

**RUSSIA AND ISLAM**

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## Analysis

### Islam and the State in Russia

By Aleksei Malashenko, Moscow

#### Abstract

In dealing with Islam, Putin has sought to ensure that Muslims remain loyal to the state and suppressed any political opposition that appears in religious form. In Muslim-majority regions, local leaders often promote Islamic traditions and use the association with their religion to bolster their authority in the political sphere. The federal authorities often support the use of tradition as a way of promoting stability in the usually volatile North Caucasus. Nevertheless, the authorities seek to exert tight control over what they perceive as an Islamist opposition. Often the federal authorities use harsh methods to crack down on the Islamists, provoking anger in the Muslim community. Traditional forms of Islam are now becoming politicized, giving Muslims a new identity which is gradually cutting off the North Caucasus from the rest of Russia. With its focus on political loyalty, the Kremlin has overlooked this development.

#### The State's Approach toward Islam

In post-Soviet Russia, the authorities made it a priority to establish control over Islam. In practice, this control entails:

- Demanding that the Muslims remain loyal to the state;
- Subordinating the Muslim leadership to the state;
- Exerting oversight over the activities of religious and political-religious organizations, including religious educational organizations, and
- Monitoring foreign contacts with the goal of countering their internal influence.

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? I 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. Russian Minister for Nationalities Policy Vladimir Zorin has positioned himself as a “supporter of active interrelations between the state and religious organizations.” In fact there are spheres where partnership between the state and Muslim structures can be extremely useful. In particular, in combating the drug trade, helping those infected with HIV, and saving homeless children. Cooperation in the penitentiary system is also taking shape. There is also interest in legally regulating the entrepreneurial activity of charitable organizations. Likewise, the state and religious organizations also have to agree on suitable land taxes.

Like his predecessor Boris Yeltsin, Vladimir Putin also thought about how to build relations with the Muslims. Having established authoritarian methods

of leadership in the country, for a while he was attracted to the idea of setting up an “Islamic vertical of power” with a single organizational center and head. Putin’s approach includes strong parallels to the way that the Russian empire dealt with Islam, when the authorities tried to set up something like a “Russian Islamic Church.” At the same time, the state categorically rejects the legal existence of the Islamic opposition and mercilessly suppresses any appearance of political protest in religious form.

#### Relations with the Muslim Regions

There are three types of Russian regions defined according to their relationship with Islam: regions in which Muslims constitute the majority; regions in which they are compact, but significant, minorities; and those where there are relatively few Muslims. The following discussion will focus on Muslim majority regions, particularly in the North Caucasus.

In the North Caucasus and the Muslim regions of the Volga, particularly the republics of Tatarstan and Bashkortostan, decisions adopted at the regional level and the implementation of decisions made in the center must be carried out while taking into account the specific features of the indigenous populations’ religious mentality. One should not exaggerate the significance of these religious feelings, but ignoring them is not wise.

In the Muslim regions, the regional leadership must inevitably appeal to Islam because of the traditions of society and the authorities’ need for additional religious legitimacy. Islam is particularly important when public officials have no other way to build their own authority.

Naturally, there are differences among the Muslim republics. In Tatarstan and Bashkortostan, the secular authorities freely manipulate Islam and control the religious situation. In contrast, the authorities in Dagestan,

Ingushetia, Chechnya, and Kabardino-Balkaria need Islam as an ally. It is simply impossible for them to subordinate Islam. 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.

In the North Caucasus, traditional forms of behavior can take the most varied forms – from enthusiastic participation in religious holidays, periodic vows of fidelity to Islam, to the use of “Islamic levers” in political battle, and a search for support from all stripes of religious forces, including the most radical.

In this manner, while acting as the bearers of secular values (the constitution declares that the state and religion are separate), regional politicians behave essentially as religious authorities. For example, in several republics, Friday has effectively become a non-working day. The Muslim celebration of Kurban-Bairam, held during the hajj, has become an official holiday. In 2005, Ingushetia adopted an order outlawing the sale of alcoholic and tobacco products in public places during fasts and feast days.

Additional proposals have gone farther. Former Ingushetia President Ruslan Aushev, who was in office 1993–2001, and Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov are lobbying for the legalization of polygamy. This question has also been raised in the parliaments of Tatarstan and Bashkortostan. The motivation for the proposal is largely pragmatic – the lack of young men in the area.

Kadyrov has recommended that female public servants, journalists, and students wear headscarves. (At the reception honoring Kadyrov’s ascension to the post of republican prime minister, the former republican prime minister Sergei Abramov asked his Russian wife to wear a scarf.) At Chechen State University, Kadyrov gave nine female students wearing scarves \$1,000 each. In 2006, he dispensed \$1,500 per person to a large number of the men participating in the hajj. The Russian-backed Chechen president has also suggested teaching Islam in schools.

“Islam and Sharia law are the most beautiful and clean that can exist in religion,” according to Kadyrov. As the head of the republic, he says that he is accountable to God. According to Ruslan Yamadaev, an influential Chechen opposition politician, “there is an informal ‘morals police’ in the republic and Kadyrov wants to introduce Sharia law.” The Kremlin is concerned about Kadyrov’s devotion to Islam, considering that it is a small step from Islam to separatism.

