Russia and Islam

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, both the Russian state and Russia’s Muslim communities have struggled to find a new modus vivendi in a rapidly changing domestic and international socio-political context. At the same time as Islamic religious belief and practice have flourished, the state has become increasingly concerned about the security implications of this religious revival, reflecting and responding to a more general international concern over radicalized political Islam. This book examines contemporary developments in Russian politics, how they impact on Russia’s Muslim communities, how these communities are helping to shape the Russian state, and what insights this provides to the nature and identity of the Russian state in both its inward and outward projection. The book provides an up-to-date and broad-ranging analysis of the opportunities and challenges confronting contemporary Muslim communities in Russia that is not confined in scope to Chechnya or the North Caucasus, and which goes beyond simplistic characterisations of Muslims as a ‘threat’. Instead, it engages with the role of political Islam in Russia in a nuanced way, sensitive to regional and confessional differences, highlighting Islam’s impact on domestic and foreign policy and investigating sources of both radicalization and de-radicalization.

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Russia and Islam
State, society and radicalism

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Preface and acknowledgements

Most of the chapters of this book originated in papers given at a workshop on ‘Russia and Islam: Institutions, Regions and Foreign Policy’ run by the authors at the University of Edinburgh on 19–20 June 2008. This workshop in turn was part of the authors’ research grant ‘Radicalization and violence: The Russian dimension’ (Ref No. RES-181-25-0020) funded by the Economic and Social Research Council under research initiative ‘New Security Challenges: “Radicalisation and Violence – A Critical Reassessment”’.

One of the major aims of our research programme was to forge links between British and foreign (especially Russian) scholars studying Islam and related issues. Accordingly, we were delighted to have Akhmet Yarlykapov, Azat Khurmatullin, Alexander Verkhovsky, Elaheh Koolaee and Ruslan Kurbanov as research fellows on our project. They have all visited the UK, produced chapters for this volume and engaged with us in fruitful discussion about the topic over the course of the research programme. Special thanks are due to our research assistant, Ekaterina Braginskaia, who, in addition to producing a chapter for this book and working on her PhD, has been indispensable throughout the duration of our project in general, and the production of this book in particular.
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Glossary of Islamic terms

adat  customary law
amir  leader or head
ayat  a verse of the Qur’an
baraka  divine grace
bid‘a  unlawful innovation in Islam
da‘wa  summons to Islam and missionary activity
dhikr  practice of meditation, often accompanied by dancing and chanting
Eid al-Adha  Islamic festival celebrating sacrifice and God’s forgiveness of Ibrahim
fatwa  theological ruling
fiqh  a branch of traditional Muslim system of jurisprudence
ghazawat  holy war; term used in Caucasus for resistance against Russian expansion
giaour  infidel
hajj  annual pilgrimage to Mecca, one of five pillars of Islam
halal  lawful activities, permitted food
hijab  veil worn by Muslim women in public
hijrah  exodus, migration
i‘tikaf  act of devotion in the mosque during Ramadan
ijtihad  independent theological judgement
imam  leader in the Friday prayer at Sunni mosques
iman  Islamic faith
intifada  uprising, rebellion
ishan  Sufi leader
Jadidism  Islamic reformist movement in Russia
jamaat  (rural) community, an Islamist (combat)group
jihad  struggle, Islamic holy war
kafir  non-believer, one who rejects the message of Islam
karamat  ability to perform miracles, characteristic of Sufi shaykhs
khutba  Friday sermon
kufr  non-belief in Islam
madhhab  religious school of law in Sunni Islam (the four schools are Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi‘i and Hanbali)
madrasa  Islamic secondary school
mahalla  Islamic community
mahkama shar‘iya  shari‘a court
majlis  legislative assembly or council
mawlid (al-nabi)  celebration of the Prophet’s birthday
mazar  holy shrine
mufti  interpreter of Islamic law able to issue a fatwa; in Russia, head of Muslim Spiritual Boards
muftiat  organisation or council of muftis
mujahid (pl. mujahidin)  Islamic fighter, warrior
mullah  Muslim educated in Islamic theology and sacred law
munafiq (pl. munafiqun)  hypocrite or Muslim non-believer
murid  Sufi follower
namaz  Islamic prayer
Nowruz  celebration of Persian New Year
Salafi  promoter of pure Islam
shahidism  martyrdom in the name of Islam
shari‘a  Muslim code of law
shaykh  Islamic scholar; Sufi who is authorised to teach and guide aspiring followers
shirk  polytheism or heresy
shura  lit. consultation, Islamic council
Sufism  Islamic mysticism
Sunna  examples from Prophet Muhammad’s life and sayings used as recommended practice
taghut  idolatry and worshipping of anything other than Allah
taip  Chechen family clan
taqlid  Islamic tradition
tariqa, tariqat  Sufi order
tariqatist  proponent of Sufi Islam in the North Caucasus
tawba  repentance
tawhid  monotheism
ulama (sing. alim)  Muslim religious scholar
umma  universal community of Islam
Wahhabi  follower of Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab; term used in Russia for all Salafis
wird  a subdivision of the Sufi tariqa
zakat  annual obligatory alms tax
ziyarat  pilgrimage to Muslim holy shrine
1 Introduction

Roland Dannreuther and Luke March

In 2003, during a visit to Malaysia, then president Vladimir Putin declared Russia ‘a Muslim power’, and expressed his wish that Russia play a major role in Muslim global affairs. Yet Putin’s aspirations have barely influenced Euro-Atlantic understandings of Russian conduct, which have tended to see Russia’s Orthodox Christian traditions as most relevant both to its identity and foreign policy. Indeed, many prominent commentators have seen Russian policies as a reformulation of the reactionary Tsarist doctrine of ‘Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Nationality’ in which the symbiosis of Orthodox, state and national identity was central to the legitimization of an autocratic, imperial state.¹

So it is easy to forget that some 15 to 20 million Russians are Muslims, over ten per cent of the population, and that Islam is Russia’s second most professed religion. Islam is a topic of obvious central importance in global and European politics today. The growth of Muslim communities across Europe raised questions of representation, integration, cultural adaptation and exclusion well before 9/11 brought the spectre of ‘radicalized’ political Islam to the fore. Yet Russia represents an often-neglected but critical dimension in this debate.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, both the Russian state and Russia’s Muslim communities have struggled to find a new modus vivendi in a rapidly changing domestic and international socio-political context. At the same time as Muslim religious belief and practice have flourished and blossomed, the state has become increasingly concerned about the security implications of this religious revival, reflecting and responding to a more general international concern over political Islam.

The first decade of post-Soviet Russia, under the presidency of Boris Yeltsin, was characterized by rapid economic and political change and state fragmentation and decentralization, which affected both state and political institutions and religious structures. State power became increasingly devolved to the regions and it was Muslim-dominant republics, most notably Chechnya and Tatarstan, which sought to gain the greatest degree of autonomy and, in Chechnya’s case, full independence. The Soviet-inherited central Muslim authority, the Spiritual Board of Muslims, similarly fragmented into diverse affiliations and institutions. At the same time, Russian Muslims found themselves open to influence from the rest of the Muslim world to an extent never before experienced. In Chechnya,
this influence included radical Islamist ideology and over the decade the conflict in Chechnya increasingly became part of the global ‘landscape of jihad’, to use Faisal Devji’s suggestive phrase, along with Bosnia, Palestine, Afghanistan and Kashmir.\(^2\)

However, under Putin’s presidency from 2000 to 2008, Russia saw a significant reversal of decentralization and fragmentation processes. A second war in Chechnya saw a substantial re-establishment of Moscow’s control and the emergence of a loyal Chechen leadership which has enforced the marginalization, though far from the elimination, of the Islamist opposition. The autonomy and quasi-independence of other republics, such as Tatarstan, have been considerably reduced as the central powers of the state have been enhanced in the name of restoring the so-called ‘power vertical’. The Kremlin has also taken much more proactive measures to promote a consolidated Russian national identity, utilizing in particular the idea of ‘sovereign democracy’ to mark Russia’s historical mission as a unique civilizational force. These developments have been accompanied by a greater emphasis on national cohesion and conformity to dominant state-approved norms and practices. In terms of its external projection, these domestic trends have been paralleled by attempts to limit the influence of outside actors, while seeking to project Russia’s revived status as a Great Power in international politics. This is particularly evident in relations with the Muslim world. Considerable efforts have been expended to reduce the penetration of foreign Muslim influences, while Russia has sought to reassert its traditional influence and power in the Middle East and elsewhere.

Such developments, particularly on the cusp of the partial political transition from President Putin to President Medvedev in 2008, make it especially appropriate to take stock of the role of Islam in Russia now. In the transition from Yeltsin to Putin, we have observed dramatic changes in state power in general and the state’s relationship to society and religion in particular: alongside a transformation of the quasi-democratic anarchy of the 1990s to systematized authoritarianism, dominant ideologies of liberal nationalism and laissez-faire liberalism have been replaced by more conservative traditionalist nationalism and state interventionism; decentralization has become recentralization, dis-institutionalization is now re-institutionalization, international weakness is now geopolitical reassertion. Above all, state disinterest in religion has become re-engagement with and reintegration of Russia’s ‘traditional’ faiths: Orthodoxy, Islam, Judaism and Buddhism.

Although there have been several English-language books on Islam in contemporary Russia, the majority have concentrated exclusively on the North Caucasus (the conflict in Chechnya above all).\(^3\) There have been a number of good overviews, although they have predominately-historical emphases and, since they concentrate on the Yeltsin era, do not reflect on the aforementioned post-millennium changes.\(^4\) Shireen Hunter’s analysis is one of the most detailed and broad ranging (like our own volume, it engages with domestic and foreign policy). However, it too takes a predominately-historical approach, concentrating on Islam’s role in emergent Russian national identity prior to 2002.\(^5\) So it takes
little account of recent issues such as the impact of growing Muslim communities in larger cities or the reconstruction of Chechnya and, indeed, the question of radicalization.

Islamic radicalization has indeed become central to more recent studies. As its title implies, Gordon Hahn’s 2007 book *Russia’s Islamic Threat* deals with Islam primarily as an existential challenge to Russian ethno-political stability and state integrity and to Russian and international security. This originally Chechnya-based threat has developed networks throughout Russia and links with global Islamist jihad. Hahn does address Putin-era policies and (some of) the divisions within Russian Islam; his central thesis is that Russian authoritarian centralization is becoming a key driver in the consolidation and spread of militant Islam far beyond the North Caucasus. This direct relationship between authoritarianism and radicalization is certainly open to question, and this connection is arguably much more nuanced and regionally variable. Galina Yemelianova’s forthcoming book has a broader approach, both geographically and conceptually, although it too is focused on radical Islam. First, it examines radicalization in Russia’s Muslim regions and the Muslim republics of the former Soviet Union; second, it has a broader analysis of the drivers of radicalization, including national cultures and religious, socio-economic dynamics, and international networks.

**Aims of the book**

This volume has a different logic and content to these studies. Our principal focus is to provide a better understanding of state–Muslim relations: how contemporary developments in Russian politics (and Putin’s policies in particular) have affected Russia’s Muslims, how Muslims are helping to shape the Russian state, and what insights this provides as to the nature and identity of the Russian state both in its inward and outward projection. Our volume highlights several factors that, we believe, have received insufficient attention in works to date:

- **The diversity of Russian Islam.** Although it is a truism that Russia has many Islams, far from all scholarly works give this sufficient attention. The historical, regional, cultural and ethnic differences that might hinder a unified Russian umma (global community) must be at the centre of attention. One of our primary aims is therefore an exploration of this diversity of Islamic expression within Russia, radical and moderate, global, national and regional, state-focused or internet-based. Accordingly, we explore Russia’s multiple Islams through several cases, not just in Chechnya and the North-Caucasus, but also in Tatarstan and the Volga-Urals region and in the less-known case of Moscow.
- **Discourses and concepts.** A related point is our focus on divergent approaches to Islam and political Islam in the dominant official, academic, media and popular discourses, as well as amongst Muslims themselves. Of particular interest are the sources and processes of change in key concepts, such as extremism and radicalism, traditionalism and fundamentalism that are commonly applied to Russia’s Muslim communities.
The comparative dimension. Studies of Russian Islam and global Islam tend to be mutually exclusive, taking little account of each other (the principal exception being analyses of the influence of global Islamism in the Caucasus). One of our concerns, in the comparative chapters in particular, is the extent to which the Russian experience is unique or broadly congruent with developments elsewhere, above all for Muslim communities in other European countries. We seek to explore the extent to which methods of analysis for understanding political Islam, drawn from different regions and academic traditions, can be helpfully applied to the Russian case.

Policy impacts. We seek to look explicitly at the dynamics in the socio-legal, institutional and security frameworks of the state’s engagement with its Muslim population, identifying the key policies and policy outcomes. We explore the consequences of Putin-era re-centralization, re-integration and re-engagement with Muslims. A particular focus is on the responsiveness and overall success of state policies, particularly as regards combating radicalization and balancing the demands of Muslim populations, wider society and government.

The international dimension. One of our main topics is the extent to which there is, or is not, a connection between Russia’s domestic state–Muslim nexus and communities in the wider Muslim world, in particular nearby countries in Central Asia and the Middle East. We examine the extent to which Islam is a factor in Russia’s mutual relations with these countries, focusing in particular on Central Asia and Iran, and the degree to which this facilitates or complicates Russia’s overall ambitions in its foreign policy projection.

The aim of our volume is therefore to provide a broad-ranging analysis of the opportunities and challenges confronting contemporary Muslim populations in Russia that is not confined in geographical scope to the North Caucasus, and which aims to challenge essentialist characterizations of Muslims as a ‘threat’. Instead, it engages with the role of political Islam in Russia in a nuanced way, sensitive to regional and confessional differences, which emphasizes Islam’s impact on domestic and foreign policy and investigates sources of both radicalization and de-radicalization as part of a wider concern with state–Muslim relations.

Plan of chapters

Our first two chapters concentrate on discourses and frameworks of analysis. In chapter 2, Roland Dannreuther sets out the broad context of Russian approaches to understanding Islam in Russia. This context includes:

- the impact of historical legacies on defining and understanding the role of Russia’s Muslim population;
- the principal ways in which Russian approaches have changed over the post-Soviet period;
• analysis of particular Russian approaches to understanding and conceptualizing moderation and radicalization (particularly the dualism between ‘loyal’ or ‘official’ Islam and ‘unofficial’ and potentially ‘disloyal’ Islam, and the peculiarity of the often-used term ‘Wahhabism’); and
• the degree to which Russian approaches are unique, or have parallels elsewhere.

In the third chapter, Alexander Verkhovsky analyses the effect of shifts in state/public discourses on legal frameworks towards radicalism and extremism, the prism through which Islam has increasingly been interpreted. Verkhovsky shows how public discussions, legislation and law enforcement became increasingly Islam-focused, before returning to more generic anti-extremism in recent years. The general trend is decreasing state toleration for ‘extremism’ and ‘terrorism’ and an emerging ‘one-size-fits-all’ legal framework whose vagueness permits arbitrariness of action and a tendency to criminalize a broad range of often moderate and harmless groups. Muslims have been one of the groups most affected by this tendency, although their treatment has been far from unique.

In the following two chapters, we move explicitly to comparative approaches towards Islam. In chapter 4, Ekaterina Braginskaia discusses the three different traditions of state integration of Muslim communities: British liberal multiculturalism, French egalitarian republicanism and Russian ‘vertical’ administration. Despite significant differences, the three countries share remarkable similarities in their engagement with Muslims, including the development of measures to promote ‘national’ forms of moderate Islam, with which they selectively engage. This ‘domestication’ of Islam involves each state integrating it within its institutional framework of state–religion relations, while granting Muslim citizens equal religious and cultural rights. The chapter draws several cross-national lessons in how best to integrate Muslim populations.

In chapter 5, Stephen Hutchings, Galina Miazhevich, Chris Flood and Henri Nickels examine how, in comparison with its UK and French equivalents, Russian ‘Establishment’ television manages ‘tolerance’ (inter-ethnic cohesion, the role of religion, free speech and legal rights) in general and the topic of ‘Islamic extremism’ in particular. Using brief case studies, the chapter assesses how each channel has internalized official inter-ethnic cohesion policies, and identifies the common challenges each confronts. Well-intentioned strategies for avoiding Islamophobia and supporting tolerance are prone to contradiction. It is Russian reporting, in which the state–media symbiosis is most complete, where these contradictions are most apparent.

The central section of the book focuses on regional case studies of Muslim populations, first across wider Russia and then in the Caucasus. In chapter 6, Luke March analyses the contemporary dynamics, demands and challenges within Moscow’s Muslim population. Moscow is fast becoming one of the most important centres of Russian Islam. Although this growing Muslim presence has not yet posed the problems of Muslim accommodation that confront authorities in
London and Paris, increasing demands for Muslim cultural and religious articulation are present, to which the state is proving slow to respond, potentially increasing disenchantment amongst Moscow’s Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

In the following chapter, Azat Khurmatullin explores the ways in which Islam and nationalism have been inter-connected over the last 20 years in Tatarstan, one of Russia’s main Muslim regions, concentrating above all on relations between the republican authorities, the national movement and spiritual leaders. Traditionally, Islam has been used instrumentally by the Tatar national movement and republican authorities alike to further demands for greater autonomy or independence from the federal centre. Overall, Tatarstan remains an exemplar of moderation and stability, with the mass potential of unofficial, radical forms of Islam as yet relatively limited, despite increasing Islamization of intellectual life.

Galina Yemelianova then examines divergent trends of Islamic radicalization in Russia, focusing on the Volga-Urals and North Caucasus regions. She explains how the different histories of Islamization and the relations with the Russian political centre and Russian culture influenced the nature and intensity of the post-Communist Islamic revival and Islamic radicalization in both regions. She demonstrates how in the Volga-Urals region Islamic radicalization has occurred largely within intellectual and theological debates. In the North Caucasus, however, radical Islam has transcended doctrinal discourse and fused with politics.

In chapter 9, Akmet Yarlykapov addresses the radicalization of North Caucasian Muslims in particular. He identifies multiple forms of radical Islam, including not only the Salafi/Wahhabi movement but also a radicalized neo-traditionalist or tariqatist (neo-Sufi) current. These radical movements have become a significant challenge to regional stability, the authority of the federal government, and the security and prosperity of the North Caucasus population. There has also been a major shift in the dynamics of radicalization in the North Caucasus away from ethnic separatism to a pan-Caucasian jihadist movement rebelling against the power of the ‘infidel state’ and seeking to create a Muslim state across the Caucasus.

In the following chapter, Ruslan Kurbanov focuses on the website www.jamaatshariat.com, belonging to the radical Dagestani ‘Shariat’ jamaat (Islamist group), arguing that analysis of the factors behind the creation of the website and its key objectives and achievements can help determine the real potential of the jamaat itself and the degree of influence it exerts on young Muslims. The chapter outlines how the gradual development of the main objectives of the website and its thematic content closely followed the evolution and development of the jamaat. Inevitably, the website was heavily influenced by the ideology espoused by the insurgents, by the strategic and tactical steps taken by them, and also reflects their ideological and intellectual weaknesses and the limitations in their military preparedness.

John Russell’s chapter 11 outlines how Chechnya has secured an unprecedented degree of autonomy within the Russian Federation. It also analyses a related outcome, whereby the renaissance of Sufism, long regarded by the Soviets
as a dangerous form of Islam, has been fostered in Chechnya in an attempt to prevent a more extreme brand of Islam (Wahhabism). The chapter also dissects the crucial role in Russian policy played by Akhmad and Ramzan Kadyrov. Applying William Zartman’s analysis of ‘the intersection of need, creed and greed’, it becomes apparent that issues of both ‘greed’ and ‘need’ have actually played a considerably more important role in the Moscow–Chechnya relationship than ‘creed’ (religion).

Our final two chapters analyse Russia’s interaction with the Muslim world. In chapter 12, Matteo Fumagalli assesses the security predicament of those Central Asian states most severely exposed to Islamic radicalism, principally Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Asking how this exposure has framed their security discourses and their relations with Russia, Fumagalli identifies an ‘insecurity dilemma’, whereby state weakness has led to the framing of the Islamic factor as an existential threat to the local regimes. This has resulted in measures aimed at enhancing the security of the regimes in the short term, which includes reliance on Russian support, but which he argues ultimately undermine state security in the long run.

In chapter 13, Elaheh Koolaee focuses on the rapprochement between Iran and Russia, a relationship that appears unaffected by either Chechnya or Russia’s reassertion of policies towards its Central Asian neighbours. This rapprochement reflects a certain degree of ideological convergence around Eurasianism and anti-Westernism, but is primarily driven by pragmatic factors. Overall, the Russian–Iran relationship is mutually important in geopolitical terms. The issue of Islam has not, on the surface, been a source of conflict or harm to the relationship. But, at a deeper level, there remain significant differences in self-identity, historical memories and mutual distrust, which limit the depth and potential of co-operation to develop into a truly strategic bilateral relationship.

Notes


8 Roland Dannreuther and Luke March

5 Hunter, *Islam in Russia*.
2 Russian discourses and approaches to Islam and Islamism

Roland Dannreuther

Russia has had a long and intensive engagement with Islam and with the Muslim world. Exceptionally for a European country, the Russian state was forged through the repression and conquest of Muslim political entities and through the incorporation of a significant Muslim minority as a part of its indigenous population. Muslim Tatars have over 400 years of living and coexisting within the Russian state. The subsequent imperial expansion of the Russian state incorporated further substantial Muslim communities, most notably in the Caucasus and Central Asia. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 significantly reduced the formal territorial control exercised by Moscow, but the legacies of imperial expansion remain evident in the restive Muslim communities of the North Caucasus and in the large-scale migration of Central Asian Muslims into post-Soviet Russia. In terms of external politics, Russia has had a similarly intense and complex engagement with the Muslim world. Imperial Russia fought three major wars with the Ottoman Empire and there were over three centuries of conflict and imperial competition in the Near and Middle East. The Soviet Union continued this tradition, seeking to play a powerful and active role in the Middle East which would diminish or usurp US and Western influence in the region. In the end, it was Muslim resistance through the struggle of the mujahidin in Afghanistan which played a key role in the collapse of the Soviet Union.

This chapter seeks to examine contemporary Russian discourses and approaches to Islam and Islamism and provide an analysis which takes into account the historical realities of Russia’s internal Muslim composition and the Russian state’s important and enduring set of relations with the Muslim world. This first involves an assessment of how the legacies of history and the experiences of the Soviet and pre-Soviet past continue to influence post-Soviet perceptions and understandings of Russia’s engagement with Islam. This is then followed by an examination and comparison of views and perceptions of key elites in post-Soviet Russia, seeking to answer a number of inter-related questions. How have post-Soviet leaders approached and adapted to the challenges of the increasing Islamization of Russia’s Muslim communities, including the dynamics of Islamist radicalization? How have Russian academics, intellectuals and policy analysts sought to frame understandings and conceptualizations of these societal transformations? And how have Russian Muslims themselves responded to the
opportunities and challenges of an often-chaotic post-Soviet Russia to forge their own distinctive self-identity?

Inevitably, this chapter can only hope to provide a partial and incomplete picture of the complex mix of Russian discourses and approaches to the Islamic renaissance in post-Soviet Russia. Nevertheless, it is possible to identify two particular themes or aspects. First, there is a strongly engrained tendency among Russian elites, both Muslim and non-Muslim, to constructing a model which places a ‘loyal’ or ‘official’ Russian Islam in opposition to an ‘unofficial’, and potentially ‘disloyal’, foreign Islam. This perception of a dualism and opposition in the heart of Russian Muslim identity and practice reflects a recognition, on the one hand, of the rootedness of Islam in Russia and, on the other, of the territorial disembodiment of Islam as a universal religion which necessarily transcends and potentially threatens the Russian state. What is more difficult to articulate in the Russian context is the idea of a pluralistic Islam, where multiple interpretations are both possible and desirable. Second, Russian commentators tend to view Russia’s history and its historical interaction with Muslims as highly distinctive, if not unique, and argue that there is a limited utility to comparing Russia’s challenges to other parts of the world, such as Western Europe or the Middle East. This is, admittedly, not just a failing among Russian but also among Western analysts who tend to focus on the ‘exceptional’ nature of Russian politics and to accord prominence to Soviet legacies rather than the broader global dynamics and influences of Islamic and Islamist expression. (As this chapter and other contributions of this volume seek to demonstrate, there is much that can be valuably interpreted by a comparative analysis of developments within Russia with other parts of the world.)

**Historical legacies: Soviet and pre-Soviet**

Nevertheless, Russian Islam does have its specific features and these can only be understood through Russian history. It is this historical experience which provides a key explanation for distinctive Russian approaches and understandings of Islam and Muslim identity. Islam in Russia can be divided into two main periods – the Tsarist and the Soviet. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, there has been a significant intellectual and academic effort to recover the pre-revolutionary tradition and practices of Russia’s Muslim peoples. Russian orientalists have been significantly involved in this revival and reconstruction, the fruits of which can be seen in the comprehensive multi-volume encyclopaedia, *Islam on the Territory of the Former Russian Empire*, the first volume of which was published in 1998. The main practical ambition of this collection, which reflects other similar officially approved exercises, is to highlight the pluralism and internal regional differentiation of Russian Islam, the co-existence of Muslims with Orthodox Christians, and the pre-revolutionary tradition of inter-religious tolerance and Muslim intellectual dynamism. Particular attention is given to the Jadidist movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which was led by the Tatar intelligentsia and promoted a reformist Islam compatible
with modernity and liberalism.\textsuperscript{4} The clear underlying implication is that Russia’s Muslim community can, after the historical aberration of the Soviet period, again become one of the leading intellectual centres of the Muslim world.\textsuperscript{5}

Such attempts to resurrect a tolerant pre-revolutionary tradition are problematic on two accounts. First, the historical record of pre-Soviet Russia is mixed with as much repression and discrimination of Muslims as their inclusion and incorporation. This ambivalence is captured well by one of the new generation of Tatar scholars, Damir Mukhetdinov, who unequivocally states that, on the one hand, ‘to serve, defend, to share their general fate with the Russian Orthodox people is genetically lodged in [Tatar] blood’ but that, on the other hand, ‘Muslims, whose historical memory has not forgotten the brutality of the period of the occupation of Kazan, see their Russian foes as wanting to convert all Tatars, capture their children, and to impose by force the Orthodox faith’.\textsuperscript{6} Tsarist Russia always accorded primacy to the Orthodox Church and many leaders of the Church traditionally viewed Islam as a heresy and conversion of Muslims as a noble mission. From the capture of Kazan, for over two hundred years until the institution of religious tolerance under Catherine the Great, Muslim Tatars were not permitted to practise their faith and many were forcibly converted. These memories are not forgotten among Russian Tatars.

