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THE RUSSIAN STAKE IN AFGHANISTAN

By David Satter



FPRI Senior Fellow David Satter is the author most recently of It Was a Long Time Ago and It Never Happened Anyway: Russia and the Communist Past, which is just out in paperback from the Yale University Press.

As the U.S. prepares to withdraw from Afghanistan, perhaps no nation has more to fear from the consequences than Russia which faces the possibility of both instability in Central Asia and the radicalization of its own Muslim population.

In the wake of the attack on September 11, 2001, Russia lent its support to the U.S. as it drove the Taliban from power. This was frequently depicted by Russian officials as a generous gesture for which Russia had a right to expect in return a free hand in the former Soviet republics. The Russian action, however, was in Russia's strategic interest.

When the Taliban was in power, it was the only real foreign threat facing Russia. Fear of the Taliban-supported radicalization of Central Asia and the North Caucasus and other Russian Muslim republics led Russia to support the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan at a time when the Taliban controlled 95 per cent of the country's territory.

When the U.S. invaded Afghanistan, Russia provided intelligence and equipment. It encouraged the Northern Alliance to assist the Americans and persuaded the Central Asian nations to give the U.S. basing rights on their territory. This assistance contributed significantly to the ease with which the Taliban was overthrown.

After the Taliban was toppled, Russia did not meddle in Afghan politics and did not contest U.S. influence over the Karzai administration. In a series of agreements, it opened up and then expanded a Northern supply route for NATO forces that would otherwise have had to rely on the route from Pakistan over the Khyber Pass.

More than 2,200 flights, 379,000 military personnel and 45,000 containers of cargo have now been transported through Russia in support of operations in Afghanistan. In June, 2012, the Russian authorities gave permission for a transit route through the Volga region for supplies supporting the NATO operation. To support this, NATO opened a special transit center in the Russian Volga River city of Ulyanovsk despite U.S.–Russian disagreements on many other issues.

While it was in power, the Taliban offered training camps to Chechen rebels and encouraged Islamic militants in Central Asia. Many militants left Central Asia to fight alongside the Taliban against NATO. Now, however, they are filtering back. According to Ahmed Rashid, a leading Pakistan based expert on Afghanistan and Central Asia, "They have done enough fighting for other people. They want to fight for their own country... They are trying to infiltrate weapons, ammunition and men back into Central Asia."

Previously dormant groups like the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan are regaining strength and, in the opinion of analysts, preparing for a long, sustained military campaign in Central Asia. The goal of the IMU is to overthrow the Uzbek president Islam Karimov who has tolerated no opposition during his two decade long rule. Another target is the Tajik leader, Imomali Rakhmon who led pro-Russian forces against Islamists in the civil war in the 1990s. The internet is full of videos by groups such as the Islamic Jihad Union that were believed to have been founded by

breakaway IMU fighters.

The strategic threat to Russia involves more than Central Asia. The confrontation with radical Islam has spread to Russia itself, including the formerly peaceful Muslim communities along the Volga.

The first members of the Islamist movement, Hizb ut-Tahrir, for the most part ethnic Uzbeks and Tajiks, appeared in Russia in 1996. Faced with repression by the authorities in the Central Asian republics, they began to gather in the lower Volga. In 2003, the Russian Supreme Court designated Hizb ut-Tahrir a terrorist organization but their strength grew in the Volga district.

On July 19, 2012, simultaneous terrorist attacks in Tatarstan, the most important Volga Muslim republic, ounded the Tatarstan chief mufti, Ildis Faizov, and killed Valiulla Yakupov, the former deputy chairman of the Tatarstan Spiritual Board of Muslims. Yakupov was a well-known Islamic theologian and opponent of what the Russian media refers to as Wahhabism. He was posthumously awarded the Medal of Courage by Putin. These killings represented the first time that official religious leaders from outside the North Caucasus became the victims of Islamist terror. Three months later, the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) announced it had prevented a large scale terrorist attack in Kazan, the capital of Tatarstan, planned for the eve of the celebration of the Muslim holiday of Eid al-Adha.

In 1998, the Mufti Sayyid Muhammad Hadi Abubakarov, was murdered in Dagestan. In 1999, the People's Assembly of Dagestan reacted to the attack by enacting a law banning "Wahhabism and other extremist activity." This was followed by mounting violence that has now made Dagestan the most dangerous place in the North Caucasus. In 2012, deputies of the Tatarstan State Council reacted to the attack on Faizov and Yakupov by prohibiting foreigners from establishing religious organizations in the republic. By attempting to control religious expression in the same manner as their counterparts in Dagestan, however, they risk similar results.

The Volga Federal District is home to about 40 per cent of Russia's Muslim population and it is critical to Russia's economic and political stability. Its oil and gas reserves constitute 13 and 12 per cent respectively of Russian's total hydrocarbon resources. The district also contains 96 per cent of the country's known reserves of potassium salt, 60 per cent of Russia's phosphorus deposits, and 16 per cent of its copper deposits. It accounts for 24 per cent of Russia's industrial production, the highest rate of any district in the country and 15.3 per cent of Russian investment. The region is crossed by numerous oil pipelines and five gas pipelines. It takes up a third of the Russian-Kazakh border and so can be considered to be Russia's gateway to Central Asia.

Tatarstan was held up as a model of stability and tranquility by comparison with the North Caucasus. In 2010, however, special operations troops fought terrorists in the Arkhangelsk district of Bashkortostan and in the Nurlat district of Tatarstan, which contains one of Russia's largest oil reserves. In March, 2010, the authorities arrested Bashir Pliyev, a native of Ingushetia who is considered to be the spiritual leader and organizer of the Islamist underground in Tatarstan and Bashkortostan. It was learned that a group he led had perpetrated a number of crimes that had been previously unsolved, including diverting the route of the gas pipeline in the Birsk district of Bashkortostan.

Russia is continuing to fight a low level civil war in the North Caucasus where Islamist forces are likely to draw encouragement from any Taliban victory in Afghanistan. Russia's key strategic vulnerability, however, may be in Central Asia where brutal but incompetent local armed forces are uncertain of being able to contain reenergized Islamist movements that enjoy the full backing of the Taliban and in the Volga District where the long standing peace and stability may face a serious threat from radical Islam that is able to depict itself as a triumphant revolutionary force.

Under these circumstances, Russia may continue to depict its cooperation with NATO as a sign of its good will and demand what it considers to be corresponding concessions. But the reality is that the failure of the NATO mission in Afghanistan is likely to have consequences that are as least as grave for Russia as those for the U.S.

FPRI, 1528 Walnut Street, Suite 610, Philadelphia, PA 19102-3684

For more information, contact Eli Gilman at 215-732-3774, ext. 255, email fpri@fpri.org, or visit us at www.fpri.org.