

## RUSSIA AND ISLAM: POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC ASPECTS OF THEIR DIALOG

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Islam is the youngest of the great world religions; as such it imbibed the vast spiritual and intellectual wealth of the preceding epochs. The Muslim world and its theological pillars (monotheism, religion as the Revelation, religion-based ethics, and veneration of Jesus and St. Mary) are much closer to the Christian European legacy than any other of the great world religions. Socially and culturally, however, the Muslim world is far removed from the Christian European legacy because it emphasizes loyalty to the umma rather than the individual's spiritual life.<sup>1</sup>

This is a dynamic religion with a rapidly increasing number of followers. Today, one-fifth of the planet's population follows Islam (1.3 billion), which comes second after Christianity. Muslims live in more than 120 countries of the world. Russia with about 20 million Muslims is one of them.<sup>2</sup> There are approximately 50 million Muslims in Central Asia and the Caucasus.

In the last quarter of the 20th century, Islam moved to the forefront of world history and confronted mankind with a host of paradoxical problems. Today it attracts much more attention than any other religion; it stirs up heated discussions and contradictory conclusions. This is explained by its sheer size, and its intensive and multisided cooperation with other civilizations. For this reason, a dialog of civilizations should become the prerequisite of a fair world order for the future.

The world of Islam is unique; the Muslims can be regarded as a single whole, irrespective of where they live and pray on the planet. Islamic integrity, however, is relative: Islam is both unified and diverse, therefore it is far from being integral for the simple reason that the Islamic nations speak different tongues and have vastly different cultures and customs. Practiced in different countries and regions, this religion is affected by local faiths and traditions and embraces a variety of cultures. Indeed, Islam practiced in Indonesia by the ordinary people has little in common with the faith of the French intellectual proselytes, yet, in the final analysis, it is one and the same Islam. Frederick Denny has rightly pointed out that the Muslims live in at least two cultural environments: the local culture of their native land in which they are born and which they imbibe along with their mothers' milk, and Islam and the Muslim culture acquired and consciously embraced.<sup>3</sup>

According to Dr. Dina Malysheva, Islam has gained a lot of political weight worldwide due to several factors. First, its practically unlimited oil and gas reserves (still the key strategic raw materi-

<sup>1</sup> See: E. Rashkovskiy, "Islam v dinamike global'noy istorii," *Mirovaia ekonomika i mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia*, No. 6, 2004, p. 21.

<sup>2</sup> See: D.B. Malysheva, "Rossia i musul'manskiy Sever v vodovorotakh novogo miroporiadka," in: *Sbornik statey*, RAS, IMEMO, Moscow, 2003, p. 6.

<sup>3</sup> See: F.M. Denny, "Islam i musul'manskaia obshchina," in: *Religioznye traditsii mira*, Vol. 2, Moscow, 1996, p. 7 (Frederick M. Denny, *Islam and the Muslim Community (Religious Traditions of the World)*).

als) add huge geopolitical importance to Islam. Second, conflicts mostly flare up in Islamic countries, or in areas where Muslims and the followers of other religions live side by side. This has already given rise to a vast flow of Muslim refugees, who outnumber all the other refugees throughout the world. Third, the share of the Muslim population is rapidly increasing both in Russia's European part and Western Europe, where Muslims find it hard to blend with local cultures. There the man in the street has already associated Islam with a potential threat to the stable centuries-old social order rooted in Christian ethics and culture. Fourth, in the last few decades it was Muslims who either carried out or organized the terrorist acts that shook the world. Muslims are associated with the transnational religiously tinged terrorism, the culminating point of which was 9/11. No wonder ordinary people in the non-Muslim world associate Islam with suicide bombers. The above is responsible for the negative image of Muslims, which is especially true of Europe, Russia, and the United States. There are people, however, who see Islam, along with other religions, as part of mankind's cultural heritage and do not accuse the Muslims of instigating conflicts between civilizations or religious wars.<sup>4</sup>

