

THE ARAB-ISLAMIC COMMUNITY IN ROMANIA: THE STRUGGLE FOR REPRESENTATION¹

Cristian Ovidiu Mariş**

Abstract: *In Romania, the Muslim community comprises two groups, the Indigenous community (composed of the Turks and Tatars established by centuries in Dobrogea region) and the Arab-Islamic Community (which includes Arab migrants who arrived in Romania from the MENA region – mainly Palestine, Syria, Egypt - starting with 70's). The current research theme is focused on the second group, the Arab-Islamic community, and its efforts to be represented religiously and culturally. The Romanian Muslim community members are mostly Sunni, the biggest part of them being included in the first group (ethnic Turks & Tatars). They are represented by the Mufti of the Muslim Cult (lead by Murat Iusuf). This is an institution officially recognized by the Romanian Government. Besides this, there are other informal leaders/organizations (not recognized officially by the Government) which represent the interests of the Arab-Islamic community. The most prominent are The Islamic and Cultural League in Romania, Foundation "Islam Today" etc. The two Muslim groups have experienced several disputes regarding the representation of the Arab-Islamic community. Nevertheless, sociological understanding of relationships between different Islamic branches and views indicate that the risk of radicalization is low. The Schools of Thought (Islamic jurisprudence / madhab) are not of significant influence in the Romanian Muslim community, and radical interpretations of the Quran are very low. Even in times of international / regional religious based conflicts, the leaders of the Romanian Muslim community did not instigate towards violence and have constantly promoted interfaith dialog. Most of the leaders (formal or informal) also have business endeavours in Romania and such "agitation" would result in business disruption. Furthermore, in terms of security,*

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** Doctorand, Universitatea Bucureşti; e-mail: maris.cristian93@yahoo.com

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the Romanian authorities keeps an active and ethical degree of oversight over the Muslim community. The research on the Romanian Arab-Islamic community, might present a case study for other European countries with significance Muslim communities such as France, Great Britain, Germany etc. Also, the research represents an academic contribution in a field less studied / promoted in Romania.

Keywords: Islam, community, leaders, integration, challenges

Assumption & Methodology

In Romania, the struggle for the official religious representation between the key people of the Arab-Islamic community and the Indigenous community (Turks and Tatars) might raise challenges for its members and for the Romanian authorities. The integration process is difficult.

The research is based on data gathered from quantitative methods (census, national and international statistics) and qualitative methods as interviews with certain Arab students (Libya, Jordan). Also, media articles and document analysis were used during the research process (speeches, interviews etc.). A reference work for the current paper belongs to Kozak Gyula, a researcher at The Romanian Institute For Research on National Minorities, who published in 2009 the article „Musilims in Romania: Integration Models, Categorization and Social Distance”².

A part of the „Muslim Community Description” section of the present paper is based on the content of K. Gyula’s article. The content of the other sections of the paper are built on quantitative data, interviews and media articles analysis.

Muslim Community Description

The Muslim community in Romania counts 64,337 individuals according to 2011 census³ („unofficial numbers ranging between 150,000 and 180,000 including all inhabitants”⁴) and is composed of two groups divided on ethnic criteria, as per those below:

² Gyula Kozak, *Working Papers In Romanian Minority Studies*, „Musilims in Romania: Integration Models, Categorization and Social Distance”, 18, 2009, Cluj-Napoca.

³ Institutul Național de Statistică, *Recensământul Populației și al Locuințelor - Volumul II Populația Stabilă (Rezidență) - Structura Etnică și Confesională*, „Populația după etnie și religie - categorii de localități și județe”, Available online: <http://www.recensamantromania.ro/noutati/volumul-ii-populatia-stabila-rezidenta-structura-etnica-si-confesionala/>, Accessed on 10/09/2020.

⁴ Gyula Kozak, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

1. The first group is the Indigenous community, composed of the Turks and Tatars from Dobrogea Region, which amounts to 46,963 individuals. The traditional community has roots back in the 13th century, during the rule of Ottoman Empire on Romanian lands.

