagogical training rather than theoretical instruction alone. This indicates that the institution aims to produce graduates capable of serving both religious and civic roles. Therefore, the madrasa today operates not only as a place of religious learning but also as a modern educational institution aligned with contemporary secondary-school standards in North Macedonia.

Isa Bey Madrasa During the Ottoman Period

The Ottoman Empire did not limit itself to establishing a political order in the territories it conquered; it also aimed to create a lasting structure in areas such as settlement policies, urbanization, and the institutionalization of education. In this context, the waqf system became one of the most important instruments of

Ottoman administration. Waqfs not only ensured the sustainability of newly built institutions but also contributed to the stabilization of social order. A waqfiyya⁶ is defined as an official document that specifies how endowed properties will be used for charitable purposes and how they will be managed. These documents are of great importance as they provide detailed information about the administration of the waqf, the allocation of income and expenditures, the number and salaries of employees, the methods of covering expenses, and the groups or individuals who can benefit from the waqf (Özgüdenli, 2012).

Isa Bey, referred to in historical sources as Gazi Isa Bey or Ishakbeyoğlu Isa Bey, was an important sanjak bey who served during the reign of Murad II (Emin, 2023). His father, Gazi Ishak Bey, was raised as the adopted son of Paşa Yiğit, a frontier lord who played a crucial role in the conquest of Skopje, and he provided significant services in strengthening Ottoman dominance in the region (Emecen, 2000; İnalçık, 1954).

Following in the footsteps of his father and grandfather, Isa Bey played an active role in the Ottoman conquest campaigns in the Balkans, participating in various military operations with his brothers across Kosovo, Albania, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Bosnia. Known as the founder of the cities of Sarajevo and Novi Pazar, Isa Bey made great contributions to the development of Ottoman institutional and cultural presence in the region. In Skopje, he commissioned the construction of mosques, masjids, caravanserais, khanqahs, baths, and madrasas, leaving a permanent mark on the city's religious and social life (Elezović, 1926; Asani, 2010).

Isa Bey's waqfiyya, dated 874 Hijri/1469, is considered one of the most comprehensive examples of the classical Ottoman waqf tradition in the territory of present-day North Macedonia. This waqfiyya was first published by Gliša Elezović and is a highly detailed document measuring 6.72 meters in length, 26 centimeters in width, and consisting of 305 lines (Elezović, 1926; Ayverdi, 1953). The document provides extensive details about the madrasa's founding purpose, structural features, and sources of income.

According to the waqfiyya, Isa Bey built a madrasa with ten-rooms and an adjoining zawiya in Skopje (Elezović, 1926). To ensure the madrasa's financial sustainability, commercial buildings such as the Çifte Hamam, surrounding shops, nineteen shops located in front of the Ishak Bey Bazaar, and the Kapan Han were dedicated

6 The official legal deed that records the conditions, revenues, personnel, and management of a waqf foundation.

to the waqf as revenue-generating assets (Miftar, 2022). The waqfiyya states: “*I will build a madrasa for those who seek knowledge, and this madrasa will consist of a specified number of rooms.*” Additionally, it stipulated that each student residing in the madrasa would receive 10 dirhams⁷ daily, two loaves of bread, and two bowls of meat-based food per meal, while the *mudarris*⁸ would be paid 20 akçe⁹ per day. This illustrates how Ottoman educational institutions supported both the academic and social needs of their students (Elezović, 1926). Furthermore, the waqfiyya specified that the *mudarris* must possess sufficient knowledge in fundamental religious sciences and be qualified to teach recognized classical texts (Hızlı, 2020).

Although no direct document regarding the madrasa curriculum has been found, the waqfiyya’s condition that “the positive sciences (philosophical sciences and astronomy) should not be taught” provides significant clues about the institution’s educational approach (Elezović, 1926). This divergence from the typical classical Ottoman curriculum likely stemmed from Isa Bey’s pragmatic approach to the conditions of his time.