No matter what, common folk in Russia and the West tend to identify the mounting wave of mass unrest, violence, and terror with Islam and its response to the current globalization trends. Terror and violence cannot be justified—it is very important, therefore, to achieve a profound understanding of Islamic reality and overcome the stereotypes of mass consciousness. The Koran and the Bible both say that God rewards everyone who voluntarily embraces good and rejects evil. I think that Dr. Georgiy Mirskiy was right in saying that the recent terrorist acts were not only, and not so much, outbursts of Islamic civilization's malice—they were, said he, a "malignant tumor" in its body. It contaminates not only the non-Islamic world—it also affects Islam, which has found itself in a qualitatively new global environment. Islamic conservatism and "Islamic" terror are two different things: terrorism survives not so much at the expense of religious ideas proper as at the expense of sociocultural, economic, and psychological factors.<sup>5</sup> It is wrong to classify Islam both as one of the world religions and as international terror. Terrorists have neither nationality nor faith; religious fanaticism which breeds mutual enmity and intolerance is equally dangerous for Muslims and non-Muslims. Indeed, one-fourth of the 9/11 victims who perished in the Twin Towers were born in Muslim countries. The terrorist acts in Saudi Arabia, the cradle of Islam, and Iraq, where the major Shi'a shrines are found, demonstrate that their initiators and perpetrators acting under the green banner of Islam accompanied by the Allah Aqbar chants are nothing more than criminals on the payroll of extremist organizations.

Russia's considerable Muslim population and the fact that it has had its share of terrorism in religious garb have moved the question about its relations with the Islamic world to the top of the national agenda. Russia's Islamic neighbors have already developed into an important geopolitical and foreign policy factor, therefore Russia should take a closer look at its own "Russian" Islam, which is moving to the fore in public and political life. Islam comes second after Christian Orthodoxy as a dominant confession; from time immemorial the Muslims have been identifying Islam with their national identity.

It was in the 8th century that the Slavs first met the Muslims, who by that time had emerged beyond the boundaries of the Arabian Peninsula. More likely than not this happened in Daghestan where the new faith and the Arabic tongue, which for the next 100 years served as the language of inter-national communication, were already firmly rooted. Russians met Muslims in the Khazar Chaganate, their eastern neighbor located in the Lower Volga and the Northern Caucasus. Until 735, when Islam acquired a large following among the local people and became the second official faith, Juda-

<sup>4</sup> See: D.B. Malysheva, *op. cit.*

<sup>5</sup> See: E. Rashkovskiy, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

ism was the only official religion there. Late in the 10th century, Bulgaria replaced the chaganate on the Volga and Kama shores; the larger part of its population were also Muslims.

For many centuries the relations between Russia and the Islamic world were contradictory and far from simple: they abounded in wars, conflicts, mutual grudges, and mutual insults which bred mutual suspicions. Russia fought against Turkey 13 times; there were wars with Iran and military operations in Central Asia and the Caucasus. It was on the territory of a Muslim state, Afghanistan, that the Soviet Union fought its last war.

The Chechen conflict which flared up as part of power struggle across Russia and developed as an instrument used to divide state property threw the crisis in Russia's relations with the Islamic world into bolder relief. Certain forces spared no effort to present the conflict with no religious tinge as "Russia's new aggression against Islam," which added tension to the relations between the Russian Federation and the Islamic world.

Ethnopolitical conflicts threaten Russia's interests: the trends toward stronger regional separatism and wider ethnic conflicts still threaten Russia's territorial integrity and its statehood. The following also threatens ethnic relations in Russia: attempts to set up ethnic enclaves on Russia's territory; deepening social and economic inequality of peoples and ethnic groups; increased ethnic migration, and the growing number of refugees and forced refugees.

What can be done to relieve ethnic and political tension in conflict-prone places? First, the refugees' problems should be resolved by granting each nation the right to realize its national specifics rather than through territorial issues and claims; second, all military units should be disarmed once the armed conflict is over even if harsh measures are needed to achieve this; third, more money should be poured into specific programs and strictly controlled; fourth, the nation should know how the past looks today from the viewpoint of law and politics.<sup>6</sup>

Buddhist monk Nichiren, whose teaching served as the cornerstone of a Japanese influential public political organization Soka Gakkai, said at one time that those wishing peace for themselves should pray for the same for others. These words are vitally important for Russia, which needs to prevent its closest neighbors from becoming hotspots of ethnic and other conflicts. There is more and more talk in the Russian expert community about how the ruling Central Asian regimes should be supported to preserve their stability. This fully coincides with what the country's leaders want. In 2003, when speaking at an international conference called "Russia and the World Order," then RF Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov said: "Like any other country of the world, Russia wants a world order maximally adjusted to the interests of its security and sustainable socioeconomic development. . . . The prospects of a new world order affect the interests of all states."<sup>7</sup>

