ETHNOCULTURAL RESOURCE VS. RADICAL ISLAMISM IN THE NORTHERN CAUCASUS

Vakhit AKAEV

D.Sc. (Philos.), Academician, Academy of Sciences of the Chechen Republic;
Professor, Department of Philosophy, the Academician
M. Millionshchikov Grozny State Oil Technical University
(Grozny, Russian Federation)

Boryat NANAEVA

D.Sc. (Philos.), Professor, Head of the Department of Philosophy,
the Academician M. Millionshchikov Grozny State Oil Technical University
(Grozny, Russian Federation)

ABSTRACT

The authors analyze the phenomenon of the so-called radical Islamism, its forms and characteristics in the Northern Caucasus. The paper attempts to address its theoretical foundations, the relationship between Islam and Islamism, and

The work has been carried out within the project/State Target of the RF Ministry of Education and Science, No. 359530.20 N/BU.

reveals the divergence of the substantive aspects between the two.

Particular attention has been paid to the potentials of the traditional ethnic culture of the North Caucasian peoples as a means of opposing radicalism and extremism camouflaged under the cover of Islamic slogans.

KEYWORDS: ***Islam, Islamism, politics, extremism, Wahhabism, folk culture, ethnocultural resource.***

Introduction

The emergence and spread of radical Islamism in the region of the Northern Caucasus is a religious and political phenomenon in its own right, with its own specifics and organizational structure, ideology and all sorts of particularities. Not infrequently, what has been written about the correlation between Islam and Islamism so far, does not point to any differences between these two concepts, and regards them as equated. This happens when Muslims rise against colonialist policies and corrupt regimes for social justice, equality, etc. The theory and practice of such concepts are entirely wrong: the contexts of these phenomena are absolutely different.

Some authors prefer the term "radical Islam" that they define as "Islamic fundamentalism," "Islamic extremism," ditto "Islamism."[1] This approach is, likewise, fairly ambiguous, since Islam cannot and should not be divided into "radical Islam" and "non-radical Islam": there are no such gradations in Islam. It seems that Artur Sagadeev was right, when he wrote that the term "Islamic fundamentalism is highly and regrettably inaccurate and, practically in all cases, politically biased."[2] He pointed out that "extremists, radicals, terrorists can be found everywhere … but they are defined as such without pointing to their religious affiliation".[3]

It should be said that different interpretations of Islamism are extremely vague when it comes to its dogmatic, ideological and political components, responsible for the highly varied interpretation of their content. Islamism can be moderate and radical. Muslims, who obey religious injunctions, but are unrelated either to religious or political activities, are described as moderate, while the Muslims, actively involved in religious and political processes (not infrequently, in their extreme forms up to and including acts of terror), are defined as non-moderate, or radical. This interpretation of Islamism can be found in Russian and Western Oriental studies that investigate political processes unfolding in Islam.

In the Northern Caucasus, the Wahhabis who are actively involved in political separatism and oppose local Islam in an effort to drive it to the periphery of social, cultural and religious life (this is especially prevalent in Chechnia) are described as Islamists. Their political agenda includes the "Caucasian Caliphate," to be established as soon as the Russian Federation is squeezed out of the region. In the final analysis, this agenda (that can be described as openly Islamist) is responsible for the religious and national discord in the Northern Caucasus.

But nevertheless, much is being done in the region to oppose religious radicalism (including Islamism) by using political and legal instruments and the ethnocultural resource of the local peoples.

---

[1] A.A. Ignatenko, *Islam i politika,* Institute of Religion and Politics, Moscow, 2004, p. 8.

[2] A. Sagadeev, "Islamskiy fundamentalism: cho zhe eto takoe?"*Azia i Afrika segodnia,* No. 6, 1994, p. 3.

[3] Ibid., p. 6.

Islamism: Theoretical Foundations

Radical Islamism, as a phenomenon, has been widely discussed in Russian and foreign political and Oriental studies; their content sometimes invites objections if not contention. John Esposito, a prominent American expert on Islam, has offered his interpretation: "The term fundamentalism evokes many images… For many this term is simply equated with radicalism, religious extremism, and terrorism."[4] It may be applied to a very wide range of Islamic movements: to those, who took up arms to fight for the freedom of their country; to those, determined to set up the world caliphate. Moreover, "the ranks of Islamic fundamentalists include those who provide the much-needed services to the poor, such as schools, health clinics, and social welfare agencies."[5] This means that the Islamic fundamentalism is a highly voluminous and diversified phenomenon that comprises not only radical but also all sorts of charitable activities of Muslims, Islamic organizations, movements and countries.

