

RELIGION IN SOCIETY

**THE ISLAMIST MOVEMENT
IN THE NORTHERN CAUCASUS:
TRENDS, POSSIBLE DEVELOPMENTS,
AND HOW TO OPPOSE IT**

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Unfolding in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the religious revival that involved all the traditional confessions, including Islam, existing in Russia spread to the Northern Caucasus. In fact, it added a political dimension to the local forms of Islam and, by the same token, made it more radical.

Centrifugal factors caused disunity in North Caucasian Islam on the institutional level when seven independent spiritual administrations replaced the single Spiritual Administration of the North Caucasian Muslims in the early 1990s. On top of this, new actors appeared on the formerly homogeneous Muslim field. I have in mind numerous “Islamic” political parties and movements, as well as national/nationalist organizations fond of Islamic rhetoric and symbols. After reaching their peak in the mid-1990s, they went downhill—today they are practically invisible.

At the same time, Salafi groups (wrongly called Wahhabi in academic publications and the press), aided and encouraged from abroad, appeared in the Northern Caucasus and became the major opponent of traditional and official Islam. Practically until the end of the decade, they were locally (as elsewhere in the Islamic world) represented by two wings: moderate radical and ultra-radical or extremist. The events of 1994-1996 in Chechnia added an international dimension to the local Salafi

movement. The interval between the first and second Chechen campaigns (1996-1999) turned Chechnia into a testing ground of international terrorism, which sheltered killers and criminals who traded in people, drugs, and weapons. At that time, an extremist movement dressed in Islamic garbs reached its maturity and tried to prove its force by invading Daghestan in August 1999. The federal forces and local people pooled forces to rebuff the extremists. The second Chechen war began.

Regrettably, the positive results remained untapped. Federal and republican authorities subjected all Salafi groups without discrimination to harsh pressure. Nearly all the North Caucasian federation entities passed the so-called anti-Wahhabi laws that drove away nearly all moderate radical groups. Religious-political extremists came to the fore. Followers of traditional Islam, representatives of “official Islam” in particular, were called upon to fight the “Wahhabis,” a step that added political bias and radicalism to those who followed traditional Islam. Their opposition against the Salafi is mounting.

The defeat the separatists suffered in Chechnia and the spread of the Salafi movement to other North Caucasian republics transformed “resistance” into guerilla warfare of sorts, or mobile and unconnected groups of terrorists. The extremist jihad spread across the region, created a lot of tension in Daghestan, Chechnia, and Ingushetia, and predetermined the negative developments in Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachaevo-Cherkessia, and North Ossetia-Alania.

It is highly important, therefore, to monitor and analyze the Salafi radicalization process in the Northern Caucasus. In fact, it should be interpreted in academic terms to gain a better understanding of radical political practices.

It seems that today the Islamist movement in the region demonstrates the following trends:

- In the last two or three years the predominantly traditionalist type of religious beliefs (mainly obvious in the North Caucasian republics’ piedmont and mountainous parts, first and foremost in Daghestan and Chechnia, as well as in Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, and Karachaevo-Cherkessia) has been displaying fundamentalist features. According to sociological polls, the increasing number of ethnic Muslims would prefer to live in a Muslim state ruled by the Shari’a;
- The systemic crisis turned elements of fundamentalist worldview into fertile soil on which radical Islamic (Salafi or neo-Wahhabi) ideas flourished;
- Neo-Wahhabism is a novel phenomenon in the Northern Caucasus, yet the systemic elements of radical Islam—taqfir (accusation of faithlessness) and jihad—born from the Caucasian War of 1818-1864 are still applied in their immutable form;
- As distinct from the Caucasian War, today the rising opposition among some of the North Caucasian Muslims and their resistance are unfolding against the background of the hazardous military-political Islamic upsurge all over the world. The external factor is playing an important role in regional developments;
- Until the end of the 1990s, the North Caucasian Salafi had two wings: the moderate radical and the ultra-radical (extremist), which were observed elsewhere in the world. Later, for subjective and objective reasons the Islamist movement in the Northern Caucasus leaned toward extremism;
- The official Islamic structures (the Muslim spiritual administrations) are largely responsible for these unwelcome developments. The faithful became more radically minded and moved away from the classical traditionalist principles because the administrations were carried away by their struggle against the neo-Wahhabis and were bogged down in squabbles. They have acquired political biases and lost their contact with the grass-roots base, which cost them the

remnants of their authority among the faithful. By becoming involved in the anti-Salafi struggle, the traditionalists and representatives of “official Islam” are inevitably pushing traditional Islam toward political games and radicalism;