As part of Europe and Asia, Russia can play a key role in ensuring security and prosperity on both continents; this is especially true of the CIS countries. Instability in the CIS's southern members endangers Russia's national security. The massive American and NATO military and economic presence in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as the changes in the balance of interests of the world's leading powers in Central Asia and the Southern Caucasus call for readjusted strategies in this part of the world. Russia's foreign policy should obviously be adapted to the new geopolitical realities. We are all aware that the Iraqi crisis has added importance to the so-called Caucasian-Central Asian arc, which is a sort of "southern security belt" for Russia.<sup>8</sup>

When talking to the Islamic world leaders, Russian President Putin invariably demonstrates that Russia is pursuing an active foreign policy in this part of the world. Indeed, in the past, Iran, Iraq,

<sup>6</sup> See: D.A. Munkozhargalov, "Etnopoliticheskie konflikty v sovremennoy Rossii: puti uregulirovaniya," *Rossia i musul'manskiy mir*, No. 4, 2005, p. 38.

<sup>7</sup> See: D.B. Malysheva, op. cit., p. 67.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 68.

Syria, Egypt, Malaysia, Jordan, and the UAE all belonged to our sphere of cooperation; some of them belonged to our sphere of influence. We should not pursue our cooperation with these countries at the expense of our relations with the West and the United States. In fact, our contacts with the Muslim world should improve our relations with the West; they are not spearheaded against Israel either—they may help alleviate Mid-Eastern tension.

President Putin's statement about Russia's intention to join the OIC in Malaysia in 2003 at the OIC summit he attended as a guest surprised everyone, to say the least. Viewed from inside the country, it can hardly be called surprising: the problem of Chechnia, which for many years has been and remains the sore spot of domestic policies despite the statements to the contrary by the country's military and political leaders, is responsible for this. The president explained that at the first stage of its cooperation with the OIC, Russia might work as an observer.

It seems that OIC membership would add efficiency to Russia's relations with the Muslim world where joint opposition to political radicalism, extremism, and terrorism are concerned; Russia should find partners among the civilized Islamic forces and make them its allies. The context is still favorable: since Soviet times, the East has been treating Russia with respect. It is still unclear how the RF can work in the OIC, yet it is important for Russia to be inside an organization responsible for decisions that concern the entire Islamic world, and to be able to follow its development trends in order to protect its interests in the Islamic world and strengthen its security.

There are several more reasons why Russia should join the OIC: first, it will become involved in the dialog with the Muslim world, which will add weight to its role there; second, Russia will play a more effective role in crisis settlement in the Islamic world and in the countries where Christianity and Islam coexist; finally, as a European state, from the perspective of its culture and history, Russia would be able to explain European viewpoints on many issues (such as globalization) to the Muslim community. It might assume the role of an ideological and cultural intermediary between Europe and Asia. Russia's involvement and cooperation with the Muslim world may create better conditions in the economic sphere as well. So far, Russia has no vast economic interests there, yet OIC membership will offer Russia certain advantages as one of the countries that sell armaments to Muslim countries. Some of the Arab states—Syria, Iraq, Oman, the UAE, etc.—are showing a lot of interest in a grandiose project of which Russia is one of the sides. I have in mind the North-South transportation corridor, one of the ten largest geo-economic projects of the 21st century to be carried out in Eurasia.

Ramazan Abdulatipov, senator and a leading expert in Islam and Russia's relations with the Islamic world, was quite right when he said: "There are many other important organizations that unite the Muslim countries besides the OIC. We should be present there as well, while our involvement in the OIC will help us to accomplish this. If we want our country, home of over 20 million Muslims, to wield influence we should be present everywhere. Over time, the importance of the Muslim factor in world politics will increase, which means that Russia should not detach itself from the Muslim world."<sup>9</sup>