2. The Arab-Islamic community comprises arab migrants who arrived in Romania from Middle East & North Africa countries starting in the 1970's. They came to Romania as students, mainly from Palestine, Syria and Egypt for educational purposes. According to the same source, in 2011, the second group counted around 7,000 Arabs. In addition to the official data regarding the Arabs from Romania, another 18,000 Arabs have settled in Romania since 2015. The table below represents the fluctuation of the number of migrants who came into Romania between 1990 and 2019. All of them came from Arab countries part of The Arab League:

Year	1990	1995	2000	2005	2010	2015	2019
Algeria	3	5	7	8	12	130	373
Bahrain	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Egypt	7	13	20	23	41	105	436
Iraq	299	638	998	1,018	1,245	1,419	2,563
Jordan	261	527	809	858	1,042	120	362
Kuwait	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Lebanon	306	642	999	1,032	1,256	806	580
Libya	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Mauritania	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Morocco	4	6	8	9	16	129	751
Oman	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Qatar	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Saudi Arabia	8	6	6	4	17	19	123

Somalia	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Palestine	7	12	19	22	27	72	230
Sudan	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Syria	2,087	4,579	7,217	7,254	4,087	2,576	3,829
Tunisia	2	3	4	4	8	1,062	1,784
UAE	5	4	4	3	13	13	296
Yemen	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Total	2,989	6,435	10,091	10,235	7,764	6,451	11,327

Tabel 1: Number of migrants from the Arab countries⁵

From a religious perspective, Islam is a religion formally recognized by the Romanian Government. This status includes the right to establish mosques, cemeteries, associations, leagues, printing houses, schools and election of an official leader (the Mufti).

The majority of Muslims in Romania are Sunni, with a small number of Shia Muslims, mainly from Iran (not included in the research), Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. The central Sunni community is not divided based on dogmatic criteria - Sunni Islamic Schools of Thought (Islamic Jurisprudence / *Madhab*) - Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i and Hanbali. The Islamic worship practices in the Romanian mosques do not take into account the dogmatic differences between these Schools of Thought - the Quran being preached without deviations or interpretations. This traditional method of Islamic worship has tended to eliminate radical views of Islam within the Romanian Muslim community.

The Arab and Turkish Muslim communities are mainly separated, with the latter being significantly larger, stronger, richer and better organised. Scarce attempts have been made to organise joint events, unsuccessfully (eg. yearly prayer at the "Dinamo Soccer Club" Stadium, to celebrate the end of Ramadan).

⁵ UN, International Migration - International migrant stock 2019, Available online: <https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/data/estimates2/estimates19.asp>. Accessed on 12/09/2020.

The most influential Islamic community leaders in Bucharest are usually formal or informal leaders of the local mosques. These are more or less formal and established as “annexes” to Islamic leagues or associations.

The older established members of the Arab-Islamic community are mainly willing / happy to stay in Romania, more interested to maintain a functional status in the country than to initiate any endeavors that could jeopardize their stay. They are mostly business oriented. Although rarely a first destination country for asylum seekers from the Middle East, Romania is mainly perceived as an excellent place to live in, for all Muslims, regardless of religious orientation (Sunni or Shia).

So far, the local Muslim community was not involved in terrorist acts in Romania (except from 1985 Grozavesti incident⁶), neither against Romania's allies on Romanian soil.

Religious Representation

The Romanian Muslim community is represented by The Mufti of the Muslim Cult of Romania, an institution officially recognised by the Romanian government, part of State Secretariat for Cults, with salaries of employees paid for by the Romanian State.

The current Romanian Mufti - Murat Iusuf (born on 18 August 1977), of Tatars origin, is the leader of the Romanian Muslim community since 2005. Iusuf is a Romanian citizen. His official title is "The Mufti of the Muslim Cult". The Mufti officially represents the issues and interests of Muslims in Romania (being in constant contact with the Romanian Government).

Due to the fact that the largest number of Muslims consists of Turks and Tatars, since the 90's the Indigenous community chose the Mufti as an official representative. The Mufti of the Muslim Cult includes 81 places of worship (most of them located in Constanta and Tulcea counties) and 35 imams. Also, the institution includes an educational institution in Medgidia, Constanta county⁷.

The Arab-Islamic community is mainly represented by two organizations having NGO status. These organizations are not officially recognised by the Romanian Government.

⁶ Mariana Iancu, *Atentate teroriste dejucate în România comunistă. Cum au fost salvați studenții din Complexul Grozăvești cu prețul morții a doi ofițeri USLA, 2017*, Available online: https://adevarul.ro/locale/constant/atenate-teroriste-dejucate-romania-comunista-fost-salvati-studentii-complexul-grozavesti-pretul-mortii-doi-ofiteri-usla-1_59eefb7b5ab6550cb86f5882/index.html. Accessed on 13.09.2020.

⁷ State Secretariat for Cults, *The Muslim Cult*, Available online: http://culte.gov.ro/?page_id=770. Accessed on 14/09/2020.

The first organisation is The Islamic and Cultural League in Romania (ICLR), initially named „Muslim Students in Romania” Association, created in 1991, in Timișoara. The second organisation is The Foundation „Islam Today”- Cultural Center, initially named „Al Taiba Foundation”. The two organisations were founded by Abu Al-Ola Nagi Al-Ghithy, a Yemenite national who is the main informal leader of Arab-Islamic community.

