

Islam and Islamism in Contemporary Russia: The Lack of State Power or Factor of Stabilization?

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Abstract: The article describes the process of Islamic revival in the North Caucasus and the Volga region. Analyzes the situation of contemporary Russian Muslims and the reasons for the radicalization of Islam. It has shown that the Islamization of the two Russian regions took place against the background of inter-ethnic conflicts and separatist movements. The author's approach to minimizing the negative effects of the Islamization of Russia.

Key words: North Caucasus • Volga region • Islamic revival • Jihadists

INTRODUCTION

In the last USSR census of 1989, numbers of ethnic Moslems in the Russian Federation were 12 million, or 8 per cent of the Russian Federation population [1, p.72]. The 2002 Russian Federation census reveals that the Moslem component of the Russian Federation is 14.5 million (out of a total population of 144 million). However, this data is claimed in some quarters. An estimated 3-4 million Moslems are migrants from former Soviet regions, including more than 1 million Azeris and several hundred thousand Uzbeks, Tajiks and Kyrgyz. Russia had about 300 mosques in 1991 and now there are at least 8,000 (although a significant proportion of them are so-called “family mosque”) – more than in Egypt, which has a population of 75 million, about half of which were built with money from abroad, especially from Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia.

In contemporary Russia, Islamic identity plays an important role for a significant portion of its citizens, at times crowding out national identity. A growing number of Russian Muslims are annually sent to Hajj and Islamic studies at foreign universities. Many of them are radicals and go into opposition to the government, some are beginning to armed struggle. The two main Muslim region of Russia-the North Caucasus and the Volga region-have faced in the last decade with a massive display of illegitimate violence and religious intolerance. The possible extension of their natural habitat is a threat

to the Russian state. On the other hand, the government is trying to use the constructive potential of Islam and the clergy loyal to strengthen statehood. That is why the role of the Muslim community in the social life of contemporary Russia will continue to grow and the state needs to establish contacts with representatives of all structural movements and organizations.

Overview of the Situation of Muslims in Russia:

The Islamic population in the Russian Federation is concentrated into two main areas: The Volga-Urals region, i.e. Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, Udmurtia, Chuvashia, Mari-El and pockets in Ulyanovsk, Samara, Astrakhan, Perm, Nizhniy Novgorod, Yekaterinburg oblasts. The other Moslem area is the Northern Caucasus where the total number of compactly settled (but ethnically fragmented) Moslems is about 4.5 million [2]. Each of these two regions is divided by internal ethnic differences and preoccupied with their own problems, including relations with the central government. Of the four legal schools (mazhabs), two are widespread in Russia-Khanafi and Shafi. Khanafi is the most liberal of the four and it is prevalent among Tatars, Bashkirs, the majority of North Caucasian groups and Central Asian diasporas. The more conservative Shafi mazhab prevails among Dagestanis (except Nogay), Chechens and Ingush. Among Chechens and Ingush there are followers of non-temple Islam, belonging to the Nakshbandiya and Kadiriya tarikats (sects).

Although there has never been any single all-Russian Moslem community or *umma*, the Moslems in Russia are organized into Spiritual Boards. Since the mid-1990s at least five centers have been competing to become central institutions, representative of all Moslems of Russia. The most influence of them has two: the Central Spiritual Board of the Moslems of Russia and the European States of CIS, head-mufti Talgat Tadzhuiddin; and the Council of Muftis, headed by mufti Ravil Gaynutdin; muftis of many regions are members of the council [3].

In 2003 there was much discussion about creating a single administrative structure for Moslems in Russia, a so-called Higher Moslem Council, that would be analogous to the Moscow Patriarchate in the Russian Orthodox Church. Tadzhuiddin opposes Gaynutdin, claiming that the Council of Muftis supports foreign Wahhabite organisations. This is denied by Gaynutdin. He denies support for extremist organisations and claims that the term Wahhabite is often misunderstood and wrongly applied to Moslems in the Northern Caucasus fighting the pro-Moscow Chechen leadership. Tadzhuiddin fell out of favour with the Russian leadership when he called in 2003 for a jihad against the USA in response to the US invasion of Iraq and Gaynutdin was appointed to the Public Chamber [4, p.4]. In February 2003 he proclaimed: "...those who oppose the federal authorities in this republic do not have the moral right to justify themselves by allegedly defending Islam and the rights of Moslems, so that they are not damaged. Politicians, who consider that a clash of two civilizations, two cultures and religions, namely Islam and Christianity, is taking place in Chechnya are mistaken" [5]. Moreover, Gaynutdin does not seek to challenge violently the existing order in Russia, but on the contrary accepts it. He favors cooperation with the Russian Orthodox Church, Buddhists and the Jewish religious community in Russia.