The scope of Russia's cooperation with the Muslim countries is still much narrower than it should be. This is partly Russia's fault: the young democrats who came to power along with Boris Yeltsin were looking at the West, while the Muslim world and the East were seen as terra incognita. Today, Russia is making up for lost time. Several years ago, a Russian-Arab Business Council with bilateral commissions was set up on the initiative of Academician Evgeny Primakov, Chairman of the Russian Federation Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

In 2004, the State Duma set up an inter-faction group called "Russia and the Islamic World: a Strategic Dialog" to draft laws, parliamentary decisions, and deputy inquiries with respect to Russia's relations with the Islamic countries and international Muslim organizations. The group intends to carry

<sup>9</sup> D. Suslov, "Ramazan Abdulatipov: Rossia nikogda ne borolas s islamom," *Nezavisimaja gazeta*, 17 October, 2003.

out parliamentary hearings, press conferences, round tables, etc. to discuss Russia's strategic cooperation with the Islamic world, problems of security, and economic and cultural cooperation. Russian and Muslim experts, prominent public figures, and academics will be invited to take part.

During Vladimir Putin's visit to Egypt, the sides reached an agreement on Russia's involvement in modernizing the facilities built with Soviet help; the Syrian debt issue was settled, which made it possible to revive economic cooperation between the two countries. I have already written that the Muslim countries are showing a lot of interest in Russia-made weapons and special equipment; some of these contacts are developing into practical cooperation. This means that the president's initiative to revive and develop contacts with the Islamic world is a well-planned step toward more balanced foreign economic relations.

As religious extremism becomes more pronounced, a dialog between Islam and Christianity is emerging as the most important international issue. Russia, which at all times favored good relations between Islam and Christianity, the two religions that underlie its statehood, can make an important contribution in this sphere too. It can and should support the idea of an inter-confessional dialog and promote it at all levels. Economic partnership with the Muslim regions is one of the aspects of this dialog, which means that in the near future the Near and Middle East countries, Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, Central Asia, and the Muslim part of the Southern Caucasus—in short, Russia's immediate and close neighbors—will remain in the sphere of its interests. We should not only strengthen our bilateral ties with Muslim countries, but also advance toward strategic partnership with the Islamic world as a whole. Economic cooperation is one of the instruments.

In the 1990s, Russia's economic contacts with the Islamic world were gradually disappearing because of Russia's vague foreign economic strategy, lopsided politics, vague national interests in various regions and in the world economic system as a whole, lack of a conception for restoring contacts with the Muslim countries, no foreign economic organizational structure, etc. To remedy the situation we should formulate our foreign economic strategy with respect to the Islamic world. Indeed, all Muslim countries have national interests of their own, even if their specific aims might differ. On the whole, all of them want to eliminate economic backwardness, develop high technologies, preserve their religious, political, and cultural sovereignty, ensure national security by buying the latest armaments, develop their own military-industrial complex, etc.

Under the new conditions, several roads are open for those countries that seek closer economic contacts with the Russian Federation at a higher level: first, realization of long-term projects in which the Russian side will be responsible for the larger part of technologies, as well as R&D, while the Islamic side will supply investments and marketing. Second, it is advisable to elaborate and implement large-scale business plans in which the Islamic side will not limit itself to investments, but will contribute to production as well. Third, investments of the Islamic Development Bank (IDB) and other OIC financial structures should be used to create, together with Russia, new industrial branches in the Muslim countries. The Russian Federation will also profit from the above, not only by developing its high-tech branches and creating new jobs, but also by funding its social and investment spheres.<sup>10</sup>

The Muslims of Russia want their country to establish better relations with all the countries of the world; they have their special interests in the Islamic world:

- new industrial investment projects created jointly with the IDB in Russia's Muslim regions, the products of which could be exported to the Muslim countries;
- target programs designed to create more jobs in the economically vulnerable Muslim regions to eliminate mass unemployment, primarily in the Northern Caucasus (carried out jointly with

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<sup>10</sup> See: "Rossia i islamskiy mir: problemy, predposylki i perspektivy dolgosrochnogo vzaimodeystvia," *Rossia i musul'manskiy mir*, No. 6, 2005, p. 46.

international Muslim financial institutions and Russian business). It is very hard to integrate the Northern Caucasus, a region of special strategic importance for Russia, into the contemporary economic context: it requires huge funding. Only economic and political instruments can be used to defuse ethnic and religious squabbles; the war in Chechnia has amply demonstrated that the use of force creates more separatists and extremists who spare no effort to bring the local peoples closer on the anti-Russian platform;

- one of the Muslim regions of Russia should receive a banking center in which the OIC financial structures will also be involved;
- business forums under the aegis of the IDB and the Islamic Chamber of Commerce and Industry should be organized in Russia's regions to help Russian businessmen establish contacts with the business community of the Islamic countries, etc.