Zalman Levin has written: "The term 'fundamentalism' was coined by those Protestants, who refused to accept modern ideas in Protestantism and insisted that the Holy Scriptures should be understood and interpreted literally."[6] Having borrowed the term from the Protestant religious culture and specified it as "Islamic," politicians, journalists and academics muddled the idea of fundamentalism still more: "Recently, for some reason, fundamentalism and Islam have been more and more identified with terrorism and extremism."[7]

John Esposito has written: "*Political Islam* and *Islamism* are more useful terms when referring to the role of Islam in politics."[8] This means that the term "Islamic fundamentalism" cannot adequately describe the religious processes unfolding among Muslims. The two terms are instrumentally accurate, yet it is equally important to establish a correlation between them. The two options are logically possible—either their contexts are equated or intersecting. Esposito believes that they are equated: "Islamic fundamentalism, or political Islam, is rooted in a contemporary religious resurgence, which began in the late 1960s and has affected both the personal and public life of Muslims."[9]

Boris Kliuchnikov writes about the extreme, radical trends in Islam—Islamism and extremism—that threaten the contemporary world. Contrary to his opinion, however, there are no such trends in Islam: all purely Islamic trends have been studied in detail and described. Kliuchnikov has not offered his definition of Islamism and extremism; he merely writes that Wahhabism, as an extremist Islamic trend, is the predecessor of contemporary Islamism.[10] Some pages later, he writes about extremist Islamists, the most vehement enemies of the West and Christian civilization that were used to fight "godless communism."[11] He has never specified the details of their ideology and practice, and limited himself to general deliberations, without going into details of their nature and specifics.

Gilles Kepel, a French political scientist and Arabist, sounds much more specific. In his *Jihad. The Trail of Political Islam* he has identified Islamism as a militant trend of Islam[12] and wrote that

---

[4] J. Esposito, *What Everyone Needs to Know About Islam,* Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 59.
[5] Ibidem.
[6] Z.I. Levin, "Preface," in: *Fundamentalizm,* Institute of Oriental Studies, RAS, Kraft Publishers, Moscow, 2003, p. 3.
[7] Ibidem.
[8] J. Esposito, op. cit., p. 59.
[9] Ibid., p. 60.
[10] See: B. Kliuchnikov, *Islamizm, SShA i Evropa: Voyna obyavlena!,* Eksmo Publishers, Moscow, 2003, p. 34.
[11] Ibid., p. 39.
[12] See: G. Kepel, *Jikhad: Ekspansia ili zakat islamizma,* Ladomir, Moscow, 2004, p. 8.

"Qutbe's contribution had been vital, along with that of two other figures, Mawlana Mawdidi (1903-1979) of Pakistan and Ruhollah Khomeneini (1902-1989) of Iran… While opposing the secular nationalism that had dominated the 1960s, they also rejected the view within traditional Islam that relegated political combat to a secondary concern."[13]

From a strictly scientific point of view, the term "Islamic fundamentalism," widely accepted in the West and Russia, does not clarify the meaning of the above-mentioned terms and makes it much harder to distinguish between the two. So far, nothing has been done to arrive at its clearer interpretation.

This means that the correlation between Islamic fundamentalism and Islamism needs theoretical and practical clarification. We are convinced that the terms are not equated. The Islamic fundamentalism can be described as the roots of Islam: *Usul al-Din*, the principles of religion. As is known, there are five basic pillars of Islam:

(a) *Shahada* or *Al-Tawhid* as the belief in the oneness and unity of God;

(b) *namaz*—establishing of the five daily Prayers (*Salah*);

(c) fasting from dawn to dusk in the month of Ramadan (*Sawm*);

(d) *zakāt* or alms-giving is a tax for the benefit of the poor or needy;

(e) the pilgrimage (hajj) to Mecca during the month of Dhul Hijjah.

Islamic fundamentalism mainly analyzes the principles of Islam, the Koran and Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad; it is engaged in the development of the theological system in strict conformity with its foundation. On that score, Salafism is also related to Islamic fundamentalism. Ignatenko believes that reversion to the foundations of Islam is called Salafism because of its formula—*al-Salaf al-Salih*, or the righteous predecessors.[14] Even though the supporters of Salafism insist that Muslims should obey Islam of the times of the Prophet and the righteous Caliphs, Islamic fundamentalism does not stem from the righteous predecessors—it stems from the principles of Islam (Usul al-Din).