- With a new generation replacing the old one, the recent stakes on traditional, or even “official” Islam are wearing thin. Educated abroad and trained in Islamist centers, the newcomers have their own ideas: the “young imams” in Adigey and “young Muslims” in Kabardino-Balkaria are two relevant examples. At the recent Seventh Congress of the Muslims of Karachaevo-Cherkessia, the heads of the RF Southern Federal Okrug and the republic’s leaders stood firm against Rector of the Islamic Institute Bostanov (well-known for his radical ideas) who was nearly elected mufti of the republic’s Spiritual Administration of the Muslims. It is wiser to shift support from the traditional institutions (spiritual administrations) to the pro-Russian clerics;
- In the absence of a modernist reformist process in the Northern Caucasus, the religious biases among the mountain dwellers are represented by two types: traditional, which tends toward fundamentalism, and extremist Salafi (Wahhabi). The latter developed into a base of terrorist movements that brandish Islamic slogans;
- Today terrorism in the South of Russia is mainly represented by radical Islamist structures—the so-called Wahhabi jamaats.

Nearly all of them are small bands or groups acting in their own territories, which, in turn, consist of even smaller legal or illegal (semi-legal) groups. The members are divided into three categories: the mujahedin, “students,” and “audience.” The former are fully trained for acts of subversion and terror; the two latter, not “mature enough” as Islamists, are subjected to ideological indoctrination.

- Jamaats function under amirs (normally local people) and instructors (normally foreigners) who serve as liaison men; there are also active fighters who, for various reasons, cannot go back to their native villages. It is their task to look after the weapons and other equipment; they accumulate food and medicine supplies and replenish them; reconnaissance and recruiting are also their task. Amnestied fighters or those carrying forged documents go back home. They are many such people in each jamaat who form stand-by reserves ready to join the amir and fulfill his orders. It is their duty to disseminate Islamist values by all means and methods, a practice known as “Islamic call-up;”
- The recent Chechen wars, the second one especially, brought to the region the latest Islamist ideological schemes used to brainwash the local people and forge a stratum of ideologically irreconcilable Islamists hostile to Russia. While the law-enforcement and other power-related structures report nearly every week about the killing of leaders of illegal armed formations and their most active members, the Islamic separatist ideologists go on with their task of enlisting more and more young men from Chechnia and other North Caucasian republics. It should be said that young men are especially susceptible to quasi-Wahhabism—this ideology has come to stay. The time has come to recognize this. Recently, the terrorist movement experienced a generation change: the young Chechens and young men from other republics (all of them separatists who hate Russia) are even crueler and bolder than their predecessors. Some are prepared to take up arms to wage all forms of warfare against the authorities;
- There is another obvious and very important trend: everything that has taken and is taking place in the Northern Caucasus during the last decade is no longer ethnic Chechen. The local developments are attracting crowds of discontented people from all the neighboring Federa-

tion entities; there are still foreigners from other Islamic countries fighting in the Northern Caucasus (their number, but not their political influence, has lately decreased). In each of the North Caucasian republics there are Salafi-trained people ready to join the terrorist movement and fight together with the veterans;