In 2011, Abu Al-Ola Nagi Al-Ghithy and his organisations were investigated by DIICOT (Directorate for Investigating Organized Crime and Terrorism) for suspicions regarding possible connections with terrorist organisations⁸. These possible trends towards radicalization are resolved by Romanian authorities, expelling any Islamic individuals known to be involved in potential terrorist activities.

The aforementioned organizations include mosques and educational centers mainly in Bucharest, Cluj-Napoca, Iasi, Constanta and Timisoara. According to public data, recently, between 10,000 - 15,000 active Arab -Islamic community⁹ have been established in Bucharest and Ilfov county. They mainly consist of foreign citizens and converts. The main religious places of worship and gathering used by the Muslims located in Bucharest are:

- „Taiba” Sunni mosque - managed by The Foundation “Islam Today” Cultural Center, led by Abu Al-Ola Nagi Al-Ghithy and the Imam Demirel Gemaledin¹⁰. It is one of the two most significant mosques for the Arab-Islamic community in Bucharest. Islamic training to young students is held within this mosque. This Foundation has a significant publishing activity, the books and brochures are printed courtesy of “Islamul Azi” and then spread all over the country. The Foundation is actively involved in facilitating travel to the annual Hajj and also Friday prayers.

⁸ Daniel Teodoreanu, *Un islamist radical cercetat de DIICOT încearcă să bage dihoniu între musulmani și români folosind cazul fetelor musulmane atacate la București, 2015*, Available online: <https://evz.ro/un-islamist-radical-cercetat-de-diicot-incearca-sa-bage-dihonia-intre-musulmani-si-romani-folosind-cazul-fetelor-musulmane-atacate-la-bucuresti.html>, Accessed on 14/09/2020.

⁹ Institutul Național de Statistică, *Recensământul Populației și al Locuințelor - Volumul II Populația Stabilă (Rezidență) - Structura Etnică și Confesională*, „Populația după religie - macroregiuni, regiuni de dezvoltare, județe și categorii de localități”, Available online: <http://www.recensamantromania.ro/noutati/volumul-ii-populatia-stabila-rezidenta-structura-etnica-si-confesionala/>, Accessed on 10/09/2020.

¹⁰ *Fundatia Centrul Cultural Islamic Islamul Azi*, Available online: <https://islammessage.org/fr/center/237/Fundatia-Centrul-Cultural-Islamic-Islamul-Azi#>, Accessed on 10/09/2020.

- „Az Zahra”, Shia mosque - run by the Association “Al-Zahra Islamic Cultural Center” and it is more a prayer’ house than an actual mosque / religious place.

- „Ahlul Bayt”, Shia mosque - run by the “Ahlul Bayt Islamic Cultural Center” and, like the previously discussed Shia mosque, it is not merely a mosque, rather a place where Shia’s believers gather. It is located in the vicinity of one of the greatest students’ campuses - Grozavesti / Regie and it is known that most of the worshippers are students in Bucharest.

A brief description of other representative mosques for the Arab-Islamic community in Romania is represented in the table below:

Mosque	Confession al orientation	Leader	Owned by	Address
Ar Rahman	Sunni (Jordan)	Ahmed Mazhar Nakechbandi	“Semiluna” Islamic Cultural Center Foundation	Bucharest, Muntii Gurghiului Street, no. 50-52, District 6
Al Quds	Sunni	Abu Al-Ola Nagi Al-Ghithy	Foundation “Islam Today” Cultural Center	Bucharest, Fabrica de Gheata Street, no. 14, District 2
Fundeni	Sunni	N/A	Foundation of Islamic Services Romania	Bucharest, Fundeni Street, no. 9, District 2
Al Taqwa	Sunni	N/A	N/A	Bucharest, Tăutu Street, no. 74-80, District 3
Islamic Center	Sunni	-	The Islamic and Cultural League in Romania	Cluj-Napoca, Pastorului Street no. 17
<i>Masjid</i>	Sunni	-	The Islamic and Cultural League in Romania	Iasi, Morilor Street no. 22
Islamul Azi	Sunni	-	Foundation “Islam Today” Cultural Center	Constanta, Maior Sofran Street no. 11
Islamic Center	Sunni	-	The Islamic and Cultural League in Romania	Timisoara, Dr. Ioan Muresan Street no. 15

Tabel 2: Representative mosques of the Arab-Islamic community in Romania

Struggle for Representation

The relation between the leaders of the two Muslim groups, Murat Iusuf and Abu Al-Ola Nagi Al-Ghithy has been tense for years. They are accusing each other on two main topics: radicalism and political interest. Murat Iusuf constantly accused Abu Al-Ola Nagi Al-Ghithy of promoting radical views of Islam and identified similarities between Al-Ola Naghi's discourses and Daesh ideology or other terrorist organisations.