### Using Tradition for Political Purposes

With the active support of the authorities in the North Caucasus, a process of traditionalizing societies is under way. These changes include incorporating Islam

into the sphere of administrative activities and defining day-to-day conduct. There are Sharia courts operating in Ingushetia, including a republican-level court which has been in operation since 1999. Since 2001, however, the court has operated as a consultative organ, rather than a legal one, and only has jurisdiction over individuals, but not legal entities. During the last two years, it heard one thousand cases and 90 percent of the people who appealed to the court were satisfied with its decisions. Sharia courts also operate in Dagestan, but there they are concentrated in Wahhabi communities.

In regions with Muslim majorities, local laws must take into account the beliefs of the population and at least partially restore Islam as a regulator of relations in society. Tatarstan’s constitution provides “expanded rights to believers employed in enterprises and organizations, where they have the opportunity to carry out religious rites during the working day. Religious organizations have the right to create a special network of enterprises and institutions to provide services to believers in accordance with canonical requirements.” Examples include the establishment of halal meat shops or the participation of medical personnel in circumcision ceremonies. Similar provisions exist in the legislation of the North Caucasus republics. Islamic tradition is one of the real sources of the law, but also a way of guaranteeing the legitimacy of the law.

Federal officials accept the inclination of local politicians toward traditionalizing society. In 2006, the Russian Federation Social Chamber Commission on Issues of Tolerance and Freedom of Conscience supported initiatives to revive traditional institutions in the North Caucasus in order to use them to stabilize and even modernize society.

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. What is permitted and not permitted depends on the opinion of the authorities and, of course, their relationship to spirituality.

During the time of President Valerii Kokov’s rule in Kabardino-Balkaria, the authorities fired imams and other elected religious leaders and transferred ownership of some mosques (such as those in the village of Chegem) to the secular authorities. There was a well-known case in which law enforcement authorities interrogated female students for reading the Koran in a university auditorium. In 2006, the police in Adygeya did not allow the faithful into several mosques where imams who had fallen out of favor with the authorities were delivering sermons. In several parts of the North Caucasus, including Stavropol Krai, the authorities refused to reregister Muslim societies, claiming that

in doing so they were fighting terrorism. Mosques in Chechnya likewise are under strict control.

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.

### Crackdowns on the Islamist Opposition

What does the state perceive as the Islamist (usually described as Wahhabi) opposition? Obviously, partly they are focused on Muslims who have a negative attitude toward the authorities, reject the idea of the mosque cooperating with them, and consider the only possible exit from the crisis that society is facing to be an “Islamic alternative,” which requires conducting jihad. The state describes the religious opposition as fanatics, terrorists, and bandits. In fact, Islamist extremists frequently use bandit methods, while criminals use Islamist phraseology, attempting to present themselves as fighters for the faith.

However, it should not be forgotten that the separatists are not bandits and the Islamists active in the region (at least the majority of them) are ideological fighters and consider themselves to be part of an international jihad.

The authorities’ actions often draw the irritation of the Muslims, who are loyal to the Russian state but are critical of the methods its uses against the Muslim opposition. Pursuing members of the religious opposition often includes storming large apartment buildings with the consequent destruction hurting both residents and people passing by. The presence of tanks and armed personnel carriers on the streets of several North Caucasus cities has become part of daily life.

As both sides gain experience in the battle against terrorism, they become more cruel. The Chechen campaign and the counter-terrorist operations in the neighboring regions 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. As the conflict drags on, the latent civil war gives rise to irreconcilable differences, which will be transferred to the next generations. Psychologists believe that the situation can deform both social and individual consciousness.

The police are tough on “Islamic dissidents” in other regions outside the Caucasus as well. In several cases, the police have conducted searches in mosques and detained people there, including in Moscow. On February 27, 2004, following a bomb blast on the Moscow metro, 80 members of Nafigulla Ashirov’s Istorichesky Mosque were arrested. In July 2003, after a terrorist attack in

Tushino the police issued order 12/309 to conduct operation Fatima in which they checked women who wore traditional Islamic clothing, considering these signs of devotion as criteria for identifying potential female terrorists.

In recent years, the special services 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 (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.

Attempts to prevent the rise of religious radicalism include censorship of religious materials. In the 1990s, throughout all of Russia, including in mosques and bookstores, it was possible to buy any Muslim book, including the initiators and ideologists of fundamentalism: Hassan al-Banna (founder of Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood), Abu Ala Maududi (founder of Pakistan’s Jamaat-e-Islami Islamic political party), Said Khutba, Yusuf al-Qaradawi (a prominent Egyptian scholar seen on al Jazeera) and others. In 2004 Moscow’s Savelov Raion Court forbid the distribution in Moscow of *The Book of the Unity of God* by Mukhamad ibn Abd al-Wahhab at-Tamimi, the spiritual leader behind the Wahhabi movement, claiming that it violated the law against promoting hatred. In June 2008, the court outlawed the printing and distribution of Ayatollah Khomeini’s last will and testament.

### Some Efforts to Understand the Enemy

This simplistic and primitive approach toward Muslims who think differently takes place along with sporadic attempts to try to figure out the “enemy.” Although the general line is to destroy the Wahhabis, there are other interpretations of their work, though only rarely formulated and voiced. Then Prime Minister Sergei Stepashin made one of these first analyses during a visit to Dagestan in 1998. In the village of Chabanmakhi he met with a leader of the local Wahhabis, the so-called General Mukhtar Ataev, and even presented him with a medal. On returning to Moscow, Stepashin said that the Wahhabi threat was greatly exaggerated and that it was possible to talk to them. Quickly, however, his words were repudiated and he was fired, turning over his office to Vladimir Putin. Consequently, Stepashin was accused of “consorting with the Wahhabis.”