Alongside the madrasa, Isa Bey also established a highly valuable library. Founded in 874 Hijri/ 1469, this library became one of the most comprehensive in North Macedonia, containing a collection of 332 volumes comprising 215 different works. The collection included not only religious sciences but also works from other disciplines such as philosophy and medicine. The presence of texts by prominent scholars such as Fakhr al-Din al-Razi, Ibn Sina, and Hippocrates, along with dictionaries and books on logic, demonstrates the library’s intellectual diversity (Miftar, 2022; Hasan, 1992). Since its foundation, Isa Bey Madrasa has had to pause or completely halt its educational activities on several occasions. The first interruption occurred in 1689, during the Austrian General Piccolomini’s occupation of Skopje. During this invasion, the city was devastated by a massive fire, which forced the madrasa to suspend its educational activities, while its library suffered severe damage (Bajrami, 2005; İnbaşı, 2018).

According to Albayrak’s work “*The Last Period Ottoman Scholars*”, Hayreddin Efendi, who was born in 1287/1870 in the village of Nikoştak, Kumanovo district, part of the Kosovo Vilayet, began his studies at Skopje Gazi Isa Bey Madrasa in March 1302/1884 and later went to Istanbul in 1313/1895 to complete his education

7 A medieval silver coin used as a unit of currency in Islamic territories.

8 The chief instructor or teacher in a madrasa.

9 The principal silver coin of the Ottoman Empire, used as the basic monetary unit until the 19th century.

(Albayrak, 1996). This indicates that the madrasa, which had been damaged in 1689, resumed its activities in 1884. Furthermore, according to the 1321/1903 edition of the Ottoman Education Yearbook (*Maarif Salnamesi*), the *mudarris* of the madrasa at that time was Nabi Efendi, and the student population was recorded as thirty-nine (*Salnâme-i Nezaret-i Maarif-i Umumiye*, 1321).

In his 1932 publication, Salih Asım Bey noted that there were twelve madrasas in Skopje, four of which were unusable, while the remaining eight had continued educational activities until roughly twenty years earlier (Asım, 2004). Based on this information, it is plausible that Isa Bey Madrasa was among the eight institutions that remained active during that period. These records clearly demonstrate that Isa Bey Madrasa held a central role in educational activities in Skopje throughout the Ottoman era. The limited availability of information and documents concerning Isa Bey Madrasa during the Ottoman period restricts the ability to fully evaluate its educational programs and practices. However, the existing records reveal that the madrasa functioned not only as a religious institution but also as a social, cultural, and economic hub for the local population. Its long-standing continuation of educational activities highlights the durability and influence of the Ottoman institutional structure in the Balkans.

The Position of Isa Bey Madrasa in the Post-Ottoman Period

With the end of the Ottoman Empire's political rule in the Balkans and the conclusion of World War I, the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (1918-1929) was established in 1918. This new political entity continued to exist under the name Kingdom of Yugoslavia (1929-1941) after 1929. Along with the establishment of the kingdom, the multi-religious and multicultural social fabric of the Balkan region was reshaped under a centralized nation-state model (Güveloğlu, 2019).

In the post-Ottoman period, the continuity of religious education was of vital importance for the Muslim community, not merely as an educational policy issue but also as a crucial means of preserving religious and cultural identity. Changes in the political system brought religious institutions under state supervision, raising significant concerns about the future of Islamic institutions. During this time, one of the most pressing questions for the Muslim community was under what conditions and in what manner Islamic education would be sustained. Although information on the religious organization of Muslims in North Macedonia following the Balkan

Wars and World War I is limited, it is clear that this period was marked by a serious institutional vacuum. Muslims within the borders of the SHS Kingdom were granted international minority status through Article 10 of the 1919 Minorities Treaty. According to this article, the family and personal matters of Muslims would be regulated according to their own religious traditions. In this treaty, Muslims were defined as a “Religious Community” (Vjerska Zajednica) (Babuna, 2024).

During both the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and later the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, the Islamic Religious Union of North Macedonia operated as an organization affiliated with the Islamic Religious Presidency in Sarajevo. The Vidovdan Constitution of 1921 was based on the principle of religious freedom and theoretically aimed to grant equal rights to all religious communities. Articles 12 and 109 of the constitution included provisions guaranteeing the legal status of religious minorities, particularly the Muslim community. During this period, a central institution called Vakufska Direkcija was established to manage the religious affairs of Muslims in Yugoslavia, and above it, a Council of Scholars (Ulema Meclisi) was formed. This structure was of great importance for organizing activities related to the Muslim population in the region (Derviş, 2014).

