

## THE ISLAMIC UMMAH OF RUSSIA AND ISIS: ISLAMIC RADICALISM IN THE TURKIC-SPEAKING REGIONS

Svetlana LYAUSHEVA

*D.Sc. (Philos.), Professor,  
Department of Philosophy and Sociology, Adyghe State University  
(Maykop, Republic of Adyghea, Russian Federation)*

Irina KARABULATOVA

*D.Sc. (Philol.), Member of the Russian Academy of Natural Sciences,  
Research Professor at the Department of Foreign Languages,  
Philological Faculty, Peoples' Friendship University of Russia  
(Moscow, Russian Federation)*

Zuriet ZHADE

*D.Sc. (Political Science), Professor, Head of the Department of  
State and Law Theory and Political Science, Adyghe State University  
(Maykop, Republic of Adyghea, Russian Federation)*

Nadezhda ILYINOVA

*Ph.D. (Sociol.), Assistant Professor,  
Head of the Department of Philosophy and Sociology, Adyghe State University  
(Maykop, Republic of Adyghea, Russian Federation)*

### ABSTRACT

**E**thnocultural conflicts in the world today are rooted in the increasingly incendiary globalization in the course of which certain regions cannot cope with migrant flows (EU member countries are a pertinent example) while others (the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in the People's Republic of China, Tatarstan, Chechnia, Bashkortostan, the Stavropol Territory, Tyumen Region, Adyghea, and Ingushetia in the

Russian Federation) are living in the complicated context of ethnic patchwork. Societies are moving towards blending different ethnocultural elements, causing havoc in human minds, unexpected ethnocultural situations and social and ethnic deviations which, as could be expected, consolidates the positions of the Islamic State.<sup>1</sup> It is difficult to

<sup>1</sup> This organization is banned in Russia.

*The paper has been carried out with the President of the Russian Federation Support Grant intended for state support of the leading academic schools of the RF KhSh-6738.2018.6 and with the RFFI Support Grant No. 17-04-00607.*

study different aspects of the problem in depth in the age of the contemporary digital information society and various brainwashing strategies used by ISIS agents: they present ISIS as the best place for the development of genuine human qualities, which has already brought together members of several ethnic communities. The transnational extremist groups, Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami among them, have spread their influence to Central Asia and are gradually moving into Russian territory. Strongholds of extremism are not limited to the Northern Caucasus; they are present in the historically peaceful Volga area where Islamists have their own mosques and training courses and work hard to lure as many young people as possible to their side. Post-Soviet Islamism is a mixture of classic universalist Islamism and xenophobic fundamentalism. In Soviet times local Muslims treated the so-called Muslim world as something abstract, while

Afghan mujahideen caused a lot of irritation in the Soviet Central Asian countries: Uzbeks or Tajiks, for instance, found it hard to associate the mujahideen persistent opposition with the defense of Islam. Today, the situation in the Muslim world is different. Former Soviet republics accept the universalist model of Islam as an endogenous phenomenon rooted in economic, political and ideological prerequisites. Fundamentalism/Wahabism is seen as an exogenous phenomenon that forced some adherents of classic Islam out and drew the rest into its ranks. Political religions are never neutral. The difference between “us” and “others” is ontological. “Others” are a product of evil (ideologists of political religions do not hesitate to state that their enemies are “soulless”), therefore destruction is the only method to be employed against them. This paradoxical combination of cruelty and flexibility is typical of the post-modernist phenomena.

**KEYWORDS:** *ISIS, Islamic organizations, Russian Ummah, conscription strategies.*

## *Introduction*

In Russia, the Islamic factor was stabilized to some extent during the wars in Chechnia. It was at this time that public opinion asserted that Moscow was not confronting regional separatism, but the Muslims who were determined to establish what they called Islamic order and a vaguely defined Islamic state. It was during the war in Chechnia that Islamic solidarity in Russia became obvious for the first time—Muslims of the Northern Caucasus sided with the Chechens; numerous Tatars from the Volga area fought on the side of separatists.<sup>2</sup> The Tatarstan elite, represented by the then President Mintimir Shaymiev, was cautiously trying on the garbs of an intermediary between Moscow and Grozny. Radicalization and politicization of Islam that was spreading far and wide across the country awakened the Muslims of Russia to their common religious and cultural identity inside the country and their sense of belonging to the international Muslim Ummah and the Muslim world, which practically unilaterally sided with the Chechens and their struggle. This strongly affected their perception of Moscow’s foreign and domestic policies.