The second problem is that the Soviet period cannot simply be treated as an aberration and its legacy and impact ignored. Admittedly, unlike the Tsarist period, the brutality and repression of Muslims during Soviet times is not generally contested. In post-Soviet Russia, Islam has enjoyed, along with the other so-called ‘traditional religions’ of Orthodox Christianity, Buddhism and Judaism, a state-tolerated revival and resurgence where Soviet-style discriminations and restrictions have been lifted or significantly reduced. The consequence has been a more liberal and favourable environment for Muslim belief and practice in Russia than was ever experienced, certainly during the Soviet period, and arguably in the whole history of the Russian state. But, this seeming transcendence of the evident Soviet legacy of repression and persecution does not mean that deeper and more hidden aspects of this legacy are not still powerful and do not continue to exert significant influence. A key example is how Soviet concepts and categories continue to provide the conscious and unconscious ways in which Russian Muslims and non-Muslims understand and approach Islam as a religion and socio-political force.

For instance, Soviet conceptual lenses continue to define and categorize the potential threat that Islam presents to the post-Soviet state. In particular, a strong legacy remains of the Soviet distinction between an official Islam, which was co-opted and loyal to the state, and an unofficial Islam which was uncontrolled, ‘popular’ and challenged the monopoly of the state and Marxist–Leninist ideology. During the Soviet period, this distinction became entrenched after World War II, once official Muslim religious institutions were re-established and it was recognized that communist ideology had not yet succeeded in overcoming the persistence of Islam at a popular level. Much like modernization theory in the West, which presented Muslims as faced with an existential choice between
‘Mecca and mechanization’, Soviet ideologues and anthropologists viewed popular Islam as the relic of a pre-modern past which was holding back the Muslim parts of the Soviet Union. State-approved official Islam sought to demonstrate a model of a more advanced Islam compatible with, if not fully aligned to, Soviet culture and dictates. Unofficial Islam was not only presented as backward and impregnated with pre-Islamic shamanistic practices but also as being inherently hostile to Soviet progress and modernity. A number of prominent Western scholars also adopted this Sovietological distinction but inverted it to present the case that Islam and Muslims in the Soviet Union, aided by their fast demographic growth rates, represented potentially the most significant internal threat to the Soviet system.

Despite the collapse of the Soviet Union and the formal rejection of the Soviet legacy in its treatment of Muslims, the Soviet-inherited dualistic categorization continues to exert an influence on perceptions of Islam in post-Soviet Russia. As in the Soviet period, both Russian and Western commentators are prone to its logic. The distinction between an official and an unofficial Islam remains critical for many scholars in defining post-Soviet Russian Muslim practices and movements. Unofficial Islam, now defined primarily in terms of ‘non-traditional’ Salafi practice and movements, is viewed by a number of Russian and Western commentators as the most significant threat to the integrity of the Russian state. Even the demographic threat of a burgeoning Russian Muslim population has been resurrected as a potential Achilles heel for the state’s future stability.

The problem with this often-unconscious adoption of an oppositional duality in post-Soviet Islam is twofold. First, as in the Soviet period, it tends to assume the incommensurability of a Muslim identity with a Soviet or Russian identity and to overlook the possibility of Muslims being loyal (or at least not disloyal) Soviet or Russians citizens simultaneously. Academic studies of nationalism now recognize that identities are more often overlapping and multiple than single and exclusive. In the Soviet Union, it is now clear, particularly given the loyalty of the Muslim republics to the preservation of the union during perestroika, that there was no necessary contradiction between a commitment to Islam and to Soviet power. Similarly, in post-Soviet Russia there is a danger simply of assuming that Russian Muslims are predisposed to disloyalty to the Russian state and that their religious faith is in essential contradiction and opposition to the Russian nation and statehood.

The second problem is that the Soviet-inherited dualism is highly reductionist. What is distinctive about Islam as a religion is that its egalitarian and non-hierarchic structure tends naturally to generate a multiplicity of interpretations and expressions of Islamic practice and belief. Reducing this multiplicity of Muslim expressions into a simple oppositional form, a positive ‘us’ against a negative ‘them’, politicizes Islam into a simple state-approved and state-opposed bipolar form. In the post-Soviet period, this is expressed as an opposition between ‘Wahhabism’, which is seen as both foreign and extremist, and a ‘traditional’ Russian Islam, which is seen to be rooted in Russian Islamic culture. Paradoxically, this bifurcated distinction is a reverse image of the Soviet conceptualization of Islam. During the
Soviet period, it was traditional Islam which was viewed as backward, regressive and disloyal, while official Islam promoted a pure or pristine Islam, shorn of popular or traditional practices, and was closer to both modernism and Salafism.\textsuperscript{14} Ironically, the Soviet legacy is to some extent evident in the popularity of Salafi Islam in post-Soviet Russia which, consonant with the official Soviet line, views Sufism as a perversion of Islam and traditional Islam as ignorant and backward. What is absent from both these Soviet and post-Soviet accounts is a recognition of the pluralistic essence of Islam and a lack of toleration for difference. As such, this tends to exacerbate rather than reduce conflict.

One further Soviet-inherited legacy which also needs to be taken into account is related to the categories of ethnicity and nationality. The conventional view that the Soviet Union engaged in a coercive exercise to ‘destroy’ and ‘break’ nations has now been challenged by the argument that the Soviet authorities engaged in a systematic attempt at ethno-national construction and were remarkably successful in this exercise, convincingly presenting their constructions as eternal primordialist givens.\textsuperscript{15} With the demise of the Soviet Union and communism, the salience of these Soviet-constructed ethno-national identities has only grown. One way in which ethnicity continues to assert a primacy over religious identity can be seen in the conflation of religious and ethnic identity in the term ‘ethnic Muslims’, a concept specific to Russia.\textsuperscript{16} The popularity and unreflective use of this term highlights a general Russian tendency to see ethnic identity as primordial and religion as subordinate to, and a function, of ethnic identity. In practice, for most post-Soviet (but Soviet-trained) elites, the model of an acceptable traditional Islam is of a set of religious customs and folkloric practices which, as in the Soviet period, adorn but do not challenge ethnic and national communities in any serious manner. The problem with this narrow and attenuated understanding of the role of religion is that it makes such elites unable to understand how others might legitimately see a religious tradition as an integral, rather than an external and superficial, part of an ethnic or national culture, which might make legitimate autonomous demands in terms of social and political norms and practices. To an even greater extent, it makes it difficult to accept as legitimate those who express unease at the subordination of a universal religion to a particularist ethnic or national identity and who are attracted to a religious identity which transcends such ethno-national divisions and fragmentation.

**Official discourses and approaches**

The legacy of the Soviet approach to Islam, and the periodic recognition of its limitations, is evident in the discourses and approaches adopted by the Russian leadership since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Although the presidencies of Boris Yeltsin during the 1990s and of Vladimir Putin in the 2000s differ in many significant ways, in both periods similar approaches and discourses towards Islam and Islamism, and analogous shifts in these approaches, can be identified. In both the 1990s and the 2000s, the Soviet-inherited dualism of a moderate Russian and an extremist foreign Islam was generally strongly asserted;
but in certain periods, a more differentiated and pluralistic understanding of Islam was promoted with significantly differing domestic and foreign policy implications.

In the Yeltsin period, these shifting approaches can be most clearly identified in the transition from Andrei Kozyrev’s tenure as foreign minister (1990–6), to Yevgenii Primakov’s (1996–8). In the immediate post-Soviet period, Kozyrev developed a transformative foreign policy approach which paralleled the domestic economic reforms and sought to allow Russia to ‘cross over to another civilised, democratic side of the barricades, so that Russia would finally become a “normal power”’.  

It was clear that, for Kozyrev and his liberal allies, the Muslim world was generally viewed as being on the ‘non-democratic’ side of the barricades and that a liberalizing and westernizing post-Soviet Russia needed to withdraw not only physically but also mentally from the culture and traditions of ‘oriental despotism’, which, it was believed, had infected and corrupted the Soviet Union. In this context, Islam and the Muslim world were viewed as the non-democratic ‘other’, and Russia’s best chance to develop as a fully consolidated Western and European democracy was through disengagement from Muslim Central Asia and the Middle East.

In practice, the ambition to withdraw swiftly from Central Asia was only partially reversed when the civil war in Tajikistan, which pitted an Islamist opposition against the incumbent neo-communist government, was seen potentially to threaten the stability of Russia itself. Defence Minister Pavel Grachev explicitly warned that if the Tajik opposition were to succeed this would lead to further penetration of Islamic fundamentalism to the North – Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and further North. It ought not be forgotten that there are 20 million Muslims in Russia. If we do not extinguish the flames of war in Tajikistan, it could have dangerous consequences for Russia. 

Although these fears did contribute to Russian intervention on the side of the embattled government forces in Tajikistan, there appears to have been little genuine anxiety about the Islamic threat to the integrity of the Russian Federation. Independence movements in Tatarstan and Chechnya were interpreted almost exclusively in ethnic, national and criminal rather than in religious terms. Domestically, the Yeltsin administration adopted an open and liberal policy towards the activities of foreign Muslim governments and organizations in fostering and supporting the Islamic resurgence within Russia. The general assumption was that Islamist extremism confronted backward Afghanistan or Tajikistan but was a not a serious threat to Russia’s own westernized and secularized Muslims. In this early post-Soviet period, therefore, the Soviet-inherited dualistic separation between a foreign extremist Islam and a loyal indigenous Islam served to reassure the new elites that Russian Islam was somehow inoculated from Islamist penetration.

Such a sense of reassurance dissipated significantly as the 1990s progressed. This was in part due to changing international and national circumstances. The victory of the Taliban in Afghanistan in 1996, the incursions of groups like the
Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan into the heart of Central Asia in the late 1990s and the increasingly prominent role played by transnational jihadists in Chechnya accentuated elite fears of Islamist extremism penetrating Russia from the Muslim world. Another significant factor was the new approaches to thinking about Islam and Islamism that Yevgenii Primakov brought as foreign minister from January 1996. As head of the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), he had already identified the danger for Russia of the ‘Islamic threat’ in a 1994 report. He also became foreign minister at a time when Russian relations with the West were under considerable strain, primarily due to Russia’s alarm at NATO intervention into Bosnia and at NATO enlargement. As an Arabist, who was formerly Director of the Oriental Institute in Moscow, Primakov had an extensive knowledge of and sympathy for the Middle East. As part of his general rebalancing of Russian foreign policy away from its Western-centric to a more multi-polar approach, he sought to resurrect traditional Soviet ties with the Muslim and Arab world, such as in Iraq, Syria and Egypt.

Primakov’s Arabist training also meant that he had a more sophisticated and nuanced understanding of political Islam than did Kozyrev, who tended to view it as an undifferentiated external threat. Primakov made a critical distinction between extremist Islam, which he argued was unconditionally hostile to Russian interests and could only be repressed by force, and fundamentalist Islam which might certainly be antagonistic to Russian secular values but could potentially be consonant with Russian strategic interests. This distinction provided the underlying rationale for Primakov’s cultivation of the fundamentalist regime in Iran and the subsequent Russian–Iranian cooperation over Tajikistan, which resulted in a power-sharing agreement between the Islamist opposition and the neo-communist government. This agreement represented a significant shift in Russian foreign and security policy, as previously the secular neo-communists had been unconditionally supported by Moscow and there had been no willingness to negotiate with the Islamist opposition. A similar more nuanced and differentiated policy was also tentatively (and considerably more controversially) pursued in the North Caucasus when the Interior Minister Sergei Stepashin sought to negotiate a peaceful compromise in Dagestan between the official religious establishment and the radical Salafist opposition. This religio-political conflict had become increasingly more tense in the late 1990s, not least due to radicalizing influences coming from lawless Chechnya, and ultimately led to the Salafists setting up an autonomous zone in some western districts of Dagestan. Although this was highly provocative, Stepashin held to the view that dialogue was possible and that a political compromise could potentially be negotiated, which recognized rather than eliminated different outlooks in religious expression.

Such initiatives were perceived as excessively liberal and effectively eliminated Stepashin for the candidacy of presidential successor. Instead, Vladimir Putin was elected in 2000 on a record of uncompromising opposition to Islamist extremism through his forceful responses to the Chechen intervention into Dagestan in 1999 and the simultaneous succession of deadly terrorist bombings in Moscow. With Putin, the Soviet-inherited dualism of a foreign extremist Islam
and a loyal Russian Islam was resurrected with a vengeance. Islamic fundamentalism and international terrorism became virtually synonymous and Putin placed Russia at the forefront of the international struggle against Islamist extremism. In Dagestan, Wahhabism was legally banned and the security and military forces were directed to eliminate, rather than negotiate or compromise with, the radical Islamist elements. In neighbouring Chechnya, Putin initiated a second war which was better prepared and more ruthless than the first campaign, providing the military with *carte blanche* in terms of strategy, rigorously excluding the international media, and refusing to consider any compromise and negotiations with the Chechen resistance. Putin whole-heartedly joined the Western coalition in the ‘war on terrorism’ and supported the intervention into Afghanistan to topple the Taliban.

The surge in Putin’s domestic popularity was clearly linked to the perception that, in contrast to the vacillations and indecisiveness of the Yeltsin years, Putin had taken a resolute and determined approach to resolving the Chechen issue and to curtailing Islamist extremism. Putin was particularly careful in presenting the struggle as one which sought to eliminate the threat of a foreign extremist Islam through protecting and restoring traditional Russian Islam, which was presented as both moderate and committed to peaceful co-existence. The most notable exemplification of this was the co-option of Akhmad Kadyrov, who had previously been the Mufti of Chechnya and who had earlier declared a ‘holy war’ against Russia, as the leader of Chechnya’s pro-Russian government. Kadyrov’s elevation provided a critical symbolic representation that Putin’s strategy was not anti-Islamic in intent but only targeted extremist Islam.

However, such ‘pro-Muslim’ initiatives were counter-balanced by the overall reliance on the exclusive use of force and a series of repressive legislative measures, which proved to be harder to sell the broader Muslim public. The evident brutality of the second Chechen war significantly damaged Russia’s image in the Muslim world, as did the enthusiasm that Putin appeared to demonstrate in supporting the US-led ‘war on terror’. Within Russia, the exclusive focus on radical Islam as the principal cause of the conflict in Chechnya and the rest of the North Caucasus failed to address the corruption and ineffective governance of local and federal authorities which many local Muslims saw as the real underlying causes of conflict. More generally, the sense that all Muslims were being potentially tarred by the association of Islam with violence accentuated fears that the state was implicitly supporting a revival of a less tolerant and more xenophobic Russian nationalism.

These limitations in the discourse and approach taken in the early Putin period led eventually to significant policy shifts which have certain parallels with the changes made by Primakov. As with NATO enlargement in the late 1990s, so
the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 prompted a markedly more anti-Western tilt in Russian foreign policy. This provided an opening for a deliberate and more sustained campaign to improve Russia’s image and relations with the Muslim world, which included a far greater official emphasis on the multi-ethnic composition of Russia; the recognition of the vital role played by Russian Muslims; and the conceptualization of Russia as a Eurasian country with a unique mix of European and Asian values. In 2003, Putin even ventured to proclaim that ‘Russia is to a significant extent a part of the Muslim world’. A significant public relations breakthrough came in 2003 when Russia joined the Organization of Islamic Conference as an observer member. In general, this policy has been successful and the Middle East and the Muslim world have increasingly viewed Russia in a more positive light.

Domestically, the Putin administration followed a parallel process of deliberately seeking to improve the state’s engagement with Russia’s Muslim communities. This involved in particular the ending of the policy of state neutrality and the laissez-faire approach of Yeltsin’s religious policy through providing financial support for Islamic activities, such as education, training of Imams, oriental scholarship and the building of mosques and other religious establishments. Although the purpose of this generous state funding has been to buttress a loyal and moderate Russian Islam (and to make up for the losses from foreign Arab and Muslim charitable support), there is also evidence that the political leadership has seen the need to qualify and provide greater differentiation to its hitherto rigid bifurcation between a loyal Russian Islam and an extremist foreign Islam. Putin has been on record saying that ‘Wahhabism in its original form is a normal tendency within Islam and there is nothing terrible in it. But there are extremist tendencies within Wahhabism itself’. This mirrors, if in rather less sophisticated form, Primakov’s distinction between extremist and fundamentalist Islam.

**Academic discourses and approaches**

Primakov’s relative sophistication was in part due to his training as an Arabist and orientalist. Russian academics trained in oriental studies have more generally contributed to the understanding of Islam and Islamism, which reflects Russia’s long and distinguished tradition of scholarship on the Muslim world. During the Soviet period, Islamicist and orientalist scholars often had a good knowledge of the religious, social and political conditions in the Middle East or other parts of the Muslim world, but rarely if ever studied Islam or the Muslim peoples within the Soviet Union. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, this was significantly reversed as funding for research abroad effectively evaporated and there was a renewed interest in the Islamic renaissance in the former Soviet Union.

Russian scholars have generally brought a more sophisticated understanding of Islam to the Russian debate and, perhaps more crucially, a recognition of the broader international and global context and how this affects Islam within Russia. But these academic contributions have not been without their divisions and controversies, which have some parallels with the so-called ‘orientalist debate’ in
the West. Ever since the publication of Edward Said’s book, *Orientalism*, there has been a vigorous debate in Western academia about the traditional discipline of oriental studies, which critics like Said have attacked for presenting Islam as an unchanging reality, imic to the modern world, and eternally driven to a radical anti-Westernism. These critics, who target in particular the work of Bernard Lewis, have argued that Islam must be understood as a complex and differentiated entity and that contemporary forms of political Islam need to be understood in sociological and not theological terms, reflecting the changing socio-economic conditions in the Muslim world and shifts in international politics, not least the post-Cold War reassertion of Western global hegemony.  

The closest that Russia comes to its own Bernard Lewis is Aleksandr Ignatenko who, like Lewis, is a renowned Arabist, philologist and specialist on the Qur’an and whose work has increasingly shifted from textual analysis to seeking to explain the root causes of the threat posed by political Islam and by Islamist terrorism. His interpretation of the causes of such religiously induced violence is primarily Qur’anic and theological, providing a close textual interpretative analysis of how Wahhabism should be properly viewed as a sectarian heresy which perverts orthodox traditional Islam through its call for religious intolerance and violence. Ignatenko heads the Institute of Religion and Politics, which has had a strong focus on Islamist terrorism and has reportedly had a significant impact on Russian counter-terrorism policy.  

Another high-profile academic, who has taken a similarly uncompromising view of the threat of radical Islam, is Roman Silant’ev. A relatively young scholar, his approach contrasts with Ignatenko by eschewing a philological approach and providing instead a detailed empirical study of Islam in post-Soviet Russia, focusing in particular on the complex conflicts and debates between the various official state-approved organizations, most notably between the Central Spiritual Board of Muslims, the inheritor of the official Soviet body, and the more recently formed but competing Council of Muftis of Russia. His accounts of the often unseemly and scandalous behaviour among Russian Muslim leaders have fostered a great deal of antagonism from the Russian Muslim community. Although his approach differs radically from Ignatenko, their positions converge in the unqualified negative representation of Wahhabism as an extremist and violent ideology and as a direct threat to Russian security and stability. For both authors, any suggestion of the need to compromise or seek a dialogue with Wahhabis is rejected as only consolidating the threat. In Silant’ev’s work, this is reflected in his warm and positive portrayal of Talgat Tajuddin, the Soviet-era head of the Central Spiritual Board, who is a rigorous opponent of Wahhabism, and his more critical portrayal of Ravil Gainutdin, the head of the Council of Muftis, who he presents as being more accommodating to radicalizing Muslim trends.  

In their differing ways, Ignatenko and Silant’ev’s intellectual contributions act to entrench, rather than to problematize, the dualistic bifurcation between a foreign extremist Islam and a moderate traditional Russian Islam. Both of them view political Islam as primarily an ideological threat and something that needs to be eliminated rather than contained. Nevertheless, within the Russian
academic discourse, there are other voices which present a more sociological and differentiated understanding of Islam and Islamism, which draws at least in part from Western anti-orientalist scholarship. Key figures in this regard are Vitalii Naumkin, the head of the Arab section of the Oriental Institute and Director of the Centre for Islamic Studies, and Aleksei Malashenko, who is scholar in residence at the Moscow Carnegie Centre.

Both Naumkin and Malashenko have made significant contributions in challenging the tendency in Russia to use Wahhabism as an undifferentiated catch-all phrase to denote any form of Islam which is perceived to diverge from traditional Russian Islam and, along with other younger scholars, they identify the potentially damaging implications of the pervasiveness of the term in the Russian context. First, they argue that this overlooks the sociological reality that Wahhabism is but one movement within the broader modern ideology of Salafism and has a number of different variants – a quietist version, which ironically includes the traditional Saudi Wahhabi model; a communitarian version which involves a separation from wider society but remains non-violent; and a radical and violent version. These distinctions, they argue, are relevant for policy-making in the Russian context. For example, the failure to differentiate between differing Salafist manifestations in the North Caucasus has itself been a significant contribution to the radicalization of the Islamist opposition and the upsurge in jihadist violence. A second problem is that use of Wahhabism entails a monolithic view of Islam where there is a ‘right’ version (traditional Islam) and a ‘wrong’ version (Wahhabism), which undermines the conception of Islam as a pluralistic religion where a multiplicity of interpretations can be accommodated. As Silant’ev’s work demonstrates, the term Wahhabism can easily degenerate into a term of abuse for the more worldly ambitions of politically active Muslim religious elites. More insidiously, it can also lead to what some analysts have seen as the ‘radicalization’ of traditional Islam (a form of neo-traditionalism) which is as intolerant as its Islamist opposition. The leaders of official or traditional Islam become not only more intolerant towards Wahhabis but also to any Muslim leaders or groups who challenge their religio-political authority. In asserting their authority, they also increasingly challenge the secular principles which constitutionally underpin the Russian state. And this leads to the third problem, that it entails policies, such as the legal prohibition of Wahhabism in Dagestan, that have counter-productive consequences, most notably alienating apolitical but devout Muslims who get caught up in the anti-Wahhabi campaigns. Similarly, by focusing on Wahhabism as a foreign Arab ideological import and as the enemy to confront, Russian policy-makers are led to overlook the domestic socio-economic and political roots of radicalization, such as the corrupt patrimonial power structures in the North Caucasus.

**Muslim discourses and approaches**

The analysis so far has not given any significant attention to the voice of Russian Muslim elites and intellectuals. In fact, Russian Muslims are themselves agents...
of their own self-definition and contribute to the debates on the appropriate discourses and approaches to Islam and Islamism. In this regard, a notable feature of the post-Soviet period is the emergence of a religious Muslim intelligentsia which simply did not exist during the Soviet era. Yet, as with the Russian political and academic elites, there are significant divisions and debates within Russia’s Muslim communities and between the various elites. At the risk of simplification, three distinct approaches towards Islam can be identified as having the greatest impact on Russian Muslim thinking – reformism or modernism, traditionalism and universalism. These three approaches also reflect the main differing currents of Islamic thought in the broader Muslim world.

Of the three, the modernist or reformist approach currently exerts the least influence on the general Russian Muslim population, though it continues to exert a strong attraction among secular intellectuals and government elites. The most notable example of a distinctively modernist Russian Islamic contribution is the ‘Euro-Islam’ project of Rafael Khakimov, a Tatar nationalist and intellectual with strong personal ties to President Mintimer Shaimiev of Tatarstan (outlined further in Chapter 7). The modernist approach was most influential in the 1990s when the Tatar nationalist revival saw itself as the successor of the Tatar-led modernist Jadidist tradition of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which had sought to radically reform traditional Islam so that it would be compatible with modernity and with secular liberal values. Khakimov’s ‘Euro-Islam’ project was part of a general post-Soviet ambition for Tatarstan to become both a religio-cultural centre for the Russian Muslim world and a European centre for religio-political moderation through institutionalizing a dynamic fusion of Islam and modernity and of Europe and Asia.

However, the influence of such modernist approaches, with their rejection of what they presented as traditional obscurantism, has become increasingly marginal, not only at a popular level but also among Muslim elites. One factor behind this is overt political patronage from the authorities, as seen with Khakimov’s close links with the Tatarstani political establishment. This strengthens the perception that projects like ‘Euro-Islam’ represent a continuity with the Soviet practice of co-opting religion as an ideological support for, rather than a challenge to, the secular political order. This also leaves modernist approaches vulnerable to the critique that they are explicitly heterodox, seeking not just to update Islamic doctrine and practice but also to reject orthodox Islam. A particular bone of contention in this regard is the rejection of the traditional schools of Islamic law, the madhhabs, which modernist interpretations like ‘Euro-Islam’ reject as backward and retrogressive. The suspicion is that figures like Khakimov promote an attenuated secularist Islam which is effectively a tool of the political authorities seeking, like their Soviet predecessors, to strictly control religious freedom of expression. The promotion of an analogous ‘Russian Islam’ in the early 2000s by the federal authorities in the Volga-Ural federal region, whose barely hidden political objective was to change the language of Islam in Russia from Tatar to Russian, only increased suspicions of the political manipulation of Islam through the discourse of progress and modernity.
These critiques of a modernist reformist Islam have undoubtedly strengthened the traditionalist ulama (scholars) and religious establishments, and their claims that orthodox Islam, while preserving a degree of religious autonomy separate from the state, is nevertheless fully compatible with loyalty to it. While this has been increasingly accepted by the Russian political authorities, the traditionalist approach faces a real problem of defining what exactly is represented by traditional Islam in the Russian context. The challenge here is that, in practice, there are multiple traditional Islams and much competition between them for the orthodox standard. On strictly religio-theological grounds, there are differences between the Hanafi madhhab (school of law), which is prevalent in the Volga-Urals region, and the Shafi‘i madhhab, prevalent in the North Caucasus. Yet within the North Caucasus, there are further divisions between Sufi- and non-Sufi-dominated religious establishments. These legal–doctrinal differences are further exacerbated by internal ethno-national divisions and inter-regional competition, with for example Tatars asserting their pre-eminence in Russia’s Islamic religious tradition – a pre-eminence rejected in Dagestan where the religious leadership sees itself as preserving a pure form of Islam uncorrupted by Russian domination and cultural assimilation. But even between the traditional Tatar religious establishments there are significant tensions and divisions, as most explicitly expressed through the competition between Tajuddin’s Ufa-based Central Spiritual Directorate and Gainutdin’s Moscow-based Council of Muftis.