There are certain subjective barriers that limit the scope of real investments, as well as the trends and tactics of economic cooperation with Russian business: imperfect laws related to foreign investments; still unregulated legal issues related to the purchase of land plots by foreign firms to build enterprises; inadequate information about potential economic partners; and the absence of legal norms related to Russian economic structures' full responsibility to their foreign partners. The list can go on: judicial protection on civil and arbitration proceedings in Russian legislation is ineffective; lawyers and notaries public have no civil liability; there are no adequate financial instruments of cooperation, including bank support, effective mechanisms of crediting trade and production operations, procedures of risk sharing and insurance, etc., nor are there any key Islamic banks on the Russian market.<sup>11</sup>

Russia's new policies across the post-Soviet expanse will be successful if it also uses such positive factors as the geographic proximity and economic and political dependence of the post-Soviet states on Russia. The Russian Federation can potentially use the domestic political problems of some of the former Soviet republics in its interests. Recently, Russia revived its military-political and economic ties with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan; large Russian companies—Gazprom, LUKoil, Wimm-Bill-Dann, and others, invest in Uzbekistan, etc.

Cooperation in the oil and gas sector is practically the only sphere where Russian investments in the southern CIS countries bring profits. The Russian oil and gas corporations are first, competitive on a global scale; second, they have advantages over other companies when it comes to Russia's presence on the local energy markets, since Russia is the region's main donor; and third, the oil and gas sector depends on Russia's pipeline system. On the strength of the above, Russian firms may expect a share in such projects along with the leading international corporations.

In view of the close economic, ethnic, social, and cultural ties between the Southern and Northern (Russian) Caucasus, Moscow should remain in the region to prevent an increase in instability and a new wave of threats to Russia's security. Our country obviously needs consistent stability in the Southern Caucasus and should help to form friendly and economically developed democratic regimes in the region. Security cannot be achieved by demonstrating solidarity with kindred nations and ethnoses abroad and people of the same faith: traditional contacts between states should be normalized, while states should display trust and equality in their mutual relations. The following can be done to defuse ethnic and religious tension inside the states: consistent economic reforms; creation of a middle class, which needs stability; and the planting of basic democratic principles and values, while the states' policy should develop national culture and restore national dignity.

There is the opinion in the expert community that the Islamic world is a global force which needs a strong and dynamically developing Russia with a great power status. This is more than a pragmatic

<sup>11</sup> See: "Rossia i islamskiy mir: problemy, predposylki i perspektivy dolgosrochnogo vzaimodeystvia," *Rossia i musul'manskiy mir*, No. 6, 2005, p. 50.

approach to the current global balance of power and not merely shared historical experience: the sides have identical or close geopolitical, economic, and other interests. Russia may acquire a natural partner in the Islamic world to address many of the important issues without which it would be unable to find itself a worthy place in the multipolar world. There is the opinion shared by many that it will be impossible to defeat international terrorism unless the world becomes once more balanced, multipolar, and fair. The recent terrorist acts in Russia demonstrated that, along with the Islamic world, Russia has become the main target of international terror and has also attracted the attention of the “third force” wishing to keep “the seat of war in the Caucasus” smoldering to be able to influence domestic developments.

Moscow has overcome the ideological confrontation of the recent past; it should prevent the triumph of those who want to split the world according to religious and civilizational features. President Putin spoke about this in April 2005 during his Middle East visit.

Professor Huntington wrote at one time that we should do everything to avoid a clash of civilizations; we should strive toward a dialog and resist attempts to replace the war on terror with a war on Islam; we should move away from ethnic discord and religious intolerance and encourage a dialog between Islam and Christianity. No wonder Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia Alexii II, who supported Russia’s initiative to cooperate with the OIC, said that the Russian Muslims are not followers of a “tolerated” faith: they are true allies of the Russian Christian Orthodox Church.

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