In the Russian tradition of Islamic studies, including the works dedicated to Islamic involvement in political processes, there are no publications that specify Islamism, to say nothing of its exact interpretation. Islamic fundamentalism as the core of Islam with its very specific attribute can be hardly equated to Islamism, which is neither the Islamic fundamentalism nor Islam. It is a very specific political trend, related to spiritual, cultural and social phenomena, decorated with Islamic injunctions to make them look religious.

Gilles Kepel has offered an interesting comment: "The Brothers over the years developed a model for twentieth-century Islamist thought and action based on the work of the society's founder, Hassan al-Banna (1906-1949)."[15] Set up in the colonial epoch, the Society of the Muslim Brothers was banned in 1954 in Egypt by Nasser, founder of the Egyptian National State. The Brothers' ideology and practice were radical; nobody ever described them as moderate either religiously or politically: they wanted to live and act according to the Koran, which they treated as the Constitution of the Muslims that allowed them to set up a social and political order, which they needed and believed to be necessary.

The leaders of the National States, set up by Muslims in the post-colonial period, could not accept this. Some were moving toward socialism, others, toward capitalism. The third group, the unde-

---

[13] See: G. Kepel, *Jihad. The Trail of Political Islam,* L.B. Taurus& Co. Ltd, 2006, p. 23.

[14] See: A.A. Ignatenko, op. cit., p. 14.

[15] G. Kepel, *Jihad. The Trail of Political Islam*, p. 27.

cided, tried to flirt with either the first or second group, while maintaining their old-fashioned social positions.

Radical Islamism: Outcrops in the Northern Caucasus

The desire of certain Muslims to insist on their right to build mosques and open religious schools, as well as the emergence of Islamic movements and parties, determined to join political processes, unfolding in Russia, to run for the State Duma, etc., stirred up a lot of controversy about the resurgence and, later, radicalization of Islam.

The All-Union Islamic Revival Party, set up in 1990, to unite Muslims for an active involvement in elections and the U.S.S.R.'s political life in general, radicalized Islam. It became directly involved in political processes; there appeared political parties, ready to run for the State Duma. The authorities and the official Muslim clergy were suspicious, while, at a grass-roots level, members of the new party were known as Wahhabis. Malashenko is convinced that it was the Soviet special services that put the term into circulation to discredit the party members and their intention to join the political processes, unfolding in the country, where perestroika and glasnost were gaining momentum.

The party disappeared together with the Soviet Union, yet its regional structures were determined to hold their positions in the religious and political life of the Muslims of Central Asia, and in Russia (in the Volga Region and the Northern Caucasus, in particular). At first, the Wahhabis of the Northern Caucasus tried "to reform the local Islam and relieve it of all sorts of fallacies." Later, they gradually radicalized and moved from the intention to revise local Islam to adopting the idea of the Caucasian Caliphate, detaching the Caucasus from Russia, getting rid of the Russians (living in the region) before moving to complete Islamization of the rest of Russia's territory.

Much has been already written about the politicization and radicalization of Islam by V. Akaev, L. Bashirov, A. Ignatenko, A. Malashenko, I. Dobaev, K. Khanbabaev, and M. Iakhiaev[16], who discussed different aspects of Islamism and the specifics of its functioning. Later, they concentrated on its radicalization, as well as the extremism and terrorism, perpetrated by the Wahhabis and Salafis, and activities of certain religious extremist organizations, banned in Russia. We have written a lot about the specifics of Islam in the context of the political processes in the Northern Caucasus, especially in Chechnia and Ingushetia.[17]

Unlike many of his colleagues, who limit themselves to the facts and assessments of the ideology and practice of Wahhabism and Salafism in the Northern Caucasus and elsewhere in Russia, Igor Dobaev goes to the roots of Islamic radicalism, its evolution and practice. His book, in which he has pointed out that "in the last decade the public, international journalism and certain members of the academic community have recognized political Islam and extremist shoots of militant Islamism as