For many Russian Muslims, particularly among the migrant communities and the younger generation, traditional Islam can appear more as a defence of a particularist cultural tradition than the expression of a universalist and transnational religious faith. The traditionalist religious establishment is also seen as being compromised by its unseemly competition for political support and its willing co-option into federal or republican state-approved structures. Among the younger generation, there is also a strong sense of a usurpation of religious authority by an older Soviet-trained elite which is rarely justified by their theological or religious knowledge. For these young Muslims, as well as for the increasingly large Muslim migrant communities in large Russian cities, the generalized sense of alienation from particularist ethnic Muslim identity makes the call of a universalist transnational Islam attractive and they find that this is often most clearly and logically expressed by a Salafist ideology. The appeal of a ‘pure’ Islam, which prioritizes a Muslim over an ethnic or national identity, also provides a connection with the global dynamics of the radicalization of Islamic thought and practice. As such, it sets challenges not only for the secular Russian authorities but also for the state-supported protagonists of a ‘traditional Islam’. Those leaders who, like Tajuddin or the leaders of the North Caucasian religious establishments, reject without qualification such Islamist universalism face the danger of increasing irrelevance and further feeding the process of radicalization though their rejectionism. However, those leaders, like Gainutdin and others in the Council of Muftis, who have sought to keep open channels of dialogue with the younger more radical Muslims face the danger of state disapproval and accusations of being soft on Wahhabism.40
Conclusion

The clash between a culturally infused traditional Islam and a universalistic transnational Islam reflects a broader global tension within Islam between its multiple expressions as the religio-cultural basis for diverse national and ethnic identities and its universal claims as a monotheistic religion. This tension, which is present in most religions that seek to transcend narrow ethnic or national boundaries, is particularly intense in contemporary Islam due to the particular socio-economic and political frustrations of many Muslims around the world. This means that, although the Russian case has a number of distinctive and even exceptional features, what happens in Russia, and the ways in which Russians seek to understand Islam and Islamism, cannot be divorced from the broader dynamics and processes in other parts of the world where Muslims constitute a significant social and political force.

In all the sections covered in this chapter, with their various perspectives on Russian approaches and conceptualizations of Islam, useful comparisons can be made with other countries and contexts. Russian leaders are not alone in seeking to promote an Islam which is moderate, committed to the national culture and traditions, and which can be resistant to radicalization processes. British, French and German leaders, among many others in Europe and beyond, have sought to encourage a distinctive British, French and German Islam and have faced similar problems to their Russian counterparts in defining what is an acceptable moderate or traditional Islam and what variants of radical Islam are unacceptable and must be ideologically resisted or legally proscribed. In the North Caucasus context, Russian leaders have faced similar dilemmas to many Middle East leaders, or to US and British interventionist forces in Iraq and Afghanistan, of the appropriate mix of military repression and political accommodation to radical Islamist and jihadist groups.

As was noted above, Russian scholars have, whether consciously or unconsciously, developed contrasting views and approaches to Islam and Islamism which mirror, to a significant degree, the orientalist debate in the US and Western Europe. Both Russian academics and their scholarly counterparts elsewhere are divided in understanding the root causes of Muslim radicalization on whether to accord primacy to religious ideology or to the material sociological conditions of contemporary Muslim societies. As for Russian Muslims, their leaders and intellectual elites, the choices open to them for developing their Islamic inheritance in ways which meet the needs and demands of modernity correspond in broad terms with the principal options available to Muslims in differing contexts elsewhere – whether to reform Islam to make it compatible with modernity, whether to preserve Islamic traditions and culture and to seek an accommodation with Western modernity, or whether to reject the West and to promote an alternative Islamic order.

Overall, there is certainly much that can usefully be learnt by comparing the Russian context, and the various Russian discourses and approaches to Islam and Islamism, with other parts of the Muslim world and in countries where Muslims are living as minorities. But there is also much that can be learnt in these other parts of the world through a better understanding of the distinctive history and
traditions of Islam in Russia and of the developments in Russia’s Islamic renaissance since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Notes
4 Jadidism (‘jadid’ is ‘new’ in Arabic) originally referred to proponents of new, phonetic, methods of teaching Arabic in Tatar madrasas, initiated by the Crimean intellectual Ismail Gasprinskii. Later the term began to apply to a broader socio-political and cultural phenomenon, associated with Islamic modernism.
5 Kazan, the capital of Tatarstan, is making particular efforts to regain its cultural and intellectual reputation in the field of religious studies, which can be seen in the efforts in bringing together an anthology of Tatar theological thought. This includes collections on leading nineteenth and twentieth-century Muslim theologians such as Abu Nasr Kursavi, Shigabutdin Mardjani and Musa Japrullakh Bigiev. For a general survey, see T.K Ibragim, F.M Sultanov and A.N. Yuzeev, *Tatarskaya religiozno-filosofskaya mys’ v obshchemusul’manskom kontekste*, Kazan’: Tatarskoe knizhnoe izdatel’stvo, 2002.

Strictly speaking, ‘Wahhabism’ refers to the ideas of Muhammad Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab, an eighteenth-century scholar in what is now known as Saudi Arabia, but in Russia it regularly denotes any form of ‘non-traditional’ Islam.


Some of the major anomalies in this designation are that many ethnic Muslims are not actually Muslims (such as a sizeable community of ethnic Tatars who are Orthodox), and that a growing, if still small, number of Russians, or ‘ethnic Orthodox’, are Muslim converts.

For a good account of this, see S. Akiner, *Tajikistan: Disintegration or Reconciliation?*, London: Royal Institute for International Affairs, 1998.


Thomas Hegghammer has noted that most of the Saudi jihadists who ended up being caught in Afghanistan in 2002 had earlier been radicalized by the second Chechen war. See T. Hegghammer, ‘Terrorist recruitment and radicalization in Saudi Arabia’, *Middle East Policy*, 13:4, 2006, pp. 39–60 at p. 49.


For discussion of background to and the significance of this, see Malashenko, *Islam dlya Rossii*, pp. 158–62.


During the Soviet period, this was left as the scholarly preserve of anthropologists and sociologists of religion.

Approaches to Islam and Islamism


34 For example, V. Naumkin, Islamskii radikalizm v zerkale novykh kontseptsii i podkhodov, Moscow: KomKnia, 2005; Aleksei Malashenko, Islamskaya al’ternativa i islamistskii proekt, Moscow: Ves’ Mir, 2006.


40 See, for example, the public denunciation by Mufti Ismail Berdiev, head of the North Caucasus Coordination Centre of Muslims, of Gainutdin for his statement that Wahhabism was not necessarily an extremist doctrine, which is published in Silant’ev, Islam v sovremennoi Rossii, p. 138.
This chapter is certainly incapable of covering the full diversity of approaches to the topics mentioned in the title. My objective is therefore less ambitious – namely, to underline some key approaches to the issue of extremism. The concept of extremism in Russia is linked to nationalism and involves a vague concern about certain religious movements; therefore, these links will be briefly discussed here also. Understandably, the main focus will be on the Islamic aspect (if any) of the issues described.

Accordingly, this chapter will briefly explore the history of ‘anti-extremism’ as a concept in public debates and especially in the legislative process in post-Soviet Russia. I will show how public discussions, legislation and law enforcement became increasingly ‘Islam related’, before latterly returning to a more generic focus. I will argue that official and public approaches to radicalism and extremism have developed in an erratic and ad hoc way, and of course have been heavily influenced by political conjuncture. The notion of ‘extremism’, as it finally appeared in legislation under Putin, has been the product of a top-down and increasingly authoritarian process. This has increasingly taken a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach, whereby a number of different phenomena have been conflated under the notion of extremism. That development made Russian society wholly confused about this notion and created a very complicated situation for those who would like to oppose really dangerous trends such as terrorism and hate crime.

The emergence of approaches to defining extremism in the 1990s

The USSR used a simple system to determine what was or was not permitted in the political and ideological spheres: anything which was not part of the official ideology was explicitly forbidden. Such a system did not need to define extremism, since it did not recognize different degrees of the forbidden (even though in practice certain things were considered less acceptable than others). When repression was lifted between 1986 and 1987, it became necessary for the state to differentiate between more acceptable and less acceptable types of dissent. The latter included direct attacks against communist ideology and the single-party system, as well as against the conduct of nationalist groups that no longer bothered to hide their nationalism. The country’s political landscape was increasingly complex, so
the authorities needed to recognize even subtler differences. For example, there was a ‘bad’ nationalist *Pamyat* group versus a ‘good’ *Pamyat* (moderately nationalist and loyal to the government);\(^1\) there was a ‘bad’ seminar on ‘Democracy and humanism’ with its explicit opposition to one-party rule and communism versus more acceptable socialist groups.\(^2\)

The year 1988 revealed that new political groups might promote really dangerous ideas, such as appeals to strict discrimination and even to pogroms, or demands to restore Stalinism. In the same year, the first ethnic pogrom occurred in Sumgait; thus, society and the government alike realized how dangerous radical groups could become. On the other hand, freedom of expression was already strong in Russia at the time. The law enforcement agencies and government officials could attack their opponents with sharp criticism, but they rarely used real repression – even against groups which openly encouraged violence and deportations.\(^3\)

In the late perestroika and first post-Soviet years, the political vocabulary in Russia was extremely vague. Even today, the concept of extremism has not yet been fully delineated. Nevertheless, the early 1990s were a period of total confusion in this respect. At that time, politicians would readily accuse each other of extremism and even of fascism, making any substantive political discussion of the issues impossible prior to the end of the decade. Public debates evolved separately in each political sector. We now know that back in 1996, the ‘democrats’ (i.e. the political forces who rallied around President Yeltsin and their liberal opponents) prevailed over their chief competitors, described in the early 1990s as the ‘red-browns’. The latter term collectively described a diverse and volatile coalition of those opposed to Russia’s modernization, who relied more or less on hopes for a restoration of the old regime. This coalition lost and soon disintegrated, so we can only discuss the winners’ perspective. Nevertheless, the power of the former coalition was such that the democrats strongly associated the term extremism with the threat of Soviet restoration. Of course, in addition to advocates of the USSR restoration, like the Communist Party of Gennadii Zyuganov (KPRF), the red-browns included allies like Russian National Unity (RNE), headed by Aleksandr Barkashov. The RNE became popular during the October 1993 crisis and virtually monopolized the niche of radical Russian nationalism in the mid and late 1990s.\(^4\)

In 1993, the democrats survived a serious attack by the red-brown forces, and counteraction to extremism remained high on their agenda for years afterwards. Things had to be kept under control, and ‘the democratic community’ urged the government to suppress the threat using the repressive machinery available. Ever since then, extremism has been discussed mainly from the legal perspective with an emphasis on repression. The government and the democratic community shared similar attitudes towards this phenomenon at the time. However, while the latter increasingly urged for repression, the authorities hardly ever used it.\(^5\) Following the serious clashes in 1993, the Kremlin stopped all attempts to step up a repressive campaign, while the law enforcement authorities remained traditionally passive without pressure from the top. In addition, the oppositionist majority in
parliament discouraged consistent efforts to fight radical nationalists in an effort to prevent potential future repression directed against themselves.\(^6\)

The rapid shift of the KPRF and related organizations towards Russian nationalism, sometimes of an explicitly racist nature, focused the attention of the democratic camp on the ‘brown’, as opposed to the ‘red’ component of the anti-modernization coalition. In those years, ‘fascism’, rather than ‘extremism’, was the buzzword commonly used to describe any (even fairly moderate) manifestations of ethnic Russian nationalism.\(^7\) Those sentiments brought about Yeltsin’s anti-fascist decree of 23 March 1995, notable for requiring the Academy of Sciences to provide an official definition of fascism.\(^8\) Until 2001 (but in 1994–7 particularly) the Duma discussed several special draft anti-fascist laws. Of course, this rather strange focus was also influenced by the fact that the slogan of ‘anti-fascism’ was doomed to popularity, whereas ‘anti-communism’, in addition to being far less popular, contravened the government’s gradual shift towards reconciliation with the weakening communist opposition. The popularity of anti-fascist rhetoric had another important consequence – it allowed the democratically oriented public to avoid thinking about the downside of repression as long as it was used to counteract the dangerous opponent. In the late 1990s, neither the human rights community, nor the democratically oriented public at large took much account of the problem of potential abuse associated with such counteraction. They had certainly been aware since at least 1993 that the fight against enemies involved potential abuse, but they never raised this concern in the context of fighting ‘fascists’.

When the debates about fascism finally dwindled, the pro-governmental part of the democratically oriented public came to contemplate a broader and more productive concept, which led to the establishment of a Presidential Commission against Political Extremism and a relevant analytical report of the INDEM Foundation.\(^9\) The authors of the report finally identified the target of suppression – namely, any forces seeking to eliminate liberal democracy and likely to use violence. Examples of such forces included fascism, bolshevism and ‘certain varieties of religious fundamentalism’; the authors referred to ‘totalitarian ideology’ as an overarching term. However, the authors also cautioned against excessive use of repression, urging the careful and gradual improvement of enforcement practices, and they opposed the introduction of political terms, such as ‘extremism’ and ‘totalitarianism’, into the legal language. The authors emphasized the difference between violent extremist practices and abstract theoretical pronouncements and urged the authorities to punish the perpetrators of violence and also to keep an eye on those who waged extremist (i.e. pro-totalitarian) propaganda. The report only tentatively mentioned the problem of public tolerance of inappropriate statements, a line of thought that was developing only slowly.

This 1998 INDEM report proved to be the highest peak of theoretical discourse about extremism in circles close to government. However, the recommendations expressed in the report were barely implemented due to the 1998–2000 political turmoil. It was only in the early 2000s that attempts were made to define different ‘degrees of extremism’. Thus, Alexander Zhuravskii (currently director
of the inter-ethnic relations department in the Ministry of Regional Development) proposed a typology whereby ‘terrorists’ were defined as those who practice violence; ‘extremists’ were described as those who promote, but do not practice physical violence (then, for example, the Islamist movement *Hizb ut-Tahrir* (HT) were extremists); and ‘radicals’ were those who denied certain constitutional foundations, but only engaged in peaceful propaganda.  

**Nationalism and extremism**

As mentioned above, the notion of *extremism* used to be associated primarily with ethnic Russian nationalism and with the nationalisms of titular nationalities, both of the former constituent republics of the Soviet Union and the current constituent republics of the Russian Federation. However, beginning in the second half of the 1990s, minority nationalisms have been progressively less manifest and have receded to the background, while Russian nationalism soared in influence after a period of decline at the turn of the millennium.

Notably, according to Soviet tradition the term ‘nationalism’ has carried (and still largely does) a negative meaning. If anything illegal is perpetrated in the name of nationalism, most members of all social groups will perceive it more negatively than the same illegal act committed for other purposes. (Besides, a certain informal hierarchy continues to exist, ranking different types of ethno-phobia based on how unacceptable they are in public perception.) In any event, both society as a whole and nationalists themselves have long interpreted nationalism only in terms of ethnicity (often involving biological conceptions). This situation evolved in post-Soviet Russian mentality due to a highly ethnocentric perception of social problems, very often relying on biologization. As time elapses since the Soviet era, ethnocentrism appears to be growing stronger.

In the 1990s, ‘the fight against extremism’ was virtually the same as the fight against the dominant trends of the Russian nationalism: imitation neo-Nazism (*à la* Russian National Unity, RNE), revived ‘Black Hundred’ followers, nationalist versions of communist nostalgia, radical neo-Eurasianism and Eduard Limonov’s National Bolshevism. By the millennium, however, these movements either entered a state of decline or transformed into something new. In fact, they had long lost any ability to capture the attention of the broader public. They were replaced by the virtually idealess – i.e. devoid of any concrete ideology – national populism of the Movement against Illegal Immigration (DPNI) and the *Rodina* (‘Motherland’) Party, and by the real neo-Nazi of most radical groups (incidentally, even the relatively respectable national-populists often rely on the neo-Nazi activists for support).

One would think that national populists espousing ethno-phobia (in the form of hatred against so-called migrants), and particularly the neo-Nazis, would be a convenient target for anti-extremism. However, it was precisely when these groups grew that the fight against extremism dwindled. Admittedly, the authorities still take some measures to control neo-Nazi street violence and to curb their aggressive propaganda. However, fighting against national populists is increasingly
difficult, because since the beginning of this decade a major part of the Russian public consistently share strong ethno-xenophobic prejudices, therefore the national populists, while they are not particularly strong at organizing politically, clearly represent the opinion of many, if not the majority of, Russians. In fact, the government tries to compete with national populists, rather than suppress them. National populist groups – such as DPNI and Great Russia – come under pressure only to the extent needed to discourage them from engaging in major-league politics. However, the authorities often behave in ways similar to these groups’ practices. Accordingly, they are no longer seen as extremists either by the authorities or by the public at large. On the other hand, national populist leaders rarely engage in gross racist rhetoric and hardly ever encourage violence; therefore, it would be unfair to consider them truly extremist, particularly in comparison with the growing neo-Nazi movement.

‘Religious extremism’ – from NRD to ‘Wahhabs’

The phrase ‘religious extremism’ was hardly ever used in the early and mid 1990s, when public mentality, including that of legal scholars and politicians, understood the term ‘extremism’ only in its political aspect. At the same time, concerns over new religious movements (NRD) were widespread; the worried public described them as ‘totalitarian sects’ and accused them of radical religious practices. A regular Orthodox monastery was seen as familiar and cozy compared with the community of the Great White Brotherhood or the Unification Church. The mass concerns of the 1990s gradually subsided as the expansion of the new religious movements became less aggressive and their practices began to appear more normal – although, of course, negative attitudes towards new religious movements persist. Remarkably, they have hardly ever been accused of political radicalism (with the sole exception of highly politicized neo-pagan groups). Instead, political accusations against them were based on the assumption that all new – or, more precisely, all unfamiliar – religions acted as transmitters of Western influence.

The ‘Islamic component’ appeared in the overall concept of religious extremism only belatedly, and its significance grew very slowly. The first Chechen war was barely recognized as a religious war by either side. Other radical Muslim groups (such as HT) kept a low profile, thus ‘radical Islam’ was perceived as something relevant to Afghanistan and Tajikistan, rather than Russia. However, with radical political Islam playing an increasingly important role in Chechen separatism, the situation began to change – although the change was surprisingly slow. The tables did not really turn even after the 1999 explosions in residential buildings in Moscow or after the introduction of the term ‘Wahhabi’ into official propaganda after the hostilities in Dagestan in the same year (marking the beginning of the second Chechen war), but they did so after 9/11. This is a typical situation in Russian society, when changes of public attitudes in the West legitimize and even trigger changes of public attitudes in Russia. The theme of ‘Islamic terrorism’ became dominant in Russian society, and radical Islam was generally
perceived by the democratically oriented part of the Russian society (already small in 1999–2000) to be a serious threat. This attitude was even stronger among the supporters of Putin’s authoritarian modernization, not to mention nationalists. Thus, it took a relatively short time between 1999 and 2002 for the entire Russian society to shift the focus of perceived ‘religious extremism’ from NRD to radical Islam.

Since then, Russian nationalism has had an increasing impact on life in Russia; therefore, it is worth saying a few words about the attitude of Russian nationalists, both grassroots and establishment, to Islam and Muslims. Of course, the overall attitude is negative, but this is just a simplistic observation. While nationalists were more radical than other political movements in their attitudes towards NRD, Islam was a somewhat different story. For example, we know of very few violent attacks against individuals motivated specifically by hatred against Muslims. Members of Muslim ethnicities are certainly targeted more often than others, but these are clearly racist attacks. Vandalism against Islamic buildings is more common, but again, it is not particularly widespread. Neo-Nazi and many other ethno-nationalists are fairly indifferent and insensitive to religious identities, and these indifferent and insensitive individuals form the majority of the Russian nationalist movement.

In contrast, the so-called ‘civilizational nationalism’ that has been gradually promoted by intellectuals who claim proximity to the ruling elites is largely based on the primacy of Orthodox Christianity. Besides, the civilizational approach per se invariably questions its attitude towards ‘Islamic civilization’ – and one can easily guess that this attitude happens to be more or less confrontational in most cases. Russian civilizational nationalism is concerned about the ‘Islamic threat’ and it sees extremism primarily as Islamist extremism (civilizational nationalists also label their competitors from radical nationalist groups as extremists, albeit less significant ones). We find that a shared understanding of this matter has been reached among the government, many intellectual groups and the majority of the public. On the other hand, there is a tendency in nationalism, whether radical or moderate, to engage with Islam in the form of neo-Eurasianism. Generally speaking, the only form of proximity to Islam accepted now by the Russian nationalism is an alliance against the West. From this perspective, even radical political Islam may be viewed as an ally rather than a threat.

The repressive sentiments in society were exploited by the authorities as radical Islamism became their chief worry and they focused all their efforts in this direction. While before 2003 excessive repression against Muslim activists was rare outside Dagestan, it has become increasingly common since, gradually transforming into a powerful repressive campaign targeting more and more groups of ‘unusual’ Muslims. (Interestingly, in Dagestan and some other ethnic republics, the trend has reversed in the past couple of years, and pressure against such groups has progressively relaxed.)

Such Islamization of the concept of religious extremism could clearly have resulted in fully-fledged Islamophobia, but the authorities found this unacceptable. However, to change public discourse some re-conceptualization
was required. Therefore, explanations offered by the leaders of major religious organizations – the Russian Orthodox Church and the main Muslim communities – have readily been accepted. The faith leaders insisted that the reason why minorities are dangerous is their deviation from the religious and cultural mainstream. This argument referred to a vision of society as an organic plant which may suffer if injected with alien shoots. Such conservative rhetoric was very popular earlier this decade, when Putin’s presidency was interpreted as a conservative revision of the tumultuous 1990s. Of course, such rhetoric also appealed to isolationist sentiments.

However, intellectual conservatives had to admit that Pentecostals in the US or Wahhabis in Saudi Arabia were very traditional and quite conservative. Therefore yet another argument explained that these otherwise traditional faiths would automatically become innovative when transported to a different soil, which rendered them at least risky and conductive to religious extremism. This approach was implemented in the Draft Concept of Russia’s official policy concerning religion, designed at the end of 2003 by the Department of Religious Studies of the Russian Academy of Civil Service under the Russian Federation President. Eventually, even Vladimir Putin learned to repeat a simplified version of this statement. The Russian government at large gradually absorbed the conservative ideas offered to it (the concept of ‘traditional religions’ per se is a vivid example). To some extent, they found a common language with religious conservatives like Metropolitan Kirill (Gundyaev; Moscow Patriarch since 2009) and their allies.

The results became manifest in recent years: the authorities now directly support educational programmes offered by the major muftiats. According to the Presidential Administration, the funding made available for Muslim education doubled from 400 to 800 million rubles in 2008. Moreover, the authorities are quite open about the fact that this support is provided for the purpose of fighting ‘religious extremism’. The authorities use this term in a broader sense, but primarily they mean, of course, radical political Islam. This practice in and of itself is a reasonable alternative to repression, but unfortunately, repression also continues at an increasing pace.

The evolution of legislation

Due to political confrontation between the President and the parliament, the large-scale debate on extremism in the early and mid 1990s did not lead to substantial changes in the legal framework. The main weakness of policy proposals made at the time was the fact that they relied on the concept of fascism, which was open to broad interpretation. Eventually, the term religious extremism came under criticism from different perspectives for essentially the same reason: for being open to diverse interpretations. However, the concept survived the criticism – apparently, because it was so inclusive. The exact term never became part of the Russian law, but the concept of religious extremism made a serious impact on the relevant legislation.
The 1997 Law on the Freedom of Conscience brought under one umbrella – and we may even say intentionally mixed up – various concerns about the religious groups’ anti-constitutional political activity and their radical religious practices. The law provides (in article fourteen) a list of offences warranting liquidation of a religious organization; these include attempts to undermine national security and forceful disruption of families, creation of armed formations and the use of hypnosis. Any extremes, behavioural as well as political, were prohibited to religious organizations and groups. It is also important to note that the list of grounds for liquidation set out in the 1997 Law was innovative for its time. Neither the previous law on freedom of expression, nor the 1995 Law on Public Associations contained this type of list. Before 1997, laws had only made general warnings against illegal activity, whereas the 1997 Law clearly reflected the debates in the Duma (parliament) and the government about political extremism. The detailed text of the 1997 Law, article fourteen, was a direct predecessor of similar articles in many subsequent laws, including the current legal definition of extremism. However, the 1997 Law did not yet refer to the term extremism.

The term extremism in association with religions came into the focus of legislative debates in 1999, when Sergei Stepashin’s government launched a bill in the State Duma on Counteraction to Political Extremism. Led by Pavel Krasheninnikov, the drafters provided a definition of extremism which was fairly reasonable, even though somewhat vague: it included attempted mutiny or secession, establishment of illegal armed formations, ethno-religious provocation, and ‘public appeals to illegal conduct for political purposes’. The communist majority in the State Duma, concerned that the label of extremism might be used against them (just as they had earlier been concerned about anti-fascist bills), argued, *inter alia*, that the bill failed to address the specifics of religious extremism – which, in their interpretation, included both Wahhabism and the religious sects. This bill was never adopted.

