RELIGION IN THE SOCIOPOLITICAL CONTEXT OF CENTRAL ASIAN AND CAUCASIAN COUNTRIES

THE ISLAMIC FACTOR IN THE NORTHERN CAUCASUS

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The role of Islam in North Caucasian politics has long been a topic of discussion in the academic, political, and journalist community. The term "the fault line" used by Prof. Huntington to describe the clash of civilizations looks tempting in the North Caucasian context. Indeed, it is an area with a high level of social and political tension and ethnic conflicts (more or less natural in the homeland of nearly 100 nationalities) rooted in economic and political inequality, unjust distribution of land, and an unwillingness to show justice when dealing with these evils. In addition, there are attempts to add religious hues to the already burning ethnic issues.

Perestroika started Muslim renaissance in Russia; it was at that time that Islam moved into the sphere of politics. In 1990, Akhmad-qadi Akhtaev and the Kebedov brothers, among others (very popular as the leaders of "renovationist" Islam in Daghestan also known as Wahhabism), set up the Islamic Revival Party (IRP). Wahhabism is part of a wider movement called Salafism. We can paraphrase the formula "every Islamist is a Muslim, while not every Muslim is an Islamist" used by political scientist Igor Dobaev[1] to say "every Wahhabi can be described as a Salafi, but not all Salafis are Wahhabis."

[1] I.P. Dobaev, *Islamskiy radikalizm: sotsial'no-filosofskiy analiz,* ed. by A.V. Malashenko, SKNTs VSh Publishers, Rostov-on-Don, 2002, p. 32.

The local Salafis concentrated on criticizing the Sufi Sheikhs for their complete loyalty to the secular state, which developed into conformism. In fact, they were also criticized by common Sufis for the fairly superficial nature of the process of re-Islamization limited to building new mosques and restoring holy places (*ziyarats*)—nothing was done to revive Tariqah as the method of mystic cognition.

There is the opinion that in the Northern Caucasus, Wahhabism was promoted on foreign money, but we should bear in mind that no radical idea could have been accepted in the Caucasus in the absence of adequate local conditions. Soviet power destroyed the network of Islamic educational establishments: by the late 1980s, decades of repressions, anti-religious propaganda, and mosque closures wiped out the knowledge of Arabic to the extent that not all imams could independently study the necessary theological literature. Islam was no longer a religion—it had degenerated into a system of rituals and moral prescriptions. This gave rise to groups that called for the revival of "pure" Islam and detached themselves from "everyday" Islam. The youth alien to Sufi mysticism was very much attracted by Salafi rationalism.

The "traditionalist" leaders proved unprepared for theological disputes and let the initiative slip between their fingers. By calling on the state to oppose "the Wahhabi threat," some of the Islamic functionaries tried to shift the burden of confrontation onto the state. At the same time, those Salafis who wanted to restore the basic Islamic values channeled popular protest against the official clergy. At the first stage, opposition was dominated by the Salafis engaged in charities and enlightenment; as tension between the Salafis and the Tariqah Sufis within the opposition camp mounted, radicals little interested in enlightening the masses came to the fore with their slogans of deposing power.

The range of so-called non-traditional Islam is very wide—it is not limited solely to the radicals, therefore it is critically important to identify the fundamentalists seeking purification of Islam and distinguish them from extremists using Islamic rhetoric as a smokescreen. Not all fundamentalists are extremists and separatists. They merely want to restore Islam to its original purity. For example, in one of the villages of the Tsumada District of Daghestan, a plaque can be seen on an administrative building that reads: "Islamic Territory. Russian Federation."[2] The conflict stemmed from social problems and corruption of the local authorities and the militia. The so-called Wahhabis of the Kadar zone, who earned money by hauling cargos on their trucks, refused to pay tribute to the traffic controllers and united into jamaats (communities). The authorities, which refused to talk to the opposition, had to pay dearly for their shortsightedness.