- It should be said that the nature of local terrorism changed along with its area: it has spread beyond its original region. Many of the recent terrorist acts are unrelated to Chechnia, where terrorist activities are gradually subsiding. (According to the Ministry of Internal Affairs, in 2004, there were 214 terrorist acts, compared to 492 in 2003.) The situation is different in other places: after the Beslan tragedy (September 2004), the terrorist war engulfed the entire Northern Caucasus with Daghestan and Ingushetia, two of Chechnia's neighbors, being in the worst position;
- Significantly, the terrorist groups' social composition also changed to a great extent. At the early stages, it was social outcasts and even criminals who never hesitated to exploit Islamic slogans and appeal to the Koran and the Prophet's pronouncements after each of the terrorist acts for which they claimed responsibility. Starting in the latter half of 2005, the ranks of the extremist underground swelled with young Muslim intellectuals. Quite a few students, post-graduate students, academics, etc. became active terrorists. One of them, Abuzagir Mantaev, fighter of the so-called Shari'a jamaat, killed on 9 October, 2005 in Makhachkala, defended a candidate thesis in Moscow in 2002 on the subject "Wahhabism and the Political Situation in Daghestan." Before going back to Daghestan in 2005, where he joined the Shari'a terrorists, he worked at the Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of European Russia under Mufti Ravil Gaynutdin. There are many others like him;
- The ultra-radical ideas of the Salafi authors who say that jihad (armed resistance and subversive acts) is the only weapon that can defeat the system of *qufr* (faithlessness) and its abettors (apostates, or *murtaddun*, and hypocrites, or *munafiqun*) have greatly impressed North Caucasian terrorists. The apostates are ethnic Muslims, especially those employed by the power-related structures, which explains why terrorists hunt them with more zeal than others. The hypocrites are representatives of official Islam. The fact that young intellectuals are willing to join the terrorist movement and do this in great numbers means that, unlike in the past when radical ideologies were borrowed from abroad, today they will be locally produced by young North Caucasian intellectual Islamists. The trend will obviously survive. Rooted in local specifics, these ideologies, their principles probably borrowed from Hizb ut-Tahrir's radical wing, might prove to be ever crueller and more destructive;
- Today, groups of Wahhabi fighters are organized on an absolutely new ideological basis imported from Islamist centers in other countries. To improve their fighting tactics and strategy, they have moved away from frontal attacks to arm themselves with the "swarm" tactics carried out by small mobile semi-autonomous groups of the Jennet, Shari'a, Caliphate, and Yarmuk type operating in Chechnia and some other North Caucasian republics. They are extremely maneuverable and can promptly pool forces with other similar groups. The groups and bases are in constant contact; they coordinate their actions. In other words, the neo-Wahhabi terrorist groups have become an Islamist terrorist movement organized according to the network principle (spider's web);
- Terrorist organizations can easily adapt themselves to the current realities, which means that they can either operate as hierarchical structures or as organizations without a commanding core; there are structures organized on the spider's web principle and completely independ-

ent structures. The extremist groups that belong to one terrorist network are normally kept together by shared ideologies and aims. They are present in almost all the constituents of the Southern Federal Okrug, including the Stavropol Area, Astrakhan, and Volgograd regions.¹ It is wrong to think that all terrorist organizations are united into one hierarchical and ramified structure under a single command;

- The means and methods of such struggle are changing all the time: the local terrorists look at the international terrorist movement for better methods of subversion, terrorism, and secrecy. Members of several terrorist cells are kept strictly apart—they obey their immediate commanders and are not supposed to know rank-and-file members. Subordination is absolute—this is confirmed by prisoners and computer archives captured in Chechnia, Ingushetia, and Kabardino-Balkaria. Terrorist leaders seek contacts in power-related and administrative structures where they plant their agents—activities amply testified to by the June 2004 attack on the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Ingushetia. The Shari'a terrorist group that operated in Dagestan compiled an execution list of 140 law-enforcement officers complete with their home addresses and phone numbers. According to official sources, several scores of employees of the power-related structures have been identified as terrorist agents in the last five years. Some of them were killed during arrests—others were brought to court²;
- Worldwide experience has demonstrated that the radical Islamist structures can easily regenerate themselves: there is an unending supply of new members. *The New York Times* Internet site carries information extracted from the computers of the Islamists Americans captured in Pakistan: it looks as if al-Qa'eda has acquired a new generation of leaders to replace the killed and arrested ones. American experts concluded that those who started in al-Qa'eda at the bottom of the hierarchical ladder have moved up to commanding positions. Today, even recent members can count on speedy promotion. This contradicts President George W. Bush's statement that, deprived of nearly all the old leaders, the worldwide terrorist network was bled white. Members of the American special services agree that al-Qa'eda has preserved its centralized structure to a certain extent. The victory over the Taliban gave the American special services the wrong idea that al-Qa'eda had been decentralized and fallen apart into several independent terrorist groups³;
- The same applies to the situation in the Northern Caucasus: the local terrorist movement can restore and self-reproduce itself without outside help. Nobody doubts that its leaders should be hunted down and exterminated even if the positive effect is short-term. Today, Ahmad Fayruz Sheikh Abdulhalim Saydulaev, one of the leaders of the Chechen Wahhabi underground who spent much time training suicide bombers, has replaced Aslan Maskhadov⁴;
- Money comes from abroad and from local sympathizers. In recent years, however, there has been much less money from abroad than before, which forced the bandits to switch to self-support by trading in drugs, weapons, and people, and racketeering. Hostage-taking has become less frequent and less lucrative, while racketeering has moved to the fore as the main source of money.