Whilst a serious terrorist threat has emerged in the Northern Caucasus since 1994, the Moslem communities in the Volga-Urals region have so far shown little inclination to engage in acts of terrorism or other forms of violence. It has been argued that Russia, in contrast to these former colonial powers has always had a large Moslem population and that Moslems and Orthodox Slavs have peacefully co-existed for centuries. In day to day life in the Russian Empire, Moslems were not seen as alien. This contrasts with Britain, France and other West European states, where Moslem communities have

developed largely as a result of post-1945 immigration from former colonies and have often been perceived as alien by large elements of the host population.

The rebirth of Islam has been largely confined to the religious and cultural spheres, rather than to the political sphere. For the majority of Moslems in the Russian Federation, their political orientation is not linked to their faith. The situation is different in the Northern Caucasus, but Islamic movements there are primarily concerned with North Caucasus issues rather than all-Russian ones.

Islam in Tatarstan constitutes a model of "Euro-Islam", namely a moderate non-political force that poses no threat to the constitutional order in Russia. However, although Islam in the Volga-Urals region is in the main moderate and does not pose a threat to the system, there is concern that the state has not done enough to develop a dialogue with Islam in order to ensure that any possible future politicization will not develop in a militant direction.

Dialogue between the state and the Moslem community is also seen by the Russian Moslem leadership as playing an essential role in preventing the subversion of Russian Islamic educational institutions by extremist imams. Russian Islamic educational institutions now face the task of ensuring that Russian Moslems do not fall under the influence of extreme variants of Islam. The institutions therefore insist that all imams study both theology and various secular disciplines. The Council of Muftis recommends that young Russian imams study first in Russian Islamic educational institutions before travelling abroad to study in Islamic schools in Moslem states.

During the 2000s, most Russian analysts are of the opinion that the influence of extremist Islam outside parts of the Northern Caucasus is limited. But the weakness of the state and of the current Russian elite is enabling radical Moslem elements to increase their influence. It is true that there have been acts of violence committed by Moslem groups in the Volga region. Five members of the illegal group Islamic Jamaat were sentenced to five- and six-year prison sentences by the Supreme Court of Tatarstan, in August 2006 [4, p.6-7].

One may often meet the opinion, that Islamist terrorism in Russia is probably inspired by foreign jihadist elements. This has led to a desire by the Russian Moslem leadership to develop a moderate Islamic education within the Russian Federation. There is certainly a belief that extremist organizations have used Islamic educational

organizations as a means of waging jihad in the Russian Federation [6]. That why both the state and the Council of Muftis have a clear interest in promoting moderate Islamic education.

If the Moslem proportion of the Russian Federation population increases and comes to constitute more than 20 per cent, then it is likely that there will be a major political shift in the country. In the long term, if current demographic trends in the Russian Federation continue, it will be impossible to keep Moslem political representation at its current low level. The Russian Slav component of the population will eventually no longer be large enough to maintain its current level of domination of the political leadership. Nevertheless, there is now no significant Moslem lobby in Russian politics. This could change as the proportion of Moslems in the population grows and particularly if Moslems come to believe that current Russian elites are preventing them from assuming leadership positions.

In summary, it would seem that there are three main scenarios for the development of Moslem-Russian relations within the Russian Federation as the Moslem component of the Russian population grows:

- Russia therefore becomes more Moslem, with Moslems occupying a greater proportion of the political leadership. A relatively harmonious synthesis is formed with the Slavic component of the population, along the lines advocated by some Eurasianist geopolitical theorists.
- Russian elites hinder the full emergence of Moslem elites and the Moslem elements of the population become more restive.
- Russian elites and society fear the emergence of an “Islamic threat” from non-ethnic Russian, supported by outside Islamic powers. This leads to the emergence of a more overtly Russian nationalist regime [4, p.11].

