

POLITICAL PROCESSES IN RUSSIA AND ISLAMIC RADICALISM

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ABSTRACT

The authors reveal the role Islamic radicalism plays in the political processes unfolding in Russia, its global and internal sources and explain how and why it takes shape and develops within the political agenda. Today, Islamic radicalism is no longer a potential threat—it carries political risks for Russia's national security. Studies of the ways in which Islamic radicalism affects the political agenda of the Russian Federation remain a highly topical or even a burning issue: the latest methodological instruments have opened new vistas for scholarly studies of this highly complicated phenomenon and its in-depth analysis. These instruments are absolutely indispensable in forecasting the risks of Islamic radicalism spreading far and wide at the regional and local levels; these risks, in their turn, are changing under the pressure of globalization.

In fact, traditional (moderate) and radical trends in Islam are its intrinsic features, while Islamic radicalism of the twenty-first century is an absolutely new social and political phenomenon—no longer a “confes-

sional issue” within Islam but a global threat. This has been fully confirmed by the recent outbursts of criminal activities perpetrated by Islamist radicals, extremists and terrorists who have already crossed the borders of Muslim countries into other countries and stirred up Islamophobia on a global scale. Today, political conflicts rooted in confessional aspects have acquired a special importance and echo far and wide in social and political spheres. Radical Islamist teachings, even if disjointed, are extremely dangerous: they dent the social and political order within states. We should, however, distinguish between “Islamic radicalism” and “Islamic extremism,” concepts that are similar, but not identical. The former shapes political positions and a fundamentalist world outlook, and may remain within these limits rather than slip into criminal activities. Islamic extremism can be described as a practical implementation of radical ideas: terror, fanning religious conflicts, seizure of political power and regime change. The question is: are these phenomena related?

KEYWORDS: *Islamic radicalism, political process, national security, risks, modernization, federalism, democracy, pluralism, prevention, politicization.*

Introduction

In this article we examine Islamic radicalism as a system of ideological and political paradigms and conceptually substantiated social and political practices that propose the only correct world order based on Islam and monopoly on power.

According to scholarly and expert assessments, the popularity threshold of Islamic radicalism in the worldwide Muslim community is no higher than 0.5% of its total size.¹

The results of sociological studies among Muslims in Russia cause no concerns: about 60.4% of Muslims are positively disposed to Orthodox Christianity, while 2.8% are indifferent or negatively disposed.²

¹ See: T. Ramadan, *To Be a European Muslim*, Islamic Foundation, Leicester, 1999, p. 243.

² See: S.A. Vorontsov, “Islamskiy radikalizm kak ugroza natsionalnoy bezopasnosti sovremennoy Rossii,” *Filosofia prava*, No. 6, 2008, pp. 94-100.

It seems absolutely correct when observed through the prism of social, moral and lofty ideas, yet we should also take political practices into account.

In his Ph.D. thesis, Alexei Tsurkan writes the following: “Today we can say that despite the fact that for the purposes of sociological studies Islamists are seen as a uniform phenomenon within Islamic radicalism, in real life they are far from being united. This means that the phenomenon of radical Islam is treated as a wrapping of sorts with specific trends and characteristics inside.”³

One can agree with Igor Dobaev, who points out that the ideology of Islamic radicalism is based on the irreconcilable division of human society into the “world of Islam” and the “world of the faithless.”⁴ This is fully reflected in the unambiguous rhetoric of the contemporary world’s apocalypse in the context of coexistence of these two confessions.⁵

There is a widespread and commonly accepted opinion that radicalism as a political phenomenon took shape in Western Europe in the eighteenth century and played a special and important role in consolidating the new social and political relationships of the modern age. By the twentieth century it lost its popularity to become a mere political attribute in the Third World.⁶

Recent events point to the contrary: radicalism is coming back and, despite its superficially humanistic declarations and programs, it is blending with religious canons and dogmas. Today (14 September, 2017) Google browser offers over 240 thousand “Islamic radicalism” websites.

Methods and Materials

Our methodology is based on the social and philosophical paradigm that orientates scholars toward formulating metatheoretical concepts and undertaking theoretical studies of global and regional policies (Zb. Brzezinski, A. Dugin), civilizational conflicts (S. Huntington) and religious syncretism (N. Kapustin).

Recently it has become even clearer that Islamic radicalism should be discussed as a multi-dimensional (ideology and political practices) and ideologically patchy social phenomenon that includes moderate, extremist and mixed trends.⁷

Vladimir Volkov notes that “the postulate of Islam’s intrinsic radicalism, its refusal to accept the non-Islamic part of the world has become all but the central mythologeme of our days, defining ordinary people’s fears and affecting global political processes. This can be explained by the media’s poor habit of exploiting the subjects of violence, radicalism and extremism. It seems, however, that numerous instances of religious intolerance, justification of acts of terror by jihad, etc., demand that

³ A. A. Tsurkan, *Islamskiy radikalizm: analiz podkhodov i vozmozhnostei vzaimodeystvia Rossi i SShA*, Author’s abstract of the Ph.D. thesis defended at the Institute of the United States and Canada, RAS, Moscow, 2012, 42 pp.