Former Presidential Representative to the Southern Federal District Dmitry Kozak spoke reasonably carefully about Wahhabism. After investigating the local situation, he admitted that eliminating the religious opposition using only repressive methods would be impossible. In 2005 his staff prepared two reports – one

about the situation in the North Caucasus and one about Dagestan, which was described as a black hole. The reports pointed out that the “corrupt elite, dirtied in the battle for power, precipitated ethnic, *religious* (my emphasis – A.M.) and social conflicts.” Kozak’s reports did not result in serious steps to change the situation. The only reaction was to increase the number of soldiers in the region.

### Seeking Political Benefits from Fighting Extremism

The battle against religious extremism has been a convenient instrument for the authorities to confirm their power since the Yeltsin era, when the president sought to increase his popularity by launching a “small victorious war” in Chechnya. Likewise in 1999, the second Chechen war, this time called a “counterterrorist operation” helped Vladimir Putin take the “throne.” In 1999 in the North Caucasus, there were many rumors suggesting that Shamil Basaev’s intervention into Dagestan, which provoked a powerful Russian response leading to his defeat, was all but planned by the special services.

The authorities used the battle with the Wahhabis to strengthen the system of government and limit democratic freedoms. Following each large-scale terrorist act, Kremlin politicians make harsh statements calling for a further tightening of the screws in the name of victory. And that is exactly what happens. The “classical” example of this policy is the cancellation of the gubernatorial elections after the 2004 Beslan terrorist acts. 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.

Carried away with the battle against “Wahhabis” and using it as a means to achieve their own goals, the federal authorities are paying unforgivably little attention to 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 a instrument in local political intrigues. This situation is typical for Dagestan, and to some degree for Ingushetia and Kabardino-Balkaria.

### Unintended Consequences

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 and their followers are becoming legitimate participants in the political process. In particular, they are energetically fighting to increase the role of Sharia law and to

build society on an Islamic base. In this area, their position is merging with the position of the Salafis and between these long-time competitors, there is an unexpected consensus emerging. At the same time, the “neo-traditionalists” remain loyal to the authorities and moreover are gaining their understanding and even support. In the region, the process of retraditionalization is gaining greater strength in terms of consciousness and norms of behavior. De facto, a new identity is being created (or the old conservative one is being restored), which is gradually “cutting” the North Caucasus off from the rest of Russia. However, the Kremlin does not pay attention to this trend since its top priority is political loyalty.

The result could be that while distracted with the fight against Islamists, the federal authorities fail to notice another potential opponent: the neotraditionalist instructors. And explaining the appearance of a new “Islamic force” as the result of outside interventions will no longer succeed.

Moreover, in eliminating Wahhabism, the authorities remain indifferent to innovative religious ideas. However, neglecting how these Islamic ideas develop is short-sighted and even dangerous. Ultimately, they will influence politics.

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.

“Today we still do not know how to address the problems of the North Caucasus and other Mohammedan lands with agricultural overpopulation and extreme poverty,” commentator Maksim Sokolov has pointed out. At the same time, the Kremlin authorities have convinced themselves that the worst is already past. Kozak is proud that the number of terrorist attacks in his sector dropped to a quarter of their previous level (of course, it is not clear how he came up with this figure). However, in 2008 few doubt that the Islamic radicals have considerable resources at their disposal and that they, as before, are able to launch effective and damaging strikes in Ingushetia, Dagestan, and even in Chechnya.

*Translated from the Russian by Robert Ortung*

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## Analysis

# Russia and the Muslim World: The Chechnya Factor and Beyond

By Jacques Lévesque, Montréal

## Abstract

This article looks at Russia's relations to the Muslim world as an aspect of its foreign policy directly related to domestic issues. It argues that because of its own large Muslim population and its desire to conduct an independent foreign policy, Russia has developed a special relationship with Muslim countries and claims a different approach to fighting terrorism than the US. This relationship is not without problems, as the case of Iran demonstrates. Also, Russia's conflict with Muslim-dominated Chechnya has shown the difficulties that Russian leaders have in coping with autonomy struggles and religious diversity within the Russian Federation.

## The Impact of 9/11

In the aftermath of 9/11, many observers in the West and Russia predicted a fundamental re-orientation of Russian attitudes and policies toward the Islamic world, and the Middle East in particular, that would bring them in line with policies conducted by the US and even Israel. The prediction was based on Putin's own obsession with the international ramifications of terrorism that plagued Russia as a consequence of the war in Chechnya. In the two years preceding 9/11, Russian leaders had pointed out to their Western colleagues the threat of terrorism emanating from an arc of instability stretching from hotbeds of Islamic fundamentalism in the Philippines through Taliban-controlled Afghanistan, on to Central Asia, Chechnya, the Middle East and Kosovo in Europe.

In the months following September 11, Western and Russian scholars expressed the view that a new lasting alliance between the US and Russia would be formed on the basis of the common threat of Islamic militant fundamentalism. In early 2002, Russian scholar Dmitri Glinesky-Vasiliev forecasted that Russia would support a US war against Iraq that was already in the cards.