Relations Between the State and Islam: “What kind of model has the Russian state established in its relations with Islam? Does it function as a director, architect, defender, engineer, or partner?”-asked himself A.Malashenko, famous Russian Islam specialist. He think, that mainly the state functions as an architect and then, once the building is in place, becomes a director, not only conducting the “Muslim musicians,” but Russia’s entire multi-confessional orchestra. While remaining an architect and director, the state also maintains partner-like relations with Islam [7, p.2]. There are spheres where partnership

between the state and Muslim structures can be extremely useful. But the Russian state categorically rejects the legal existence of the Islamic opposition and mercilessly suppresses any appearance of political protest in religious form, being led by V.Putin, who was attracted to the idea of setting up an “Islamic vertical of power” with a single organizational center and head.

To the State Islam is particularly important, when public officials have no other way to build their own authority. In the Volga, the regional authorities are in complete solidarity with the federal authorities. In the North Caucasus, the regional authorities, as a part of traditional society, correlate their behavior with tradition. For example, former President of Ingushetia, Murat Zyazikov, in 2005 adopted an order outlawing the sale of alcoholic and tobacco products in public places during fasts and feast days [7, p.3].

Sometimes, the local authorities are using tradition for short-term political purposes, what can further destabilization. So, there are Sharia courts operating in Ingushetia, including a republican-level court. Sharia courts also operate in Dagestan, but there they are concentrated in Wahhabi communities. Islamic tradition is one of the real sources of the law, but also a way of guaranteeing the legitimacy of the law. However, the creation of a parallel court system weakens the system of state power. Supporting traditional practices has serious downsides for the authorities since doing so means the introduction of traditional practices into areas that are directly controlled by the authorities.

Since the early 2000s, the Federal Security Service (FSB) and Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) constantly keep watch over the activity of Muslim societies, looking for the presence among them of radically-minded groups and individuals, who could be connected to the Islamic opposition. From time to time this “watching” provoked the jihadist to attack. The Chechen campaign and the counter-terrorist operations in the neighboring regions (especially, in Kabardino-Balkaria case, which led to “Nalchik riot” in 2005) corrupt the law enforcement agencies and military units because the nature of the conflict gives them a feeling that they cannot be held accountable and this feeling is ultimately transferred to the rest of society.

In recent years, the special services also have paid special attention to the ties between Tatar and Bashkir radicals and their colleagues in the North Caucasus and to the penetration of the radical organization Hizb ut-Tahrir al Islami (the Islamic Party of Liberation) from Central Asia. The authorities have arrested supporters

of the organization in Chelyabinsk, Yekaterinburg, Kurgan, Orenburg and other cities of the south Urals and Siberia [7, p.4].

Attempts to prevent the rise of religious radicalism include censorship of religious materials. The authorities used the battle with the Wahhabis to strengthen the system of government and limit democratic freedoms. Putin first suggested abolishing the elections at an expanded meeting of the government on September 13, claiming that a more hierarchical political system would improve the state's ability to fight terrorism. One should pay attention the fact, that in the North Caucasus the Islamists are not only working underground, waiting for their chance to move into action, but have long been used as an instrument in local political intrigues. This situation is typical for Dagestan and to some degree for Ingushetia and Kabardino-Balkaria. Today there is a new tendency in the North Caucasus and to a lesser extent in Tatarstan: Traditional Islam, including Sufi Islam, is becoming politicized. The sheiks are becoming legitimate participants in the political process.

Mostly, the "neo-traditionalists" remain loyal to the authorities and moreover are gaining their understanding and even support. Under the current political system, the state is succeeding in preserving control over a large part of the Muslim community. However, the religious-political opposition remains intact and it is mostly concentrated in the North Caucasus.

The increasing level of authoritarianism in the political system, the lack of serious reforms in the economy, the growing gap between rich and poor and even the unpopularity of the Muslim religious elite eventually result in the elite becoming cut off from society and a growth in the popularity of religious radicalism, which will ultimately destabilize the situation. [7, p.5].

Islamic Revival in North Caucasus: The Caucasus region remains one of the most vulnerable spaces in Eurasia. In the Caucasus region, the first precedent of a revision of borders between the former Soviet republics was established. For the first time in Eurasia and particularly in the Caucasus, partially recognized states have emerged. Russia defines the "Big Caucasus" as the sphere of its vital interests and priorities and consequently pretends to be a key stakeholder for the whole region. Moreover, in 2009 the situation there was characterized as the most important domestic policy issue by President Dmitry Medvedev in the Presidential Message to the Federal Assembly [8]. Why such small region on the borders of Russia became so important?