Between 2000 and 2001, the parliament of Dagestan attempted to take its law banning Wahhabism to the federal level. The local law adopted in Dagestan did not provide any definition of Wahhabism, so it would have introduced a system of religious surveillance over Islam. Of course, the bill fell through at the federal level; however, many experts, including the aforementioned Krasheninnikov, admitted that some sort of legislation against Wahhabis, i.e. radical Islamists, was, indeed, necessary. Then came 9/11, which made arguments in favour of such a law much stronger.

Perhaps the only reason why the law was never adopted was a coincidence: at around the same time, Putin’s administration drafted a broader anti-extremist law. Between 2001 and 2002, the Presidential administration – the country’s real government by then – instructed the Ministry of Justice to draft a law on Counteraction to Political Extremism, responding to the expectations of law enforcement and other ‘power agencies’ and to popular post-9/11 sentiments. This draft explicitly included the concepts of ‘political’ and ‘religious’ extremism and came under serious criticism, in particular as an imminent threat to freedom of conscience. This draft was promptly dropped, and the Presidential administration
then proposed a new one in April 2002. It is difficult to identify precisely why; technically, the new draft retained many features of the previous version, but abandoned terms such as 'political extremism' and 'religious extremism' and avoided explicit reference to religion, except in defining 'religious hatred'. This version was eventually adopted as the 2002 Federal Law on Combating Extremist Activity. At the same time, the problem of radical Islamism was increasingly urgent due to high-profile terrorist attacks.

In addition, many bureaucrats and experts who often encountered what they described as 'religious extremism' in the course of their work continued to insist that this poorly defined sphere needed better regulation. Among them, we should specifically mention Vladimir Zorin, who was appointed in late 2001 as federal Minister for nationality (i.e. ethnic) policies. Fairly soon after his appointment – in the summer of 2002 – his efforts resulted in a paper against religious extremism. The paper was drafted by a working group led by the former mufti of the Chechen separatists, Akhmad Kadyrov, and was so militant (for example in its attitude to the extremism of allegedly foreign-sponsored sects) that the drafting had to be stopped following a media scandal. The paper’s concepts, however, gained strong presence in official and public discourse – if not in the law – for years to come. These concepts, just like the Law on the Freedom of Conscience, addressed both political and other threats, such as crime, espionage, and even demography and public mental health.\(^29\)

Did these concepts contribute, as might have been expected, to official pressure against religious minorities? Indeed, the umbrella of religious extremism potentially placed Krishna worshippers on the same footing as Wahhabis (in fact, Russian representatives have been reported to make such statements literally, even at intergovernmental conferences).\(^30\) It is difficult to measure the amount of additional pressure, but it does not appear to have increased substantially with regard to minorities in general. Whatever additional pressure they experience corresponds to the overall administrative pressure against all independent organizations and groups felt particularly during Putin’s second presidential term.

**The inertia of repression**

As noted above, the draft bill on Counteraction to Political Extremism finally gave rise to the Law on Combating Extremist Activity that was promptly adopted in the summer of 2002. This law differed from its predecessor in two substantial ways. Firstly, it provided for tougher sanctions. Secondly, and more importantly, it avoided not just defining political and religious extremism, but giving a general definition of extremism altogether. The concept was replaced by a heterogeneous, loosely worded list of various activities, ranging from terrorism to lack of political correctness; this list was designed to be easily modifiable, and it has been modified twice since its adoption. The initial suspicion that the new law was perfectly designed for arbitrary interpretation has been proven beyond doubt during its recent enforcement.\(^31\)
While back in the 1990s the law enforcement agencies played an advisory role in the discussion of draft legislation, the situation quickly changed during Putin’s presidency. The procedure leading to the adoption of the 2002 law was still similar to the 1990s, but included some new features, such as the key role of law enforcement ministries as sponsors of the new law, and the Presidential administration as the final editor and decision-maker. The State Duma’s role was merely decorative even then. Later, as the law was substantially amended in 2006 and 2007, these amendments were neither a result of grassroots advocacy, nor a response to the actual situation. Nor were they part of a consistent strategy either, since many of those adopted in 2006 were deleted just a year later. One thing is certain: the overall trend was to expand the range of measures available to suppress fundamental civil rights and liberties through an intentional confusion between extremely dangerous behaviours (such as terrorist attacks) and harmless ones (such as statements of religious superiority).  

The 2002 Law did not become effective until around four years later. Nevertheless, since coming into effect, anti-extremist enforcement – not surprisingly – has primarily targeted independent Muslim groups, radical and virtually apolitical alike. The list of banned Islamic literature has burgeoned within a short period, and now includes, in addition to leaflets of banned groups, the books of prominent Islamic preachers and theologians. A ban on all books by Said Nursi is just one example. Even the official list of banned organizations raises questions. The most important of such groups in Russia – Hizb ut-Tahrir – was banned as a terrorist organization, even though it does not engage in terrorism. Recently the authorities have unleashed a campaign of closing all Tatar-Turkish lyceums as part of criminal prosecution against Said Nursi’s followers – even though the lyceums are not even religious schools.

Even though terrorist activity under Islamic slogans virtually dwindled after the Beslan crisis, official repression of potentially dangerous groups – such as HT or some jamaats (combat groups) in the North Caucasus – has been clearly excessive (not to mention harsh investigative methods, which are a general problem in Russia, not limited to cases of extremism). However, the high point of radical Islamic activity between 1999 and 2004 made such a powerful impact that even clearly excessive repression against independent Muslim groups triggered few protests before 2007, except from a small number of journalists and human rights defenders. However, now it appears that repressive measures have tended to spill over to affect less dangerous or harmless groups.

The need to justify repression brings the above-mentioned theory of traditional religions as opposed to dangerous innovations into the legal sphere, even though it is not easy to do in a country as secular as Russia is today. The arguments used in courts concerning religious cases openly defend traditional religious practices (as understood by the judge and the prosecutor) from various innovations. The number one opponent is ‘pure Islam’ warranting special efforts to protect ‘the traditional Islam’, i.e. the policies and practices of local and federal muftis.

An illustrative example is the case of imam Said Baiburin, who was tried and convicted in Ufa on 16 April 2008 for public appeals to extremist activity
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(part 1, article 280 of the Criminal Code) and sentenced to eighteen months in prison. Formally, the charges relied on the (controversial) legal ban against The Fundamentals of Tawhid, an eighteenth-century theological treatise written by Muhammad Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab (the founder of Wahhabism). The evidence of Baiburin’s guilt presented in the courtroom was insufficient. But even more importantly, central to his conviction was Baiburin’s support of Wahhabism and dissemination of The Fundamentals of Tawhid. Whether or not he disseminated the book should not have mattered for criminal proceedings, being a minor offence (called an ‘administrative’ as opposed to ‘criminal’ offence in Russian law). The expert witnesses of the prosecution alleged that Baiburin had incited hatred against certain groups, but failed to provide any evidence – even quotations – to support their allegations. Thus, Baiburin was effectively convicted for expression of his religious opinions. Bans on texts are also expanding, and political motives (let alone legal grounds) for such bans are increasingly vague. In February 2008, a website in Samara was closed for publishing an article which said that Muslims should not celebrate Nowruz, as it was allegedly a pagan holiday. The court found it appropriate to defend the religious custom from Salafi criticism, even though the article in question did not otherwise say anything suspicious.

It would be wrong to assume that efforts to suppress religious ‘innovation’ with the help of law enforcement agents only affect Muslims or that the trend is recent. In 2008, Jehovah’s Witnesses faced pressure in Yekaterinburg in similar circumstances. Notably, the case against them was based on a single expert opinion which essentially said that Jehovah’s Witness teaching is inconsistent with Orthodox Christianity. One may consider this an extreme example, but again, one may find it illustrative of a pattern of repression and its underlying mechanism.

Some people insist on protecting religious traditions from secular ‘innovations’ as well, namely from modern art. This is true of the scandalous case of the Beware: Religion! Exhibition and of the Forbidden Art-2006 Exhibition held in Moscow in 2003 and 2007, respectively. In both cases, impious treatment of religious symbols was interpreted as incitement to hatred against followers of the religion in question, and criminal charges were brought. The verdict in the first case is an example of the use of religious and ideological arguments by experts and judges to protect religious and national traditions. One can argue that defendants in the first case were effectively convicted of blasphemy. Proceedings in the second case are ongoing, but the charges clearly demonstrate close similarities to the first case.

**Provisional outcomes of increased repression**

Muslim groups who are not content to stay under the wing of officially recognized muftis face increasing threats. The anti-extremist campaign continues to marginalize them, and this policy may cause serious problems to the entire Muslim community, while being unlikely to reduce the risk of really dangerous Islamic movements emerging in the future. On the other hand, since liberal human rights
activists advocate the rights of unfairly persecuted Muslims, some Muslim activists have been softening towards liberalism – they also share the status of persecuted groups. Now we see the prominent Islamist Geidar Jemal join the left-wing opposition and become one of the leaders of the National Assembly, a coalition of radical opposition created in May 2008. His presence there is tolerated even by the most liberal coalition members (indeed, they have also agreed to share the coalition with some radical nationalists and Stalinists).

Muslim groups are not alone in being the target of unlawful, excessively tough anti-extremist enforcement. The political opposition is also a very important target, but not the only one, even though one gets this impression from media reports. Anti-extremist legislation penetrated the entire life of the country after 2006 and has served not only the political elites or the law enforcement agencies, but has also increasingly been exploited as a universal instrument of repression by local authorities seeking to suppress their opponents, by different groups of bureaucracy as a weapon in disputes and, apparently, by some individuals trying to advance their personal agendas. But, of course, this legislation has also been applied to violent Islamist or neo-Nazi groups, and pressure against the latter has been growing, even though it started later than persecution of Muslim groups, but before pressure against groups usually described as the democratic or left-wing opposition. The authorities’ success in counteracting hate crimes is far less impressive than the alarming scale of racist violence, but progress cannot be denied.

However, when the same set of rules and the same rhetoric are used to address such widely diverse phenomena, Russian society finds it difficult to grasp the essence of the problem. In its periodic report submitted to the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) the Russian Government indicated that in 2005 criminal investigation was underway into 199 extremist cases, i.e. cases under a dozen or so criminal articles relevant to extremism (as compared to 133 cases in 2004), and 135 sentences were delivered. The Russian authorities, as several times before, provided these data in response to the Committee’s question about prosecution of hate crime, even though extremism is a broader concept, thus the statistics include, in particular, numerous verdicts against various Muslim activists. The ever-expanding concept of extremism prevents the collection of statistics based on more substantive criteria. Moreover, punishment for propaganda is far more common than prosecution for violent hate crimes. Due to the vagueness of legal provisions and the poor qualification of investigators, verdicts are increasingly absurd.

While fighting against extremism, the Russian authorities often condone the radical and offensive practices of pro-Kremlin youngsters. What really matters is their loyalty, rather than the kind of things they do – as has been noticed by many of those who used to be considered extremists. A legitimized neo-Eurasian radicalism, a new and unusual phenomenon in Russian nationalism, has emerged as a fairly sustainable trend. The Eurasianist publicist, Aleksandr Dugin, has assumed the role of a respectable expert loyal to the Kremlin, while the radical Eurasian Youth Union – a group under Dugin’s patronage and also highly loyal to
the government – can get away not only with explicitly violent actions, but with explicit support for much more radical ethno-nationalists who have split from Limonov’s National Bolshevik Party.44

Conclusion

Due to the specific circumstances of the mid 1990s, the notion of anti-extremism, which became visible at that time, was related mostly to the activity of various radical nationalists. It was strongly related to anti-fascism, and for many people this is still so. Later, between 1999 (the explosions in Moscow) and 2004 (the Beslan tragedy) the threat of radical religious movements (it has always been usual to mention just Islamist ones) became number one.

It is important to note, that in both periods the main threat was not the only one. In the 1990s, the ultra-right threat was supplemented by the left threat, while the threat of politically radicalized religion was supplemented by the threat of radical religious practices (so-called ‘totalitarian sects’). So society and the authorities needed more complex concepts. Accordingly, the concepts of ‘political extremism’ and ‘religious extremism’ appeared. They had been partially implemented in the Law on Freedom of Conscience in 1997 and in the anti-extremism bill in 1999, and both trends were merged (in the main) in the anti-extremism law of 2002. Since then, this universal anti-extremism has been implemented ever more actively. Moreover, society soon found that this law created a very effective and universal mechanism of repression. It is not strange that in an authoritarian society a considerable proportion of public actors support or at least tolerate this mechanism.

However, universal anti-extremism has also produced a visible intellectual resistance. In particular, members of the public, irrespective of their political views, are outraged by absurdities, such as the case of Savva Terent’ev, sentenced in 2008 to eighteen months probation for rude comments against the police, which the court found to be ‘incitement to hatred against the social group of police officers’.

Eventually, certain extremely unfair cases against Muslims have received public criticism. At the end of 2007, a blanket ban on a number of Islamic texts, including the widely available book by Muhammad Ali Al-Hashim, The Personality of a Muslim: The True Islamic Personality as Defined in the Qur’an and Sunna, triggered protests even among mainstream muftis from the Council of Muftis.45 Many print media and public figures who had never focused on what they perceived as the authorities’ opaque measures against ‘radical Islam’ – voiced their critical comments. The protests prompted the government to address the situation, but no practical steps have so far been taken to remedy it. There are indications that debates about appropriate boundaries for freedom of expression are increasingly substantial or at least inclusive. A growing number of people are realizing the dangers of the authorities’ ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach to extremism.46
It is difficult to say how far the anti-extremist campaign may go. It is equally difficult to predict how the authoritarian regime established during Putin’s presidency will evolve in the future – and an answer to this question would largely predetermine the former answer. However, the current negative experience may take the future discussion of extremism, nationalism and religion to a higher level. What may be said already today is that Dmitrii Medvedev’s administration has started to look for some new (but not radically new) ways and methods of governance. Many observers see these ‘signals from above’ as a beginning of liberalization. But such signals are not so unambiguous. For example, in February to April 2009 the Ministry of Justice created a new Expert Council on religion, the purpose of which is more or less clear – to provide ‘expert support’ for repression towards religious minorities (including pretexts like one member of an organization being accused of extremism, or the religious practice of an organization differing from the religious teaching declared at the moment of registration). Then on 13 May 2009, President Medvedev signed the new National Security Concept; this again mentions the term ‘religious extremism’ which had seemed to be officially forgotten. Such signals may mean that the universality of the anti-extremism notion is again under question. If this becomes true, an approach which concentrates opposition on suspicious or unusual religious practices or concepts may again become relevant.

Notes


2 A. Shubin, Predannaya demokratiya: SSSR i neformaly, 1986–1989, Moscow: Evropa, 2006, pp. 72–3, 101–6. The Seminar on ‘Democracy and humanism’ was a small informal group. In 1988, it became the basis for creating the first political party in opposition to the CPSU, the Democratic Union (its main figures in 1987–8 were Valeriya Novodvorskaya and Evgeniya Debryanskaya). At the same time, several informal groups of socialist orientation appeared, which were not in open opposition to the CPSU. For example, the Club of Social Initiatives (the most notable leader being Gleb Pavlovskii) or the Movement ‘Socialist Initiative’ (headed by Boris Kagarlitskii).

3 Just nine sentences for hate propaganda were delivered in the RSFSR between the 1960s and the breakup of the Soviet Union. See: ‘Dannye o primenenii st.74 UK RSFSR i ee analogov v UK soyuzykh respublik za 1962–1991 gg.’, in Problema otvetstvennosti za razzhiganie mezhnatsional’noi roznii, Moscow: the Memorial Human Rights Center, 1993, pp. 139–40.


7 Speculative use of the term ‘fascism’ is observed, for example, in the collection of papers Nuzhen li Gitler Rossii? (Does Russia Need Hitler?). See details in: M. Sokolov, ‘Izobretaya russkii fashizm: nekotorye zamechaniiya po povodu diskussii 90-kh’, in Russkii natsionalizm v politicheskom prostranstve, Moscow: French-Russian Center for Humanitarian and Social Sciences, 2007, pp. 30–53.


18 Eurasianism was a buzz-word back in the 1990s; many people believed in reconciliation between the Russian majority and political Islam around this concept. In fact, this version of Eurasianism was fairly remote from the views of historical Eurasianists and from those of the best known and maybe the most influential neo-Eurasianist Aleksandr Dugin. Rather, it was a kind of ‘quasi Eurasianism’ based on a banal conception that Russia had a special destiny predetermined by its dual Slavic/Turkish and Christian
Orthodox/Muslim nature. The proportions of religious and ethnic components may vary in this quasi-Eurasianism and certain undertones may apply, but all these distinctions do not really matter. These vague views are readily shared by those people who are not likely to look deeper into such matters. It explains why Dugin’s International Eurasian Movement had such an extremely representative leadership, which even included Mufti Talgat Tajuddin with his theory of immanent proximity between Russian Orthodoxy and Tatar Islam, but did not include other muftis, who preferred to emphasize their separate identity. However, this movement was virtual more than real, and now it is practically non-existent.


25 Current as well as previous versions of main Russian laws are available free from the Consultant Plus website. The Law on the Freedom of Conscience is online at: www.consultant.ru/online/base/?req=doc;base=LAW;n=61456 (accessed 21 April 2009).

26 A. Verkhovsky, Politika gosudarstva, pp. 70–2.

27 Ibid. pp. 75–6.


32 See details of the amendments in, A. Verkhovsky, ‘Anti-extremist legislation, its use and misuse’.


36 A. Verkhovsky and G. Kozhevnikova ‘Inappropriate enforcement of anti-extremist legislation’.

37 The text of this expert opinion is available in the author’s archives.


42 Unfair pressure against Muslim activists appears to have stopped growing over the past two years.


44 At some point, Limonov and Dugin had aspired to bring under their banners everyone prepared to fight radically against ‘the System’ – irrespective of their views and lifestyle, not to mention religion. Limonov continues along the same lines, having modified his ideology (which was not really important to him anyway), and his party is currently banned as extremist. In contrast, Dugin seeks to attract anyone who is prepared, also irrespective of differences, to fight radically for the System, even in the name of some future systemic transformation. Dugin has certainly been less successful in mobilization, but instead he has managed to fit into the pro-governmental circles.


State–Muslim relations in Russia are often examined as a distinct, self-contained field of research. Similarly, many comparative studies of state policies and debates on Muslim integration in Europe tend to focus on Muslim migrants, with a particular emphasis on Britain and France, and hardly include the Russian dimension. Occasional comparisons are made with Muslim populations in the United States or Australia. This chapter argues that it is useful to compare the Russian policy of Muslim integration with similar policies in Britain and France. Not only does such a study reveal particular differences of national approach in line with historical and cultural traditions, but it also brings out a greater degree of often-overlooked policy convergence.

I discuss three different traditions of state integration of Muslim communities. The British model of liberal multiculturalism is based on respect for cultural difference and cooperation between different ethnic and religious communities. The French model of egalitarian republicanism focuses on the secular management of religious institutions. The Russian tradition contains elements of the British and French approaches. However, it is largely rooted in its semi-authoritarian preference for ‘vertical’ administration of social and religious representation, as well as the desire to infuse its policies with a more spiritual or ideological flavour. What is particularly relevant to the comparative analysis of the three models is that they are not static, but open to reformulation. In the last ten years, each model has undergone a series of policy shifts and therefore, such a comparison is highly beneficial for further cross-national lessons.

Each state is required to facilitate (or at least not hinder) Muslim political participation and civil society activism, improve Muslims’ social and economic situation and deliver better educational opportunities. However, each is also increasingly preoccupied with the issues of religious governance and institutionalization of Islam within its particular secular context. Without neglecting either the security or the social dimension, this study examines how each model develops a series of ‘softer’ measures to promote ‘national’ forms of moderate Islam. Despite the three different contexts, these similar initiatives are aimed at reducing the real or perceived tension between loyalty to one’s own country of residence and affiliation to the global Islamic community. Recent terrorist activities experienced by all three countries have led to a similar approach of bounding Muslim
identities by selectively engaging with moderate, ‘non-threatening’ Islam. This ‘pseudo-nationalization’ or domestication of Islam allows each state to integrate it within its institutional framework of state–religion relations, while granting Muslim citizens equal religious and cultural rights.

The first section examines the British and French approaches through the lens of liberal multiculturalism and egalitarian republicanism. Although neither model fully succeeds in integrating Islam, they are flexible enough to accommodate a number of policy shifts and re-adjustments. The second part presents Russia’s distinct model of centralized, top-down integration. It suggests that Russia’s semi-authoritarian approach has been shaped by a long history of state–Muslim relations and the changing priorities of assimilating its large Muslim populations or respecting their autonomy. It highlights Russia’s inherent difficulty of reconciling ethnically defined national integration with integration increasingly associated with religious revival and spiritual unity. The third section argues that despite different conceptualizations of integration, similar security concerns and failures to provide Muslim citizens with equal religious rights in each country have resulted in the state assuming a larger role in managing and facilitating Muslim practices. There is increasing convergence in how each state develops its relations with Muslim citizens by encouraging ‘national’ forms of Islam. A better understanding of these processes provides a basis for cross-national policy learning and their creative adaptation within traditional national contexts. Thus, the final section discusses the relative strengths and weaknesses of each approach and suggests some cross-national policy lessons.

**British multiculturalism and French laïcité**

Until recently, the French and British approaches to Muslim integration were mainly considered as two contrasting models based on secular assimilation and multicultural difference.\(^4\) Both countries have large Muslim migrant populations which need to be integrated in the overall fabric of society.\(^5\) However, different versions of state–religion relations, together with a different degree of autonomy that they allocate to religion, have influenced the way Muslim integration is conceptualized, discussed and implemented. In Britain, it has been addressed through liberal multiculturalism and its communitarian preference for resolving internal tensions within local communities. In France, the discussions focused on the concept of laïcité (official separation of state and religion) and more regulated patterns of religious governance, compatible with the republican nature of the state. Although the ideas of laïcité and multiculturalism are still important, certain failures, exemplified by Muslim alienation and radicalization, have prompted each state to re-assess its respective approaches.\(^6\)

The issue of imam training provides a good illustration of how the British and French states deal with Muslim integration within their specific national contexts. Each country needs well-educated and linguistically qualified Muslim imams who can engage with young Muslims and preach moderate Islam. Although the objectives
are the same, the way the two states address this question to further their own agenda of Muslim integration is revealing of their individual approaches.

The British approach

The British model envisages provisions to ensure that its individual ethnic and religious groups have an equal access to community representation. It shows respect for difference and encourages migrant populations to practise their religion and establish communities. State policies have sought to accommodate minority rights of ethnic and racial communities based on plurality of identities, religious tolerance and the peaceful coexistence of different faiths. The model has also been marked by the decentralization of power to the local level and by a strong reliance on local initiatives to achieve greater social cohesion. However, this approach has suffered from an overstated emphasis on protecting minority rights which has resulted in cultural segregation and fragmentation rather than the desired integration of separate, but mutually respected communities. In the aftermath of 9/11 and renewed public debate on the failures of integration, the lack of state intervention has proved to be less sustainable.

Multiculturalism in its traditional form has failed to recognize the importance of religion and has done little to address Muslims’ religious requirements. In the absence of a strong attachment to faith in British society and a certain preference for cultural labels, the faith-identity of British Muslims has given way to their Asian identity, exemplified in Asian restaurants, community groups or media programmes. Although practical elements of religious rituals are respected, their spiritual dimension is not given enough attention. As Parekh notes, ‘when individuals privilege their religious identity…they want to be Muslim Britons not British Muslims’. The growing alienation of practising Muslims, coupled with the threat of Islamic radicalization, prompted the British government to change its laissez-faire multiculturalism and develop a more sensitive approach to Islam.

In the last couple of years, the multicultural model of integration has undergone a number of changes. The focus has shifted from recognizing racial differences, to celebrating cultural diversity, to promoting the peaceful coexistence of faith communities. The government took an active role in formulating a new brand of multiculturalism, designed to address Muslim concerns within a general discourse of shared British values. Generally, low levels of religiosity among the British population can partly account for the more ideological transformation of multicultural politics to strengthen national unity. Tony Blair claimed that integration was no longer about culture or lifestyle, but that it was all about values.

The idea of ‘common unifying British values’ is used as a persuasive rhetorical device to justify a policy shift: from recognising communities’ cultural distinctiveness to promoting community cohesion. Being British still implies the ‘right to be different’ but it also demands the ‘duty to integrate’. Although the state has taken a proactive role in engaging with Muslim communities, it is
keen to present itself as a neutral force, a practical platform for integration. It does not control the process of Muslim integration but only facilitates it. In a lecture on multi-faith Britain, former Home Secretary David Blunkett was keen to demonstrate that the ‘government has a role to play…which is to facilitate interaction between the different faith communities, and between them and the wider community’.12

A report published by the Commission on Integration and Cohesion also mentions a needless emphasis on ‘different routes that brought people into local communities in the UK’ and calls for accentuating ‘the shared concerns that matter to everyone’.13 In an attempt to isolate radical Islam and ensure that it lacks strong support in Muslim communities, the British government is keen to protect the common values and institutions of parliamentary democracy. It promises to support the work of its ‘empowered communities’ by helping them ‘challenge those work[ing] against…shared values’.14 The government acknowledges the fact that there is no easy assimilation between ‘the secular liberal and the person whose faith is inseparable from their politics’, but it is also keen to praise many British Muslims for binding together the values of liberal democracy with their own religious identity.15

Britain’s development of local programmes for imam training illustrates some of the specificities of the British approach. A partnership-based interaction between the state and the Church of England helped to broker imam representation in prisons and the NHS.16 Community efforts led to the establishment of the Muslim College in Ealing and the Markfield Institute of Higher Education in Leicestershire, to provide local training in Muslim areas. In a similar vein, Hazel Blears, the former Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, has argued for the need to put ‘local communities in the driving seat, with proper support from Government’ in charge of ‘helping imams and mosque leaders develop the professional skills to play a greater leadership role in their communities’.17

A shift away from traditional forms of multiculturalism has thus been marked by a more proactive recognition of Muslim religious needs and a stronger state involvement in monitoring Muslim activities.