It should be said that the very formula "traditional Islam" is not completely correct since it implies closeness to secular power. In the 19th century, Naqshbandi imams Gazi-Muhammad, Gamzatbek, and Shamil waged a holy war (*gazavat*) against tsarist Russia and the unrighteous Muslims who supported it.[3] As distinct from Shamil, Qadiriya leader Kunta-hajji Kishiev called on the Muslims to accept the power of the "white-faced czar" to preserve the nation. This all changed in the 20th century: in the Chechen-Ingush Soviet Autonomous Republic the Naqshbandi Tariqah actively cooperated with Soviet power, its members filling the majority of posts in the party nomenklatura. The Qadiriya Tariqah found itself in opposition. No wonder General Dudaev relied on its members. Under Dudaev the Naqshbandi Tariqah moved toward the opposition. Today, the state has recognized all Sufi Tariqahs, while radical Salafis, or Wahhabis as they are often called, are in opposition. This is why I believe that the terms "traditional" and "non-traditional" Islam are incorrect—today we are witnessing a confrontation between "official" and opposition Islam.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Islamic revival in Daghestan was ethnically tinged. Fuel was added to the Salafi/Sufi opposition in the republic by serious contradictions between the ethnic

[2] A. Stepanov, "Islamskaia ugroza: mif ili real'nost?" *Trud,* 2 October, 2002.
[3] See: *Islam i islamizm na iuge Rossii,* ed. by Iu.G. Volkov, SKNTs VSh Publishers, Rostov-on-Don, 2003, pp. 78-79.

spiritual leaders. The Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of the Northern Caucasus (SAMNC), which had fallen apart, was not replaced with another central structure able to unite the republic's Muslims. The Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Daghestan (SAMD), which replaced it in 1994, is known as the Avar administration because of the Avar majority in the highest posts. There are also the Kumyk and Lak spiritual administrations and the Darghinian kaziat. In the past ten years, the spiritual administrations have become purely bureaucratic structures, while the Muslims prefer to congregate around sheikhs or opposition fundamentalist leaders. This process is also ethnically tinged. Late in the 1980s, the Sufi sheikhs and the future Salafis were fighting together against M. Gekkiev, who headed the SAMNC. As soon as they won the battle, they began squabbling over posts in the new administrative structures and finally parted ways after the first serious clashes between the Sufis and the Salafis in the mid-1990s. Supporters of Sheikh Said Afandi of Chirkey, who by that time had the SAMD under their total control, proved to be the most belligerent group.

Conventionally, the fundamentalists (or the Salafis as they prefer to call themselves) can be divided into three movements headed by Bagautdin Kebedov (Bagautdin Muhammad), Angut Omarov (Aiub of Astrakhan), and Akhmad Akhtaev. The former two are more radically minded; their followers are the harshest critics of Sufism and the republic's regime. They tend to freely apply the concept of *taqfir* and accuse their opponents of lack of faith. Akhmad Akhtaev showed more flexibility: he believed it possible to follow a Sufi imam in prayer and himself attended Tariqah-controlled mosques; he also favored an active dialog with the authorities and criticized the radicals for their indiscriminate application of taqfir.

Gradually, under the pressure of several factors, the Salafis grew more radical. First, after finding a common language with the SAMD, the republic's leaders no longer needed the Salafis and, therefore, pursued harsher policies against the religious opposition. Second, Chechnia, as the closest neighbor, also influenced the process. After the clashes in the village of Karamakhi in May 1997 between the Wahhabis and united Tariqahs, law enforcement bodies, and mafia structures, detachments of the Chechen field commanders looked like a military force able to support the religious opposition. Finally, the moderate Salafi wing was left without a leader when Akhmad Akhtaev, who had at one time been deputy of the republic's People's Assembly, died. Much more radically-minded Bagautdin Kebedov filled the vacated niche. In July 1999, he, together with the detachments of Khattab and Basaev, invaded the Tsumada District of Daghestan from Chechnia.

The results were tragic for the Salafis: the republican leaders acquired an external enemy against whom society could be united. In September 1999, the People's Assembly adopted a Law on Banning Wahhabi and Other Extremist Activities in the Republic of Daghestan,[4] which put the moderate Salafis in the same category as the radicals. The problem of the religious opposition, however, survived the rout of the invading fighters and establishment of control over the Kadar zone. Even though the SAMD regularly criticizes secular power, "official" Islam does not constitute the opposition, rather it is part of the republic's political system. By tagging the Salafis "the Wahhabis," the republican leaders have outlawed them as the real opposition. Prominent Russian expert on Islam Alexey Malashenko has discerned numerous pitfalls created by this approach: "There is not much sense in branding the Salafis or sending special forces against them: this is a struggle against ideas and thoughts. Meanwhile, all of us, including officials in the administration of the second president of Russia, learned in school that Thought could not be destroyed."[5]

[4] See: K.M. Khanbabaev, "Wahhabism v Daghestane," *Islam i politika na Severnom Kavkaze, Collection of scientific articles*, SKNTs VSh Publishers, Rostov-on-Don, 2001, p. 46.