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, ethnic separatism in the Russian Caucasus was a particularly topical issue for a long period of time. The landmarks of this struggle have been two military campaigns in Chechnya (1994-1996 and 1999-2000) and the Ossetia-Ingushetia conflict (1992), which has not been fully settled yet. In the early and mid-1990s, apart from Chechen separatism, other ethno-nationalist movements in the North Caucasus were also brandishing the idea of "self-determination up to secession." The popularity of ethnic nationalism reached its peak in the first half of the 1990s. The rise of ethnic nationalism in the early 1990s was fuelled not only by the "weakness of the state," but also by objective circumstances. Religiousness was prohibited, while ethnicity was cultivated. In the beginning of the 1990s, there were simply no skillful preachers of "pure Islam" in the region. This is why in the early 1990s the movement of Islamic "radicals" emerged in the North Caucasus, in an effort to combine religious rhetoric with ethnic nationalism.

The rise of Islamic radicalism across the whole of the North Caucasus was only indirectly connected with Chechnya and its fight against the federal center. The first strikes between Sufi Muslims and Salafites in Dagestan were registered in 1994-1995. Already in 1997, the Sufi Islam supporters of Dagestan demanded to prohibit any Salafites activity. In time, the popularity of ethnic nationalism and ethnic separatism started to falter and decline because of different reasons. First of all, it is necessary to point out that the persistent ethnic nationalism (and separatism as its ultimate phase) is fraught with conflicts. [see: 9, p.3].

Ethnic nationalism failed to solve a number of urgent problems faced by the ethnic elites (in particular, it did not fulfill their hopes of territorial rehabilitation). The popularity of ethnic nationalism and separatism also waned because of the failure of the "Ichkeria" state experiment. In the mid 1990s, a radical Islamist environment was being shaped in the North Caucasus, where a new project, "Pure Islam," was developed, which was different from the Soviet experience, failed processes of democratization, or ethnic nationalism. The radical Islamists invoked a world religion (free from local "distortions" and traditions) and universal values (beyond ethnic groups, wirts, tarikats, clans). It was equated to egalitarianism, the fight against corruption and social injustice [see: 9, p.4].

The ideologists of "pure Islam" also skillfully used psychological methods of influence-appealing to disenchanted sections of the young population who were deprived of opportunities for career growth or

quality education. All these things were shaped in the conditions of a lack of any exact social, economic, or political development of the North Caucasus. Outset: this situation is not unique to the North Caucasus, but also in many other regions of the world with excessive youth.

The radical Islamists also have claimed moral superiority. As a result, radical Islam started to spread not only across the eastern part of the region (i.e., Chechnya, Dagestan, Ingushetia), but also across its western part, where the religiousness of the population had traditionally been less strong. The tragic events that took place in the capital of Kabardino-Balkaria on October 13, 2005, were a product of this development. The 2005 Nalchik attack was a raid by a large group of militants. It was the first full-scale raid after collapse of the Soviet Union, appealing not to Chechen independence but to Islamic jihad. Moreover, even the last similar terrorist attack committed in the name of “independence of Ichkeria”, occurred 10 years before the events in Nalchik-it was the capture of the hospital in Budyonnovsk.

Since the Beslan tragedy in September 2004, the main anti-Russian statements on the North Caucasus have been made not under slogans of ethno-political self-determination, but under a green flag of radical Islam. One can say, it was a bifurcation point in developing of Northern Caucasus’ instability. From that moment until present day the insurgents use not nationalism, but Islamism to explain their activity and achieving legitimacy. On October 31, 2007, Doku Umarov, the president of the so-called Chechen Republic of Ichkeria, relieved himself of his duties as head of that separatist state and inaugurated a new entity, the “Caucasus Emirate.”

It is also necessary to note that those who consider themselves defenders of “pure Islam” or “real Islam” (sharing the Salafites approaches) do not constitute such a homogeneous group as one might expect. In Russian society, in people’s mass consciousness and even among experts, the concept of “Wahhabism” has long been associated with extremism and terrorist activity. Among the critics of Wahhabism in the republics of the North Caucasus, a special word arose-“Wahhabist”-which rhymes with “terrorist.” it is obvious that the very definition of Wahhabism and the derivative notion of the Wahhabi are not just inadequate, but simply incorrect.

The activities of today’s Caucasian Salafites clearly include an element of extremism. As a rule, Salafites in Russia are the ones who organize and carry out terrorist acts. At the same time, to consider Doku Umarov and his confederates Islamists, in the complete sense of the

word, is problematic. They lack the requisite theological preparation and in some cases even the most basic education. but the ideals of “pure Islam” underlie the antigovernment protests of these unschooled Islamists. With the help of these ideals, they have managed with a certain effectiveness to mobilize the extremist potential in the area.