In 2015 the Mufti Murat Iusuf declared in the media that almost 90% of the Arab-Islamic mosques from Bucharest are not authorised by The Mufti of Muslim Cult (Institution). He said that within these mosques the messages shared during the sermons are unknown. The Mufti used this argument to justify the need for a great mosque in Bucharest¹¹. At the same time, the Arab community did not have sufficient power in order to promote and establish the authorization process of the mosques. This was because of the Romanian legislation that gave the Mufti entitlement representative duties in this regard.

On the other side, through the activities of his organisations, Abu Al-Ola Nagi Al-Ghithy constantly challenges the authority of the Mufti accusing him of being interested only to get a new mandate.

The Islamic and Cultural League in Romania declared in 2016 that the Arab-Islamic community doesn't feel represented by the Mufti due to the ethnic differences. Also the organisation mentioned that all the mosques and Islamic centers related to ICLR „are condemned to pay high taxation because the Romanian Government doesn't recognise them as places of worship”¹².

These verbal conflicts between the representatives of the two Muslim groups were intensified during the elections for the new Mufti. In 2015, the opponent of Iusuf Murat, Ozghin Nurla was accused of having strong relations with Abu Al-Ola Nagi Al-Ghithy. Ozghin Nurla was the founder of the „Muslims from Romania” Association, a wing of „Islam Today” Foundation lead by Abu Al-Ola Nagi. The Mufti declared that the Muslim Cult doesn't want leaders who incite the Muslim community. Also Iusuf Murat said that the community request him “to not let the Mufti of Muslim Cult drop into the NGO's hands, NGO's investigated by DIICOT”¹³. In response, Abu Al-Ola Nagi posted on Facebook a message saying that „the Muslims (referring to Arabs

¹¹ Mihai Ivaşcu, *De ce vor musulmanii o mare moschee in Bucuresti? Muftiul Iusuf Murat pentru HotNews.ro*, 2015, Available online: <https://bit.ly/3kzTz4i>. Accessed on 15/09/2020.

¹² Cosmina Fernoaga, *Vrea control asupra tuturor musulmanilor din Cluj si din tara*, 2016, Available online: <https://actualdecluj.ro/vrea-control-asupra-tuturor-musulmanilor-din-cluj-si-din-tara/>. Accessed on 15/09/2020.

specifically) who are pushed aside by the current Mufti (Iusuf Murat) have only one choice: to form a new Mufti (Institution) in order to have better representation”¹⁴.

Conclusions

The clashes between Indigenous Muslim community representing the majority of the Muslim community from Romania and the Arab-Islamic community are based on the desire for official representation. The only institution recognised by the Romanian government is The Mufti of Muslim Cult, the representative of the entire Muslim community, in large part, focused on Turks and Tatars.

The Arab-Islamic community doesn't have an institution recognised by the Romanian State due to the low numbers (around 25,000 at present). They are represented by NGOs, some of them being investigated by DIICOT in the past for possible ties with terrorist organisations and radical entities.

On the one side, the representatives of the Arab-Islamic community attack the Mufti on the following subjects:

- the Arabs are not well represented by a Mufti with tatar origins.
- the Mufti doesn't recognise the Arab mosques.
- the Arab mosques and Islamic centers are paying high taxation toward the Turkish mosques recognised by The Mufti of Muslim Cult.
- the Mufti has only one interes, to gain another mandate.

On the other side, the Mufti is constantly accusing the Arab organisations and their representatives on the following topics:

- the Arab organisations and Abu Al-Ola Nagi have connections with terrorist organisations and promote radical messages.
- the Arab mosques are unofficial and the preaching messages are unknown.
- if a candidate for Mufti position has connections with Arab-Islamic community he is a promotor of disordment within the entire Muslim community.

All these mutual allegations might generate challenges for the integration process of th Muslim community within Romanian society. Particular cases of alienation can appear as an effect of clashes between the two groups, with the risk of a snow-ball effect.

¹³ Feri Predescu, *Scandal in comunitatea musulmana din Romania pentru alegerea liderului religios*, 2015, Available online: <https://evz.ro/scandal-in-comunitatea-musulmana-din-romania-pentru-alegere-liderului-religios.html>. Accessed on 16/09/2020.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

From my point of view, the solution for these issues is the Romanian State Secretariat for Cults is to officially recognise the Arab worship places. First of all, recognising the Arab places of worship will reduce the tension regarding the high taxation paid by Arab NGOs. Also, the Romanian authorities may better manage what happens within the Arab mosques eliminating the risk of radicalisation or connections with terrorist organisations. At the same time, recognising the Arab-Islamic judicial entities, the representatives of this community will decrease the attacks against The Mufti of Muslim Cult.