To be sure, there were a number of important signs pointing in that direction. Putin thought that a window of opportunity had suddenly opened for an overall political understanding with the US. He supported the opening of military bases for the US in Central Asia and contributed, in different ways, to the success of the US-led effort to overthrow the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. Russian relations with Israel significantly improved. Yet a robust new US-Russian strategic partnership failed to materialize.

## The Failure of the US-Russia Partnership

The first reason that the US-Russia partnership failed was the Bush Administration's complete disregard of

many of Russia's key national interests. It is sufficient to mention only two. In December 2001, Washington announced its unilateral withdrawal from the ABM Treaty. In the few preceding weeks, Bush had given his final and decisive endorsement to admit the three Baltic Republics to NATO. These US actions simply continued the long-standing US strategy toward Russia: contain Russian influence wherever possible.

There is however a second and more fundamental reason. Already in 1992–93, in the debates concerning what was then Russia's alignment on US foreign policy, Russian scholars and politicians argued that their country could not afford to go along with American policies in the Middle East. They invoked the fact that Russia is surrounded by Muslim countries and that around 16 million Muslims live in Russia. This was indeed to become a major factor in shaping Russian foreign policy, especially under Putin.

In October 2003, Putin scored a significant international political success. In spite of the merciless war he was conducting in Chechnya, he was the first head of state from a country without a Muslim majority to be invited to address a summit meeting of the Islamic Conference Organization, which brings together 57 Muslim countries. Putin reminded the members of Russia's Islamic identity due to the fact that eight of the 21 ethnically-defined republics of the Russian Federation are dominated by Muslim nations. In an interview to Al Jazeera, Putin stated "unlike the Muslims who live in Western Europe, our Muslims are indigenous and have no other homeland." On a different occasion, he even stated that Islam had existed on Russia's territory longer than Christianity.

In these conditions, Russia claims a privileged political relationship with the Arab and Muslim world as a whole – in fact, Russia has achieved official observer status within the Islamic Conference Organization.

Putin and other top Russian leaders keep denouncing the idea (or ideology) of the “clash of civilizations.” They assert that Russia, as a European state, has an historical and existential mission as a bridge between the Western world and the Muslim world.

### **The Chechnya Factor in Russian Politics**

Three arrays of motivation must be considered to explain the meaning of these claims and related policies. The first has to do with the necessity of countering the deleterious effects of the Chechen war inside Russia and for its foreign policies. Russia’s outreach to the Muslim world seeks to prevent, or at least minimize, a polarization between the Russian ethnic majority and Russia’s Muslims and give the latter a sense of belonging to the Russian state while blocking the rise of Islamophobia.

It is tricky to pull off such a policy given Russia’s hounding of presumed Islamic fundamentalists in Chechnya and other parts of the country. However, Putin’s will to check the polarization resulting from his policies is real and is often reflected in his speeches when he claims that “terrorism must not be identified with any religion or cultural tradition.” Instead of systematically characterizing the Chechen fighters as “Islamic fundamentalist terrorists,” as he would generally do during the first years of the second Chechen war, after 2003 Putin often spoke of them as “terrorists linked to international criminal networks of arms and drug traffickers,” thus trying to avoid a reference to Islam.

### **“Multi-polarity” as Key Objective of Russian Foreign Policy**

A second range of explanation for Russia’s search for a special political relationship with the Arab and Muslim world has to do with the officially-stated general goal of Russian foreign policy to “reinforce multi-polarity in the world” – a doctrine that was developed during the late 1990s under then-Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov. Multi-polarity in essence means creating poles of resistance to US hegemony and unilateralism in world affairs. More specifically, here the purpose is to take advantage of the general hostility towards Washington’s foreign policy that keeps growing in the whole of the Arab and Muslim world.

Of course, this is not an entirely new dimension of Russian foreign policy. In Soviet times the USSR claimed to be the natural ally of anti-imperialist Arab states of “socialist orientation.” Not only has the support for any “socialist orientation” disappeared, but Russia no longer divides the countries of the Middle East into those that are aligned with the US and those that are not. Russia is looking for a strong political relationship not only with Iran and Syria, but also with states

that are traditional allies of the US, like Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Egypt. In all cases, economic interests and concerns weigh much more heavily than in Soviet times. Most importantly, Russia is focused on energy, which has been the driving force of Russia’s significant come back in world affairs. It involves not only oil and gas, but also nuclear energy which both Medvedev and Putin consider as a key sector for the future. Moreover they see it as crucial to give Russia international economic competitiveness in an area of high technology and move away from its role as a supplier of raw materials to the world market. The same applies to the export of a wide range of sophisticated weapons – the arms industry was one of the most advanced high tech sectors of the Soviet economy, though the economic difficulties of the 1990s seriously shook it.

Russia is no longer seeking formal alliances in developing its relations with Arab and Muslim states. Instead Russia desires a strong, but non-constraining political relationship, along the lines of the “strategic partnership” with China and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, a key instrument of multi-polarity. Russia, like China, does not want to be on the front line of opposition to Washington and that is why both avoid stating openly that multi-polarity is aimed at the US. As political scientists would say, it is “soft balancing” that Russia is pursuing with respect to the US. This also applies to its relationship with its closest partners in the Muslim world. For instance, Russia supports Iran only as long as such support does not seriously endanger its relationship with the West. It is no coincidence that Iran is granted only observer status in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, although Teheran would like to become a full member.