Naturally, among the Caucasus Islamic radicals there are people who have committed crimes; others consider “pure Islam” a fashion or affectation; while some people have been disoriented or have just lost their path. At any rate, it might be a big political mistake to dismiss them all as being alike. It would be also highly incorrect to simply equate terrorism with Salafism. Former Chechen president Dzhokhar Dudayev, the founder of “independent Ichkeria,” never associated himself with Salafism. On the contrary, he belonged to the “traditional” tarikat (Sufi order) Kadiriyah. Akhmad Kadyrov, another former Chechen president and a well-known opponent of the Salafites, belonged to the same tarikat, which did not prevent him from declaring jihad against Russia in 1995.

Nevertheless, the different groups and leaders of the North Caucasus Salafites all have some significant features that give us the opportunity to weigh in on their basic ideological and political values. First of all their radical Islamist background (regardless of educational level) is always signified by a degree of extremism. Anti-Semitism also is a compulsory element of all North Caucasus Islamic radicals’ proclamations. Consequently, external impact on the regional versions of militant Islam raises an important question on the correlation between radical Islamist trends and the Caucasus interpretations of them.

In order to adequately evaluate external influences on the Caucasus Islamic radicalism phenomenon, it is necessary to propose several important theses. First of all, the Arab nations never had any common policy toward the Russian Caucasus. Second, many Arab states-including Syria, Egypt and the Palestinian Authority-have been and continue to be interested in activating and increasing Russia’s role in the Middle East peace process. Third, it is necessary to clearly separate the official positions of Arab states and those of representatives of local societies that are more subject to radical Islam and fundamentalist network structures. In the end, not one Arab country acknowledged the independence of Chechnya or of the “Special Islamic territory” (the Kadar zone) in Dagestan, although Chechen delegations were officially received in the United Arab Emirates and in Qatar [9, p.9].

By contrast, much greater support has come from Islamists in East and Central Asia [22]. But the foreign Islamist preachers very frequently represent themselves personally and not by any organizations or structures. In some cases their aims and mentality are vastly different from the Caucasian “cobelievers.” It is not an accident that most of the criminal processes connected with Hizb ut-Tahrir’s activities took place not in the Caucasus but in the Volga region, Siberia and Central parts of Russia [10]. Al Qaeda leaders did not proclaim the Caucasus as the “new battlefield of jihad” after Afghanistan and Iraq. Some al Qaeda representatives organized financial and ideological aid, as well as fighting operations in Dagestan and Chechnya [11].

Features of the Islamism of the Volga Region: Islam in the Volga region exhibits a different character. Although Salafis are active in the Volga region, the area is a remote periphery where several well-known international Islamist groups-such as the *Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami*, the *Tablighi Jamaat* and the *Fethullahcilar* movement-extend their influence, as do various sects of local origin that are unrelated to popular and well-known international Islamic organizations. Nevertheless, these movements can be united under the term “nonofficial Muslims,” because they do not follow Russia’s officially recognized Muslim structures, are not registered as official religious groups and are considered illegal, extremist organizations under Russian law.

As a boundary region, the VFD comprises one-third of the Russian-Kazakhstan interstate border. Taking into account the porousness of this border as well as the fact that Kazakhstan borders on Central Asia, the VFD could be considered Russia’s gateway to Central Asia. This location is therefore both strategically and economically important and susceptible to migration problems involving new groups of Muslims.

The VFD includes six national republics-one third of Russia’s national republics-and is home to about 40 percent of Russia’s Muslim population. Muslims constitute a majority in seven Russian constituencies, two of which are located in the VFD: Bashkortostan with 54.5 percent and Tatarstan with 54 percent. Some other territories of the VFD are home to a significant percentage of Muslims, even if they don’t constitute a majority of the population [see: 12, p.3-4].

Both the VFD and NCFD have diverse ethnic compositions and Islamic traditions as well as a relationship with other religions, primarily Orthodox Christianity. The respective histories of the two regions

are very different, however. In both the Imperial and Soviet periods, the Volga region experienced higher levels of industrialization and urbanization than the North Caucasus. A large proportion of non-Muslim groups, mainly ethnic Russians, also settled in these industrialized, urban areas, leading the Volga region to become more secularized as well. Those factors decreased the role of Islam, especially in political sphere. Another key difference between the two regions is that, unlike the North Caucasus, the Volga region has been an integral part of Russia for a much longer period of time, dating back to mid-sixteenth century Muscovy and the conquest of the Kazan Khanate by Ivan the Terrible.