**The French approach**

The distinctiveness of the French model of Muslim integration lies in its secular conceptualization of national assimilation. Whether integrating Muslim migrants in the 1960s or 1990s, the underlying principle of French-style integration has been a republican separation of state and church.18 It has been enshrined in a much treasured, albeit controversial notion of *laïcité* and egalitarian principles that recognize neither ethnic, nor racial or religious differences. Following the same measures previously developed to limit the influence of the Catholic Church and its involvement in public life and education, the French traditional approach to Islam consisted of counteracting any encroachment of religion.
State management of religious expression has been exemplified by the controversy over the headscarf affair. Further efforts to institutionalize Muslim practices and to grant Islam an official status came with the Ministry of Interior’s efforts to set up the French Council for the Muslim Religion (CFCM). Locating the practice of Islam within the private sphere, for example by banning wearing any religious symbols in public, does not contradict the constitutional separation between state and religion. However, such a strict application of secular principles has been met with Muslim opposition, contributing very little to the accommodation of minority interests. Not surprisingly, there has been a shift towards less strict enforcement of laïcité. Although greater state regulation of religious affairs restricted any outward religious manifestation of Islam, it has also found a way to accommodate Muslim religious needs by encouraging the creation of Muslim ‘representative’ institutions and providing financial support for the mosques.

Yet this is where a strict version of republican secularism finds itself potentially at odds with its more generic understanding of equality. State and religion are separated in the name of equal treatment of religion. This implies equal religious representation and restraint in the public sphere. The republican principle of greater state intervention is thus more acceptable to the French public than to its British counterparts. However, too much regulation is seen as neither feasible nor desirable. The French government does not want to be seen to be controlling Muslim communities, but rather ‘helping’ them to catch up with the other confessions. President Nicolas Sarkozy commented that ‘the State must not get involved in theological questions, but it cannot ignore religious affairs’ and has to ‘help Islam to organize itself’.

The disadvantaged position of Muslim citizens in terms of financial resources, prayer spaces and community centres implies that the state needs to play an active role in redressing the balance and supporting Islam. The challenge of Muslim integration has thus questioned the restrictiveness of laïcité and encouraged politicians to stretch the concept, making it more accommodating to religion. Laurence and Vaïsse note that ‘the presence of Muslims in France [forced] laïcité to adapt to the needs of Islam’. In their work on the compatibility between the republican values and Islam, Kaltenbach and Tribalat even suggest that the idea of assimilation became unfashionable and politically incorrect and that laïcité has lost some of its meaning. There is some state acknowledgement that strict assimilationist policies may not have been entirely successful and that a more communitarian approach à l’anglaise is required. By institutionalizing Muslim representation and making a clear distinction between ‘French Islam’ and ‘Islam in France’, the French government has tried to re-brand laïcité. It has sought to make it more appealing to Muslim citizens by presenting laïcité as entirely open to ‘the freedom of conscience and freedom of religion’ and thus fully compatible with Muslim religious identity.

State provisions for imam training illustrate how the state envisages and controls dialogue between republican principles and Islamic practices to promote Muslim integration. They are also an example of state recognition and greater
accommodation of the Muslim faith. A separation between state and church has made it feasible to create a special training programme for Muslim preachers on French civic values in the Catholic Institute in Paris. Such an initiative inevitably provoked controversy not only among Muslim circles but also in the press. Nevertheless, the director of the Institute, Pierre Cahné, justified the move by highlighting the need to better prepare French imams and educate them in cultural and legal aspects of the Republic. This reflects a shift towards making laïcité more open to Muslim religious needs within the existing secular arrangements and republican values. The recent exclusion of one of the students for his anti-Semitic remarks was presented by the Ministry of the Interior as a reminder of the application of the law and Republican values of tolerance and respect for others.  

While the legal aspect of laïcité may have been more acceptable, the government has tried to infuse its integrationist discourse with more conciliatory overtones in order to depict laïcité as an attractive model of open and dynamic integration. Considering the renewed debate on Islamic symbols, whether or not this can improve the prospects Muslim integration remains to be seen.

The Russian model of Muslim integration

Russia’s approach to Muslim integration has developed within its distinct regional, historical and political framework. It has been strongly influenced by the dominant role of religion and ideology and the need to protect the Muslim populations’ cultural differences while integrating them in the name of national security. The specificity of Russia’s semi-authoritarian preference is based on a mix of ‘multi-ethnicity’ (mnogonarodnost), ‘multi-confessionalism’ (mnogokonfessional’nost) and cultural diversity (kul’turnoe raznoobrazie) that escapes any single label of narrowly defined multiculturalism or assimilation. The Russian approach is particularly complex because of Russia’s long historic legacy of state–Muslim interaction. Russia’s interaction with Muslim communities has not only involved integrating Muslim migrants, but also Russia’s own ethnic Muslims, living for centuries within its territorial borders. Strong regional differences have provided Muslim communities with their particular political, religious and ethnic character, ranging from reformist Islam in Tatarstan to rebellious Sufi traditions or radical jihadist movements in the North Caucasus. While economic and social issues continue to dominate the Muslim agenda in big cities, the existence of large, geographically dispersed Muslim communities requires the state to differentiate its policies at the regional level.

The most striking difference can be seen between state integration of Muslim populations in the Volga region and the North Caucasus. Tatar Muslims have been exposed to political integration through the policies of Christianization and Sovietization. Despite their strong national aspirations, they represent the most culturally assimilated Muslim community. They remain relatively open to government efforts to centralize regional administration and religious representation through the presidency of Mintimer Shaimiev and a greater cooperation.
between the two muftiats in Moscow and Kazan. The North Caucasus, on the other hand, has remained Russia’s primary security concern, from the days of colonial expansion and the rebellions of Shaykh Mansur and Imam Shamil to the Chechen Wars and the current region-wide instability. Aware of the rebellious character of the Caucasus and its complex clan system, the state does not aspire to control and integrate Islam there as much as it does in the Volga region, nor does it attempt to undermine traditional sources of local and religious authority. However, the most recent efforts to achieve regional political stability have centred on problematic counter-terrorist policies.

Accommodation of Muslim interests in Russia has thus been characterized by a delicate balance between top-down assimilation and preservation of multicultural autonomy. Historically, short-lived liberal phases of greater cultural autonomy and respect for Muslim religious institutions have been followed by more authoritarian periods of suppression of Muslim practices in line with state security concerns and ideological preoccupations. A brief outline of some of the key historical developments in state–Muslim relations provides a glimpse of how these periods of forced assimilation and liberal accommodation have helped shape Russia’s current semi-authoritarian approach to Muslim integration.

Catherine the Great set up official institutional mechanisms of Muslim representation to guarantee the country’s internal stability by providing effective, secular management of Muslim activities. The establishment of the Muslim Spiritual Boards in 1788–89 may be seen as a precursor to some of the contemporary secular measures of regulating Muslim representation. In the nineteenth century, an excessive emphasis on the Tsarist policies of ‘Orthodoxy, Autocracy and Nationality’ resulted in a programme of the Russification and Christianization of Muslim populations in the Volga Region. The Soviet repressive methods of integrating different ethnicities and fostering a new brand of ideological atheism have also significantly weakened Muslim institutions. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russian policy has been marked by a continuous re-assessment of its national ideas on religion and identity. If in the Yeltsin era, the emphasis was on religious revival, respect for individual identities and greater autonomy of institutions, Vladimir Putin’s successive administrations have been more preoccupied with forging Russia’s ‘unique’, ‘synthesized’ identity. Creating a stronger sense of national belonging has led to positioning Russia as a strong multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-cultural country. This has recently been exemplified by state efforts to build closer ties with its ‘traditional religions’, and consolidation of religious and social institutions that could serve and promote multinational unity and spiritual revival.

Putin’s agenda of transforming Russia into a powerful sovereign nation has been accompanied by the Kremlin’s drive to reformulate and re-appropriate the discourse on nationalist unity based on Russia’s multifaceted heritage. Public speeches by government officials and representatives of the United Russia party are heavily saturated with expressions of Russian statehood through spiritual revival, inner strength and the need to consolidate, centralize and protect the peaceful coexistence of different peoples and confessions. Putin’s 2007 address
to Muslim leaders is typical of a discourse that reiterates the importance of multi-religious coexistence as ‘an absolutely new form of cultural cooperation between different peoples and religions [which] constitutes Russia’s inner strength as a great and important world power.’ What is symptomatic is the idea of spiritual revival presented as an attractive fusion of religious and secular values.

The same idea of inter-religious dialogue and multi-ethnic strength underpins state rhetoric on Muslim integration. New President Dmitrii Medvedev echoed Putin by saying that Russia’s success is conditioned by its moral values and ideals based on inter-confessional and inter-national cohesion, social stability and patriotism. However, the special status enjoyed by the Orthodox Church rests uneasily with state efforts to construct this new multifaceted Russian identity. Therefore, a separate Muslim identity is used to demonstrate that Russia professes unity in diversity. Russia’s holistic vision of its identity gives the state a further motivation to shape and promote Islamic education that would help create Muslim interlocutors committed to inter-confessional dialogue. There is the further security incentive of training imams within the state educational framework to ensure they are sufficiently familiar with the stage agenda of ‘national cohesion’. Some commentators question large-scale funding of Islamic education on the grounds that it gives Muslim communities an ‘unfair’ financial and political advantage. While such an initiative is beneficial for supporting Islam in Russia, it is a good illustration of the official drive for secular regulation of Muslim integration.

The most striking feature of state–Muslim relations in the Putin–Medvedev period has been the crystallization of the semi-authoritarian principle of vertical distribution of power. While a negative implication of this process is excessive central control over Muslim communities, some of its positive value lies in a much-needed effort to systematize and consolidate the flow of financial resources and political opportunities needed to rebuild Muslim institutions. Whether this is enough to justify slowing the growth of more independent, unofficial Muslim self-organization remains debatable. In the Russian context, where unofficial organizations are less developed, this tight partnership appears to be a mixed blessing. On the one hand, it facilitates the top-down consolidation of Muslim institutions. On the other, it results in the ‘over-bureaucratization’ of official Muslim figures. If too closely identified with the state, they risk losing religious authority in the eyes of some Muslims and being accused of working in the interest of the state rather than representing Muslim communities.

Highly centralized, vertical structures of government support have become the norm, so much so that even some unofficial Muslim organizations, which usually accuse their official counterparts of being too close to the state, are forced to interact with the state to ensure financial backing for their activities. According to one commentator, ‘a specific feature of the Russian state is that everything is permeated by the state’. There is a shared understanding between state officials and official Muslim leaders that the internal stability and spiritual revival of the nation requires a consolidation of Muslim structures of administration, effective only in close cooperation with the state. A representative from Russia’s Council
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of Muftis commented on the advantages of a vertical rather than horizontal structure of interaction: ‘this is our state model…it makes it easier to deal with the authorities…a village imam cannot have access to the authorities, so he has to ask the Council to help solve local issues.’

This brief analysis of the Russian case has demonstrated some of the distinct features of Russia’s increasingly centralized engagement with Muslim communities. It has revealed a changing approach, which now conceptualizes Muslim identity through the prism of national unity and spiritual revival rather than simply the more traditional Soviet-era concept of ethnically defined nationality. Growing security concerns, coupled with state consolidation, justified by the perceived political failure of the liberal reforms of the 1990s, have given the state a greater role in managing Muslim affairs.

Converging challenges of Muslim integration: managing ‘our national’ Islam

The previous section focused on the key differences in how each state deals with the question of Muslim integration. What is more rarely discussed is the degree of current convergence between these three models, which are not static but constantly evolving.

Indeed, despite Russia’s distinct historical experience of state–Muslim relations, the challenges faced by the post-Soviet elites are increasingly analogous to those experienced in Britain and France. The first reason for this is that despite different political approaches, each government is slow in rebuilding Muslim institutional infrastructure and improving living conditions for Muslim communities. The second can be found in the salience of global security concerns and the real (or perceived threats) of Islamic extremism. It is therefore not surprising that over the last ten years, Russia’s policy towards Muslim minorities has undergone similar changes to improve Muslim representation and institutions. Conversely, Britain and France have recently displayed a greater preference for more conservative approaches to ‘state-manage’ Muslim integration from above, which are reminiscent of some of the elements of the Russian semi-authoritarian model. State efforts to promote ‘home’ versions of Islam (compatible with received national values) demonstrate how similar security dilemmas are addressed through parallel efforts to domesticate Islam. Each country seeks to complement its counter-terrorist policies with a series of softer measures designed to promote moderate Islam. These are accompanied by increased state involvement in regulating and funding specific Muslim activities which fit within each country’s definition of tolerance and moderation.

In his evaluation of state–Muslim relations in Russia, Sergei Filatov highlights that the perceived success of ‘sovereign democracy’ (the Russian state’s quasi-ideology) is conditioned not by the support of any Muslims, but rather the ones who fit within the state’s ideological framework, are loyal to it and recognize Russia as their homeland. This contractual agreement is relevant to the British
and French engagement with Islam. The state caters for the needs of its Muslim citizens, respects their rights and provides legal recognition of moderate Islam. In return, Muslim citizens are expected to fulfil their obligations of staying loyal to the national interests and the development of tolerant Islam. This is perceived as a process of accommodating the requirements of Muslim minorities within the national interests of the majority. State efforts to develop Russian, French or British Islam present an attempt to ‘appropriate’ the Islamic faith by disengaging it from its foreign roots and fusing it with the familiar sets of national values. There is a shared conviction that ‘today’s tension over Islam is not linked to “our Islam” but to its imported version’.40

While the actual policies are specific to each national context, the way each state conceptualizes its own version of ‘our’ Islam rests on the same four pillars. The first is the use of ‘our money’. It envisages channelling state resources to rebuild mosques, subsidize moderate Muslim initiatives and provide funds for Muslim education at home. The second pillar is the need to use ‘our people’. As already mentioned, it is embodied in state attempts to train home-grown imams within the existing educational establishments. The third pillar is represented by ‘our institutions’. It is exemplified by state support for Muslim representative bodies, such as Muslim Councils, entrusted with facilitating Muslim religious practices and representing Muslims in public debates. And finally, the fourth element is the notion of ‘our values’. It is based on fostering a more inclusive sense of national belonging by focusing on what it means to be a British, French or Russian Muslim. Inevitably, all four pillars imply a greater role for the state in Muslim affairs.

This support, however, can be both beneficial and problematic. In France, the state has given Islam its legal status and offered free language classes for newly arrived migrants. However, it has also tried to bring Islam within its secular agenda by creating the Council for the Muslim Religion as a rather weak administrative institution to oversee Muslim practices. In Britain, state initiatives provide funding to local Muslim projects through the Community Leadership Fund.41 Extra resources have been allocated to engage Muslim women and youth to participate in community life. However, the former Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, Ruth Kelly, openly voiced a clear strategy of ‘funding…[only] those organizations that are taking a proactive leadership role in tackling extremism’.42 Although these measures play a positive role in fostering more active participation, they are also part of the efforts to control Muslim communities. In contrast, Russian officials tend to emphasize a policy of non-intervention into religious activities.43 Yet this does not mean that the state is unwilling to get fully involved in such initiatives as sponsoring Muslim educational institutions and religious practices.44 The state-sponsored programme of support has included a more systematic approach to Islamic scholarship and education, as well as exercising controls over extremist literature.

The process of state-sponsored integration of Muslim communities into officially secular contexts has also reopened the debate between secularism and religion. State regulation of Islam and accommodation of Muslim interests
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has become a delicate balancing act. Although the state needs to be seen to be improving the life of Muslim communities, its involvement should not privilege Islam and thereby unsettle the balance of secular non-interference into religious matters. It might upset not only members of other faiths, but also non-believers and non-practising Muslims whose secular values are being threatened. However, the fact that the state still manages to find ways to support Islam within its secular framework testifies to a certain flexibility of each national system of religious and secular values.

Cross-national lessons in liberty, equality and authority

Convergence between the three national models provides opportunities for policy improvement. Russia’s approach, based on centralization of authority, high levels of religiosity and ‘moral spirituality’, can benefit from a selective and critical application of some of the policies implemented in Britain and France. The British experience reveals the advantages and the dangers of developing a more horizontal engagement with Muslim communities. The French model demonstrates a more practical way of reconciling secularism and religion, but suffers from banishing religion to the private sphere. The Russian vertical arrangement of power may not be suitable for either French or British contexts. However, some of its centralized mechanisms, including a close cooperation between official Muslim organizations and the government on the international arena, allow the state to position itself as defending Muslim interests at home and abroad.

Learning from the French experience

France and Russia share the constitutional recognition of secularism as the underlying principle of the state. Both countries face the same challenge of how to make funding available for Muslim communities without infringing any of the secular arrangements designed to protect religious rights. Although there are many private funding initiatives and local arrangements, Sarkozy’s and Putin’s administrations are similarly determined to set up far-reaching, nationwide provisions to support and monitor Muslim activities.

Sarkozy claimed that the only way to integrate Islam in France is within the Republic and not outside it. An example of this greater intervention in the matters of religion was the creation of the French Foundation for Muslim Works in 2005, set up to finance the maintenance of the mosques and fund imam training. It was created by the government in conjunction with the CFCM as a central depository for foreign donations. Although the state does not provide direct funding for the Foundation, its civil servants and representatives sit on the Committee and play an active role in overseeing the distribution of resources.

Russia’s secular framework inevitably restricts state financial support to religious organizations. Article 14 of the Constitution states that the ‘Russian Federation is a secular state’ and ‘religious associations shall be separated from
the State and shall be equal before the law’. Similar to the French notion of *laïcité*, the official separation implies that no religion should receive more financial support than any other. In an ideal situation, where the needs of individual religious communities are equally and sufficiently provided for, this would not be a problem. Staying within the secular constraints, the Russian state has officially recognized Islam as the second ‘traditional religion’ and played an active role in establishing the Fund to Support Islamic Culture, Science and Education in 2007.

The Fund supports various projects aimed at promoting Islamic education, academic research and developing Muslim infrastructure through community initiatives and cultural activities. The creation of the Fund, its structure, and its ambivalent charitable status is reminiscent of the Foundation created in France two years earlier. However, with the representative of the President’s administration having a voice on the committee of the trustees together with the key Muslim organizations and national oil and gas companies, the authorities’ involvement in the Fund cannot but go beyond purely ‘moral support’. Nevertheless, the Fund does play a positive role in channelling resources to Muslim communities.

What lessons can Russia learn from France? Russia has a historic tradition of importing French administrative and social practices. The setting up of the French Foundation was arguably a direct inspiration for Russia’s Fund. However, the Foundation has the advantage over the Fund of channelling state resources without overbearing state control or an infringement of official secularism, and has thereby been more positively received by different religious groups. Arguably, Russia might further benefit by replicating similar practices from the French rationalistic experience. This would avoid relying so heavily on the rhetoric of the spiritual unity of faiths as the guarantor of Russia’s national cohesion. This rhetoric, which guarantees strong state support for the traditional religions (above all the Orthodox Church), arguably contravenes the legal and constitutional framework developed to protect religious and secular freedoms.

However, any cross-national learning should be selective and mindful of the need to balance secular requirements with religious needs. The French approach may become detrimental to building an emotional connection with Muslim citizens if its egalitarian principles are taken too far. There is a risk that a ‘hard’ version of secularism may split the religious and cultural dimension of Muslim identity by controlling its administrative affairs and disengaging completely from any theological questions. As Olivier Roy notes, French-style assimilation separates religion and culture and thus ‘*laïcité* creates religion by making it a category apart’. It reinforces individual religious identities rather than ‘allow[ing] them to dissolve in more diversified practices’. His analysis reveals a further irony: the same loss of cultural identity that lies at the heart of French integration also (unwittingly) contributes to new forms of fundamentalism. Islamic radicalism is given an opportunity to decouple itself from any cultural reference. It goes beyond the French specific culture and thus appeals for the universal.
Learning from the British experience

Russia’s interpretation of Muslim integration remains strongly influenced by the former Soviet territorial model and understanding of ethnicity. However, there is a shift towards a greater respect towards traditional religions, as long as this furthers the cause of national unity and spiritual revival. Although there may be a degree of affinity between Russia’s cooperation with protected ‘religious communities’ and the British approach of integrating different faith communities, the Russian model lacks the flexibility of a wider field of engagement. The Russian state supports Muslim integration by cooperating with the three official organizations: the Council of Muftis of Russia, the Central Muslim Spiritual Board and the Coordinating Centre of Spiritual Boards of Muslims of the North Caucasus. A more flexible (though state-managed) encouragement of Muslim communities to develop from below would give Russian Muslims a greater sense of representation.

The key lesson from the British approach is its more horizontal and diversified interaction with Muslim official and unofficial organizations, based on supporting more diverse forms of moderate Islam. Even though some aspects of religious governance are becoming more controlled by the state, a more decentralized policy fits well with fundamentally liberal principles. This approach provides greater freedom in building partnerships with Muslim elites and selecting its interlocutors from a variety of organizations. A vast diversity of Muslim groups, encouraged by a more liberal framework of state–religion cooperation and less invasive policies, allows the British government to be more selective in its choice of partners for integrating Islam.

With no provisions precluding state financial assistance to religious organizations, the British government is free to channel financial resources to specific Muslim organizations, as has been recently demonstrated by its support for the Sufi Council and British Muslim Forum. By channelling further resources to set up the National Muslim Women’s Advisory Group, the government attempts to foster moderate forms of Islam from within. Such an initiative illustrates both determination to find alternative, ‘softer’ ways of de-radicalizing young Muslims and diversification of cooperation towards more reliable interlocutors. Although why the state sponsors particular Muslim groups rather than others might be questioned, this approach does display sensitivity towards Islam’s pluralistic nature and non-hierarchical structures of authority.

A potential danger of liberal multiculturalism lies in state over-commitments to Muslim communities which are not backed up by real improvements. Despite relative successes in building social cohesion and diversifying its engagement, the British government is struggling to fulfil high expectations for greater respect and tolerance. Recent reports on Muslim public opinion suggest that British Muslims feel more isolated and angry than their European counterparts. For example, the Gallop Coexist Index 2009 suggests that while 46 per cent of French Muslims feel most integrated, only 10 per cent of British Muslims share this sentiment. These sentiments are largely due to the unpopularity of British foreign policy.
However, they also result from a newly developed confidence stimulated by more inclusive state rhetoric yet frustrated by unfulfilled promises to resolve economic and social issues.

Accordingly, Russia’s state-managed policies of religious governance may be effective in providing more systematic support for Muslim communities. However, the British flexibility in accommodating different Muslim interests and state-endorsed diversity might be beneficial for Muslim integration in Russia, provided it is sustained by real social improvements.

Learning from Russia’s own successes

Russia’s proactive diplomacy with the Muslim world, illustrated by its observer status at the Organization of Islamic Conference since 2003, is an integral part of its geopolitical ambitions. However, its external policy is also directed inwards to demonstrate to its own Muslim populations that Russia should not be associated with the foreign policy mistakes of Western liberal democracies. The Russian authorities are keen to show that they understand their Muslim citizens and to encourage their interaction with Muslim communities outside Russia’s borders. Such exchanges include providing resources for Russian Muslims to make the hajj (pilgrimage), inviting moderate Muslim scholars and diplomats to Russia and securing international business contracts to regulate halal (lawful) provisions. Most of these activities are undertaken with the help of Russia’s Council of Muftis, which receives foreign delegations and acts on behalf of Russian Muslims. Although it is not the only official Muslim organization in Russia, its seat in Moscow has made it the most centralized body with close ties to the authorities.

Russia’s vertical arrangement of state–Islam relations allows the Council to act in the interests of the state while representing the Muslim communities. Although in the domestic sphere, many Muslims may resent the Council’s excessive loyalty to the state, in foreign relations, such an arrangement is effective. The state uses its ties with the Muslim world to build a stronger emotional connection with its Muslim citizens, while simultaneously, its centralized approach to addressing the needs of its Muslim communities presents it in a better light to the global umma (community). When Dr Ahmad Hasyim Muzadi, the Chairman of the largest Islamic organization in Indonesia Nahdat al-Ulama, met senior representatives from the Council of Muftis, he remarked that the way Russia treats its Muslims determines its relations with the Muslim world.52

In contrast, France and Britain cannot disassociate domestic efforts at Muslim integration from foreign policy failures in North Africa or the Middle East. They attempted to build stronger relations with Muslim citizens’ countries of origin through Muslim representative bodies, yet they made little effort to use these ‘national’ Muslim organizations to improve the country’s image in the Muslim world and, conversely, in the eyes of their own Muslim populations. Similar official efforts of cooperation between Muslim representative bodies and the state do exist in Britain and France but there are not very many. For example in France,
the CFCM gave its unequivocal support to two French hostages kidnapped in 2004 in Iraq and tried to intervene on their behalf. The British Muslim Forum proposed to reduce the levels of hostility in Pakistan towards the British government by running a campaign of adverts starring famous British Muslims. The adverts were designed to ‘push the message that the West in general and Britain in particular are not anti-Islamic’ and to demonstrate ‘the successful integration of Muslims into British society’.53

Despite the inherent dangers of greater centralization, the strength of the Russian approach lies in developing institutional mechanisms to project a more positive image to Muslim communities at home and abroad, which may be transferable to different contexts. The extent to which it is possible or indeed beneficial to transform the individual French and British efforts into a more systematic policy of state–Muslim cooperation remains debatable. The two governments can, nevertheless, do more to capitalize on the individual opportunities to improve their relations with Muslim communities.