It is wrong to believe that funding and terrorist activities are directly interconnected. Stemming the money flow brings tactical victories, yet it cannot check religious-political extremism or wipe

¹ See: N. Shepel, "Terroristy ispol'zuiut opyt revoliutsionerov i shpionov," *Izvestia*, 10 January, 2006.

² Ibidem.

³ Al-Qa'eda otrashchivaet novye golovy vzamen otrublennykh [<http://www.lenta.ru/terror/2004/08/10/new>], 11 August, 2004.

⁴ In June 2006 Saydulaev was killed.—*Ed.*

it out altogether. There are absolutely autonomous mobile terrorist groups preaching radical ideologies that do not need much money or consistent funding;

- Thus, an analysis of the key trends of North Caucasian Islamist terrorism suggests that the jihad of terror and subversion is steadily spreading across the region and spilling beyond it;
- This is a sure sign that Russia's strategy in the Northern Caucasus is wrong. It seems that it should be corrected with an eye to the specific features of the local Islamic factor.

Today, the key terror-breeding factors—social, economic, and political—should be neutralized. We should never forget that the Islamic revival is primarily an objective process. This means that use of force should be avoided as useless at best and harmful at worst. Islamists are exploiting the Islamic revival together with other factors (demographic, migration, and ethno-confessional), therefore everything should be done to deprive radical Islamist organizations and movements of funding; this is especially important in the case of extremist organizations. The still smoldering political conflicts should be settled, new conflicts should be prevented, and the social and economic situation should be improved. The latter is especially important: better living will narrow down the Islamists' social base and help settle political conflicts, many of which are fed by economic contradictions.

Seen in the narrower context as a crime, terrorism can be stemmed with the help of efforts in four directions: improving the legal basis; strengthening and upgrading the efficiency of the special services; stemming the money flow; and more active propaganda among the local people. Other countries have already tried this. In Russia much has been accomplished in the first three directions, while no victories have been scored in promoting the right ideas among the people.

The forces hostile to Russia are doing their best to revive the idea of detaching the Northern Caucasus from Russia. They are urging the local people to take up arms against the Russian state and its institutions. The events of 13-14 October, 2005 in Nalchik confirmed that these forces are placing their stakes on the younger generation. Russia is pushed toward rivalry over the hearts and minds of the generation on the threshold of active life. If Russia fails, peace in the Northern Caucasus will be destroyed.

Today, the country's leaders, as well as religious and public organizations should think hard about how to protect the younger generation from this threat. The state, aided by secular academics alone, is impotent: it needs the support of Muslim clerics and people respected in traditional North Caucasian society. The interests of the state and religious organizations are absolutely identical when it comes to opposing the extremist forces that exploit religious feelings to achieve their criminal aims.

Today it is very important not only to make law enforcement more effective, but also to train clerics able to actively protect the traditional religious values. I have in mind a system of professional education, not merely teaching the principles of religion in secondary schools. Those who decide to become religious leaders should be prepared to create new spiritual and moral principles in our society and teach religious values. The vacuum left by Marxism and its Leninist interpretation should be filled in.

This problem is especially acute in Russia's Muslim community, which is in fact a confessional minority related to both Russia and the world Muslim ummah. In the post-bipolar world, Islam and its Salafi interpretation are responsible for many political conflicts across the former Soviet territory and elsewhere. This is clearly seen in the Northern Caucasus where fundamentalist missionaries from the Far Abroad, the so-called Wahhabis, played a negative role. Religiously unsophisticated, the local people readily accepted the extremist ideas presented as true Islam, while the traditional Muslim clergy of Russia proved unable to oppose the extremist propaganda.

Some of the Muslim countries and NGOs, including terrorist organizations, are out to exploit the situation to achieve their own aims. They are trying to put pressure on Islamic communities abroad

to interfere in the domestic affairs of their home countries. Religious education is used to plant false values and ideological ideas in people's minds. Technological progress, which has already created a global information society, makes such efforts even easier than before. Alien and radical ideas are another mechanism of outside pressure, which threatens Russia's national security.

The above suggests that we should discuss the possible development trends of Islam in Russia. It would be wise to concentrate on religious education, which can determine, together with other factors, the future of Islam in Russia.

The time has come to invite traditional religious organizations to help sort out the educational establishments that have been mushrooming in recent years and identify those that correspond to the interests of society. The state should support them in one way or another, even though in Russia religious organizations are separate from the state. At the same time, the state cannot remain indifferent to those structures that cause ethnic and religious tension and the graduates of which are engaged in recruiting fighters.