Importantly, the first official Muslim organization in Russia arose in the Volga region. In September 1788 Russian Imperial authorities officially recognized the Orenburg Muslim Spiritual Assembly, with its center in Ufa. Volga Muslims, especially ethnic Tatars, played a significant role in the assembly’s creation and development and the competence of the assembly’s clergy in matters of religion, education and family law covered the entire Muslim population of the Volga region, promoting its comprehensive integration in the social structure of Russia. Although the assembly’s structure transformed in the Soviet era, it survived the state policy of atheism that dominated in the USSR.

In fact, in the Volga region there still has not been any experience comparable to the creation of a de facto independent Chechen state (1991-1994 and 1996-1999) or of the permanent extensive terrorist network of the “Caucasus Emirate.” Moscow and Kazan managed to avoid interethnic conflict. There were many cases in which religious community leaders-that is, senior officials of the national republics of the Volga region who identified themselves with Islam-persistently advocated for interreligious and interethnic dialogue and condemned extremism and terrorist practices. Moreover, the Volga region produced such potentially attractive concepts as “Euro-Islam,” which aimed to develop the religion in accordance with contemporary realities and interreligious dialogue. It is also true that the number of Islamic radicals in the district is relatively small; the number is estimated from some hundreds to three thousand. Overall, the VFD government and law enforcement agencies have been able to control the situation within their jurisdictions.

In the early 1990s, the question of self-determination and choice of the future model of republican statehood was at the forefront of political discourse; Tatarstan and Bashkortostan were the most active in the alleged “parade of sovereignties.” The program documents of the Tatar

movement of the late 1980s and early 1990s, largely tailored in accordance to Baltic standards, made practically no mention of religion. Official authorities did not use any religious rhetoric or arguments. The concept of a “special political path” for Tatarstan was related at that time to the proclamation of civil sovereignty, to the revival of ethno-national culture and language and, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, to the restoration of independence [13]. Islamic fundamentalism was criticized and assessed as “unacceptable” for the future of Tatarstan as it was opposed to moderate and pro-European Jadidism.

The first manifestations of politicized Islam—initially timid—took place in the Volga region in the early 1990s. In 1990 Astrakhan hosted the first congress of the Islamic Revival Party (IRP), during which Akhmadkadi Akhtayev was elected leader. He criticized the concept of “armed jihad” in Dagestan and followed moderate line. In contrast, one of the IRP’s Astrakhan Congress organizers, Bagautdin Kebedov, became the leader of radical wing of the North Caucasus Islamists. He is considered the spiritual father of Salafi Islam in Dagestan. The IRP as an organization, however, desired to consolidate all of the Muslims of the Soviet Union in pursuit of the right to live in accordance with the rules of the Qur’an and the Sunnah. At the same time, the end of the Soviet Union also brought with it the end of the official state policy of atheism; Islam, like Orthodox Christianity, Buddhism and Judaism, gained legitimacy with the social and cultural space of Russia. Across the country thousands of mosques opened, overcoming the artificial isolation of the Soviet believers. With the resurgence of Muslim identity in Russia came the acquaintance of Russian Muslims with the theories and practices of radical Islamism. The overwhelming majority of Muslims in the VFD were followers of the *Hanafi Madh’hab*, a juridical school of Sunni Islam in which the everyday life of adherents combined a mixture of Islamic religious norms and local ethnic traditions and customs. After 1991, however, religious liberalization resulted in the interference of external Islamic movements of different origins—Arabic, Turkish and South Asian—as well as domestic nontraditional groups.

Many schisms that rocked the community of Russian Muslims, especially in the early 1990s, facilitated the emergence of various radical forces within Russia. Although most Russian Muslims are loyal citizens of their country, those influenced by radical Islam aimed to effect a full and complete victory of their ideological and political worldview. This consequence of the Islamic

revival poses a potential threat to the unity of Russia. It is fraught with interethnic conflicts as well as clashes not only between Christians and Muslims, but also between different groups of Muslims.