The Law on Muslims, issued on January 31, 1930, and the Muslim Constitution, adopted on July 9, 1930, were significant steps toward institutionalizing the religious governance of the Muslim community. These regulations included legal provisions for the election processes of muftis and members of the Council of Scholars. However, during this period, religious institutions were largely forced to operate under strict state supervision (Popovic, 1995). The first major institutional step in the field of education during the post-Ottoman era was the reopening of the Meddah Madrasa in 1920 through the efforts of the ulema. This madrasa aimed to continue the traditional Ottoman educational model (Aruçi, 2002). However, in 1924, the King Alexander Madrasa was established in line with the state’s modernization policies, adopting a Western-style educational approach intended to integrate state ideology into the educational sphere. The lack of acceptance of this madrasa by the Muslim population led to its closure in 1936 (Memiş, 1984). While the Meddah Madrasa’s sole focus on traditional religious sciences proved insufficient in meeting the societal needs of the period, the ideologically Western-oriented approach of the King Alexander Madrasa was not embraced by the Turkish and Albanian Muslim communities of North Macedonia. The limitations of these two institutions created the need for a new madrasa that could balance religious and rational sciences while training qualified religious leaders suited to the needs of society. In

response to this need, the Isa Bey Madrasa, which had been built in the 15th century but remained closed for a long time due to various reasons, was reopened in 1936 under the leadership of the Islamic Religious Union (Erken & Çençiler, 2019).

The reopening of the Isa Bey Madrasa symbolized not just the revival of an institution but also an attempt to preserve its historical legacy while adapting to the educational requirements of the modern era. The inauguration took place with a ceremony befitting its historical significance. On Friday, October 2, 1936, the opening day began with a recitation of the *Hatm-i Sharif* at Isa Bey Mosque, followed by speeches in front of the madrasa, and concluded with a *Mevlid-i Sharif*¹⁰ at Sultan Murad Mosque after the Friday prayer. The large public participation demonstrated the profound societal importance of this reopening (Bajrami, 2005). The curriculum of the newly opened Isa Bey Madrasa was organized as a four-year educational program combining classical Islamic sciences with modern pedagogical and scientific subjects. In addition to core religious disciplines such as Qur'an recitation, tafsir, hadith, aqidah, fiqh, ethics, and Islamic history, vocational courses such as pedagogy, citizenship, imamship, and administrative knowledge were included. Language education covered Arabic, Turkish, Serbian-Croatian, and optionally German or French. Moreover, natural sciences such as geography, mathematics, physics, and chemistry, along with hygiene, calligraphy, art, and physical education were also part of the curriculum (Bajrami, 2005). This program was widely accepted by both traditional scholars and the public as it successfully integrated religious and modern sciences (Asani, 2010). In this way, the madrasa aligned with the classical Ottoman model in the Balkans, aiming to raise individuals equipped with both religious knowledge and a sense of public responsibility.

The school's charter, curriculum, and dormitory regulations were prepared by the Council of Scholars (Ulema Meclisi) of the period. According to this program, the madrasa was tasked with training imams, teachers (*muallims*), and other religious officials. Graduates of the madrasa were eligible to continue their higher education in theological faculties in Sarajevo and various Arab countries. During the 1939-1940 academic year, the madrasa had a total of 145 students. While the exact number for the 1940-1941 academic year is unknown, it is estimated that around 180 students were enrolled at that time (Veseli, 2005). During World War II, Skopje and its surroundings suffered extensive destruction once again, which

10 A ceremonial recitation celebrating the birth of the Prophet Muhammad.

forced Isa Bey Madrasa to cease its activities (Jahyai, 2017; Redzebi, 2013). In the post-war period, a new political era began in Yugoslavia under the socialist regime led by Tito. Initially, the regime pursued strict and restrictive policies toward religious institutions. The institutional vibrancy that had existed during the kingdom period declined sharply; in a country where approximately two million Muslims lived, only the Gazi Husrev Bey Madrasa in Sarajevo was allowed to continue functioning, while all other madrasas and theological faculties were shut down (Karčić, 2015; Erken & Çençiler, 2019). Over time, the regime's harsh stance began to soften, and by the 1960s, a more moderate approach to religious life emerged. This allowed for the partial restructuring and expansion of Islamic institutions, bringing religious education back, albeit in a limited capacity, to the public sphere.