---

[16] See: V. Akaev, "Islamic Fundamentalism in the Northern Caucasus: Myth or Reality? *Central Asia and the Caucasus,* No. 3, 2000; L.A. Bashirov, *Islam v kontekste etnopoliticheskikh protsessov v sovremennoy Rossii,* RAGS Publishers, Moscow, 2008; A.A. Ignatenko, op. cit.; A. Malashenko, *Islamskaia alternativa i islamskiy proekt,* Moscow Carnegie Center, Ves Mir Publishers, Moscow, 2006; I.P. Dobaev, *Radikalizatsia islama v sovremennoy Rossii*, Sotsialno-gumanitarnye znaniia, Moscow, Rostov on Don, 2014; K.M. Khanbabaev, "Etapy rasprostraneniia vahhabizma v Dagestane. Tarikaty v Dagestane," in: *Alimy i uchenye protiv vahhabizma,* GUP Dagestanian Book Publishers, Makhachkala, 2001; *Religiozno-politicheskiy ekstremizm: sushchnost, prichiny, formy proiavlenia, puti preodoleniia*, ed. by Prof. M.Ia. Iakhiaev, Parnas, Moscow, 2011.

[17] See: V. Akaev , "Islam and Politics in Chechnia and Ingushetia," in: *Radical Islam in the Former Soviet Union*, ed. by G. Yemelianova, First published 2010 by Routledge; V.Kh. Akaev, *Islam v Chechne*, Logos, Moscow, 2008.

Islamic fundamentalism"[18] was positively received by the academic community. The author used the terms "political Islam," "militant Islamism" and "Islamic fundamentalism" as synonyms. In fact, they are not synonymous at all. The same can be said about the terms Islamism, fundamentalism and Jihadism. It seems that we need a comprehensive and strictly scholarly analysis of the entire range of political problems, related to radicalism and Islam (so far absent from academic writings) to clarify their finest points.

In some of our recent publications we have clarified some of the relevant points.[19]

Today, students of Islam in Russia prefer to coin new and fairly vague terms, rather than clarify the essence of Islamism, fundamentalism, let alone Jihadism. Not infrequently, while trying to clarify the difference between them, Russian and foreign authors make their specific features indistinguishable.

Some scholars have gone even further to divide Islam into "old" and "new"; Western politicians have armed themselves with recent coinages: Islamofascism and Islamic terrorism, which suggest that Islam encourages terrorism and supports terrorists, which is wrong and cannot be accepted.

In the Northern Caucasus, on the other hand, the term Wahhabism has been used for many years to define radical Islamism. Starting in the 1990s, Wahhabism, with no roots in the region, has been actively involved in the religious and political processes of Islamic revival and re-Islamization, the phenomena covered by V. Akaev, A. Yarlykapov, A. Malashenko, A. Kisriev, and G. Zaurbekova in their works. They cited facts and offered assessments of Wahhabis' activities in the region as those, which contradict the local Islamic traditions and stir up conflicts between local Islam and its imported versions and trends.[20] Perestroika and the Soviet Union's disintegration destroyed the system that had protected the region against radicalism and extremism and opened the doors to all sorts of religious organizations, each wishing to pose as the only and most correct supporter of the "genuine Islam."

This wave crushed folk cultures and destroyed traditions, cultural values and centuries-old achievements. No wonder, extremism, including religious extremism, was outlawed in the Northern Caucasus, while the region's political and religious elite added vehemence to their struggle against Islamism.

Mobilizing the Ethnocultural Resource

Neither religious radicalism and extremism nor the outcrops of radical Islamism, geared at religious and political destabilization of Muslim societies, can destroy the centuries-old traditions and ethnic values of the North Caucasian peoples firmly rooted in social life as the factors of resistance

---

[18] I.P. Dobaev, *Islamskiy radikalizm: genezis, evoliutsia, praktika,* SKNTs VSh Publishers, Rostov-on-Don, 2003, p. 30.

[19] See: V.Kh. Akaev, "Islamskie traditsii i novatsii v sovremennoy Rossii: protivorechivye proiavleniia," *Gumanitarnye i sotsialno-ekonomicheskie nauki,* No. 1, 2016; V.Kh. Akaev, N.M. Vagabova, "Religiozno-politicheskiy ekstremizm v obshchestve: faktory determinatsii, dinamika i mery protivodeystviia," *Gumanitarnye i sotsialno-ekonomicheskie nauki,* No. 6, 2016.