Russia and the West are equally concerned with the processes that are gradually transforming political Islam into an extremist and terrorist phenomenon. Russia, however, should keep Western companies that use their investments to move to dominant positions and Western military bases (this

<sup>2</sup> See: I. Karabulatova, “Ethnocultural Communication Systems in the Northern Caucasus and the Problem of Radical Islam,” *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, Vol. 17, Issue 4, 2016, pp. 71-79.

issue is especially topical in Central Asia) at a safe distance. Stability, meaning economic stability in the first place, in Central Asia will help resolve the problems of drug trafficking from Afghanistan and migration. Despite the independence acquired practically three decades ago and the road they chose for themselves, Central Asian states still need Russia as an economic and political partner:<sup>3</sup> they require markets for their natural resources and goods. This cooperation can intensify the development of certain Russian regions, as well as create a new scheme of post-Soviet integration using different mechanisms and based on different principles.

The world community is quite understandably concerned with the successful and large-scale recruitment of militants across the world unfolding in the second decade of the 21st century.<sup>4</sup> Apocalyptic perception can be described as another link (or an element of the puzzle) between religious extremism and leftist ideas. This is pertinent even if the followers of the latter (communists, socialists and anarchists) relied on eschatology and apocalyptic views, which are practically forgotten today, as their cultural and historical roots, while the radical survivalists of our days perceive the Apocalypse as the meaning and aim of their activities. While some perceive the Apocalypse as an immanent phenomenon, others look at it as highly relevant and specific.<sup>5</sup>

The fate of Saddam Hussein and Muammar Qaddafi, the only dictator who, in expectation of promised lavish economic assistance had abandoned his nuclear weapons program, taught the leaders of many Islamic states a lesson. This means that jihad declared on the Western world will never end.

## Methods and Materials

The ideology of political Islam is best described as a set of concepts to be freely used to build up any ideology required here and now. Some of them are rooted in Islam (Jahiliyyah, shirk); others are borrowed from Western liberalism (Islamic democracy), Marxism (“Islamic revolution”), etc.

An analysis of the data obtained in the course of targeted polls within the Russian Ummah and among top Muslim clergy in the Islamic regions of the South Federal District of the Russian Federation in 2016-2017 revealed that an awareness of ethnic and confessional identity among the Muslims of Russia had increased. Russian military operations in Syria strongly affect the Russian Muslims’ self-perception. While at the official level it is stated that Russian aviation attacks Islamic Caliphate (ISIS/DAESH) sites, at the grass-root level most of the Muslims are convinced that the goal of Moscow is fighting the Syrian opposition to help Bashar Assad remain in power and consolidating Russian military presence in the Middle East for strategic purposes.

## Results

Today, common Muslims and the top echelons of the Muslim clergy support one of the two opposite ideas about radicalization of Islam in ISIS/DAESH.

<sup>3</sup> See: L. Shkvarya, I. Karabulato, V. Rusakovich, A. Rapiev, “The Impact of the Customs Union and the EAEU on the Small and Medium Business in Kazakhstan,” *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, Vol. 18, Issue 1, 2017, pp. 93-100.

<sup>4</sup> See: I. Karabulato, B. Akhmetova, K. Shagbanova, E. Loskutova, F. Sayfulina, L. Zamalieva, I. Dyukov, M. Vykhrystyuk, “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; G.V. Osipov, I.S. Karabulato, A.S. Karabulato, “Matrimonialnye strategii v polittekhologiiakh IGIL,” *Nauchnoe obozrenie*, Series 2: *Humanitarian Sciences*, No. 6, 2016, pp. 69-79.

<sup>5</sup> See: E. Ermakova, M. Jilkisheva, G. Fayzullina, I. Karabulato, 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.

The biggest groups of foreign militants fighting on the side of DAESH arrived from Tunis—6,000 as of October 2015 (hereinafter all quoted figures are official, unless otherwise stated);

Saudi Arabia—2,500 as of October 2015;

Russia—2,400 as of September 2015;

Turkey—2,000-2,200 as of November 2015;

Jordan—2,000 as of September 2015.