### **Russia’s Multiple Identities**

The third factor which explains Putin’s policies towards the Muslim world relates to post-Soviet Russia’s tortuous and difficult search for identity, both internally and in terms of its international posture. Accordingly, these policies cannot be seen only as circumstantial political opportunism, which they are to a large extent. In 2005 Academician Sergei Rogov wrote in the official journal of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that “the Islamic factor” in Russian politics “is in the first place an identity question” and “this is one of the reasons why Russia cannot be a nation-state in the European sense.” He added that “the political aspect of our relations with the Islamic world (...) directly relates to our security.”

It is against this background that in September 2003, then Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov complained that the US war in Iraq had caused an important increase in terrorist attacks in Russia and elsewhere in the world. The spike in attacks had been an anticipated con-

sequence of the war and it was one of the reasons why Russia had opposed it. As we know, it was the concerted action of France, Germany and Russia in the UN Security Council that deprived the US war of international legitimacy.

The Russian leaders fear that the widespread idea of “the clash of civilizations” will become a self-fulfilling prophecy as a result of US foreign policy, particularly that of George W. Bush. That is to say, a prophecy that is false, but one that generates behavior, which makes it come true. Coming on the heels of the war in Afghanistan, the war in Iraq, and the unprecedented and unconditional American support for Israel’s most uncompromising policies, the Russian leaders are convinced that US military attacks on Iran would be a catastrophic scenario for world affairs. They are scared of the enormous destabilizing consequences that such an offensive would have, not only for the Middle East, the Caspian region and Central Asia, but for Russia itself.

### The Case of Iran

These concerns provide a key to understand the ambivalent and complex relationship between Russia and Iran. On the one hand, Iran is an important partner for Russia in the region and one that Moscow would like to see protected. Iran is the third most important customer for Russian military hardware and a showcase for the controlled export of Russian nuclear plants. (Moscow prides itself for having concluded with Teheran an agreement for the return to Russia, under supervision, of all the spent nuclear fuel of the Bushehr power plant.) Iranian leaders have always abstained from showing support for Chechen fighters. Russia and Iran cooperated in actively supporting the armed opposition to the Taliban in Afghanistan long before the US did. On the other hand, Russian leaders in a non-ambiguous manner have denounced Ahmadinejad’s incendiary speeches about Israel, calling them “shameful.” Moscow keeps pressing Iran in a diplomatic manner to comply with the demands of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to give the international community guarantees that it is not seeking to build nuclear weapons. Three times, albeit reluctantly, Russia has voted alongside the US and the other members of the UN Security Council to impose economic sanctions against Iran in order to force the regime to stop uranium enrichment and respond to the IAEA’s concerns. Together with China, Russia succeeded in limiting the scope of these sanctions, while taking care to have them framed in a way that excludes even an implicit possibility of escalation to military sanctions.

In endorsing economic sanctions, Putin was obviously risking the possibility of harming relations with Iran, which in fact happened to a certain extent. He

wants to show the US and other western states that Russia is a responsible member of the non-proliferation regime. Moscow has not entirely lost hope to see Iran reaching an agreement with the IAEA. Such a deal would be an enormous diplomatic success, vindicating the independent role it claims in international affairs.

There is no doubt that Russia does not want to have a nuclear Iran near its borders. However, it is clear that it would definitely prefer to live with a nuclear Iran than the anticipated destabilizing consequences of a US military attack, whatever its nature.

### Russia’s Relations to Turkey and Saudi Arabia

Paradoxically, the positions taken by Russia towards Iran have helped a significant political rapprochement between Russia and two of the US’s traditional allies: Turkey and Saudi Arabia. As rivals of Iran, both fear Iran’s effort to obtain nuclear weapons. At the same time, they oppose a US-strike against Iran for the same reasons that Russia does. They are fearful of the consequences it may have in their immediate neighborhood as well as on their own territory. As a result of the Iraq war, Turkey now has to live with a de facto independent Kurdistan on its border and sees it as a looming threat. The problem could be considerably worse with a destabilization of Iran that would affect its Kurdish part. As US-based analyst Fiona Hill has noted: “the US-Turkish relationship is an unnoticed casualty of the Iraq war (...) America’s alliance with the Iraqi Kurds broke the back of the US-Turkish strategic partnership.” Russia obviously is taking advantage of this situation at a time when its economic relations and common political interests with Turkey are at a higher level than at anytime in the last two centuries.

Despite a much smaller amount of trade, similar political convergences apply to Russia’s relations with Saudi Arabia, which also had opposed the Iraq war in spite of its hostility towards Saddam Hussein. In February 2007, Putin was the first head of state from Russia (and the Soviet Union) to visit Saudi Arabia. He offered contracts for the construction of nuclear plants and arms sales to his hosts and proposed concerted policies for oil production and exports. Interestingly, Putin pleaded for an increase of the quota for the number of Russian Muslims authorized to make the annual pilgrimage to Mecca. As a result, the number of Russian pilgrims increased from 20,000 to 26,000 in 2007. Among these were 3,000 Chechens. In the past, Saudi Arabia had been the most strident of the Muslim states – following only the Taliban’s Afghanistan – in condemning Russia’s behavior in Chechnya. Without going as far as Afghanistan by recognizing or openly supporting Chechnya’s independence, the Saudi rep-



representative at the meeting of the Islamic Conference Organization of 2000 had invoked the “right of self-determination” for the “Muslim people of Chechnya.” This has now ceased.