Conclusion

This chapter has discussed three different approaches to Muslim integration, taking into account distinct national traditions of managing religious diversity. It has particularly focused on recent policy reformulation in light of the security challenges and potentially divisive measures that tend to isolate the religious element of Muslim identity. While the Russian experience of Muslim integration is quite diverse, its top-down policies of fostering ‘national’ forms of Islam have not been substantially different from similar attempts in France and Britain.

Despite their contextual differences, the three approaches are equally determined to institutionalize Islam from the top. The inadequacies of previous measures certainly require some state involvement in regulating and supporting religious practices. However, certain aspects of this paternalistic approach have hindered integration through excessive prescribing of ‘acceptable’ forms of moderate Islam and tighter controls on everything that does not fit the requirements. State efforts to control the promotion of moderate forms of Islam have challenged established arrangements between state and religion and questioned the acceptable boundaries of state intervention. State-driven Muslim integration has partly failed to appreciate the different levels of religiosity among the Muslim citizens or indeed that many Muslims do not define their identity in terms of the Islamic faith. Therefore, while the state has a responsibility to protect and facilitate Muslim religious rights, this should not mean that their social, economic and political rights as citizens are neglected.

Inevitably, a brief examination of official approaches to Muslim integration within particular national constraints can cover only partially what might be addressed within this comparative framework. However, this comparison of the cross-national experiences of official Muslim integration as a mutually acceptable process for politicians, Muslim citizens and majority populations, encourages a further comparative study of the three models. The French parallel suggests
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strategies as to how Russia might further reconcile the secular state with the need for state support of religion without resorting to occasionally excessive calls for spiritual revival. The British example of state engagement with faith communities illustrates the value of widening the network of community partners, an approach which might encourage multicultural elements implicit in the Russian approach. Although Russia’s centralized approach may not be always transferable, its experience of cooperation with official Muslim institutions in foreign affairs appears beneficial to French and British efforts to promote a positive image with Muslims at home and abroad. No national approach has been entirely successful in improving Muslim integration. However, certain successes within the different contexts, as well as the degree of flexibility apparent through ideational and practical policy shifts, make cross-national learning not only possible, but also a highly desirable process.

Notes


8  See Modood and Ahmad, ‘British Muslim perspectives on multiculturalism’.


11 Ibid.


16 Birt, ‘Good imam, bad imam’.


19 Bowen, *Why the French Don’t Like Headscarves*.


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30  The Orenburg Mohammedan Spiritual Assembly was officially inaugurated in Ufa by the Empress’s edict of 4 December 1789.


37  Interview with senior representative from *Islam Minbare*, Moscow, 24 October 2008.


45  Sarkozy, *La République*, p. 117.


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49 Ibid, p. xi.
Focusing particularly on Russia, this chapter compares how ‘establishment’ television channels have treated Islamic extremism’s impact on key European values. The other two countries selected for analysis – Britain and France – share with Russia substantial Muslim contingents within post-imperial, multicultural populations, broad formal adherence to Enlightenment notions of tolerance and varying ‘contributions’ to the ‘War on Terror’. They also exhibit significant differences of media culture and policy towards minorities. The research is based on recordings from news bulletins on Russia’s Channel 1, BBC One and France 2, the principle ‘establishment’ channels in the three countries. The recordings cover the period from November 2006 to July 2008.¹

Edward Said’s analysis of media coverage of Islam has long been the benchmark for the field.² However, scholarship has expanded rapidly since 9/11, with research focusing mainly either on treatments of terrorism or negative representations of Islam and Muslims.³ Given the difficulties of archiving and analysing television news, most work deals with print media.⁴

Equally, few studies give attention to the other side of the representational picture: how the media refract the values of their own societies when covering Islam. This is a significant omission for a Europe in which purportedly tolerant societies are struggling to come to terms with multiple perceived ‘threats’ posed to security and national selfhood by growing Muslim populations – indigenous or immigrant – and the emergence of a nascent European super-state. Work on media representations of Islam tends to be nationally undifferentiated; to be oriented towards identifying the nature and impact of perceived bias against Muslims; or still to be tainted by Huntington’s ‘Clash of Civilizations’ thesis.⁵ To date there has been very little comparative analysis of television news representations of Islam in its European cultural context, and none involving Russia.

In filling the gap, we focus on a few indicative case studies, preceded by some brief contextualizing data. The analysis is aimed at assessing how, in comparison with its British and French counterparts, Russian Channel 1 has mediated state
positions on issues which can be grouped under the umbrella of ‘tolerance’: inter-ethnic cohesion, the role of religion, free speech and legal rights. We consider how disruptions to those positions attributable to Islamic radicalism have affected coverage of recent stories involving Muslims. Our case studies focus on the way that news bulletins ‘perform’ tolerance, adapting Judith Butler’s understanding of performativity as an ‘aspect of discourse that … through a certain kind of repetition and recitation … has the capacity to produce what it names’, to account for how establishment television channels not only *endorse* official values but *enact* them in their own discursive practices. Thus, the channels become complicit in the legitimization of those values beyond the governmental sources from which they emanate.\(^6\)

The ability to enact power is often indicated by the extent to which it is translatable into a national consensus capable of reconciling multiple, freely expressed viewpoints.\(^7\) We identify common challenges that perceived Muslim radicalism poses to television’s ability to address its audience from stable, consensus positions on cohesion, free speech, legal rights and other principles embodying the acceptance of difference. Eschewing notions of either a knee-jerk media Islamophobia, or a justified rebuttal of Islamic intolerance, we nonetheless indicate differences in the success with which the channels deal with the challenges. We also find that well-intentioned strategies for adjusting the performance of tolerance to guard against stoking Islamophobia are prone to collapse into contradiction. We conclude by suggesting that it is in Russian reporting, where the state–media symbiosis characteristic of establishment channels is virtually complete, that the contradictions are most keenly felt.

**Tolerance**

The principle of tolerance, traceable to Locke’s ‘Letter on Toleration’ the British Toleration Act of 1689, and the writings of Voltaire and Lessing, is considered a precondition for liberal democracy.\(^8\) It presupposes a set of normative values which are nowadays taken to be broadly shared across Europe. The very longevity of liberalism has made it diffuse. Nevertheless, there are baseline public statements to which multiple national governments are willing to subscribe. The Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (2000) is one such document: it approximates to a consensual articulation of European values.

Russia’s commitment to these values is equivocal. On the evidence of its constitution, it adheres to many of them. This can be traced to the brief period of euphoric enthusiasm for western democracy following the collapse of the Soviet Union. However, despite the sporadic influence of a progressive liberal tradition on Russian politics, this tradition has been overshadowed by authoritarian tendencies distrustful of a ‘degenerate’ West whose post-Enlightenment legacy is allegedly inappropriate to Russia’s needs. These tendencies came to the fore under Vladimir Putin, whose pronouncements emphasize the need for a strong Russian state and loyalty to patriotic values.\(^9\) Simultaneously, Putin’s Russia adopted a version of what Andrew Wilson terms ‘virtual democracy’, in which real power is wielded by a repressive elite under the trappings of a free,
tolerant society. Thus, unqualified Russian commitments to liberal democracy and opposition to Islamic intolerance have been rare. This strategy also conforms to Russia’s newfound enthusiasm for ‘Eurasianism’, and its paranoid fear of losing its Islamic territories.

**Cultural integration**

Liberal values can be glossed variously, but tolerance of difference (ethnic, political, gender) and the readiness to accede legislative force through the principles of equality, free speech and presumption of innocence are paramount. We concentrate first on news performance of beliefs in non-discrimination and cultural diversity adopted in response to the increasingly multicultural nature of European societies (including Russia), before turning to tolerance in the legal and free expression domains.

British, French and Russian official cultures have developed divergent theoretical positions on inter-ethnic relations. In Russia, multi-ethnicity (mnogonarodnost/mnogonatsionalnost), an uneasy synthesis of Great Russian imperialism, the spurious Soviet–Marxist ‘brotherhood of nationalities’ and the influence of US-inspired civic citizenship, is constitutionally enshrined. So, too, is French intégration, a process of active social participation based on shared values, expressed in terms of the equal rights and obligations of everyone living in France and encapsulated in the notion of laïcité, defined as the separation of religion from ‘public space’. In the UK, multiculturalism, based on ‘the concept of equality as difference’, gained broad Establishment support, but is now ebbing. In all three countries, the ‘war on terror’, along with concern over migration, and hostility to US-derived ‘political correctness’, have prompted a change in values. In each case, (re)definitions of extremism as a marker of what lies beyond the socially acceptable have been key to the dynamics of the change, as have related shifts in the application of political and legal rights. In each case, television plays a crucial role in driving the process.

**Context**

To gain a broad contextual overview of the relationship of Islam to tolerance and intolerance themes in news agendas, we first identified the number of Islam-related news stories in bulletins monitored over one year (1 November 2006 to 31 October 2007), the period into which the majority of our case studies fall. During this period, Islam was of differing importance to the three bulletins: Russian Channel 1’s Vremya, BBC One’s Ten O’Clock News and France 2’s Journal de 20 Heures devoted 10.0, 23.1 and 5.9 per cent, respectively, of their overall news time to the topic.

Russian coverage is more centred on domestic issues (59 per cent of Islam-related stories) than that of the other two countries (53.5 per cent in the UK and 22.6 per cent in France), a factor explained partly by its distance from the campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan. However, while most of the Islam stories occur in the first half of the programme on BBC One and in the middle of the
French bulletin, *Vremya* coverage does not exhibit a clear pattern and is characterized by the fluctuation of Islam stories throughout the main body of the broadcast (Figure 5.2).

Looking then at the relationship between Islam and extremism, we note that, in our typology of Islam-related news stories (Figures 5.3 and 5.4), only *Vremya* isolates ‘extremism’ as a discrete category.

In France and Britain, Islam and extremism are invariably conflated (only the ‘Islamic extremism’ category featured in coverage here). Echoing recent Russian governmental efforts to downplay Islam’s role in domestic terror, and in a marked gesture towards tolerant even-handedness, Channel 1, by contrast, focuses more on a generalized radicalism expressed as the politics of national hatred, fascism and, now, conveniently, hegemonic western liberalism. Much discourse centres on attempts to negotiate the boundaries of extremism and its relationship with legitimate civic protests. However, it also reveals significant traces of a criminalization discourse (the themes of ‘trial’, ‘punishment’ and ‘crime’ are prominent), the unacknowledged context of which are acts involving ‘mafias’ from predominantly Muslim regions (we discuss the implications of this in our case studies). *Vremya* stories explicitly related to ‘Islamic extremism’ virtually always belong to the international realm (Table 5.1).

It is in keeping with its ‘even-handed’ treatment of extremism, and its concern with ameliorating the dilemmas of *mnogonarodnost*, that Russian news coverage should likewise be preoccupied with the tolerance-related themes of ‘multiculturalism’ (it leads in this category when compared with Britain and France) and ‘dialogue with Islam’. Britain and Russia’s direct involvement in the ‘war on terror’ is reflected in the significant attention they accord to terrorism and its portrayal mostly from a national perspective.

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**Figure 5.1** Percentage of Islam-related news time in Russia, France and UK between 1 November 2006 and 31 October 2007
By now looking in more depth at the discursive context of which this data is the surface manifestation we can assess the attitudes to, and engagements with, tolerance that it reflects.

**Case studies**

Our case studies are divided into categories reflecting four different aspects of the impact of Islamic radicalism on the value system to which each channel in principle, at least, owes allegiance, and modified from our typology of Islam-related stories.

**Table 5.1** Percentage of ‘tolerance’-related stories from the total of Islam-related news and their division into international (i) and national (n) stories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Multiculturalism</th>
<th>Dialogue with Islam</th>
<th>Terrorism</th>
<th>Islamic Extremism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% n/i stories</td>
<td>% n/i stories</td>
<td>% n/i stories</td>
<td>% n/i stories</td>
<td>% n/i stories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>100/0</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>77/23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>63/36</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>40/60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Britain</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>92/8</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>46/54</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
We take our lead from our Channel 1 recordings, since Russia is our primary interest, but make space for extensive comparisons with BBC One and France 2. The categories we identified were:

(1) stories concerning the struggle with extremism (in which television news embraces the rejection of intolerance towards the other);
(2) harmonization stories (in which reporting emphasizes a commitment to the promotion of intercultural tolerance and cohesion);
(3) legal stories (where fairness towards the other in the judicial domain is at stake); and
In addition, the concept of free speech (or tolerance of the other’s views) is broached. However, because, unsurprisingly, the principle is conspicuous by its absence in Russian coverage, and because it is so closely integrated with other principles in non-Russian reporting, we do not treat it as a separate category.

We examine a total of seven stories from Channel 1, five from BBC One and four from France 2. The vast majority were broadcast between December 2006 and December 2007 and occurred in the period from which our contextualizing data were derived. Because of the British and French tendency to deal with issues in greater depth than Vremya, the number of reports, however, is eight (Channel 1), seven (BBC One) and eight (France 2). The preponderance of Channel 1 stories reflects not only our focus on Russia, but also, again, the greater tendency in France and Britain to integrate the different principles constituting tolerance into an organic whole (a point with ramifications for our conclusion). As a result, single French and British stories recur under different categories. The tables of stories are given in the Appendix (Tables A1, A2 and A3). Our approach is strictly qualitative and our findings far from conclusive, though, as will be apparent, they reflect observations based on the full corpus of recordings.

**Anti-extremism**

On 6 December 2006, concerned by the rise in hate crimes against Chechens, Vladimir Putin hosted a party leaders’ forum to discuss extremism. Russia’s Channel 1 responded with two reports. The first is contaminated by the voice of Putin whose ‘authoritative word’ dominates the footage and organizes the reporting discourse (Channel 1, 6 December 2006). But Vremya’s failure to internalize, and thus actively ‘perform’, the official position is responsible for the inconsistency with which it reconstitutes Putin’s speech in its coverage of the forum. Thus, following Putin’s initial declaration on the need to fight extremism, examples of court leniency towards racists are cited. But, without explanation, this is succeeded by the President’s calls for stricter migration controls: ‘We must send society a clear signal that the state is thinking of Russian citizens, of the country’s established population’ (korennoe naselenie). The confusion is exacerbated by the following segment quoting another politician’s call for the substitution of mere patience (terpimost) towards other cultures by a true ‘cultural interpenetration’ (vzaimoproniknovenii kul’tur) more in the spirit of western-style multiculturalism.

The later report (Channel 1, 10 December 2006) features the contributions of Vladimir Zhirinovskii and Gennadii Zyuganov. They concentrate on youth involvement in right-wing violence. The achievement of coherence is hampered by the lack of an overview reconciling the struggle with racism, immigration and youth policies, and the needs of the ‘Russian’ population on one
hand, with the avoidance of free speech restrictions on the other. As part of Putin’s authoritarian–nationalist power axis, these formerly extreme politicians have now been ‘mainstreamed’. The contradiction is not lost on the reporter: ‘Zhirinovskii was astonished, for, until now, he had been considered the country’s most extreme politician. Vladimir Vol’fovich thought a little and decided that extremism was nothing to do with him’. The reporter’s sarcasm is at odds with a President calling for the very restrictions on migration recently demanded by Zhirinovskii himself.

In official pronouncements, the phrase ‘our multinational, multi-confessional state’ is repeated, mantra-like. But media commentary on governmental activity promoting tolerantnost (tolerance) is absent; again, the lack of overview reflects the failure to internalize the policy. This is unsurprising given:

1. the inconsistency with which the regime itself reads its commitment to multiculturalism; at a press conference in Italy in March 2007, Putin stressed the need to strengthen Italian–Russian ties, referring to the nations’ ‘common Christian foundation’;
2. the ‘foreign’ connotations attached to tolerantnost (which even cosmopolitan commentators like Vladimir Pozner struggle to explain)\textsuperscript{17}; and
3. still fresh memories of Beslan when the official Vremya line locating Russia in the West’s war on international Islamism masked a paranoid anti-westernism.\textsuperscript{18}

The BBC, by contrast, has largely internalized tolerance values which it projects through its programming policies and its editorial strategies. It does so, however, with an increasing ambivalence sensitive to the assault to which the concept is now subjected in the wake of 9/11 and 7/7.\textsuperscript{19} This is revealed with clarity when the BBC attempts to position itself in relation to anti-Muslim extremism.

In reporter Mark Easton’s account of the failure to convict Nick Griffin, the BNP leader, for describing Islam as a ‘wicked, vicious faith’(10 November 2006), four different news stories and four different voices are represented: a Muslim extremist protesting against caricatures of the Prophet; Nick Griffin’s insult against Islam; the Pope’s recent reference to Islam’s historical association with evil violence; and Trevor Phillips, former (black) chairman of the Commission on Racial Equality, who warned of the dangers of multiculturalism. The story’s reporting function (it foregrounds tensions between multiculturalist theory and practice) overlaps with its performative dimension (the invocation of multiple voices to challenge Griffin’s extremism). But the voice sequence changes the picture. The extremist message on the Muslim protestor’s banner is followed by Griffin’s offending statement, forming a pair to be juxtaposed with the ‘moderate’ opinions of the Pope and the CRE Chairman. However, the words of the second pair, far from countering Griffin’s outburst, offer a temperate version of his message in a second set of pairings: Griffin (‘wicked, vicious faith’) + Pope (‘evil and inhuman’), and Griffin (‘multiracial hell-hole’) + Griffiths (‘dangerous form of exclusion’).
The voice of the Muslim community is both anonymized and ‘hystericalized’ through Easton’s phrases ‘caused huge offence’, ‘created a storm’, ‘offensive to many’ and ‘hugely offensive to many people’, all of which refer implicitly to the Muslim communities at which Griffin’s remarks were directed. But the emotive tenor of the phrases contrast with the ‘sensible’ rationalism of those cited as favouring ‘debate’ and ‘free speech’. Easton’s assertion that he ‘thinks there is a fear that today’s acquittal might be portrayed as evidence that Britain is almost institutionally anti-Islamic’ bears careful scrutiny. The impersonal ‘there is a fear’ masks the subjectivity of the government calling for the new law. But the passive impersonal construction ‘might be portrayed’ hides the agency of the Islamic communities who point to judicial bias. The words ‘institutionally anti-Islamic’ represent the presence of the ‘alien voice’ of the critics of Islamophobia. However, the framing expression ‘might be portrayed’ modalizes that claim, undermining its validity. Equally, the Muslims’ perception that their community is ‘under attack’ is qualified with the alternative formulation that Muslims ‘feel alienated’.

France 2 is in one sense more ‘controlled’ in signalling its rejection of anti-Muslim extremism. This is apparent in its account of a successful self-made French-Arab businessman, Mourad Boudjedal (7 December 2006). The businessman himself rejects religious separatism as the basis for his identity: ‘I’m of Arab origin but I’m not Muslim’. The tale is further authenticated through the implicit rebuttal, within Boudjelal’s own words, of the racists responsible for the immigrant stereotype: ‘Hey, dirty Arab, go back to your own country!’. The report is characterized by a weaving between official and vernacular discourses which, unlike Easton’s tension-laden narratives, mutually bind one another. Thus, following Boudjedal’s account of how he overcame prejudice in order to integrate, the reporter reminds us that an immigrant from the Maghreb now runs the town’s symbolically important rugby club, a fact reconfirmed in Boudjedal’s sentiment: ‘there’s clearly been a change of attitude’. The report incarnates laïcité in a positive example of an integrated French-Arab citizen, and also performs the victory over racist barriers to integration in its narrative trajectory.

Similarly, in coverage of a series of arson attacks on French mosques, the verdict on the accused was met with amply demonstrated magnanimity by the Muslim community:

- We’re not here for vengeance. On the contrary, we’re sorry for them.
- Yet they burned down your mosque?
- Despite that … to prove that we are not a religion of hatred or vengeance.

(8 December 2006)

The interviewer’s deliberate goading technique elicits not merely an expression, but an enactment, of the moderation of the ‘integrated’ French Muslim citizen. But, as we will see subsequently, its unwillingness to find space for ‘dangerous’ viewpoints closer to the anti-Muslim sentiment which provoked the arson indicates an uncertainty over the location of the ideological consensus point still
greater than that of the BBC and closer to the extreme represented by Russia’s Channel 1.

**Harmonization**

One sense in which *Vremya* appears more confidently to propound multicultural tolerance is in its deployment of ‘harmonization’ stories to counter the impression of a strife-ridden Caucasus. A report on the building of a new Orthodox cathedral in Dagestan (20 July 2007) proclaimed that ‘money for the project had been donated by Orthodox and Muslim believers alike’. A local inhabitant is then quoted as claiming that ‘These projects unite all faiths and all nationalities … They bring peace and understanding to everyone’. The report is framed in the context of an attempt to persuade ethnic Russians to return to Dagestan now that problems with terrorism are on the mend. An Orthodox priest argues that ‘if time and money had been devoted earlier to the building of chapels and mosques a lot of these problems could have been avoided’. Nevertheless, such reports are intended as a polemical response to perceptions of a North Caucasian security crisis. The ‘tolerance’ they promote reflects the short-term exigencies of a channel subservient to the government’s political agenda rather than the internalization of a mature consensus on cultural difference to be mediated in a nuanced portrayal of ethnic tension.

By contrast, the BBC’s ability to ‘perform’ harmonization is evident in a special report from a bulletin dedicated to Britishness (24 January 2007). Answers to the reporter’s questions about what it means to be British are provided by representatives of our multicultural society: a white female, a black male and an oriental female.

CARDIFF, [WHITE FEMALE]: ‘I think [sic] more Welsh these days, especially the Welsh government and more sort of autonomy given to the country’.

BIRMINGHAM, [BLACK MALE]: ‘I can see myself to be more English than British because England is more associated with the Queen’.

EDINBURGH, [ORIENTAL FEMALE]: ‘I am Scottish more than British. I do not really talk about me being British anyway’.

The interviewees proclaim allegiance to the home nations to which they belong, rather than to Britain, enabling the report to achieve a (re)integration of ethnic minorities around a shared commitment to difference of a ‘safer’ kind: not that of separatist Muslim communities, but of the home nations. Multiculturalism is performed, and simultaneously sanitized, in the context of the assault to which it is now subjected.

Like the BBC, France 2 extensively embraces ethnic cohesion values through its selection of actors and the words they speak. One report (2 January 2007) tells of a well-integrated Muslim family which practises its faith within republican parameters. The presenter’s introduction characterizes the story in integrationist terms: ‘a practising Muslim family, French and proud of it, at once very devout
and very attached to the Republic’. However, whilst the report tells of this law-abiding but devout Muslim family, nowhere do the interviewees refer to the Republic, or to pride in being French. Moreover, one must assume that the ‘vous’ in the presenter’s invitation to the viewer – ‘You’re going to be introduced to the everyday life of a Muslim family’ – is the average, non-Muslim/laïc Frenchman and that, in bringing this ‘ideal viewer’ into the pious Muslims’ home, the report enacts the integration the presenter claims to be already achieved.

In other respects, too, the report performs integrationism. Moustapha Moussali, head of the family, stresses the status of his religious devotion as ‘private practice’ and the avoidance of prosélytisme. Moreover, his wife’s refusal to insist on her daughters wearing the Islamic headscarf is implicitly aimed at opponents of the controversial law on religious clothing.21 The report is oriented towards critics of Islamic separatism, setting out to prove that, contrary to right-wing fears, devout Muslims can reconcile faith with French citizenship. It concludes with the reporter importing the value of l’indifférence (a term cited directly from Moussali’s words) into his own prescription: ‘a right to indifference and the hope that relations with the rest of society will one day be appeased’. In this, its approach resembles the crudely instrumentalized (and thus incompletely internalized) tolerance characteristic of Russia’s Channel 1.

Tolerance in the legal domain

The internalization of tolerance towards the other presupposes an ability to account for deviations from the norms of legality on the part of that other via narratives of social deprivation, the radicalization of susceptible youths, etc. Inserted into a global media network saturated with al-Qaeda references, Channel 1 is forced to confront this issue. But it offers no way of mediating between international Islamist terror and the Muslim-inspired secessionist activity which, on its encounter with Russia’s judicial process, is rebranded as crime. In one report (10 January 2008), the assault on a group of ‘bandits’ in Dagestan includes one cursory reference to ‘Wahhabism’. In another (23 January 2008), a headline reference to the arrest of the leader of a ‘band of Wahhabis’ is accompanied by an account of the terrorist’s prior visit to Karachai-Cherkessia where he ‘fell under the influence of religious extremists’. The term ‘Wahhabi’ underscores Islamism’s international provenance, but its repeated invocation without narrative scaffolding points up the absence of any mediatory link with the North Caucasus.

The lack of narrative scaffolding is connected with Channel 1’s non-performative approach to the domestic trials of Muslim terrorists. Rather than highlighting the equitable and tolerant application of legal procedure to the offending other, Russian trial coverage serves rather to reassure a nervous population that the offenders are being ‘dealt with’. The stories were invariably short, featuring footage of the original event; mugshots of the accused, followed by shots of the court and the victims’ families; and the substance of the sentence, together with any moral judgement passed. However, as a step in the direction of multi-angled,
western-style trial reports with their ‘legal rights’ and free speech paraphernalia, and because of the need to root the anti-extremist campaign in popular consensus, a significant minority incorporate interviews with the families of victims, and even with the accused parties. One (18 May 2007) dealt with the sentencing of a Muslim secessionist for the murder of an imam who had condemned the dangers of Islamic extremism. But in a vivid demonstration of the failure of the rooting process, the niece of the victim is interrupted by the interviewer (the second speaker in the exchange below) who ‘corrects’ her failure to embrace the official line and distinguish between the ‘mass’ of moderate Muslims, and the tiny minority of extremists:

– They call themselves Muslims
– You mean Wahhabis
– Yes, Wahhabis, but they have nothing whatsoever in common with Muslims. That was proved a long time ago.

Even the voice of the accused is heard: ‘I had nothing to do with it… I didn’t see a single weapon all that evening, in fact’. But it is framed by the reporter’s assurance, dripping with clumsy sarcasm, that he must have been ‘inspired by the presence of the television cameras’, The interventions reveal profound unease with the ethos of legal rights for the accused, and a corresponding inability to master the conventions of vox pop in order to subordinate them to the preferred agenda.