The Russian state has been faced with an Islamist threat both inside the country in the North Caucasus and, to a lesser extent, in the Volga region and outside, as it was involved in the five-year civil war in Tajikistan (1992-1997). Yet even in 1999, terrorism was beginning in the Volga region. Terrorists attacked the border of the Republic of Tatarstan and in the Kirov area in 1999, blowing up several branches of the Urengoy-Uzhgorod gas pipeline [12, p.11]. That year it was also reported that Islamist summer camps were being established in the Chusovoy district of the Perm area. In September 1999, Volgograd and Moscow became targets of terrorist bombings in which more than 200 people were killed. The main suspect of the Moscow attack was a native of Uzbekistan, but ethnically Russian, Denis Saytakov. In August 2008 in Bashkortostan the terrorist Pavel Dorokhov, an ethnic Russian who converted into Islam and changed his name to Abdul Mujib, was killed in a special operation [14]. Probably the most impressive incidents took place in 2010 when special operations troops fought terrorists in the Arkhangelsk district of Bashkortostan and in the Nurlat district of Tatarstan. One of the three radicals killed in the operation in Nurlat, was 34-year-old Ruslan Spiridonov, another one of ethnically Russian salafis and moreover, son of the former prosecutor for the city of Chistopol. Thus, we can say that the Salafis have included in their ranks people of different ethnic and territorial jurisdiction and even the elite of Putin’s Russia. Volga’s Islamists struggle is perceived in the context of “global jihad.” Like the jihadists of the North Caucasus, Volga radicals cooperate with like-minded actors in Bangladesh, Pakistan and the Middle East (mainly Saudi Arabia).

Because of decreased interest in VFD nationalism and separatism since the 1990s, however, nationalists and national separatists in the Volga today willingly and actively utilize the “Islamic factor” to draw attention to their activities. Instances of extremism based on religious and ethnic grounds had increased dramatically in recent years [15]. In October 2011, officials from the Bashkortostan branches of the FSB and Ministry of Interior issued a statement on the challenge posed by the transformation of this republic into a “new haven for separatism” owing to the increased presence of terrorist and extremist groups. They made special note of the fact that the natives of Bashkortostan have engaged with the

North Caucasus Islamist underground in terrorist activity and noted the desire of the radicals to exercise control over criminal groups.

Although only a few years earlier the Volga region had looked from the outside like a region with entrenched secular traditions, by the mid-1990s Salafi Muslims had strengthened their position. In contrast to the Caucasus, the Volga region is much more urbanized. And unlike the situation in European countries, cities and towns in the Volga region have not seen the creation of special “Islamic quarters” or any insular religious ghettos. Islamists initially had few chances to gain a foothold in the VFD, but for several reasons they did manage to take root to a significant degree.

Famous Russian expert, Sergey Markedonov proclaimed four reasons of Salafis success: The first reason they succeeded was the negative impact of divisions within the official Islamic institutions in Russia that actively cooperated with Moscow and adjusted their activities to local customs. Salafi emissaries, both domestic and foreign, visited numerous communities, offering their imams and chairmen “disinterested” aid in exchange for the promotion of their missionary programs. Their propaganda was most successful and effective in those cities where a majority of the population was Orthodox and in which Muslim communities were ethnically diverse and lacked ingrained Islamic traditions. Second, the Salafis received a “head start” because the official Muslim clergy lacked a developed system of religious education and a dearth of personnel qualified to teach. Third, it is impossible to ignore domestic political factors. “Traditional Islam,” which had been associated with loyalty to the state in the early 1990s, greatly discredited itself as a result of numerous intrigues, public quarrels, instances of corruption and the redistribution of property. All of these facts reduced the credibility of the official clergy and increased the impetus for the Russian Muslim community to search for alternatives. Fourth, attempts by the authorities at various levels to oppose nationalism and religious radicalism through state-controlled political Islam were ineffective. The Russian federal government, as well as the republican and regional administrations, focused their policy on the “Islamic direction,” cooperating with the Spiritual Boards of Muslims that had been accepted as official and legitimate structures. Thus, a huge segment of nonofficial Muslims who are not necessarily radicals or terrorists has remained outside of the governmental focus and has not experienced serious cooperation or engagement with the government [12, p.16-18].

In 1993, Taiba, a Saudi Arabian charity organization, signed an agreement with the newly formed Yoldyz Madrassa at a mosque in Naberezhnye Chelny. In 1999 there were an estimated 200 other Salafi groups in Kukmor and approximately 50 in Neftekamsk, as well as approximately 150 individual Salafi groups in both Vyatskie Polyany and Almeteyevsk. In the abandoned village of Ogryzskiy District, some Salafis attempted to create a “Special Islamic Territory” in Tatarstan as well as Mordovia, following the example of an effort in Dagestan in 1998 [16].