### **Moscow’s Stance Toward Israel and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict**

In the past four to five years, Russia has reactivated its attempts to play a mediating role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on grounds that have brought it closer to many Arab and Muslim countries. Prior to and shortly after 9/11, Russia had achieved a noteworthy rapprochement with Israel, particularly and not surprisingly around the issue of terrorism based on Islamic fundamentalism. In this respect, it is interesting to note that both countries had opposed NATO’s 1999 war against Serbia. Both countries saw the armed Kosovar resistance to Serbia as tied to international Muslim terrorism. Echoing a major Russian concern, then Foreign Minister Ariel Sharon had stated “If it becomes NATO policy to get involved militarily in internal conflicts in the world, would not Israel find itself one day under attack if the Arabs of Galilee want autonomy?” (He was referring to a small Arab majority area, north of Israel proper.) After 9/11, on September 30, 2002, during an official visit to Israel, Putin declared that “We regard Israel an important participant in the antiterrorist coalition.”

Things have changed since. Russia considers its policies towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict a crucial component of the mediating role it wants to play between the West and the Arab and Muslim world. Its relations with Israel have deteriorated, but far from completely, for a number of reasons, notably because of the formal contacts that Russia has established with Hamas since it won the Palestinian elections of January 2006. In March 2006 and 2007, Moscow welcomed official Hamas delegations. Contrary to Israel and the US, Russia refuses to regard it as a terrorist organization. The same applies to Hezbollah in Lebanon. To justify this position, Russian leaders insist that these are not uprooted and itinerant terrorist organizations. They consider them political organizations with a strong and identifiable social basis in a country to which they belong and where they participate in legitimate elections. While urging Hamas to recognize Israel as a state and stop terrorist attacks, Russian representatives say that ostracizing Hamas can only confine it to terrorism.

Among the sensible things that Putin has said about terrorism, he sometimes stated that it cannot be eradicated without addressing “the causes that feed it, like social injustice and deprivation.” The prescription is obviously more easily put on the agenda in addressing foreign affairs than internal ones.

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## **Analysis**

### **Muslim Fundamentalism in Dagestan: A Movement on the Rise**

By Paul Lies, Mannheim

#### **Abstract**

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian republic of Dagestan has faced numerous security threats. A number of ethnic groups, clans, and organized crime groups live side by side there and periodically resort to violence to pursue their interests. Violence among Islamic fundamentalist militants is also on the rise. All indications suggest that their underground movements are gaining momentum. This article addresses the central questions: Why are more people joining the ranks of these groups and why are they increasingly prone to violence?

#### **The Muslim Tradition in Dagestan**

More than 90 percent of Dagestan’s residents are members of ethnic groups that were converted to Islam in the course of their history. Islamization began in the 7<sup>th</sup> century with the conquest of the city of Derbent by

the Arab Caliphate. However, Islam did not simply replace the pre-Islamic traditions, but intermingled with them. The local conventions, traditions, and customary laws known collectively as *adat*, such as the practice of the blood feud, are still followed today.

From the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Dagestan was a center of Muslim scholarship that enjoyed a high reputation throughout the Muslim world. In parallel with scholarly Islam, however, the Muslim school of mysticism known as Sufism emerged. At the heart of Sufism lies the quest to know God directly. For this purpose, the Sufis practice special techniques, including certain forms of ascetic lifestyles or special methods of going into a trance (the so-called *dhikr*). The communities of mystics are usually described as brotherhoods or orders, and their names can be traced back to those of their founders. In Dagestan, the Kadiriya order (12<sup>th</sup> century) and the Nakshbandiya order (15<sup>th</sup> century) attracted significant followings. Especially during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, these two orders gained innumerable adherents. During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the underground Shadhiliya order became popular.

The Soviet era was a crucial time for contemporary developments in Dagestani Islam. Between 1927 and 1940, the Soviets consistently tried to destroy Islam. They closed all Muslim centers of education and mosques. Those spiritual leaders who failed to flee abroad were persecuted and mostly killed. In 1941, Stalin relaxed his repressive policies towards Islam and some mosques were reopened in Dagestan. They were monitored by the intelligence services, however, and were forced to practice a form of Islam that was in line with the regime. Many Muslims remained aloof from them.

The Soviets successfully destroyed scholarly Islam. Their influence on Sufism, on the other hand, remained limited. The hermetic nature of Sufism and its independence from the institutions of scholarly Islam made it difficult to grasp for the Soviets. Its decentralized organizational structure – each order consists of dozens of groups that have few dealings with one another – and the traditional strong hierarchy and discipline of its members are useful for maintaining an effective underground organization. For the entire duration of the Soviet era, Sufi sheikhs perpetuated their secret schools of Islam in which they taught Arabic and the Koran. However, it was impossible under these conditions to engage in a profound study of the mystics' teachings. Due to this development, Dagestani Sufism has become “shallower” to some extent. In the 1990s, the Sufi sheikhs were notable not for profound teachings, but mainly for their unswerving adherence to mandatory rituals and their religious-political engagement. This specifically “post-Soviet” brand of Sufism is today the dominant variety of Islam in Dagestan.