The CIS countries and the former Soviet republics have produced the following numbers of militants:

Azerbaijan—104 (an official figure), 216 (unofficial estimate) as of May 2014;

Georgia—50 (unofficial estimate) as of July 2015;

Kazakhstan—300 as of January 2015;

Kyrgyzstan—500 (unofficial estimate) as of November 2015;

Moldova—1 as of January 2015;

Tajikistan—386 as of May 2015;

Turkmenistan—360 (unofficial estimate) as of January 2015;

Uzbekistan—500 (unofficial estimate) as of January 2015.<sup>6</sup>

The quoted figures mean that the extremist groups involved in the civil war in Syria are replenished mostly from local and regional sources: the majority of militants are recruited in Arab countries. Citizens of Tunis, Saudi Arabia and Jordan prevail in the crowds of new recruits from other countries and of other nationalities. It should be said, however, that, after fighting in the ranks of ISIS, foreign militants will return to their home countries in North Africa, Europe and the CIS; this will inevitably tip up the balance of power there.<sup>7</sup>

The border between Turkey and the Islamic State and their ethnoconfessional affinity makes it much easier to recruit those willing to fight for ISIS. According to one of the official reports supplied by Turkish authorities in November 2015, 500 Turkish citizens who had joined ISIS were imprisoned; the same happened to 100 Turkish citizens who had joined Jabhat al Nusra.<sup>8</sup>

Terrorists are working hard to plant separatist sentiments and the idea of potentially joining the caliphate in Syria and Iraq among the Uyghurs and Kazakhs of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. The ISIS/DAESH terrorist organization went even further: it composed a song “I am a Mujahid” in Mandarin Chinese to lure Chinese Muslims to its ranks. The fear of Chinese authorities that extremist Islamist ideology might spread through Xinjiang in the country’s north-west is another argument in favor of Chinese involvement in the counterterrorist operation. So far, China has limited itself to the second Great Wall of China project to separate the autonomous region from the Chinese territory proper.<sup>9</sup> The Shi’a Axis (Iran-Iraq-Syria-Lebanon) will allow China to lay the land railway route, part of its Silk Road project, an ample argument to side with Assad, Iran and Russia.

<sup>6</sup> See: “How Many Terrorists and From Which Countries are Fighting in the Ranks of DAESH: Report by The Soufan Group,” available in Russian at [<https://eadaily.com/ru/news/2016/03/26/skolko-terroristov-i-iz-kakih-stran-voyuet-v-ryadah-daish-otchet-the-soufan-group>], 1 January, 2017.

<sup>7</sup> See: “Eksperity sravnili IGIL s Tretyim reykhom,” available at [<https://riafan.ru/165629-ekspertyi-sravnili-igil-s-tretim-reykhom>], 2 February, 2018.

<sup>8</sup> See: “How Many Terrorists and From Which Countries are Fighting in the Ranks of DAESH...”

<sup>9</sup> See: “Kitay postroit ‘Velikuiu stenu’ v musulmanskom Xinjiange,” 24 January, 2018, available at [<http://www.rosbalt.ru/world/2018/01/24/1676738.html>], 2 February, 2018.

There are pro-Turkish communities in Tatarstan, which is a far more serious factor than Shi'a, which is fairly exotic for the republic. There are supporters of Nazim Haqqani, Turkish Cypriot Sheikh Nazim. Every year in the Month of Ramadan up to 90 Turks disguised as Koran hafizes come to the Islamic regions of the Russian Federation on spying missions.<sup>10</sup>

At first, Russian Muslims remained indifferent to Moscow's military assistance to Bashar Assad and his regime. In 2013, two demonstrations in support of the Syrian opposition in Makhachkala gathered several hundred each, accusing the Russian leaders of fighting against Islam in Syria.<sup>11</sup> In the same year, the Tatar Public Center (TPC), an organization well-known for its radicalism, announced that it sided with the Syrian opposition. Rafis Kashapov, Chairman of the TPC branch in Naberezhnye Chelny, where Islamists are especially active, declared that his structure supported the volunteers determined to fight against Assad and his army in Syria. According to his information, slogans had appeared on building walls in Damascus environs "Syria today, Russia tomorrow! Chechens and Tatars, Stand Up and Be Counted!", which should be treated as scattered outcrops of disagreement.<sup>12</sup>