⁴ I. P. Dobaev, *Islamskiy radikalizm: genesis, evolutsia, praktika*, Rostov on Don, 2003, pp. 373-377.

⁵ See: E. Ermakova, M. Jilkisheva, G. Fayzullina, I. Karabulatova, Kh. Shagbanova, “The Media and Fiction: Postmodernist Discourse of Contemporary Terrorism in the Context of Apocalyptic Rhetoric,” *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, Vol. 17, Issue 2, 2016, pp. 61-69.

⁶ See: V. Volkov, “O prirode islamskogo radikalizma,” *Otechestvennye zapiski*, No. 5 (13), 2003, pp. 46-51.

⁷ See: I. Karabulatova, B. Akhmetova, K. Shagbanova, E. Loskutova, F. Sayfulina, L. Zamalieva, I. Dyukov, M. Vykhristyuk, “Shaping Positive Identity in the Context of Ethnocultural Information Security in the Struggle against the Islamic State,” *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, Vol. 17, Issue 1, 2016, pp. 84-92; I. Mkrtumova, A. Dosanova, I. Karabulatova, V. Nifontov, “The Use of Communication Technologies to Oppose Political-Religious Terrorism as an Ethnosocial Deviation in the Contemporary Information-Digital Society,” *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, Vol. 17, Issue 2, 2016, pp. 54-61; M. Seidina, I. Karabulatova, Z. Polivara, A. Zinchenko, “A Publicist Discourse of the Islamic Organizations of the Central Federal District of Russia and the Issue of Tolerance,” *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, Vol. 18, Issue 1, 2017, pp. 109-117; I. Karabulatova, “The Islamic Factor and the Political Processes in Tajikistan,” *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, Vol. 18, Issue 1, 2017, pp. 118-123.

the nature of contemporary radicalism, and the causes and nature of its ties with religion in general, and Islam in particular, should be analyzed.”⁸

Results

The term “Islamic radicalism” as we understand it today was first used in the Islamic world when the Ottoman Empire had ceased to exist.

The radical trend in Islam is a result of the changed status of Muslim states in the system of world coordinates. The Muslim Brotherhood, set up in Egypt in 1928, was one of the first radical Islamic organizations that dismissed Western values as false.⁹

While discussing the impact of Islamic radicalism on the political processes unfolding in Russia, we should take into account an important factor that predetermined further development of Islam.

In the wake of disintegration of the Soviet Union, when freedom of worship was officially recognized, the degree of religiosity in the Russian Federation increased. This narrowed down what is called the secular field and added weight to confessional groups and communities, thus increasing their role in the political processes.

An upsurge of religious feelings in the post-Soviet period was caused by several reasons.

- First of all, the objective nature of the social, psychological and epistemological roots of religious feelings in people scared of their vulnerability in the face of new challenges: default, financial instability, ideological vacuum and unemployment of the 1990s.¹⁰
- Secondly, adoption of the liberalization agenda, which played an important role in consolidating the multinational and polyconfessional milieu. Democracy and civil society institutions, as well as informational pluralism, have moved to the foreground in the religious sphere.
- Thirdly, the regulatory function of Islam and its movement toward social regimentation. Unlike other religions, Islam relies not only on moral rules but plays an important role in social and personal relationships through the Shari‘a.

Discussion

It has been repeatedly stated that “unlike Christianity, Islam is perceived by its followers as a monolithic entity of faith, religion, state legal provisions and certain cultural forms. This explains its attraction and its use as a foundation for politics, economics and social relationships; hence its amazing ability to politicize, especially apparent in the post-bipolar world, in which Islam appears as an alternative development path amid disintegrating socialism and discredited Western values.”¹¹

Samuel Huntington points out: “Muslims in massive numbers were simultaneously turning toward Islam as a source of identity, meaning, stability, legitimacy, development, power, and hope, hope epitomized in the slogan ‘Islam is the solution.’ This Islamic Resurgence in its extent and pro-

⁸ V. Volkov, op. cit.

⁹ See: K.I. Poliakov, *Arabskiy Vostok i Rossia: problema islamskogo fundamentalizma*, URSS, Moscow, 2001, p. 17.

¹⁰ See: A.R. Suleymanov, “Regionalnaia bezopasnost i natsionalnaia politika Rossii,” *Gosudarstvennoe i munitsipalnoe upravlenie. Uchenye zapiski SKAGS*, No. 3, 2015, pp. 158-160.