### **The Spread of Muslim Fundamentalism in Dagestan during the 1990s**

The end of the 1980s saw the first public emergence of Muslim movements in Dagestan that, in terms of their

views on matters of faith, law, and rite, could be classified as belonging to Islamic fundamentalism. This fundamentalism is a “back to the roots” movement within Islam. Its members strive to practice Islam as it existed during the time of the Prophet Muhammad and his first four successors, the so-called “Rightly Guided Caliphs.” One main goal of the movement is to establish an Islamic system of government in countries that are populated by Muslims, but have a secular (laicist) government. An “Islamic system” in this context means the alignment of the entire system of laws and standards with Sharia. The second main goal consists in overcoming the differences between the various groups and movements within Islam, since these only emerged after the times of Muhammad and the “Rightly Guided Caliphs.” The only admissible sources of faith according to Islamic fundamentalists are the Koran and the *sunna* of the Prophet Muhammad, but not the writings of other Muslim authorities. All of these hallmarks are simultaneously the cause of longstanding tensions between fundamentalists and Sufism, which diverges in many areas from what might be considered “original Islam.”

In Dagestan, too, Muslim fundamentalist movements have been noted mainly for their criticism of Sufism. Their moderate wing numbered around 1,400 members and coalesced around Ahmed-Kadi Akhtaev, a renowned theologian and politician. Akhtaev preached the moral and spiritual superiority of Islam and favored the idea of a Muslim North Caucasus that would be independent politically and economically from Russia. However, he rejected the notion of pursuing this goal by violent means and instead advocated engagement in the realm of politics and civil society. While he criticized Sufism, he was tolerant of its adherents. He noted repeatedly that struggles between the various schools of faith could only damage the reputation of Islam. Akhtaev was a serious challenger both to radical fundamentalists and to the representatives of the official Muslim authorities. He died in March 1998 and the circumstances of his death remain unexplained.

The spiritual and ideological head of the most influential fundamentalist group was Bagauddin Kebedov, who called himself Bagauddin Muhammad. Since the beginning of the 1990s, Kebedov had condemned Sufism in extremely harsh terms. On several occasions, he argued that mystical practices were inconsistent with the Koran and the principles of monotheism and disparaged the Sufis as polytheists. He was equally uncompromising in his attitudes towards the Dagestani government. He regarded its representatives, Muslims who adhered to the secular principle of state government, as “godless.” He refused to cooperate in any way with the organs of the state.

Kebedov untiringly advanced the propagation of Muslim fundamentalist thinking. In the village of Pervomayskoye, he founded a publishing house that printed the classics of fundamentalist writings in Russian. Most of these books were produced in cooperation with Saudi endowments, and most authors were representatives of Wahhabism – the prevalent variant of Islam in Saudi Arabia. This fact, together with certain unambiguous statements by Kebedov, is evidence that the radical fundamentalist wing adhered to Wahhabi Islam. Kebedov had several thousand followers all over Dagestan.

According to the estimates of various experts, fundamentalists made up between 3 and 20 per cent of the Muslim population in Dagestan. However, according to social science studies, the number of declared opponents of fundamentalist Islam went down from 74 to 63 per cent in the period March–September 1998 alone. Fundamentalism was thus able to garner significant popularity. Its growth was primarily a reaction to the economic malaise and social disparities in the republic during the 1990s. Since the power elites were regarded as corrupt, and no help was to be expected from Moscow, Dagestani Muslims increasingly supported the idea that the Islamization of state and society would redress the existing problems. Since the official clergy was also seen as corrupt, a process of Islamization under their tutelage was not an option for parts of the Muslim population. The only remaining alternative consisted of the fundamentalist movements.

However, religious motives also played a role. Many spiritual leaders from Arab countries were active in Dagestan on behalf of fundamentalist endowments. They had had a much more rigorous training than the local clergy, a fact that did not remain unnoticed by their audience. New teachings were therefore frequently regarded as “true Islam.” It was only because “true Islam” radically rejected many traditions and customs of Dagestani Muslims that its adherents remained in the minority.

### **The Militarization of Fundamentalism**

When the fundamentalists ideologically condemned Sufism in a society that largely equated Islam with Sufism, conflicts were inevitable. The Sufis dealt ruthlessly with their opponents. The official clergy publicly designated the Wahhabis as “enemies of the Dagestani people” and announced that all measures would be taken to “cauterize the plague of Wahhabism in Dagestan with a red-hot poker” (in the words of Dagestan’s supreme Muslim leader, Mufti Said-Muhammad Abubakarov at a press conference in May 1997). Attacks on Wahhabi mosques occurred frequently. In a number of clashes and fights with Sufis, the outnumbered

Wahhabis frequently took a beating. Organized crime groups threatened them while the police discriminated against them. Against this background, the Wahhabis set up their own self-defense structures and began to train fighters of their own.

Many, mainly younger, Dagestani Wahhabis fought alongside the Chechens during the first Chechen War. They received excellent training and established ties with co-religionists from around the world. They regarded the outcome of the war in 1996 as a defeat for Russia and as evidence of the weakness of Russia’s armed forces. For Kebedov and his entourage, this was a life-changing experience: They began to believe that it was feasible, in alliance with the Wahhabis and Chechen field commanders, to overthrow the Dagestani government, which was loyal to Moscow, and to create an Islamic State according to their own ideas.