Indeed, the cooperation between Salafis and organized criminal groups bears scrutiny. The political aims and goals of these ties are not initially evident, but such ties do have a significant social impact. These groups interpret even their criminal activities, such as the “protection racket” directed at local entrepreneurs, extortion and the weaning of property from “infidels,” through the prism of shari’a norms. There are also some facts that indicate partial support for the radicals by officials on different levels, as well as evidence of some cases of crypto-Salafi activity in which Muslim clerics refuse to perform ceremonies corresponding to “traditional” or “Tatar Islam.” Salafi activities have not been limited to Tatarstan; they were also recorded during the 1990s and 2000s in Bashkortostan, specifically the Agidel, Baymak, October and Sibai districts and the capital Ufa; in Belozerye, Mordovia; Togliatti in the Samara region; as well as in the Orenburg, Penza, Perm, Ulyanovsk regions. In 1997, an Astrakhan Salafi named Abuzar (he was an ethnic Russian who changed his name from Oleg Marushkin when he converted to Islam) began to preach in the village of Belozerye, in the Romodanovsk District of the Republic of Mordovia. In fact, we can point out, that in Mordovia were two attempts to replicate the Dagestan scenario, obtaining Islamist control of a separate village. Salafi views have also penetrated the ranks of ethnic nationalists in republics outside of Tatarstan. As a result, ideas of ethnic superiority have become inextricably mixed with religious intolerance and radicalism.

CONCLUSION

The Islamic rise in the Volga region is a deeply complex phenomenon. It has been driven by the results of internal socio-political and religious dynamics, by religious globalization and by the penetration of radicals into new territories. Unlike the North Caucasus, the Volga region has not yet become a territory where suicide

bombings, acts of sabotage and military strikes are commonplace. Nevertheless, recent years have brought with them a number of very alarming signs.

First, the Russian leadership needs to learn its lessons from the experience of instability in the North Caucasus. The Islamic rise in the Volga region cannot be controlled through military or police operations. Of course, radicals who overstep the bounds of the law must be held accountable. Still, any attempt to minimize the Islamist threat will be ineffective if it does not incorporate an understanding of social and ideological issues.

Second, policymakers should support policies that would strengthen traditional Russian Islam, which is linked to the history and culture of the country as a whole and the Volga region in particular. Moscow has to recognize the growing role of religion in the political and social life of the country, but it also needs to counter the radicals that provoke militant insurgency and instability. It must also include active and consistent promotion of a pan-Russian, supra-ethnic political identity.

Third, it will require colossal effort to differentiate between terrorists and those who would be amenable to pledge their political loyalty to the state. The important task for Russia is to engage in pragmatic cooperation with the West. Unlike the Caucasus, the Volga Federal District is to a much lesser extent involved in the international agenda. However, this status quo is likely to change quite soon, with the Volga region becoming increasingly important to a host of international actors.

As for the Caucasian radicals, they have used some ideological and operational weapons of al Qaeda. Since the 2000s, the Caucasian terrorists began using suicide bombings as a tool for their political-religious struggle. The increasing popularity of radical Islam in today's Caucasus is not explained by foreign intrigues, but rather because there are serious socioeconomic problems resulting in few opportunities in the area. Xenophobic and militant slogans continue to be the most important features of radical Islam in the North Caucasus.

It is necessary to keep in mind that every world religion adapts itself to local conditions. It is probable that the so called Wahhabi form of Islam will undergo a complicated transformation and become more traditional and less radical. It would also be very wrong to label the whole protest movement in the Northern Caucasus as Islamist. There is also a secular opposition in Ingushetia and Dagestan (opposing the Islamists) and its criticism is

leveled against the republican authorities. Today, the main challenge to the security of the state is no longer posed by ethnic separatism, but by radical Islamism.

Moscow's mission is to combine the North Caucasus republics and their citizens with the rest of Russia into a single political-civic nation. This is why an antiterrorist philosophy in Russia cannot be built using only Israel's experience in the Middle East. Rather, it should consider the Spanish, French and British experience, in which the toughness of the government's position was combined with "soft power". In fighting the terrorist threat today, Russia does not need pseudo-patriotic rhetoric. Instead, it needs a clear understanding of the dynamic in order to fully comprehend the underlying causes of terrorism used as a political strategy.

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