Between 1918 and 1941, during the periods of both the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes and the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, twelve madrasas were actively operating, particularly in regions with dense Muslim populations, including North Macedonia. This reflects the institutional resilience displayed by Muslim communities to preserve their religious and cultural identities following the withdrawal of the Ottoman Empire. Indeed, in response to the growing anti-Islamic attitudes and cultural assimilation pressures of the 19th century, madrasas became not only educational institutions but also central pillars of communal identity, religious continuity, and traditional knowledge transmission. The teaching staff of these institutions largely consisted of individuals who had received advanced religious education both domestically and abroad, particularly in Istanbul, Cairo, and Skopje. This positioned the madrasas as vital bridges of knowledge between local communities and the broader international Islamic scholarly network (İdriz, 2021).

After World War II, the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia (1945-1992) reorganized religious institutions in line with the structure of the federal system. With the 1974 Constitution, freedom of religion and conscience was granted constitutional protection, explicitly stating that religious institutions were independent from the state and that establishing schools for worship and the training of religious leaders was a fundamental right. However, this freedom largely remained theoretical, as in practice it was limited by the state's centralized educational policies. During this period, religious education was carried out only in mosques and within the framework of restricted programs called "Verska Obuka" (religious instruction). These classes were held exclusively on weekends, and participation required written consent from parents. Between 1945 and 1991, religious education practices

were inconsistent and underwent frequent changes, largely shaped by the political and ideological climate of the period (Aruçi, 1998). Muslim communities in North Macedonia continued their efforts to preserve their religious education tradition through various informal methods, though these efforts remained limited for a long time. The return of religious education to an institutional structure only became possible in the early 1980s (Veseli, 2005). In 1979, the Islamic Religious Union of North Macedonia (KMIB) took significant steps toward the reopening of the Isa Bey Madrasa. As a result of these initiatives, the madrasa resumed its activities in the 1984-1985 academic years as a private educational institution, recognized by the Ministry of Education of North Macedonia and financed by the KMIB (Kettani, 1997).

The primary goal of reopening the madrasa was to train religious leaders—such as imams, khatibs, and preachers—who could serve in the religious affairs of the Muslim community. In 1984, educational activities began in a newly constructed building located in the village of Kondova, near Skopje, marking a revival of the region's religious education tradition. Today, the madrasa continues its mission, graduating over 200 students annually to meet the demand for religious personnel in the region (Redzebi, 2013). When it reopened in the 1984-1985 academic year, the madrasa offered a four-year program with a comprehensive curriculum encompassing both classical Islamic sciences and human and social sciences. The religious sciences component included Qur'anic recitation (*Qiraat*), theology (*Aqidah*), Islamic jurisprudence (*Fiqh*), principles of jurisprudence (*Usul al-Fiqh*), Qur'anic exegesis (*Tafsir*), Hadith, ethics (*Akhlaq*), and leadership/preaching (*Imamat/Da'wa*) courses (Asani, 2010). These courses aimed to provide students with a strong foundation of Islamic knowledge and to train individuals capable of serving effectively in religious services. To enhance historical and cultural awareness, courses on Islamic History, Ottoman History, and the History of Islamic Culture and Civilization were included in the curriculum, enabling students to understand the development of Islamic civilization within a historical context. In addition, Calligraphy courses were offered to preserve traditional aesthetics and writing culture (Redzebi, 2013). This curriculum reflected a multi-dimensional educational model, aiming not only to equip students with religious knowledge but also to foster social leadership, intellectual growth, and adaptation to modern scientific thought.

Initially, the educational process was designed exclusively for male students. However, starting from the 1990-1991 academic year, it was expanded to include female students through an open education model, significantly increasing the

institution's social inclusivity (Zekaj, 2002). This reform facilitated women's access to religious knowledge while reinterpreting the madrasa's historical mission through the lens of social equality and justice, contributing to a more inclusive institutional identity. By remaining faithful to its historical roots while continuously adapting to changing circumstances, Isa Bey Madrasa has established itself not only as a school but also as a center of knowledge and spirituality in the regional memory. Its ability to survive through centuries of political, social, and cultural transformations demonstrates its indispensable role in rebuilding and sustaining Islamic identity in the region. This continuity has been possible due to the institution's capacity for transformation, allowing it to be rebuilt after interruptions while maintaining its traditional core. In this way, Isa Bey Madrasa stands out as a dynamic educational institution that both preserves the heritage of the past and responds to the needs of the present.