[20] See: V.Kh. Akaev, *Sufizm i Vahhabizm na Severnom Kavkaze. Konfrontatsia ili kompromiss?* Institute of History, Archeology and Ethnography DNTs, RAS, Makhachkala, 1999; Idem, *Sufizm i Vahhabizm na Severnom Kavkaze,* Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology, RAS, Moscow, 1999; A.A. Yarlykapov, *Problema Vahhabizma na Severnom Kavkaze,* Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology, RAS, Moscow, 2000; A. Malashenko, *Islamskie orientiry Severnogo Kavkaza,* Moscow Carnegie Center, Gendalf, Moscow, 2001; G.V. Zaurbekova, *Vahhabizm v Chechne,* Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology, RAS, Moscow, 2003; E.F. Kisriev, *Islam i vlast v Dagestane,* OGI, Moscow, 2004.

to alien influences: those who support ethnic traditions also side with moderate religious and political ideas, secular laws and public order.

The traditional culture of the North Caucasian peoples can be used to oppose Islamic radicalism and extremism. Neither in the past nor today, consistently developing societies with ethnic values of their own, permitted or will permit extreme forms to dominate public and religious life of Muslims; local societies are undaunted by the facts of cruelty or even violence Wahhabism has never hesitated to use, while spreading far and wide in Daghestan, Chechnia, Ingushetia and Karachaevo-Cherkessia, to replace traditional ethnic values with religious practices and ideology of Wahhabism.

For many centuries, the North Caucasian peoples have been building the culture and practice of relationships of close political and spiritual interaction, mutual assistance and support. They invariably relied on people's diplomacy and cultural cooperation to settle internal conflicts. Today, the local society stands opposed to the extreme religious enjoinments, of which jihad is one and which the Wahhabis and Islamists are promoting in their attempts to move against the traditional ethnocultural values.

At all times, Islamists tried and are trying today to impose on the Muslim youth of the Northern Caucasus their alternative ideas about the world, divided into those, who profess the practice of the "correct" faith and others; about the world, as the scene of perpetual jihad waged for the sake of the final worldwide triumph of Islam, divided into those, who support all shades of black or all shades of white, and the corresponding philosophical attitudes. This connotes a retreat from the real world's diversity, from social and spiritual pluralism, leading toward religious extremism and terrorism under the cover of Islamic slogans.

Wahhabi activities in the Northern Caucasus is a vivid example of how extreme religious ideas ignore the region's anti-extremist sentiments and its past and present contexts, in which traditional ethnic values have been preserved.

This means that the Wahhabis' determination to impose their ideas on the region should be analyzed; the same fully applies to the susceptibility on the part of local youth to their propaganda. It seems that this happened because the Soviet ideological system had been first weakened and, later, destroyed. Wahhabism and religious radicalism moved into the void to promote, among the young people, their own ideas that had nothing in common with the local religious beliefs that have been taking shape for centuries of adaptation to social and political realities.

Muslim clerics and the political elites of the Northern Caucasus spare no effort to stem the spread of religious radicalism and extremism by relying on the region's ethnic and cultural resource and its moderate and integral nature. The highly moral, humanitarian and peaceful potential of the local customs and traditions, the historical and cultural values, key provisions of the people's diplomacy and mental attitudes of the North Caucasian peoples are tapped to the full to oppose radicalism and extremism.

Conclusion

In their discussion, the authors proceed from the fact that radical Islamism, that has nothing to do with Islam, whose roots are well known and are neither radical nor extremist, should receive more attention of the academic community. Islam is not a religion of violence and terror: it is a philosophy and way of life, geared at avoiding extremes, achieving harmony between people, social groups and moderate lifestyle in a society or religious community.

Moderation (*wasatiyyah* in Arabic) is one of the important characteristics of Islam; it is its golden mean that rejects violence, hostage taking, highjacking, terrorist acts, etc. Islamism is a policy

of extremes, practiced by individuals and groups in an effort to justify their acts by Islamic slogans. They are not Muslims in the true sense of the word, who profess Islam as a religion of peace, creative efforts and moderation.

Islam, as the dominant religion in the traditional North Caucasian societies, and ethnic cultures are seen as part of the traditional way of life. Mutually adjusted they share local and regional specifics that set them apart from the Islamist "novelties." This means that this ethnic resource is deeply rooted in the Northern Caucasus and that its skillful and active use makes it possible to minimize the impacts of religious and political extremism, and radicalism.