It is hard to say how many Russian Muslims are fighting in the Middle East, yet we know for sure that, according to classified information of Russia's special services, in 2016 the flow was diminished to 1,700. There are 5,000 "volunteers" from Russia fighting on the side of ISIS/DAESH. In early 2015, there were 150 Chechens from Russia in the ISIS ranks; the total figure being much bigger: from 1,500 to 2,000 Chechens, most of them arriving from Europe. Akhmet Iarlykapov from Russia quoted 3,000 as the likely figure.<sup>13</sup> By late 2014, there were from 85 to 150 people from Kabardino-Balkaria fighting for ISIS in Syria. In 2015, according to the then head of Dagestan Ramazan Abdulatipov, 643 mujahidin left the republic to fight in Syria.<sup>14</sup> According to the Republic's Ministry of the Interior, there are 900 militants fighting in the Middle East; unofficial sources offer an even bigger figure of over 2,000. According to the FSB, there are 200 militants from the Volga area fighting on the side of ISIS/DAESH. Several scores left Moscow, St. Petersburg, Tyumen, Novosibirsk, and Astrakhan to fight in Syria. According to Mufti of Crimea Ruslan Saitvaliev, 500 men left the peninsula to join jihad. The Supreme Mufti of Syria quoted the figure of 2,000 Russian Muslims fighting on the side of the Syrian opposition in 2012-2013.

## Discussion

Journalists, experts, Muslim clerics and special services quote different figures.<sup>15</sup> According to power and order structures, one out of three Muslims in Russia, convinced that Russia is fighting Islam in Syria, is opposed to this policy.<sup>16</sup>

Part of the Muslim community of Russia pushes aside the arguments offered by the official clergy to the effect that the Syrian opposition and ISIS violate the norms of Islam and that ISIS (to

<sup>10</sup> See: I.S. Karabulatova, E.N. Ermakova, G.A. Chiganova, "Astana the Capital of Kazakhstan and Astanas in Siberia as a Linguistic-Cultural Aspect of the National Islam of Eurasia," *Terra Sebus: Acta Musei Sabesiensis*, Special Issue, 2014, pp. 15-30.

<sup>11</sup> See: A. Malashenko, "Voyna v Sirii glazami rossiyskikh musulman," 23 June, 2016, available at [<http://carnegie.ru/2016/06/23/ru-pub-63875>], 2 February, 2018.

<sup>12</sup> See: "V Tatarstane natsional-separatisty ob'iaivili o podderzhke boevikov-islamistov v Sirii," available at [<https://regnum.ru/news/1670767.html>], 3 February 2018.

<sup>13</sup> See: "IG privlekaet molodykh musulman obeshchaniem sotsialnoi spravedlivosti," 31 August, 2015 // Kavkazskii uzul, available at [<http://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/268043/>], 1 February, 2018.

<sup>14</sup> "U menia est pravilo: ranshe vystrela ne padat." Interviu Ramazana Abdulatipova," *Vedomosti*, 24 December, 2015.

<sup>15</sup> See: "Eksperty ob IGIL i voyne s IGIL," available at [<http://svobodaslova.su/index.php/travel/162-eksperty-ob-igil-i-vojne-s-igil>], 3 February, 2018.

<sup>16</sup> See: "Rossyskie musulmane i krizis v Sirii," available at [<http://ansar.ru/person/rossijskie-musulmane-i-krizis-v-sirii>], 3 February, 2018.

borrow the term from leader of Chechnia Ramzan Kadyrov) is a state of Iblis (Satan). They remain convinced that Russia is fighting Islam in a Muslim country which makes it an accomplice of the West.<sup>17</sup> This part of the Muslim community would have been even more opposed to Russia's military campaign if Moscow engaged in a ground operation.

According to different expert assessments, from 5 to 17% of the polled believe that Western Europe may become a caliphate.<sup>18</sup>

The number of recruits from Western Europe and Russia is steadily growing despite the efforts of individual countries and the world community to stop the flow.<sup>19</sup>

Nobody knows how many of these recruits perished in this war. According to the Defense Ministry of the Russian Federation (the data for the period when part of Russian Military Space Forces had been removed from Syria) 2,000 militants from Russia were liquidated. This means that the Russian VKS liquidated half or even the greater part of Russian citizens who fought on the ISIS side.<sup>20</sup>

It should be mentioned that some countries produce significantly more militants than others,<sup>21</sup> Russia being one of the former. From June 2014 onwards, the number of militants from Western Europe has doubled, while the flow from North America remained more or less the same. The number of foreign fighters from Russia and Central Asia increased up to threefold, according to certain assessments.

## *Conclusion*

Sociocultural coexistence of different social groups in a digital society is impossible without a social consensus based on compromises and mutual respect between majorities and minorities. The DAESH ideologists rely on this argument to win over the hearts and minds. In fact, any society, and poly-cultural and poly-ethnic societies first and foremost, is confronted with ethnopolitical myths and the way they affect social realities. Each new generation relies on the historical matrixes of the collective unconscious to revive the memory of the outstanding events of the past that goes back several centuries.<sup>22</sup>

Today, the growing number of foreign militants confirms that the measures taken to dam the flow of foreign volunteers to extremist Islamic groups in Syria and Iraq are not particularly efficient.