Isa Bey Madrasa Today

With the dissolution of Yugoslavia in 1991, North Macedonia declared its independence and transitioned to a multi-party democratic system. This marked the beginning of a new era in state-religion relations. Article 19 of the Constitution guaranteed freedom of religion and belief, establishing the legal basis for religious communities to obtain legal personality and to operate independently from the state. Article 19 explicitly states:

"Freedom of religion and belief is guaranteed. Everyone has the right to practice their religious rites, either alone or with others, collectively or individually. Religious communities and groups possess legal personality and are separate from the state. Religious communities have the right to establish places of worship, organize religious ceremonies, train clergy, and provide religious education." (Constitution of the Republic of Macedonia, 1991, Article 19) This constitutional foundation provides a legal framework that supports the activities of institutions offering religious education in North Macedonia. However, due to the principle of secularism, these activities maintain limited connections with the state's official education system and are largely carried out under the initiative of the religious communities themselves.

North Macedonia's population is composed primarily of Christian Orthodox Macedonians, with a significant Muslim minority that includes Albanians, Turks, Bosniaks, and Roma communities. This diverse demographic structure is reflected in the representation of different religious traditions within the educational

sphere. For Muslim communities, Islamic education holds great significance as it ensures the preservation of religious identity, the training of religious leaders, and the transmission of religious values to younger generations (Pajaziti & Kasami, 2012). According to the Constitution of North Macedonia, the Islamic Religious Community is recognized alongside the Macedonian Orthodox Church, Catholic Church, Evangelical Methodist Church, and Jewish Community as equal before the law and independent from the state. These religious groups, as well as others, are free to establish their own faith-based schools and charitable organizations (İdris & Ali, 2016). However, by law, religious communities cannot receive financial support from the state.

Isa Bey Madrasa operates as a four-year secondary-level formal religious education institution in North Macedonia. Students who successfully complete primary education and meet the specified application requirements may pre-register and participate in the admissions exam. The exam consists of two main sections: one evaluating religious knowledge, and the other measuring general intellectual aptitude. The psychological and pedagogical assessment component of this exam is based on internationally recognized models and adapted from assessment systems developed in Ljubljana, Slovenia (Murati, 2015). Since gaining independence, the legal status of the Isa Bey Madrasa—and more broadly, of secondary education institutions affiliated with religious communities—has remained at the center of ongoing debates and uncertainties in North Macedonia. The legal framework concerning the official recognition of religious schools has exhibited significant instability due to inconsistencies in governmental policies implemented at different periods.

In this context, in 2024, the Parliament of North Macedonia granted the Isa Bey Madrasa the status of a “private high school” in order to provide a permanent solution for students who, due to the non-recognition of the madrasa’s diplomas, had been unable to gain university admission. The then-Minister of Education and Science, Jeton Shaqiri, presented the official document approving the conditions of the Isa Bey Madrasa’s curriculum and instructional program to the Head of the Islamic Religious Community and to the public (Time Balkan, 2025).

However, this decision was soon annulled by the Constitutional Court of North Macedonia (Yeni Balkan, 2025). The Court declared that the change in status was contrary to the existing constitutional provisions and legal regulations, thereby nullifying the decision taken by the previous government. This development triggered a new and extensive public debate within the country regarding the status of religious educational institutions. Following a change in government, the issue was

once again brought to the national agenda and subjected to a detailed evaluation within the framework of the principles of equality in education, freedom of religion, and legal recognition.

As a tangible outcome of these initiatives, on July 29, 2025, the Parliament of North Macedonia adopted the “Law on the Equivalence of Religious Schools.” The government’s decision to approve this draft law was received with great satisfaction by the Islamic Religious Community of North Macedonia and was described as a long-awaited but historically significant step in the field of religious education (Time Balkan, 2025). With the enactment of the “Law on Secondary Education Institutions of Religious Communities,” also known as the “Madrasa Law,” the Isa Bey Madrasa officially attained equal status with all other secondary-level schools in the country (Medreseja Isa Beu, 2025). Through this legal regulation, the diplomas of madrasa students are now officially recognized, which significantly strengthens the legal standing of religious educational institutions and makes a vital contribution to the re-establishment of institutional stability within the national education system. Following the introduction of mandatory secondary education in North Macedonia after 2000, interest in enrolling at the madrasa increased. In response to this demand, new branches of Isa Bey Madrasa were established in different cities (Ali, 2024). These branches expanded geographical accessibility and played a strategic role in broadening the reach of religious education services across the country.