[5] A. Malashenko, "Oshibka analitikov. O predskazuemosti kavkazskogo islama," *Nezavisimaia gazeta,* 18 May, 2000.

It should be said that at first the Islamic movements in Daghestan had no contacts with similar trends in Chechnia. They were developing independently for purely internal reasons. They appeared because of ethnic tension and the resultant principle of distributing state posts according to ethnic origins. On top of this, "official" Islam was in crisis, while the authorities became bogged down in the conflict between it and the Salafis.

The situation in Chechnia was different: the conflict was a political one between the authorities and the opposition which exploited Islamic rhetoric for its own political purposes (the Islamic factor is figuring prominently in the confrontation). It was the Popular Front, well accepted in the late 1980s, that launched the national-liberation movement in the republic. It started with the problems of corruption and ecology, yet carefully avoided nationalist and Islamic slogans. Later, the nomenklatura of the Chechen-Ingush Soviet Autonomous Republic managed to tame Kh. Bisultanov, the opposition leader, by appointing him director of one of the enterprises. This moved the leaders of the National Congress of the Chechen People (NCCP) to the forefront of the struggle against the party functionaries. They needed attractive leaders—this was how General Dudaev appeared on the scene. At no time did he support the idea of an Islamic state. At an election meeting with the students and teachers of the Grozny Petroleum Institute, he succinctly answered the question "Which state—Islamic or secular—do you plan to create if you win?" with "secular."[6] Significantly, it was Beslan Gantamirov, who later became an ardent supporter of the Russian Federation's territorial integrity, who headed the Islamic movement as the leader of the Islamic Way party. Adam Deniev, later an implacable enemy of Islamic radicals, was the first to call on the nation to restore "the purity of Islam" early in the 1990s.[7]

The people, however, coolly responded to the calls of the self-appointed Islamists to purify Islam from local impurities. First, the people knew little about Islam to accept these ideas, while the nationalist opposition was speaking about an independent secular state. Second, the so-called Islamists were not true Islamists at all. The opposition was teeming with nationalists, some of them outstanding personalities. The niche of political Islam, however, remained vacant. Those who cared to fill it had a chance to plunge into the republic's political life. Chechnia is a republic of Sufi Islam (Qadiriya and Naqshbandiya being the most popular orders). In the post-perestroika period, the Sufi orders became completely legal. I have already written that Johar Dudaev and the NCCP nationalists relied on Qadiriya members from the mountainous regions. The Naqshbandiya leaders did not want to separate from Russia, therefore their followers could not be a target of separatist propaganda. By that time, the niche of "pure" Islam remained unoccupied: the Chechen pseudo-Islamists hastened to appropriate it, though without many political dividends.

The Chechen conflict is rooted in the struggle between the center and the local elites for the republic's political status. The war in Chechnia that started in December 1994 made Islam a political factor and forced the supporters and opponents of General Dudaev to close ranks; after that they needed a common ideology to become a single force. (The Kremlin was fighting for Russia's territorial integrity, while the Chechens assumed the image of fighters for an independent secular state.) As the conflict spread and the sides became even more desperate, Islamic elements came to the fore in the separatists' rhetoric.

Armed confrontation attracted numerous fighters from Muslim countries who remained in the republic when the hostilities ended in 1996. Headed by the notorious Khattab, they developed into an influential political force which relied on Wahhabi ideology. Islam moved to the center of the republic's sociopolitical life, which was finally reflected in the constitution of independent Chechnia. The processes, however, were fairly superficial: there was not a single respected theologian among those who preached the Islamic way. The Shari'a criminal code was copied from a similar code adopted in

[6] I personally heard him saying this.
[7] See: *Islam i islamizm na iuge Rossii,* p. 106.

Sudan. There it was based on the Maliki madhab, while Chechnia and the entire eastern area of the Northern Caucasus were the territory of the Shafi'ite madhab. Between the two wars, the relations between the Sufis and Wahhabis deteriorated and, in the summer of 1998, led to an armed clash in Gudermes. After that Aslan Maskhadov moved away from the Wahhabis.