¹¹ A.V. Beloglazov, *Vliianie islama na politicheskie protsessy v Tsentralnoy Azii*, A textbook, Kazan University Press, Kazan, 2013, p. 5.

fundity is the latest phase in the adjustment of Islamic civilization to the West, an effort to find the 'solution' not in Western ideologies but in Islam."¹²

This means that the Islamic factor has not lost its political significance, which helps promote a variety of ideological (including radical and extremist) constructs in mass consciousness.

Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan and the disappearance of the "iron curtain" contributed to the process of planting numerous radical elements borrowed from the "outside" into the social consciousness of Russians. This was particularly evident in the North Caucasian republics.¹³

The way Islamic radicalism has influenced Russia's political reality has its own peculiarities.¹⁴

- First of all, Muslims in Russia are not an immigrant community, but an autochthonous population that has been living in Russia since time immemorial; hence their difference from the Muslims who live in the West.
- Secondly, the "Islamic radicalism" concept is, thus, not typical or natural in Russia; it is a relatively recent phenomenon free from political speculations and manipulations.
- Thirdly, the first and second Chechen wars proved to be the most important factor in the current perception of Muslim radicalism. So, it is commonly believed that Islamic radicalism might be especially welcome in the Northern Caucasus.

Conclusion

Islamic radicalism as part of the political agenda of the Russian Federation is spreading both vertically and horizontally.

It spreads vertically on the basis of the administrative-territorial division and the periphery-megacity regionalization. The process proceeds in two directions: sources of Islamic radicalism may appear either on the periphery or in megacities, which makes it hard to identify its sources.

When spreading horizontally, it remains within the same community, which attempts to affect other social institutions by establishing various contacts and cooperation. This process creates networks of radicals, which makes it especially dangerous. Such networks are hard to identify and suppress.

"...Islamic groups brought into existence an Islamic 'civil society' which paralleled, surpassed, and often supplanted in scope and activity the frequently frail institutions of secular civil society."¹⁵

Semed Semedov emphasizes that the efficiency of Islamist structures is closely aligned with the aims and purposes of what may be called creeping Islamization, designed to create networks of social structures to be used as centers of political and ideological propaganda.¹⁶

Generally speaking, the ideology of Islamic radicalism can be reduced to two theses.

1. Islam might be condemned to oblivion by the materialist, secular values and behavior models characteristic of the liberal Western world, rather than by aggressive methods prevalent in the past. These Western ideas seem attractive to the naïve members of the Muslim com-

¹² S.P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Touchstone Books, New York, 1998, pp. 109-110.

¹³ See: I. Karabulatova, "Ethnocultural Communication Systems in the Northern Caucasus and the Problem of Radical Islam," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, Vol. 17, No. 4, 2016, pp.71-78.

¹⁴ See: A.A. Tsurkan, op. cit.

¹⁵ S.P. Huntington, op. cit., pp. 111-112.

¹⁶ See: S.A. Semedov, *Politicheskij islam v sovremennoy mire*, Doctoral thesis, The Russian Civil Service Academy at the President of the RF, Moscow, 2009, p. 261.

munity who are not firm enough in their faith. Pro-Western values are promoted and implemented by the state apparatus and its political influence on all spheres of human life (the media, education, healthcare, etc.).

2. True Muslims should unite into autonomous alliances beyond the reach of the state apparatus and, in this way, come to power guided by the Machiavellian “the end justifies the means.” Islamist radicals are not alien to the use of coercion and violence up to and including terror and wars. Having studied Islamic radicalism, M.A. Hermassi concludes that “the concept of moderate Islamism is practically dead... What has changed is that violence, formerly an exception, is now used as a method and as a strategy to get power. We have moved from Islamism as a moderate political formation to Islamism as a new form of attempted terrorist takeover.”¹⁷

In an attempt to adjust the holy books to the political and/or social realities of the present day Islamic radicals resort to their arbitrary interpretation.

In their practical activities, they pay special attention to jihad (the holy war) which literally means “striving or struggling” and, more generally, “spiritual or moral” jihad.¹⁸

It is crucial to bear in mind that the term jihad has many meanings:

- Jihad of the heart (greater jihad) is concerned with combatting the devil in an attempt to escape his sinful discourse. This is the most complex form of struggle.
- Jihad by the tongue (Jihad of the word) is concerned with speaking the truth and spreading the word of Islam with one’s tongue.
- Jihad by the hand refers to choosing to do what is right and to combat injustice and wrongful actions.
- Jihad by the sword (lesser jihad) means armed fighting in the way of God, or holy war.

Islamic radicals have pushed aside three forms of jihad, not to mention the moral norms that prohibit hurting old and sick people, women and children, to concentrate on the jihad by the sword.