Opening of Isa Bey Girls’ Branches

The Islamic Religious Community of North Macedonia initiated new efforts in the early 2000s to increase access for female students to formal religious education. As a result, during the 2004-2005 academic year, the first girls’ branch of the madrasa opened in Tetovo (Kalkandelen). This branch, operating in a building owned by the Tetovo Muftiate, is regarded as a milestone for gender equality in religious education in the region (Arif, 2010). The opening of this girls’ madrasa not only provided equal opportunities for access to religious knowledge but also supported women’s active participation in religious life, challenging traditional social structures. Thus, the initiative represented not just an educational development but also a significant socio-cultural advancement.

Skopje Isa Bey Girls’ Madrasa: Following the success of the Tetovo branch and increasing demand, another girls’ branch was established in Skopje during the 2006-2007

academic year. Initially, only one class was available, but as interest grew, the number of classes increased, allowing a broader student body to be accommodated. This demonstrated the strong interest and need for religious education among female students. The Skopje branch combines modern educational facilities with classical Islamic sciences, serving as a model institution for other religious schools in the region.

Gostivar Isa Bey Girls' Madrasa: To meet the educational needs of the local population, a third girls' branch opened in Gostivar during the 2008-2009 academic year, operating in a building owned by the Gostivar Muftiate (Redzebi, 2013). In the Gostivar branch, Albanian is the sole language of instruction. While this meets the religious education needs of the Albanian population, it has also become a limiting factor for Turkish-origin students, restricting their participation. Demographic data indicate that the Turkish community represents a significant portion of the region's population. However, the absence of Turkish as a language of instruction creates an imbalance in representation, reducing access to religious education for Turkish-speaking students. Curriculum Reforms Over the years, the curriculum of Isa Bey Madrasa has undergone several reforms to align with changing social and pedagogical needs. In 1996, the first major reform was implemented: some courses were merged, others were removed entirely, and new subjects, such as mathematics, were introduced. By 2010, courses in modern sciences, such as chemistry, physics, and didactics, were added, resulting in a more scientific and contemporary curriculum (Ali, 2012). These changes reflect the madrasa's mission to provide students with a strong foundation not only in religious sciences but also in modern academic disciplines. Consequently, graduates are prepared to serve as qualified religious leaders while also being equipped with contemporary academic knowledge.

Structure of the Current Curriculum

The current curriculum, designed by the Islamic Religious Community of North Macedonia, aims to support students' religious and academic development through a balanced structure. It consists of five main subject groups:

Religious Sciences: Qiraat, Aqidah, Tafsir, Fiqh, Siyar al-Nabi, Hadith, Qur'anic Studies, Usul al-Fiqh, Kalam, Islamic History, Akhlaq, and Islamic Art History.

Social Sciences: Philosophy, Sociology, Psychology, History, Geography.

Natural Sciences: Physics, Chemistry, Biology, Mathematics.

Language Courses: Macedonian, Albanian, Turkish, Arabic, English.

Other Subjects: Information and Technology, Physical Education. (Islamic Religious Community of North Macedonia, 2024; Official Website of Isa Bey Madrasa, 2024). This structure prevents religious education from being limited to religious knowledge alone, ensuring holistic student development. The diversity of language courses reflects the multicultural character of the Balkans and prepares students to compete in an international context.

Isa Bey Madrasa's different branches not only implement a shared curriculum but also organize social and cultural activities that support students' personal development and social integration. Students actively participate in choirs, theater performances, literature reading sessions, and sports clubs, enriching the social dimension of madrasa education beyond academics. The school magazine, "Ikre", published twice annually with contributions from talented and volunteer students, encourages literary production and provides a platform for student expression. These activities promote multifaceted student development while highlighting the madrasa's focus on social responsibility and self-confidence as central educational values (Sejdini, 2019). The madrasa's educational model goes beyond theoretical religious instruction by providing students with hands-on experience through practical religious services.

During Ramadan and religious holidays, students in their 2nd, 3rd, and 4th years are sent to various regions across the country to lead prayers as imams, deliver sermons, and conduct Qur'an recitations (mukabele¹¹) (Murati, 2015). This practice strengthens their professional skills while fostering direct religious and social interaction with local communities. Additionally, programs such as Mevlid-i Sharif ceremonies, choir performances, and theatrical plays organized on special religious days further strengthen the madrasa's ties with the broader community.