They began to put this plan into practice in the beginning of 1997. The protagonists were Saudi-born Wahhabi Ibn al-Khattab and notorious Chechen field commander Shamil Basaev. They established several training camps in Dagestan and sent their recruits to training camps in Chechnya, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. Within a few years, they had managed to build up an effective fighting force that was capable of protecting the Wahhabi communities. However, Kebedov, Khattab, and Basaev did not think this was sufficient. They aimed for a unification of Chechnya and Dagestan into a single state at the earliest possible date.

Some Wahhabi communities in Dagestan neither approved of the idea of unification with Chechnya nor of the confrontation with the government, but were unable to assert themselves. On August 2, 1999, Dagestani and Chechen fighters led by Basaev and Khattab invaded Dagestan from Chechen territory, and within days had managed to bring a substantial slice of territory under their control. At the end of August, Russian regular forces managed to throw back the rebels after fierce fighting. Subsequently, they began a military campaign against the Wahhabi settlers in Kadar, Karamakhi, and Chabanmakhi, which had declared themselves an independent Muslim territory one year earlier. On September 16, 1999, the Dagestani parliament passed the “Law on the Prohibition of Wahhabi and Other Extremist Activity on the Territory of the Republic of Dagestan.”

### **Militant Muslim Fundamentalism Today**

In the initial years after the adoption of the law that outlawed all fundamentalist groups, Wahhabi activities in Dagestan were markedly reduced. On the one hand, the outbreak of the Second Chechen War played a key role because it tied down Chechen commanders

and their followers in Chechnya. Khattab, Basaev, and several other key figures were killed in the war. The second reason is that the Dagestani security forces began a merciless hunt for militant Wahhabis. In the process, all (i.e., including moderate) adherents of fundamentalist Islam came under general suspicion. Anybody who was not arrested immediately was placed under surveillance and brought in repeatedly for interrogation. As reported by the Memorial human rights organization, suspects were beaten, tortured, raped, and forced to sign false confessions. Most of them were sentenced to years of imprisonment. Some disappeared and were never seen again.

These are the methods that have contributed to the situation today. Since 2002, former detainees have been released and have been taking revenge. Hundreds of police officers and members of the security forces have been targeted. The security forces have reacted with more violence and lawlessness and are thus creating even more discontented individuals who join militant Muslim organizations. Terrorist attacks and skirmish-

es between militant Muslims and the security forces presently occur every two or three days in Dagestan – more frequently than ever. Adherents of fundamentalist Islam have founded several underground movements. The best-known of these is called “Shariat” and cooperates with Chechen rebels. Other examples are “Saifullah” (The Sword of Allah) and “Jundullah” (The Warriors of Allah). The security forces frequently manage to arrest or assassinate the leaders of these groups; but there is no shortage of successors.

It is highly likely that the numbers of followers of the militant fundamentalist movements will continue to increase in the future. The social and economic conditions in the republic are only very slowly improving, corruption is pervasive, and the security situation has deteriorated dramatically compared to the 1990s. Fundamentalist groups continue to represent the only possible alternative for all discontented parties, especially for those who believe that all grievances can be redressed by means of Islamization.

*Translated from the German by Christopher Findlay*

#### *About the author*

Paul Lies has degrees in Political Science and Slavic Studies and currently works as a freelance journalist and editor.

#### *Further reading*

- Halbach, Uwe (2003): *Russlands Welten des Islam*, Berlin
- International Crisis Group (2008): “Russia’s Dagestan: Conflict Causes”, Europe Report No. 192
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## About the Russian Analytical Digest

The Russian Analytical Digest is a bi-weekly internet publication jointly produced by the Research Centre for East European Studies [Forschungsstelle Osteuropa] at the University of Bremen ([www.forschungsstelle-uni-bremen.de](http://www.forschungsstelle-uni-bremen.de)) and the Center for Security Studies (CSS) at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Zurich (ETH Zurich). It is supported by the Otto Wolff Foundation and the German Association for East European Studies (DGO). The Digest draws on contributions to the German-language *Russlandanalysen* ([www.laender-analysen.de/russland](http://www.laender-analysen.de/russland)), the CSS analytical network on Russia and Eurasia ([www.res.ethz.ch](http://www.res.ethz.ch)), and the Russian Regional Report. The Russian Analytical Digest covers political, economic, and social developments in Russia and its regions, and looks at Russia's role in international relations.

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The Research Centre possesses a unique collection of alternative culture and independent writings from the former socialist countries in its archive. In addition to extensive individual research on dissidence and society in socialist societies, since January 2007 a group of international research institutes is participating in a collaborative project on the theme "The other Eastern Europe – the 1960s to the 1980s, dissidence in politics and society, alternatives in culture. Contributions to comparative contemporary history", which is funded by the Volkswagen Foundation.

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The CSS runs the International Relations and Security Network (ISN), and in cooperation with partner institutes manages the Comprehensive Risk Analysis and Management Network (CRN), the Parallel History Project on NATO and the Warsaw Pact (PHP), the Swiss Foreign and Security Policy Network (SSN), and the Russian and Eurasian Security (RES) Network.

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