The report builds the case of ‘traditional’ Muslim moderates against the extremists, reverentially citing the murdered victim’s condemnation: ‘The imam called them a “flock of crows … which hides under the rhetoric of the fight for freedom, of the words of the prophet, but in fact lives by … murdering people”’. In a further illustration of Channel 1’s difficulties in embracing the evidence-based, legal rights culture, the report veers between transparent efforts to portray a moderate, yet devout, Muslim community, and attempts to associate radical Islam with the common criminality of the accused who ‘had already completed a prison sentence for attempted rape … In prison he converted to Islam and took the Muslim name, Ramzan; he studied in a madrasa (Islamic secondary school) in Kazan, then came to this mosque in Kislovodsk.’ The visual footage, however, is dominated by images of Muslim women in hijabs. The voiceover presents only the outlines of a radicalization narrative. Questions remain over the convertee’s relationship with the mysterious ‘freedom struggle’ and the madrasa, the Wahhabi influence, and his reasons for moving to the Caucasus.

Without the Islamist-secessionist context, reports on terror suspects are liable to be read in ethnic terms, and to feed into the anti-Caucasian racism motivating the downplaying of Islam in the first place. Newsreader preferences for the evasive geographical term ‘Caucasus’ fuel this tendency, as does the dominance of the official discourse of security officials over that of members of affected communities; vox pop is used within strict parameters, or, as we saw, with clumsy ineptness. Islam is represented only by officially approved organizations such as the Central Spiritual Board of Muslims and the Russian Council of Muftis.
The consequence of the decoupling of the global and domestic perspectives is to divide the image of Islam between a bureaucratized, official faith, and an alien criminal element emanating from elusive foreign sources.

What is revealingly different about BBC One’s coverage of legal issues involving Muslims is, as we saw with the Griffin report, the infiltration of the principles of judicial process into situations whose scope exceeds narrow, legal confines. This largely prevents the decoupling effect from taking hold. Thus, BBC One’s reports on the aftermath of the July 2007 attempted bombings in London’s Haymarket and Glasgow airport followed the familiar legalistic pattern, with the initial identification of suspects, proceeding through the accrual of subsequent ‘evidence’, to speculation about the crime’s sources, to the identification of the culprit:

Two men fled the vehicle .... police ... now confirm ... a terrorist attack ... the two drivers, both described as young Asians, tried to prevent emergency crews approaching ... ‘He was shouting “Allah!”’ ... The people in custody are apparently of Middle Eastern origin ... there is an established pattern to al-Qaeda’s targeting of Britain ... stoked by widespread Muslim resentment. (30 June 2007)

In adopting the ‘presumption of innocence’ code, the BBC re-enacts the legal system to which it is likewise party. The sequence reflects a shift from the official police viewpoint, to a selective eyewitness account, to journalist commentary, dramatizing the progress towards the identification of Islamist terrorism. The generic nature of the legal-performative procedure is confirmed contrastively by the reporting of the extradition of an Islamic preacher:

The Islamic cleric who preached racial hatred ... has been deported ... blamed for brainwashing British men ... el-Faisal preached his messages of hate ... But the worshippers kicked him out ... he used meetings to indoctrinate susceptible young men ... His poisonous lectures are still available on Jihadist websites. (25 May 2007)

The intemperate triumphalism completes the performative sequence, linking mimicry of the viewpoints of the eyewitness, the security services, the courts and the ‘commonsensical’ public to the reporter’s expression of (legally sanctioned) outrage.

The BBC’s adherence to the culture of judicial rights came under stress with its account of a plot to kidnap a British Muslim soldier. The fact that the likely culprit was a Muslim fanatic immediately accorded the story significance in terms of the mediation of the local/embodied (Muslim British) and the global/abstract (British Islamist). But because of the probability of al-Qaeda involvement, established procedures were undermined. With its neutral framework, the newsreader’s opening statement conforms to the rule of the legal report genre
Hutchings, Miazhevich, Flood and Nickels

according to which any attack belongs to a heterogeneous paradigm with an infinite variety of potential culprits.\textsuperscript{22}

Police arrested \textit{eight men under the Terrorism Act [for] an alleged plot … It would be a new style of terror tactics if that is what is planned by these alleged plotters…if the intelligence is correct.}

(31 January 2007)

But the report then suggests that there can be no doubting the culprit’s provenance. First, the announcement of the discovery of the plot is followed by a sampling of Asian reaction, highlighting Asians’ disbelief at Muslim involvement. The radicalization ‘script’ is invoked in the \textit{negative} to emphasize the horror that it might convey the ‘truth’.\textsuperscript{23} The compression within the opening minutes of the normally staged sequence linking the first incident account, community impact analysis and then explanatory narrative suggests that the sequence has short-circuited. The subtext that only radical Muslims could commit a crime targeting Muslims appears in the gap between the ‘tolerant’ open-endedness of the opening statement and the closed assumption that those arrested must be Muslim.

France 2 offers a contrast to both Channel 1 and BBC One in that, owing to its relative lack of domestic terrorism problems, its reporting of Islam-related stories with a judicial dimension is minimal. Those that are covered in depth tend, ostentatiously, to perform the ‘free speech’ principles treated with more circumspection in the BBC’s report on the Griffin trial. Typical is its coverage of the trial of the \textit{Charlie Hebdo} magazine for republishing the Danish cartoons of Muhammad. Here, by redisplaying the cartoons in its own coverage, France 2 re-enacts the very assertion of free speech responsible for the controversy.\textsuperscript{24}

The perceived relationship between cartoon (as free speech) and Islam (as violence) runs throughout. The first report portrays the issue as ‘Freedom of expression against respect for religions’, then recounts the violence that the cartoons provoked, asking pointedly ‘What set the powder alight?’, and answering ironically ‘Some drawings, cartoons’ (6 February 2007). In referring to ‘aggression, verbal, or in cartoon form’, the President of the French Muslim Community equates violent protest with ‘violent’ provocation. But the Muslim representative’s accusation is succeeded by a history of protests against caricatures of both Christianity and Islam, including a post-caricature \textit{Le Monde} artwork in which multiple copies of the words ‘I must not draw Mohammed’ form an image of … Muhammad, and which encapsulates the tension between verbal content and performative meaning.

The sequence is followed by a repetition of the Islamic accusation of violence: ‘The one who is ridiculed is also a victim of aggression’. What appears content-wise as balance becomes performatively an enactment of the very verbal ‘violence’ perceived by Muslims. This is confirmed in a quote from the \textit{Le Monde} cartoonist who justifies \textit{Hebdo}’s ‘provocation’ by suggesting that caricaturists ridicule all religions without favour (ibid.). But the ‘even-handed’ three-way ridiculing is precisely France 2’s strategy. The implicit ‘theme’ is
developed in the first report, when the reporter, commenting on the bizarre court
scene, jokes, ‘The scene almost warranted a cartoon’ (7 February 2007). An
undercurrent of implied Muslim aggression permeates the reports. The phrase
‘provokes anger’ is used repeatedly to describe Muslim reaction (6 February
2007). The meticulously balanced thematic opposition ‘free speech’ or ‘respect
for religion’ is played out at a second level, at which the first side is consistently
privileged.

Reports foreground laïcité explicitly, normally via the voice of an
interviewee. In the aftermath of the Charlie Hebdo verdict (Hebdo was acquit-
ted), a young Muslim comments ‘I am in a secular (laïc) country and I must
follow its laws’ (8 February 2007). French mediations of Islam thus fracture
both the image of Muslims, and the Frenchness in which that image is mirrored.
This is the corollary to Thomas Deltombe’s observation that the specificity of
France’s ‘imaginary Islam’ is its reciprocal relationship with the French national
myth. It also echoes the disjunction that we have noted in respect of Channel 1
reporting.

Muslim violence

The disjunction is still more marked in Channel 1 stories treating Muslim terror-
ism. In a report on an assault on a high-ranking Ingush mufti (24 July 2008), the
impersonal wording dealing with a Muslim extremist attack on official Islam
obscures the agency and identity of the attackers:

In the Coordination Centre for North Caucasian Muslims, they evaluated
the event as an attempt to scare the leaders of official Islam and destabilize
the region. Representatives of the Orthodox faith were also deeply offended.
And the Chief Rabbi … expressed sympathy to Muslims.

Because the variants of terror coverage (domestic and international) are not
reconciled within an internally differentiated view of the perpetrators, they
intrude upon one another at the individual report level. During coverage of a spate
of attacks by Ingush separatists on ethnic Russians, newsreaders’ propensity to
use charged terms like ‘bestially murdered’ (zverski ubit) alongside scientific-
objective close-ups of weapons revealed the infiltration of the objective ‘crime’
idiom by emotive-nationalist rhetoric. The sudden, unframed inclusion of a state-
ment of harmonizing reassurance by the Ingush Representative for Intercultural
Affairs alongside the attribution of the term ‘bandit’ to the perpetrators exacer-
bates the contradiction.

In one report on a murdered teacher’s funeral (18 July 2007) the process
surfaces overtly when a grenade explodes. The event, captured on camera, is
relabelled as a ‘terror act’, and the citing of a government statement that ‘all the
people of Ingushetia condemn the act’ invokes the harmonizing strategy. But the
report ends incongruously with a series of interviews with the teacher’s former
pupils; intended as the conclusion to the original crime update, their inclusion
in what is now a ‘terror incident’ reconfirms the manner in which local Islamist violence slips through the crack between ‘crime’ and ‘international terror’. An Ingush government condemnation of a ‘godless international rabble’ accords the confusion a lexical dimension. The media is desperate to equate Islam either with official policy on inter-ethnic harmony, or with an international terror movement distant from the concerns of ‘true’ Muslims in Russia. Unable to acknowledge the presence of a local Islamist insurgency, it thus portrays a domestic situation involving a confusing combination of skirmishes with mere criminals and an ill-defined global terror campaign. Yet this strategy cannot prevent the disjunction of Muslims and Islam, domestic and international terror, and the opening up of a discursive space conducive to the explosive conflation of ethnicity and religion; precisely because the Islamist dimension to the situation in the North Caucasus cannot be properly discussed, assaults on ethnic Russians in the region are liable to be attributed by viewers to a generalized Caucasian barbarism with roots deep in the Russian cultural memory.

In its reporting of Islamic terror, BBC One openly strives to eschew provoking ethnic tension by embracing multiculturalism within its own editorial practices. In the initial report on the London car bomb, the only eyewitness cited is an Asian man (29 June 2007), visually confirming ‘moderate’ Muslim outrage. It is adumbrated in Gordon Brown’s assertion that ‘we have got to separate … those great moderate members of our community from a few extremists’ (1 July 2007). But in ‘de-Islamizing’ government discourse, the establishment of Muslims as a coded metonymy both for ‘the British population’ (our community) and Islamic fanatics (a few extremists) reproduces the short-circuiting effect noted earlier: ‘our community’ must refer to Muslim moderates, just as ‘a few extremists’ means ‘Islamic extremists’.

The effort to de-emphasize the Islamist dimension to the terror act by citing a ‘decent’, outraged eyewitness of Asian appearance (and presumably Muslim heritage) disrupts the sequencing of the legal framework that we highlighted earlier: at that point no security spokesperson has referenced likely Islamic involvement. Moreover, the visual gesture (‘showing’ a moderate Muslim rather than ‘announcing’ him) confuses ethnicity with religion. The polemical impulse motivating the gesture (‘here is a moderate Muslim to challenge your prejudice’) betrays a prior assumption of possible Islamic guilt. Like Channel 1, albeit in a more convoluted and sophisticated fashion, BBC One’s de-Islamization strategy is ridden with contradiction.

The problems recur. During the 1 July 2007 report on the bombings, a security analyst speculates on the al-Qaeda connection: ‘It’s too early to tell whether al-Qaeda had a central role … but we do know that all the major plots since 2004 had a connection to the al-Qaeda hierarchy.’ The scene cuts to genuflecting Muslims: ‘But across Britain this weekend Muslims were appalled by the violence attempted in their name …’. This scene is preceded, however, by a conflicting analysis: ‘Terror plots in this country are currently stoked by widespread Muslim resentment over the West’s role in Iraq … News … helps radicalize angry young men in Britain and Europe.’
The contradiction ‘widespread Muslim resentment’/‘Muslims were appalled’ highlights the tension at the heart of the (specific) Muslims/(abstract) Islam(ism) confusion. Islamism drives global terrorism, with sympathy from a minority of British Muslims. Yet multiculturalism enjoins us to consider all groups as equally committed to British culture, with the corollary that terrorism is itself culturally neutral. The dilemma is highlighted in the earlier discussed spectacle of inter-Muslim conflict played out at the heart of a British institution (the army), which projects a Muslim assault on non-Muslim Britain onto a Muslim-on-Muslim conflict. Here, in place of Channel 1’s propensity for rupture, there is interference between two well-meaning performative injunctions: the requirement for terror reports to enact ‘presumption of innocence’ (to assume that terrorism is a crime of which any ethnic-religious group could be guilty); the need actively to counter assumptions that terrorism is attributable to Muslims.

In France 2’s reporting of domestic Islamic violence, the BBC’s endorsement of multiculturalism is substituted by that of laïcité and free speech, but, as we observed in relation to legal stories, to opposite effect. Coverage of Muslim threats to Robert Redeker, a teacher who publicly associated Islam with violence, featured two special reports on Redeker’s ‘plight’ but just one short announcement reporting the arrest of the suspect. The first report (15 November 2006) focused on an evening of support. The newscaster left no doubt as to the real story: ‘It is really the principle of the right to free speech and criticism which is at stake here’. Redeker himself highlights the issue of French identity: ‘French people are very attached to two things: laïcité and freedom of expression’ (15 November 2006). Muslim voices are represented only indirectly, and in polar opposite forms; first, the vicious email threat read by a supporter, then the reporter’s reminder that ‘the Muslim community has taken your side and is participating in these support rallies’ (15 November 2006).

The report features an interview allowing Redeker to express his adherence to French values. The questions are mere cues for him to vent his feelings: ‘Do you feel comforted by these displays of support?’; ‘What lessons do you draw from this episode?’, etc. France 2 here encapsulates French constitutional values by not merely tolerating but actively facilitating Redeker’s freely expressed rebuttal of extremism.

The follow-up report recounts, from Redeker’s viewpoint, his life under protection. It recalls that the episode began with the publication of Redeker’s article in Le Figaro, which precipitated a self-enclosing performative chain: from Le Figaro (which initially accorded Redeker his ‘constitutional right’), to France 2 which confirmed it, first once, then again: ‘Redeker refutes nothing in his article describing Muhammad as a cruel warlord – “It’s a question of truth … and I think that we shouldn’t stop speaking it. So I’ll write it again”’ (18 January 2007). Again echoing the fragmentation effect we observed on Channel 1, Islam is constructed either as assimilated Frenchness, with its commitment to civilized values and constitutional rights, or as its violent, reverse mirror image.
Conclusion

Russian television, then, is not alone in struggling to deal with the impact of the rise of Islamic radicalism. It shares with both its British and French equivalents a difficulty in articulating the link between global Islam and the domestic presence from which local Muslim violence emanates; and with BBC One the counter-productive effect of attempts to de-Islamize coverage of security issues (for BBC One, in the well-meaning cause of tolerant open-mindedness; in Channel 1’s case as part of a deliberate strategy of suppression). Overall, despite France’s relative lack of domestic terror issues, Channel 1 exhibits more parallels with France 2 than with BBC One, because of the rigidity with which the respective official state lines on inter-ethnic harmony are pursued by comparison with BBC One.

However, Channel 1 clearly lacks the capacity of either France 2 or BBC One to actively engage with, and thus enact, consensually negotiated societal values based on tolerance, albeit in a limited context (France 2), or via performative strategies which undercut one another (BBC One).

In Russia, the absence of broad societal consensus over the value of liberalism and tolerance means that state television is unable to internalize governmental policy and implements it piecemeal. The result of this failure is that, paradoxically, the establishment channel reflecting the most complete symbiosis of state and media is the one in which the image of Muslims is least coherent, the narrative mediation of global and local Islam least convincing, and the tolerance narrative most muddled. The fact that on BBC One the pursuit of multicultural harmony is so closely intertwined with its commitment to ‘presumption of innocence’, and, on France 2, with the enactment of secularism and free speech, indicates a degree of organismic and robustness in these broadcasters’ implied value systems of which Channel 1’s Kremlin masters can only dream.

Above all, Vremya’s efforts to cloak Muslim involvement in security issues with a dual strategy of criminalization and the rhetoric of undifferentiated intercultural harmony subsume religion under ethnicity in a manner liable to foster a grassroots intolerance of lethal potency, something we are, alarmingly, already beginning to see on the streets of cities all over Russia.  

Appendix

Table A.1  Russia, Channel One: Stories selected for case study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Story Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>06/12/2006</td>
<td>Putin makes pronouncement on extremism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/12/2006</td>
<td>Putin discussed extremism with various parties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18/05/2007</td>
<td>Trial of the murder of Kislovodsk imam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18/07/2007</td>
<td>Several injured in grenade explosion at a cemetery in Ingushetia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20/07/2007</td>
<td>Orthodox chapel in Dagestan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/01/2008</td>
<td>6 militants eliminated in Dagestan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23/01/2008</td>
<td>Suspected Wahhabi group member arrested in Moscow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24/07/2008</td>
<td>The deputy muftis wounded in Ingushetia attack</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table A.2 BBC One: Stories selected for case study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Story Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10/11/2006</td>
<td>BNP cleared</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24/01/2007</td>
<td>British identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31/01/2007</td>
<td>Arrest under Terrorists Act</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25/05/2007</td>
<td>Islamic cleric deported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30/06/2007</td>
<td>Glasgow explosion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30/06/2007</td>
<td>Glasgow bomb plot: the investigation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>01/07/2007</td>
<td>Arrests of suspects of Glasgow and London attempted bombings</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table A.3 France 2: Stories selected for case study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Story Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>15/11/2006</td>
<td>Soutien à R. Redeker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15/11/2006</td>
<td>Soutien à Robert Redeker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>08/12/2006</td>
<td>Incendiaires de mosquées: le verdict</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>02/01/2007</td>
<td>Portrait de France: une famille musulmane?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18/01/2007</td>
<td>Robert Redeker raconte son quotidien</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>06/02/2007</td>
<td>Caricatures de Mahomet: procès à Paris</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>07/02/2007</td>
<td>Le procès des caricatures de Mahomet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>08/02/2007</td>
<td>Charlie Hebdo 2ème jour de procès</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes

1 The research is based on initial results from an ongoing three-year project on European television representations of Islam as security threat. For details of the project, see www.llc.manchester.ac.uk/research/projects/etrist/.
7 Thus, ‘performance’ is allied to ‘hegemony’ in the Laclauan sense of ‘consensus’ values consisting of ‘chains of equivalence’ which provisionally fix dominant meanings within a system of differences and antagonisms. See E. Laclau, Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics, London: Verso, 1985, p. 135.

Putin’s partial rehabilitation of Soviet achievements dates from his post-Beslan address to the nation (2004), when he lamented the fall of a proud colossus of a state, the core of which lives on in the Russian Federation.


Founded in April 2001 by Aleksandr Dugin, and pledging full support for Putin, the ‘Eurasia’ movement includes amongst its founder members Talgat Tajuddin, the chief Mufti of the Russian Central Muslim Spiritual Directorate (TsDUM).


‘Islam-related’ stories are those containing specific reference to Islam, or connoting the involvement of Islamic factors.

However, it should again be stressed that, with its strongly assimilationist tendencies, mnogonarodnost does not equate to British-style multiculturalism, with its emphasis on celebrating difference. Thus, the term ‘multiculturalism’ in the tables is used as a convenient ‘umbrella’ term to capture the three channels’ coverage of inter-ethnic cohesion policies and issues.

A Federal Law on Counteracting Extremist Activity was adopted in 2002. It defines extremism sufficiently vaguely as to be adaptable to political needs.

In a broadcast of the discussion show, *Vremena*, Pozner speculated: ‘There is this foreign word, “tolerantnost” which translates as “terpimost” [patience]. What does it mean? It means a preparedness to tolerate another’s opinion … yet the world’s leading religions have not distinguished themselves by patience [terpimost’yu]’ (5 February 2006).

In response to Pozner’s question about ‘the forces which nobody cares to name’, one guest ventures that it is a conspiracy of ‘transnational corporations and American elites’ (26 September 2004).


France’s ‘Law on Secularity and Conspicuous Religious Clothing’ was signed by President Chirac on 15 March 2004.


We use the term ‘script’ in Fairclough’s sense of a recognizable narrative sequence providing an instant interpretative code. See N. Fairclough, *Media Discourse*, London: Arnold, 2005.

Ironically, Dalil Boubakeur, rector of the Grand Mosque of Paris and leader of the legal campaign against *Hebdo*, invoked the French constitution.


Jackie Smith, the Home Secretary stated in one report, ‘Terrorists are criminals, whose victims come from all walks of life, communities and religious backgrounds’ (2 February 2007). See ‘Counterterrorism’, House of Commons daily debates.
27 This resonates with Zizek’s positing of an act of violence as the founding roots of all law. See Slavoi Zizek, *For They Know Not What They Do*, London: Verso, 1991, p. 204.

Moscow has barely registered in studies of Russian Islam, which concentrate predominantly on communities in the North Caucasus, the Volga-Urals, or on Russia’s relations with the Muslim world. Traditionally, although the presence of ethnic minorities and migrant communities has been acknowledged, Moscow has been seen largely as an ethnic Russian and Christian city. Its medieval status as the self-proclaimed ‘Third Rome’ of the Orthodox world finds modern echoes in prevalent images of the cathedrals of St Basil’s and Christ the Saviour, the Kremlin’s golden cupolas and even official symbols – after all, Moscow’s coat of arms displays St. George slaying the dragon.

Yet Muslims have resided in Moscow for at least six centuries. In post-Soviet times, migration has dramatically increased their number and according to common unofficial estimates they may number upwards of 2–2.5 million of Moscow’s approximately 13 million residents – a figure which would make Moscow one of Europe’s most Muslim capitals, and certainly ‘the largest Muslim city in Russia’.¹ Even if the exact size of their population is disputed, migration and greater post-Soviet opportunities have certainly allowed Moscow’s Muslims to become an ever more visible presence in its cityscape. Since the millennium alone, we can note new websites such as islam.ru (2000) and islamnews.ru (2002); a new publishing house Umma (2002) and associated podcast radio station Radio Islam (www.radioislam.tv); Moscow’s first halal restaurant, U Rodnika near metro Tulskaya (2008); the first Russian photographic festival, ‘Islam in Russia’ held on 25 December 2008 in Moscow’s House of Journalists; and much else besides.

The nature of this Muslim presence is seldom studied and this is the aim of the current chapter. After a brief historic overview, the contemporary dynamics, demands and challenges within Moscow’s Muslim population are analysed, concentrating above all on Muslim–state relations. Neither the official discourse of mnogonarodnost/mnogonatsionalnost (multi-ethnicity/multi-nationality – ethnic autonomy within a framework of harmonious, unified fraternal relations), nor conceptualizations of incipient Islamic anti-state radicalization are adequate to capture the complex processes within a population which is increasingly culturally and religiously assertive.²

In the post-Soviet era, Moscow has gradually become one of the centres of Russian Islam to parallel and even challenge Kazan, Makhachkala, Ufa or Grozny.
This is partly the product of pro-active state policies – the re-centralization of the muftiats and the increasing importance of the Moscow-based Council of Muftis as part of policies which aim to integrate Muslims vertically (co-opting from above). Increased Muslim migration to Moscow and the autonomous self-assertion of the indigenous Muslim population are also factors. State re-centralization has had effects similar to those notable elsewhere in Russia: the emergence of a loyal strata of ‘official’ ‘clerics’ who monopolize and attempt to moderate the representation of Muslim interests, and an increased grass-roots disaffection with this officially approved Islam that inclines at least towards autonomous mobilization to defend cultural and religious practices, at most towards radicalization.

However, the growing Muslim presence in Moscow has not yet posed the problems of Muslim accommodation that confront authorities in London and Paris, let alone elsewhere in Russia. Moscow’s Muslims do not yet represent a horizontally integrated community capable of autonomous, coherent and consolidated cultural and religious, still less political, activity on a citywide scale, and no significant Muslim opposition to the authorities is visible. However, given the evidence of a latent demand for a Muslim voice, the question of whether the state’s vertical mobilization will prove adequate to the task of responding to increasing horizontal demands for Islamic articulation and representation remains a highly pertinent one.

The ‘hidden history’ of Moscow’s Muslims

In recorded history, Moscow has always had an indigenous Muslim population, traceable at least to the time of the Golden Horde (c. 1240–1420), and perhaps even earlier. Until migratory waves in the 1990s, Moscow’s Muslims were overwhelmingly Tatars – the descendants of emissaries of the Khanates who first settled in Moscow for trade and diplomatic purposes. The first significant Tatar presence recorded was the so-called Khan Yard in the Kremlin that in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries served as ambassadorial and trade representation for the Khanates.

The Tatar presence was small – numbering several hundred until migration, prompted by the abolition of serfdom and incipient industrialization, boosted its number to around ten thousand by 1912. However, Tatar influence on the imperial elite was disproportionate – so much so that one can talk of Moscow’s ‘hidden’ Islamic history. The Tatar influence spreads to royal symbols (the Monomakh cap, worn by Muscovite princes and Tsars until Peter the Great, was allegedly a gift from Özbeg Khan); architecture (St Basil’s is allegedly inspired by the Kul Sharif Mosque, destroyed in the sacking of Kazan in 1552); and even royal lineage (several Christianized Tatars were buried in the Kremlin). The Tatar heritage has left its mark on several of Moscow’s street names (e.g. Bolshaya and Malaya Ordynka streets, Krymskii val, Balchug and Arbat). Even after the conquest of the Khanates by medieval Muscovy, the necessity of trade and diplomatic contacts with Central Asia and the Ottoman empire sustained a ‘Tatar settlement’ (Tatarskaya sloboda) in Zamoskvorechie (due south of the Kremlin across the Moskva river on either side of today’s Bolshaya Tatarskaya...
mainly occupied with translation, interpreting and trade, the latter role predominating once the capital had moved to St Petersburg. Although the Tatars suffered constant assimilation due to repression and conversion (the upper strata had mostly been Christianized by the end of the seventeenth century), the compact size of Tatarka sloboda preserved its cultural specificity. The first wooden mosque in the district appeared before 1712, and a small Tatar population continued to dwell in the area until dispersal in the 1950s.