Conclusion and Recommendations

With its deep-rooted history extending from the Ottoman era to the present day, Isa Bey Madrasa has played a significant role in the religious life and cultural development of the Muslim community in North Macedonia, becoming one of the key institutions shaping the spiritual fabric of the region for centuries. The madrasa has

11 A traditional Ramadan practice in which participants collectively recite and listen to the Qur'an.

contributed to the preservation of Islamic consciousness by leading the training of religious cadres, serving not only as an educational center but also as a repository of historical memory, facilitating the transfer of values between generations. After the end of Ottoman rule, Isa Bey Madrasa was reopened twice and, despite various challenges, has continued to exist in different forms over time. Today, it operates without interruption as an active religious education institution. Thus, the madrasa is not merely a place where religious officials and community leaders are trained, but also fills an important gap in addressing deficiencies in religious education in North Macedonia. The absence of religion classes in state school curricula further underscores the necessity of alternative institutions to meet the religious needs of society. This makes Isa Bey Madrasa a valuable center not only for religious purposes but also for academic research on the region's socio-cultural structure, serving as a primary case study for understanding the interconnections between collective memory, cultural identity, and religious education.

An important stage in the madrasa's development has been efforts to increase community participation. The institution has aimed not only to transfer religious knowledge but also to strengthen social solidarity. Students and faculty members have actively participated in various social responsibility projects, fostering strong connections with the community and ensuring that the institution's educational philosophy extends beyond the curriculum to emphasize public benefit.

The original 1469 waqfiyya limited the madrasa's educational activities solely to core Islamic sciences, reflecting the religious and social needs of that period. During the Ottoman era, madrasas were tasked with training individuals who would provide religious guidance to society, and Isa Bey Madrasa focused on areas such as Qur'anic studies, Hadith, and fiqh. However, over time, political, social, and cultural changes rendered this traditional framework insufficient. The collapse of the Ottoman administration introduced new political systems and social dynamics, demonstrating that an education model based exclusively on traditional religious sciences could no longer meet contemporary needs. Therefore, while staying faithful to the spirit of the waqfiyya, the madrasa underwent structural and content-based reforms to adapt to modern circumstances.

This transformation should not be seen as a deviation from its historical mission but rather as a reflection of the institution's commitment to preserving its heritage while transmitting it to future generations. Educational institutions must balance respect for their historical roots with the necessity of addressing the social and cultural realities of their time. Isa Bey Madrasa has embraced this approach,

preserving traditional values while adopting a modern educational framework capable of meeting contemporary needs.

Located in Skopje, Isa Bey Madrasa stands not only as a religious education institution but also as a cornerstone in shaping the identity of Muslim communities in the Balkans, thanks to its historical heritage and institutional memory. Its reopening during the 1984-1985 academic year marked a pivotal moment for the re-institutionalization of Islamic education following the socialist regime. However, today the madrasa's language policies have sparked sociolinguistic debates. In particular, the exclusive use of Albanian as the language of instruction in branches for female students creates accessibility and representation issues for students of Turkish origin. Demographic data show that Albanians and Turks together form the largest Muslim population in North Macedonia. Yet, the presence of Turkish-language education in only one branch supported by the Republic of Turkey creates a perception of structural inequality.

Considering Isa Bey Madrasa's historically multicultural character, the right to education in one's mother tongue is not only a pedagogical concern but also a matter of social belonging and identity formation. The choice of instructional language directly affects the student population; the absence of Turkish-language education limits access for Turkish students and disrupts equitable social representation. Therefore, it is crucial for the Islamic Religious Community of North Macedonia to review its language policies through a democratic framework, ensuring that both Albanian and Turkish communities have fair access to education in their mother tongue. Religious educational institutions play a vital role not only in the transmission of faith but also in promoting social harmony, cultural diversity, and societal cohesion.