The idea of siding with fellow believers in the Middle East has spread across Russia to become a phenomenon of federal dimensions. We can even say that Russia, and Eurasia for that matter, are crossed by what can be called an Islamist route. Chechen militants fighting in Syria believe that they are fighting for the independence of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria. There are Chechen units called "brigades" named after Hattab, Shamil Basaev, Djohar Dudaev (no bigger than one company in strength)

<sup>17</sup> See: "Kadyrov obeshchaet 'otpraviv gnit' boevikov IGIL, ugrozhavshikh Rossii i Putinu," available at [<http://media-leaks.ru/kadyrov-isis/>], 4 February, 2018.

<sup>18</sup> See: "S bezhentsami v Evropu popal khalifat," available at [<https://vz.ru/world/2015/9/7/765391.html>], 1 January, 2018; I.M. Khrustalev, "Transformatsia immigratsionnoy politiki Frantsii v usloviakh usileniya musulmanskoj immigratsii," *Nauchnoe obozrenie*, Seria 1: *Ekonomika i pravo*, No. 4, 2010, pp. 227-230.

<sup>19</sup> See: B.V. Dolgov, *Genezis islamistskogo dvizheniia v obshchestvenno-istoricheskoy dinamike Alzhira, Tunisa i Arabo-musulmanskoj diasporj Frantsii v 1970-2015-e gody*, Doctoral thesis, Moscow, 2017.

<sup>20</sup> See: K. Rykov, "Liudi Kadyrova ishchut glavaria boevikov IGIL, chtoby unichtozhit," available at [<http://rykov.ru/post/2498/>], 4 February, 2018.

<sup>21</sup> See: I. Karabulatova, M. Polekhina, S. Lyausheva, N. Dubinina, "How the Discourse of Sufism became the Expressive Discourse of Islamic Radicalism in the Regions of 'Popular Islam' in Russia," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, Vol. 18, Issue 4, 2017, pp. 92-98.

<sup>22</sup> See: I. Karabulatova, S. Galiullina, K. Kotik, "Terrorist Threat in Russia: Transformation of Confessional Relationships," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, Vol. 18, Issue 3, 2017, pp. 93-104.



in the ranks of ISIS and the Syrian opposition. It seems that those who have already returned are united into an informal brotherhood of Muslim veterans of the Middle Eastern war. It should be said that in the Syrian conflict Russia has found itself on the side of Shi'a, namely, Iran, Lebanese Hezbollah and Bashar Assad, an Alawite, whose sect belongs to Shi'a. In Russia Sunni Muslims predominate. While the events were unfolding and the Gulf countries increased their attention to the Shi'a-Sunni aspect, Russian Muslims were confronted with the fact that de facto their country was fighting on the side of the Shi'a against the Sunni. This causes a lot of irritation, while a steadily rising number of Muslims strove to reach the Middle East to fight for Islam and against "Shi'a aggression." This is especially true of fighters from Dagestan where Islam's internal nuances are keenly felt. About a third of the republic's population is convinced that Russia is involved in the Sunni-Shi'a conflict.<sup>23</sup>

Within contemporary ultra-right extremism, the violence and death brought into the world by terrorists are not regarded as something committed of their own will: they are interpreted as something that God approves of and as a sign that the End of Days, perceived by the Christian world as a blessing, is approaching. This interpretation makes DAESH attractive to Christian fighters from Western countries as well.

The leaders of the Russian Federation should closely monitor the response of the Russian Muslims to Russia's involvement in the Syrian war to be able to prevent terrorist acts in Russia and the neighboring states.

The ISIS ideologues rely on the viable myths of Apocalypse to attract supporters from outside the Muslim world. The right extremists have borrowed the model of revolutionary behavior from the French Revolution of 1789, which was later used primarily by left radicals ranging from the members of Narodnaya Volya (the clandestine organization that operated in Russia in the 1880s) and the "urban guerrillas" of the 1960s-1980s. The right extremists do not merely use it. It seems that the history of revolutionary terror seen in the post-historical context looks like a cornerstone of newly synthesized revolutionary Apocalypse and revolutionary activity that will allow extremists to return to the origins of the revolutionary idea. In fact, the new synthesis is an ideological instrument needed to balance out racism and xenophobia by referring to the two highly authoritative historical paradigms—religion and revolution.

---

<sup>23</sup> See: A. Malashenko, *op. cit.*