The radical ideas in Chechnia became popular due to several external factors. The Wahhabi leaders were funded from abroad—everyone knew that. Former Minister of Internal Affairs of the RF A. Kulikov went as far as to say that the Chechen mafia operating in Russia had to share their profits with the Wahhabis; he never proved this though. Aslan Maskhadov accused persecuted oligarch Boris Berezovsky of consistently funding groups that took hostages.[8]

The radical wing of the Chechen separatists might have contacts with international terrorist organizations, yet I personally cannot say that Russia is encountering international terrorism in Chechnia. Escalation of the war added religious overtones to the Chechen resistance; Islam united the separatists. The fact that the local terrorists are using the al-Qa'eda rhetoric does not mean that they are connected with bin Laden. To avoid accusations of a one-sided approach let me quote Prof. Marc Sageman, a former CIA employee. In the 1980s, he worked with the Afghan mujaheddin; today he is a U.S. government advisor on the counterterrorist struggle. In an interview with the *Ekspert* journal he said: "You see similar things and want to believe that they are connected… In such places as Chechnia and Palestine there are people who sympathize with al-Qa'eda. This does not mean, however, that this is one and the same organization."[9]

On the other hand, if it is international terrorism that declared war on Russia, why has not one of the many Islamist groups attacked any of the Russian facilities abroad? The capture of *Avrasia* cannot be regarded as an attack for two reasons. First, those who captured it demanded that talks with the separatists be started immediately; they never formulated any Islamist demands. Second, the attack happened long before the counterterrorist campaign began. On the other hand, in Iraq, Russian citizens were treated with deference. Here is another argument: each terrorist act the separatists carry out is accompanied by demands to start negotiations and withdraw the troops from Chechnia; there are no statements about a war "on Crusaders and Jews." I am convinced that the events in Chechnia have been unfolding not because of foreign interference: the unregulated conflict attracted foreign forces to the region.

It turned out that not only Wahhabis were responsible for the second war. According to Sergey Stepashin: "An active campaign has been unfolding in this republic since March… This would have happened even had there been no Moscow blasts."[10] The aggressive raid by Basaev and Khattab and their Wahhabis into Daghestan merely brought the second war closer.

Salafism swiftly spread across the Northern Caucasus from Daghestan. In the latter half of the 1990s, the government no longer exploited the contradictions between the religious opposition and official Islam for its own ends. It sided with the SAMD and pushed away the Salafis prepared to hold a dialog. It was then that Daghestani radicals started moving toward Chechnia, where Wahhabism was of a purely military nature. It was politically oriented, while some of the Wahhabis never hesitated to use this ideology to justify their crimes. They concentrated on hostage taking; the Akhmadov brothers and A. Baraev were especially active. As distinct from the Daghestani Salafis, the Chechen Wahhabis had no religiously educated leaders, while in Daghestan the Kebedov brothers and Akhmad Akhtaev were teaching in illegal madrasahs back in the 1970s.

The situation in Kabardino-Balkaria (KBR) arouses concern. Any mosque attended by people the law enforcement bodies describe as suspicious can be declared Wahhabi and closed down.[11] Re-

[8] See: S. Shermatova, "Tak nazyvaemye Wahhabity" [http://www.sakharov-center.ru/chs/chrus20_1.htm].
[9] M. Chernov, "Marc Sageman: udarit mechtoy po terroru," *Ekspert,* No. 38, 2004.
[10] S. Pravosudov, "Bloka OVR voobshche moglo ne byt," *Nezavisimaia gazeta,* 14 January, 2000.
[11] See: A. Petrov, "Neosmotritel'nye deystvia vlastey provotsiruiut radikalov," *NG-Religii*, 1 December, 2004.

cently the authorities established a unified prayer day and hour when the mosques may remain open. At other times they are closed. Most of the mosques were closed down and Islam was driven underground. Without local registration a Muslim cannot perform namaz in the local mosques. The Ministry of Internal Affairs sees to this. Today there is only one cathedral mosque in the republic's capital of Nalchik.[12] The Yarmuk Jamaat, about which much has been said recently, is the tip of the iceberg. The republic's Muslim community is split. One group is headed by the Spiritual Administration of the Muslims (SAM), and the other by Mussa Mukozhev educated in Saudi Arabia and Jordan. Khazratali Dzaseshev, SAM deputy chairman, explains the split by the generation gap, not by Wahhabism. Early in the 1990s, a group of young men went to study Islam in Arab countries; upon their return they found themselves in conflict with the older generation of imams who knew no Arabic. The young people accused the older clerics of ignorance of Islamic sources and their misinterpretation.