Until recently, politicization of Islam (Islamism) looked quite logical: Islamic radicalism (Wahhabism) was a subject of politics, while traditional Islam was concerned with confessional issues and remained outside politics.

It is held that politicization of traditional Islam in Russia began early in the twenty-first century and, since then, has been gaining momentum.¹⁹

Sufism (people’s Islam), popular mainly in the Northern Caucasus (Chechnia, Daghestan, and Ingushetia), preaches that the truth can be cognized through purification of the soul (*nafs*) and self-development (*ruh*) on the basis of the Shari’a. Such a definition brings out Sufism’s similarity to other, not necessarily Islamic, confessions and philosophy of life.

We have every reason to claim that certain trends of traditional Islam can also change in the context of social relationships and norms; this is crucial for a correct assessment of the influence of Islamic radicalism on the political processes.

Politicization of Islamic radicalism proceeds under the pressure of several circumstances.

¹⁷ M.A. Hermassi, “Islam, Democracy, and the Challenge of Political Change,” in: *Democracy in the Middle East: Defining the Challenge*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Washington, 1993, pp. 42, 45.

¹⁸ V.I. Oleynik, “Radikalny islam v sovremennom mire: politicheskiy aspect,” *Vestnik Akademii ekonomicheskoy bezopasnosti*, Moscow, No. 6, 2015, p. 41.

¹⁹ See: V. Akaev, *Islam i politika (na primere Chechni)*. Chechnia ot konflikta k stabilnosti (problemy rekonstruktsii), Moscow, 2001, pp. 139-141.

- First of all, a society confronted with new phenomena and challenges, not yet sufficiently studied, cannot deal with certain problems by traditional methods.
- Secondly, Islamic radicalism as a social and political phenomenon is intensified by related ethnic, migration, economic, elite, cultural and religious problems, as well as by internal, endogenous causes of Islamic radicalism.²⁰
- Thirdly, technologies of deliberate politicization make it possible to attach social and political importance of the highest degree to issues unrelated to politics, yet indispensable for specific political schemes.

Islamic radicalism, combining objective and subjective causes, is progressing from a potential to a real threat to national security.

The Russian Federation is vulnerable to the following risks created by the impact of Islamic radicalism on political processes: criminalization of society and appearance of Islamist criminal groups, terrorism and separatism. Some of them are well known, others need an in-depth analysis.

The risks or, rather, cause-and-effect factors responsible for the extreme forms of radicalism enumerated above should receive more academic attention.

Alexander Pishchik underscores the following in this regard: “The idea that Moscow is the Third Rome was formulated to support and protect the Orthodox world. The idea of the Third International was designed to spread the ideas of communism far and wide, to build up communism to planetary dimensions and to support and protect those who share this idea.”²¹

Thus, the transition to the Russian Federation has inaugurated the new social and political status of Islam as a legal religion, and promoted potential conflicts between its Soviet, post-Soviet and current trends.

Islamist radicals are determined to identify these spheres of conflict in the model of decentralized federalism to disunite the society and stir up centrifugal trends (separatism), even though there are no real separatist trends in Russia. This does not mean, however, that there are no political risks in the sphere of federal relations.

The attempt to examine Islamic radicalism in Russia as a social and political phenomenon suggests that all possible forms of its interaction with the national and federal processes unfolding in Russia should be taken into account.

We should bear in mind that many risks outlined above are mostly present in the North Caucasian republics, while “creeping Islamism” is not limited to the region.

We should use all means and methods and all their modifications adequately and reasonably to intercept the spread of Islamic radicalism and its export to the Russian Federation. The educational component should receive special attention: official Islamic clergy at all levels should not fall behind in mastering information technologies in order to be able to compete with Islamist radicals, who are already actively using social networks and other instruments provided by the Internet to lure young people to their side.²²

Indeed, the latest technologies used for education and enlightenment offer the shortest way toward prevention of Islamic radicalism. We need a unified and impeccable (as far as the biographies of Islamic clerics are concerned) institute of Russian Islam promoted by the media, including, in

²⁰ See: A. Ignatenko, “Endogenous Radicalism in Islam,” *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 2, 2000, pp. 118-130.

²¹ A.M. Pishchik, “Kontseptsiya natsionalnoy idei Rossii,” *Educatio*, No. 5 (12), 2015, p. 69.

²² See: I. Karabulatova, I. Mkrtumova, Z. Polivara, B. Akhmetova, S. Galiullina, E. Loskutova, E. Abylkasymov, “Protest Behavior of Present-Day Russian Youth as Ethnosocial Deviation in an Ethnopolitical Conflict-Prone Situation,” *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, Vol. 17, Issue 2, 2016, pp. 94-103.