In recent years, the official status of religious educational institutions in North Macedonia has experienced significant fluctuations. The government's decision to recognize the Isa Bey Madrasa at the secondary education level in 2024 was subsequently overturned by the Constitutional Court; this annulment weakened years of institutionalization efforts and created serious grievances for students who had commenced their education expecting official recognition. The inconsistent recognition of madrasas as equivalent to state high schools has fostered an environment of uncertainty and distrust. Such fluctuating decisions have not only led to individual disappointments but have also negatively impacted access to higher education, employment opportunities, and the broader perception of social justice and equality. When the issue was revisited in early 2025, discussions led to a government

decision, by majority vote, to grant diploma equivalency. While this step provided short-term stability, it highlighted the clear necessity for a transparent and inclusive consensus mechanism involving the Constitutional Court, the Ministry of Education and Science, and religious communities to achieve a permanent and trustworthy solution. The minimum framework for this mechanism should include the determination of a core curriculum by the Ministry of Education and Science, encompassing mathematics, natural sciences, and state/applied language courses, while granting religious communities the flexibility to incorporate their own theological and religious content. Furthermore, accreditation and equivalency criteria should be defined by independent, transparent, and measurable indicators based on concrete metrics such as teaching hours, teacher qualifications, infrastructure, and assessment. A monitoring commission, with the participation of the Constitutional Court, the Ministry, and representatives of religious communities, should be established to oversee and supervise its implementation. This approach would preserve the state's educational standards and oversight responsibility while safeguarding the constitutional right of religious communities to offer education that reflects their values. Consequently, the sustainability of equivalency achieved through short-term political decisions will only be possible through binding institutional solutions that consider the triple aspects of legal guarantee, pedagogical consistency, and social legitimacy. This process will contribute to structuring all religious educational institutions in North Macedonia, not just the Isa Bey Madrasa, in accordance with the principles of equality, transparency, and long-term stability in education.

The findings of this study highlight the Isa Bey Madrasa as a valuable example of how historical religious institutions can adapt to changing political and social conditions while remaining faithful to their foundational mission. The archival and pedagogical analysis presented here contributes to the academic literature by demonstrating that Ottoman educational institutions in the Balkans were not static structures, but dynamic actors capable of institutional transformation. In practical terms, the case of the Isa Bey Madrasa offers insights for contemporary policymakers, heritage scholars, and religious education planners seeking to balance tradition with modern educational needs. The study shows that sustainable religious education in multicultural societies requires flexible curricula, mother-tongue accessibility, and legal stability in diploma recognition.

Isa Bey Madrasa, with its multi-layered structure combining historical heritage and modern educational needs, is more than just a school; it is a symbol of cultural

continuity, religious identity, and social solidarity. Its ability to preserve its institutional identity and rebuild itself despite interruptions demonstrates that it is one of the strongest examples of the Islamic educational tradition in the Balkans. However, for this mission to continue, the institution must undergo innovative restructuring that remains faithful to its historical roots while adapting to modern demands. A system built on educational equity, mother-tongue rights, and constitutional guarantees is not only essential for the future of Isa Bey Madrasa but also for all religious education institutions in North Macedonia. Without such a framework, it will not be possible to achieve a lasting resolution to the structural problems in religious education.

To address the structural challenges faced by the Isa Bey Madrasa today, a multi-layered policy approach is required. First, the language of instruction should be regulated through a pluralistic and inclusive framework that guarantees equal access to mother-tongue education for both Albanian- and Turkish-speaking students. Second, a stable legal mechanism for diploma recognition must be established in cooperation with the Ministry of Education and religious communities, preventing sudden policy reversals that negatively affect students' academic and professional futures. Such reforms would not only ensure institutional continuity but would also contribute to social cohesion, cultural rights, and educational equality in North Macedonia. In this respect, Isa Bey Madrasa represents both continuity and transformation: it preserves the classical Islamic sciences while adopting a hybrid curriculum that includes social sciences, natural sciences, and foreign languages, along with practice-based pedagogical components. Recent legal developments—such as the madrasa's recognition as a private secondary school and the 2025 legislative proposal supporting diploma equivalency—show that the status of faith-based secondary schools is no longer only a cultural or religious matter, but has become part of broader educational and minority-rights policy debates in North Macedonia. This study is limited to archival material and secondary literature, yet future research could incorporate field interviews, school records, or comparative work with Bosnian and Albanian madrasas to deepen the pedagogical perspective. Nonetheless, the findings demonstrate that Isa Bey Madrasa continues to function as a vital institution connecting historical heritage with modern educational expectations, forming a unique bridge between tradition and contemporary schooling.

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