To my mind, the official religious policies are another reason for the current situation in the KBR. In 1998, after the shelling of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the authorities, not bothering to find the real culprits, detained over 100 people, who were mercilessly beaten and some of whom were even shaved by force. The law enforcement bodies should fight extremism and prevent its outburst, yet the methods applied in the republic are not very appropriate. In April 2004, the congress of the Muslims of Kabardino-Balkaria amended the SAM Charter: the mufti was given the right to appoint imams in line with the official anti-extremist policies. The SAM leaders have just acquired the right to exclude undesirable imams, which implies radicals and clerics critical of the SAM. This will merely broaden the radicals' social base.

Confrontation between the traditionalists and Salafis is not as sharp in Ingushetia as it is in Daghestan and Chechnia, probably thanks to the well-balanced official policies. In December 1997, Ingushetia adopted a law on "justices of the peace," who are expected to apply the norms of adat and the Shari'a. There is also a conciliatory commission. The tension in the republic persists because of its territorial and confessional proximity to Chechnia and due to its internal problems: according to official figures, the unemployment rate in Ingushetia is 32.4 percent.[13] Under the influence of land shortages, the high population density, and tough competition on the labor market, the standard of living is gradually deteriorating. There is also the still unsettled conflict with North Ossetia.

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In summing up I can say that political Islam, which began as a revivalist movement in the Northern Caucasus, has gradually been gathering momentum. This happened against the background of the deepening Chechen crisis. In the latter half of the 1990s, the separatist sentiments in the region somewhat subsided due to the failure of Chechnia's experiment to lead a semi-independent existence. The Islamist ideas have been gathering more supporters. I think that this happened because Chechnia failed to become a secular state. Today, the Islamists are no longer seeking independence or autonomy inside Russia—they dream of creating a state from the Caspian to the Black Sea based on the Shari'a.

This raises the question of whether Islamism was brought into the region from outside or whether it sprang from local soil. Without rejecting the former I tend to agree with the latter.

Indeed, any war is a struggle of ideologies. In the 19th century, the harsh, or even cruel, politics of General Yermolov brought together the formerly disunited tribes of Daghestan and Chechnia; they were held together by Muridism, a new Sufi movement in the Caucasus. Today the Murids follow traditional peaceful Islam. In the past they were described as follows: "The Murids are supporters of

[12] See: M. Fatullaev, "'Navedenie mostov' s pomoshch'iu beteerov," *Nezavisimaia gazeta,* 2 February, 2005.

[13] See: A. Malashenko, *Islamskie orientiry Severnogo Kavkaza,* Moscow Carnegie Center, Gendalf, Moscow, 2001, p. 6.

Muridism, a Muslim trend, the aim of which is to destroy the Christians."[14] Much of what happened at that time has repeated itself today: Salafism replaced Muridism, which lost its political potential. It is highly attractive for those who stand opposed to the central authorities. To resolve this problem, the RF leaders are proposing that the power-wielding structures be granted more rights, the terrorists be physically destroyed, new jobs be created, and the poor regions be lavishly funded. These are half-measures: not all Salafis are terrorists; new jobs remain on paper, while funds are stolen. Here is another quote from Prof. Marc Sageman: "The greater the role of the power-wielding structures—the more terrorists there are … the fight should be limited to the ideological front."[15]

The above measures cannot defeat political Islam—they offer no adequate response to the challenge of Islamism. The Salafis are promoting the idea of an Islamic state based on the Shari'a and the Koran, values which the Muslims cherish higher than common human values. The newly created holiday—the Day of National Unity on 4 November—will do nothing to unite the nation. We have still to find a "counter-idea."

[14] V. Dal, *Tolkovy slovar zhivogo velikorusskogo iazyka,* Tsitadel Publishers, Moscow, 1998.
[15] M. Chernov, op. cit.