After the reign of Catherine the Great, the Tatars received the status of a ‘tolerated minority’. However, they still struggled to obtain full religious freedom. For instance, Damir Khayretdinov refutes the generally accepted story that permission to build Moscow’s first stone mosque was facilitated by Tsar Aleksandr I’s gratitude for ‘heroic’ Muslim deeds in the Napoleonic wars, and argues that Muslims’ protracted lobbying of unwilling officialdom won the day. 6 Construction of what is now called the Istoričeskaya Mechet (Historical Mosque) at 22 Bolshaya Tatarka street began in 1823. Moscow’s second mosque, the Sobornaya Mechet (Cathedral Mosque) near Prospekt Mira opened in 1904. Struggles with bureaucracy notwithstanding, at the turn of the twentieth century Muslims were a well-integrated, indigenous element of Moscow. Despite augmentation by traders from Central Asia and the Caucasus, the core of the population remained Tatar. Significantly, the majority of Moscow’s Tatars have historically been Mishari (Mishars), from neighbouring regions such as Nizhni Novgorod, and Kasimov Tatars from the former Kasimov Khanate in today’s Ryazan oblast (region). 7 Unlike the inhabitants of the Kazan Khanate, Mishars and Kasimov Tatars became vassals of Russia in the 1400s and lack a narrative of independent statehood. Yet even the Kazan Tatars have a centuries-old residence in Moscow that indicates they can by no means be regarded as a foreign diaspora.

In the Soviet period, Moscow’s Muslims were subject to the same persecution as other religious communities, particularly in 1928–38: the two madrasas (Islamic secondary schools) were closed in the 1920s and the Historical Mosque was shut in 1936. Its Imam-Khatib Abdulla Shamsutdinov was arrested in 1930 and shot in 1937. The Cathedral Mosque remained open as the only operating mosque in the European part of Russia, a fact which owed far less to the Party Politburo’s tolerance than its realpolitik. Foreign embassies prevented the Mosque’s closure. It was attended by foreign dignitaries and leaders (such as Sukharno, Nasser and Gaddafi) and was used by the Soviet leadership as a symbol both of the USSR’s multi-ethnicity and Moscow’s friendship towards the Muslim world. 8

Muslims and state in contemporary Moscow

Democracy and demographics

Until the early 1990s, Moscow’s Muslim population preserved historical continuity: it was relatively small, well-integrated and Tatar-dominated. For example, the 1989 Soviet census showed Tatars as the second largest minority group after Ukrainians, but with just 1.8 per cent of Moscow’s approximately ten-million
population. However, post-Soviet pluralism allowed for a much greater visibility, increased demands and opportunities which Moscow’s Muslims exploited no less than other religious and cultural groups. For instance, the early 1990s saw the re-opening of the Historical Mosque (May 1993) with Saudi funds and the mushrooming of new initiatives – for example, *Santlada* (later *Badr*), a Salafi publishing house, and social organizations such as the Islamic Congress headed by Mukhammed Salyakhetdinov (specializing in literature and social programmes) and the Islamic Committee headed by Geidar Jemal (books, lecturing and political activity).  

However, in the late 1990s, Moscow’s Muslim population experienced a seismic demographic shift not shared by Russia’s larger population. Moscow’s prosperity relative to the periphery, its role as a transfer point to Western Europe from East Asia, and instability in the Caucasus and Central Asia increased both the number and diversity of the capital’s Muslim population. It now numbers over thirty nationalities, with particular inflows from Azerbaijan, Chechnya, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. This poses acute problems of adaptation to Moscow’s resident population, above all ethnic Russians (whose number is declining) and Tatars (whose dominance of the local Muslim population is eroding). It poses new problems of integration for Moscow’s Muslims, as their environment develops from an indigenous subculture into a patchwork dominated by internal Muslim migrants and foreign diasporas.

Of course, the precise size of this demographic shift is controversial and difficult to calculate, since there are no uncontested figures on the number of domestic or foreign Muslims either in Russia or in Moscow. The last Russian census (2002) barely reflects it: the number of ethnic Russians fell to 84.8 per cent from 89.7 in 1989. However, the proportion of Tatars fell slightly (to 166 thousand, 1.6 per cent), with less than ten per cent of this population moving to Moscow since 1986. Azeris became Moscow’s second biggest Muslim ethnicity with a near five-fold population increase since 1989. But their overall number remained small at 95,563, 0.9 per cent of Moscow’s total official population (10.4 million). Accordingly, conservative estimates use the 2002 census data to argue that the total number of Muslims in Moscow is no more than 410,000. In addition, any estimate of the total number needs to acknowledge that the USSR’s officially sanctioned atheism has a legacy: a large number of Russian Muslims are not religiously devout but ‘ethnic Muslims’ whose religious belief is largely a reflection of their cultural identity, nominal or absent.

Nevertheless, it is generally understood that official figures significantly underplay the real number of Muslims in Moscow and Russia more generally. The Muslim birth rate is higher than that of ethnic Russians, and labour migrants are often deterred by strict residency and exit visa requirements from legally registering their status. State officials and some Muslim leaders may have an interest in exaggerating the number: in the former case to attract more federal resources and attention to border, registration and law enforcement agencies, in the latter to buttress Islam’s role as a ‘state religion’ demanding equal status with Russian Orthodoxy. Certainly, there is little hard evidence to support the Council
of Muftis’ view that there are 3.5 million Muslims in Moscow, a million of those being Tatars and a million Azeris. Nevertheless, it is not impossible that amongst some 4–5 million migrants to Russia, over half (predominately Muslims) may reside in the Moscow region, making a figure of at least 2–2.5 million Moscow Muslims plausible. Clearly, this is a massive shift since Soviet times, with an increasingly diverse Muslim population now comprising up to a quarter of the capital’s total.

The vertical integration of Moscow’s Muslims

In large part, Muslim–state relations in Moscow are simply a microcosm of federal policies towards Muslims elsewhere. Thus, we can characterize the 1990s as a period of neglect, when the federal government had no identifiable policies specific to its Muslim population outside Chechnya. After 2003 (following partial consolidation of Russia’s hold over Chechnya), a period of assertive engagement and vertical integration is observable. With the aim of reducing foreign funding, undermining the attraction of radical Islam, and of inculcating loyal Russian citizens, the state has far more actively sought to court and engage its Muslim community, to monopolize the funding of Muslim initiatives and to buttress the role of the official Muslim Spiritual Boards (DUMs or muftiats) as its interlocutors with ordinary Muslims.

For example, the Presidential Administration doubled its funding for Islamic education in 2008 from 400 to 800 million rubles and, through representatives on the Board of the Foundation for the Support of Islamic Culture, Science and Education, helped distribute private funding too. Since 2003, Putin has favoured Ravil Gainutdin, chair of the Council of Muftis of Russia (SMR) and head of the affiliated Moscow Muftiat (officially, the Spiritual Board of the European Part of Russia, DUMER) as head of Russia’s Muslims, in preference to Talgat Tajuddin, head of the Central Spiritual Board of Muslims (TsDUM), who was the ‘court’ Mufti under Yeltsin. However, the Presidency retains the inclination to play these organizations against each other. At the same time ‘unofficial’ organizations (Muslim or otherwise), particularly political parties, have been discouraged or banned. Although Muslim parties had developed little national support during the 1990s, theoretically we might expect that Moscow’s burgeoning Muslim community could one day be concentrated and consolidated enough to elect constituency representatives to the State Duma. This prospect cannot now be tested. Parties formed on a regional or confessional basis were banned by legislation in 2001–3, and local constituencies were abolished for the 2007 parliamentary elections.

Despite federal neglect, the Moscow city government paid more attention to Muslims during the 1990s, albeit on a largely decorative level. Moscow Mayor Yurii Luzhkov understands the ‘historical significance of symbols’, and uses ‘religion as a party ticket’. Although the city government is well-known for its harsh treatment of labour migrants, Luzhkov also made early, public attempts to court local Muslims, for example by patronizing the ninetieth anniversary of the Cathedral Mosque in 1994 and attending services to mark Eid al-Adha,
the Muslim feast of sacrifice. Luzhkov’s patronage of Gainutdin has allowed a gradual increase in the number of Moscow’s mosques from two to four with another four under construction and sixteen projected. This number is clearly inadequate: the main Cathedral Mosque holds just 500 and its courtyard is often full to overflowing. Although a massive enlargement (to 6,000) is in progress, even the projected increase will hardly provide adequate prayer facilities across the capital. For comparison, although with smaller Muslim populations, Paris has over 75 mosques and prayer houses, London over 100. Moreover, Moscow has over 600 Orthodox churches, and even seven synagogues, although Jews comprise less than one per cent of its population.

Why the slow progress? According to Nafigulla Ashirov, co-chair of the Council of Muftis, dialogue with Moscow’s high-ranking officials is good, but problems start lower down, with the bureaucracy (and presumably corruption) involved in opening and registering new religious/cultural organizations and building mosques and madrasas. This should not necessarily be attributed to ethno-religious discrimination, since all religions in Russia have periodically incurred problems with building new properties, although in a letter of 2007, the Council of Muftis accused Moscow region governor Boris Gromov of obstructing the building of mosques throughout the wider Moscow region. The problem of Muslim under-representation is far wider than just the number of mosques – for example, there is only one school in the whole of Moscow that teaches the Tatar language. Given the scale of the task, the Moscow authorities’ efforts are not particularly pro-active – for example, the Mayor has no Muslim deputy, nor are there any Muslim members in the city Duma.

However, the Council of Muftis and Moscow Muftiat have themselves been increasingly active in shaping the city and federal authorities’ reactions to Muslims. According to Galina Yemelianova, Gainutdin’s ambition was to turn Moscow into the Muslim capital of Russia, and in an administrative sense, he has largely succeeded. Although Tajuddin is widely considered a more erudite theologian, Gainutdin (whose command of Arabic is poorer) is a better politician than his erratic rival. Geography clearly helped him gain the upper hand against Tajuddin: Moscow gave Gainutdin greater visibility and better access to high-level politicians and foreign contacts, whereas federal politicians and even local Muslim officials were loath to trek to the seat of the TsDUM in Ufa. Even in the 1990s, the state funded DUMER more than TsDUM.

Moreover, Gainutdin has played elite games adroitly, preserving a dualistic and semi-independent role. To the state, he presents DUMER and SMR as the main loyalist buttresses against radical Islam. As Gainutdin stated: ‘we are not interested in having Muslims join the extremist ranks’, and he denounced terrorists as having nothing in common with true Wahhabism or Islamic doctrine. He argued that the Hanafi madhhab, to which Tatar Muslims adhere, is a ‘tolerant, mild and peace-loving school of Islamic law’. Simultaneously, the SMR presents itself to Muslims as the most authoritative but independent defender of their interests. For instance, in 2009, the SMR’s opposition helped overturn charges of extremism against Aslambek Ezhaev, head of the publishing department of Moscow Islamic
University, who published a Russian translation of Muhammad Ali Al-Hashimi’s *The Ideal Muslim: The True Islamic Personality* (banned in Russia in 2007). In response, Gainutdin proposed an ‘expert religious council’ at federal level to stop the proliferation of book prohibitions by regional courts. This independence has proved controversial, however. In 2005, Gainutdin’s proposal for a Muslim vice-president was completely rejected by head of the Presidential administration, Vladislav Surkov.

Nor has Gainutdin been averse to using *apparat* methods to further SMR’s interests. In particular, DUMER wrested control of the Historical Mosque in 1999 from TsDUM by complaining to the authorities, legally registering a ‘double’ of its religious organization (*Bait-Allah*), driving the Imam (Makhmud Velitov) from the Mosque and using the police to enforce the takeover. In 1998, Luzkhov’s support prevented Tajuddin even being invited to the opening ceremony of the Memorial Mosque. This is not to say that SMR has unchallenged jurisdiction over Moscow’s mosques; TsDUM controls the Domodedovo prayer room and the *Imam* and *Yadrar* mosques in Otradnoe — indeed, the former Imam of the Historical Mosque Velitov now works at Yadram. However, DUMER has clearly consolidated its position as the state’s favoured partner in Moscow, and has benefited from state largesse, most notably by founding the Moscow Islamic University in 1999, which has over 300 students. The Moscow Islamic Institute, founded within the University in 2005, prepares imams and specialists in religious education.

But translating state patronage into authority over Moscow’s Muslims is not a done deal. A 2002 poll in the three Moscow mosques controlled by DUMER showed (perhaps unsurprisingly) that eighty per cent of their congregations saw Gainutdin as an ideal Muslim leader. However, the views of several other Moscow Muslims are far more critical. For example, journalist Fatima Ezhova argues that:

> Ruling circles with the help of certain ‘sponsor’ structures try to control the Russian *umma*, to suppress the grass-roots structures, which, as is said in the Qur’an, might compete with one another in beneficence. This [competition] occurs in London, where...there are many more Mosques than in Moscow.

Indeed, the muftiat’s attempts to monopolize the building of mosques might be seen as either guaranteeing their construction or, rather, retarding local initiative. For example, both the Dagestani and Tatar communities made proposals to build cultural centres in the Butovo district in 2000–1 which received no answer from the authorities. The Moscow Muftiat finally took over the process and announced in 2007 that a mosque would be started only after the projected enlargement of the Cathedral Mosque in 2009. Although the project has high-level support, since it would be named after Akhmad Kadyrov and funded by Chechen money, it has yet to start. It would be followed by a second new Mosque dedicated to Imam Shamil, on Shosse entuziastov.

Although, given demographic pressures, the absence of mosques in Moscow is critical, as Ezhova’s statement indicates, the wider issue is the inability of Muslims to self-organize. Several Muslims implicate the muftiats directly in
this problem, arguing that they play a bureaucratic, managerial role, carrying out purely organizational functions such as organizing the hajj and building mosques, but having no wider social, theological or political weight: ‘DUMs with rare exceptions, do not conduct significant measures, don’t issue fatwas [theological judgements] don’t conduct social services and so forth.’

Others are more critical still, arguing that the whole institute of the muftiats (a Muslim quasi-clergy) is a Russian anomaly. A ‘tame’ muftiat imposes a bureaucratic superstratum, hinders genuine Muslim self-articulation and, although it has helped Muslims in their interaction with the Russian state, limits their exposure to international experience. It is even alleged that the muftiat collaborates with the security services, both to limit the influence of radical Islam and to stamp out any non-sanctioned Islamic activity: perhaps a fantastical claim, but one ostensibly corroborated by the Historical Mosque affair. Accordingly, although the state-led process of Islamic education is slowly increasing the general level of religious knowledge, many argue that there is no substitute for Muslim self-education and self-realization.

From ‘population’ to community?

Thus far, the word ‘community’ has been deliberately avoided in reference to Moscow’s Muslims. Indeed, not obshchina (community) but soobshchestvo (association) or obshchnost (fellowship) are more appropriate designations. Certainly, assertions that Moscow’s Islam is now so institutionalized and structured that it influences social life across Russia are an exaggeration. There is little evidence to date that Moscow’s Muslims represent a group either united by religious identity or capable of articulating a widely shared agenda in general, still less of organizing on that basis. There is nothing particularly surprising in this: Russia’s hierarchical and increasingly authoritarian political system hinders the horizontal integration and mobilization of most significant civil and political societies not explicitly sanctioned by the state, particularly if they lack political party articulation. Shared concerns that might become a more consolidated agenda are indeed visible: the above-mentioned criticisms of the muftiat share a demand for greater cultural, religious, intellectual and community representation and self-organization.

However, the weakness of Moscow Muslims’ self-articulation is not merely externally imposed: there are significant internal cleavages. There are huge divisions of aqida (creed) and ideology between the moderate Hanafi Muftiat, and, for example, the radical anti-globalist Shi’a Geidar Jemal. However, the post-Soviet legacy means that religion is often as much a statement of ethno-cultural identity as it is a faith: ‘One of the most dangerous phenomena in modern Russian Islam is its ethnicization, which is compounded by…regionalization.’

Unsurprisingly then, religious differences are relatively minor (for instance there is no observable Sunni–Shi’a conflict in Moscow, despite the influx of Azeris), and overlap with ethnic, political and purely personal disagreements to provide a complex array of conflicts. For example, although religious differences
were an undercurrent in the conflict between DUMER and the Historical Mosque (in particular the growing influence of Ingush Salafis in the Mosque), the issue was largely one of political and economic control. Under Velitov, the Historical Mosque developed a reputation as Moscow’s ‘most democratic’ Mosque, representing all Sunni Muslims irrespective of madhhab, including Sufis. It was long the only Moscow Mosque to conduct the *khutba* (sermon) in Russian and regularly to allow *itikaf* (act of devotion in the mosque during Ramadan). Unlike the Cathedral Mosque, which followed the Turkish calendar, it followed the Saudi calendar, meaning that Moscow’s two main mosques celebrated Ramadan and other Muslim festivals on different dates.

Indeed, a significant motivation of the Tatar religious hierarchy is to preserve their own cultural, intellectual and even linguistic dominance. This was not threatened significantly in the 1990s, when perhaps 95 per cent of the population of Moscow’s mosques was Tatar, but when migrants from Central Asia now make up 70 per cent, the dominance of Tatar imams and language faces rapid erosion. For example, Shamil Alyautdinov, Imam of the Memorial Mosque, increasingly uses Russian in religious services. The Tatar elite do not necessarily see new immigrants into the capital as their natural religious brethren, sometimes denouncing their lack of cultural integration in terms hardly less categorical than ethnic Russians.

The flipside of this ethnicization is that radicalizing tendencies appear weak amongst Moscow’s Muslims – there is little evidence of an internationalist Islam bridging ethnic divides to become a regional menace as, for example, in the North Caucasus. This is not to say that radical Islam is absent in the capital – several terrorist acts (most notably the Dubrovka hostage siege in 2002) indicate that Moscow can be the arena, if not the incubator, for radicalization. However, most of the other evidence is circumstantial. For example, several mosques have allegedly been abuzz with radical rhetoric, and the presence of radical Islamist * Jamaats* in Moscow has long been rumoured, although there is no indication that they are currently politically active. The proscribed ‘extremist’ organization, *Hizb ut-Tahrir*, has been present in Moscow, and its members have been subjected to several police raids. There are certainly some prominent Moscow Muslim leaders who have articulated radical sentiments. For example, the aforementioned co-chairman of SMR Ashirov also heads the Spiritual Board of Muslims of the Asian Part of Russia (DUM AChR) which has its headquarters in the Dinamo region of Moscow and frequently speaks on Moscow issues. At one stage, Ashirov supported efforts to form an Islamic political party advocating Dagestan’s succession from Russia, and was suspected by the authorities of ties with Islamic radicals. Ashirov often appears merely to be provocative and his radicalism is mainly rhetorical – in this way he is analogous to a ‘Muslim Zhirinovskii’. Chief Mufti Gainutdin has also appointed some radical figures in order to co-opt them, such as Mukhammad Abdullaevich Karachai (Bijiev), a former radical Salafi driven out of Karachai-Cherkessia, who from 2004–7 was deputy head of DUMER. In general, Moscow lacks many elements that have propagated radical Islam elsewhere: on one hand the disaffection with the bureaucratism and monopoly of the muftiats indicates that issues of Muslim representation, which contributed to a
Salafi reaction in the North Caucasus, are present; but conversely the dominance of Tatars of the Hanafi madhhab, with its traditions of accommodation to state power, and the active attempts to control the Caucasian element have weakened the impulse towards Saudi-inspired ‘Wahhabism’. Moreover, the pervasive economic destitution and youth unemployment that has fostered the longevity of anti-state insurrections in the impoverished North Caucasus are simply absent in Moscow.

Certainly, economic grievances intensify cultural ones. In general, Moscow’s Tatars are socially well off and well integrated, even assimilated, with many speaking Russian as a first language. They have predominantly professional employment and report relatively high life satisfaction, particularly the young. Newer migrants such as Azeris are far less integrated: as a whole, they are less educated (only thirteen per cent of post-1986 Azeri migrants have higher education) and more religious than the Tatars, and many seek to preserve ‘their’ traditions and not to integrate into Moscow life. However, as a moderating impulse, many Azeris maintain Azerbaijani citizenship and aspire to return home, while most migrants are ‘completely preoccupied with economic survival strategies and display…a professedly nonviolent and nonactivist character’. The migrants’ ‘illegal’ status further dictates an imperative to maintain a low profile, avoid vocalizing discontent and attracting the authorities’ attention. Overall, the absence of radicalizing catalysts in Moscow means that conversely the city becomes a motor of moderation.

However, inter-confessional and inter-ethnic relations are one significant (and growing) potential source of tension and radicalization. Relations with the Orthodox Church are officially harmonious; Russia’s official religions even have an unofficial ‘gentleman’s agreement’ against mutual proselytism and accordingly tend to their traditional ethnically defined congregations: the Orthodox to the ethnic Russians and the muftiats to the ethnic Muslims. However, in reality, relations are less idyllic. Unlike Tajuddin’s TsDUM, which supports a more Eurasianist view of Orthodoxy as the ‘elder brother’ of Russian Islam, the Council of Muftis challenges the Orthodox Church’s symbiosis with the state, most notably by successfully leading opposition to the proposed school course ‘Foundations of Orthodox Culture’ in 2006–7.

Moreover, on occasion Gainutdin has appeared to ‘bait’ the Church: for example, breaking the ‘gentleman’s agreement’, he talked of ‘tens of thousands’ of ethnic Russians converting to Islam. This was a clear exaggeration: the real number of neophytes is perhaps two to three thousand. Yet it is growing slowly, and the ‘New Muslims’ tend, as is common with converts, to be more radical. Gainutdin’s appointment of Ali-Vyacheslav Polosin, an ethnic Russian convert and former Orthodox priest, as a main adviser and publicist, was perceived in the Church hierarchy as offensive, prompting Kirill (now Patriarch but then head of the Church’s external relations department) to write to Gainutdin in protest in 2001.

The Church has on occasion been equally provocative to Muslim interests. Roman Silant’ev’s study of Russian Islam, portraying Gainutdin as hating the Church, and the Council of Muftis as particularly scandal- and conflict-ridden, was all the more sensational since Silant’ev was a member of the Inter-religious
Council of Russia (set up to co-ordinate activities between Russia’s ‘traditional religions’) and of the Department of External Affairs of the Moscow Patriarchate, until protests from the muftiat forced his removal. The activities of Daniil Sysoev, a Kryashen (baptized Tatar) Orthodox priest working in Yasenovo (Moscow) mirrored Polosin’s challenge to the Patriarchate, since Sysoev engaged in proselytism among Tatars and described Islam as a ‘false religion’. In May 2008, the Moscow prosecutor’s office refused a request from Muslim activists to convict him of religious hatred. Sysoev murdered by unknown assailants in November 2009. North Caucasian militants claimed responsibility.

More potentially problematic are Muslim relations with the majority ethnic Russian population. In part, these issues mirror those widely reported in Russia in general: the prevalence of popular xenophobic and Caucasophobic sentiments and increasing support for the slogan ‘Russia for the [ethnic] Russians’, prompted by the Chechen conflict; officially encouraged Russian nationalist assertion and weak attempts by law enforcement authorities to curb nationalist and outright racist activities. The increasing presence of Muslim immigration and unchecked ethnic Russian chauvinism has meant that Russia’s large metropolises, St Petersburg and Moscow in particular, have become potential flashpoints for xenophobia and ethnically inspired violence. Human rights observers have noted an increasing number of apparently racially motivated attacks on foreigners in Moscow, particularly targeting Central Asians and Azeris. In the Moscow region in 2008, 57 people were killed and 196 injured in racist attacks, the worst figures in Russia. There have been numerous violent assaults on Muslims at markets and in mosques. The Muslim religious centre in Sergiev Posad (75 km north-east of Moscow) was firebombed three times between 2005 and 2008. By 2006, fully 90 per cent of Muscovites believed that ethnic clashes were possible in the capital.

In general, ethnic Russians have a profoundly negative attitude to immigration, considering it ‘more threat than opportunity’. Such attitudes mirror the securitization of migration elsewhere, where migration, crime and terrorism are conflated as a security issue. The key issues raised in a 2006 poll of Muscovites were fears about crime, economic competition and the cultural incompatibility of immigrants. So far, so usual, but in Moscow, migrantophobia is especially intense: only 1.3 per cent of Muscovites polled by Tatiana Yudina in 2005 were positively inclined towards migrants. Why such an intensity of fear? On one hand, we have noted the sheer scale of migration: the migrant population has boomed as the ethnic Russian population has declined, and has filled vacant niches in Moscow’s economy, in the service and (particularly) construction sectors. The complex registration procedures and lack of integration programmes mean that most new labour immigrants inhabit a semi-legal ‘grey zone’, which increases popular lack of understanding.

Official and public reactions to immigration further stoke prejudices. Officially tolerated Russian nationalism has used Moscow as a main national stage. For instance, in the December 2005 Moscow legislative elections, the populist ‘Motherland’ bloc caused a scandal with its election broadcast showing stereotypical Caucasian immigrants alongside the slogan ‘Let’s cleanse Moscow
of rubbish’. After 2005, Moscow became the scene of an annual national anti-immigrant nationalist ‘Russian March’ on the National Unity Day holiday on 4 November. Moreover, the Moscow government’s response has been thoroughly ambiguous. The ‘Russian March’ has recently been sidelined to the Taras Shevchenko embankment far from public gaze, but the semi-disapproval shown to the nationalist marches stands in stark contrast with the Moscow authorities’ outright banning and suppression of liberal opposition and gay rights events. Symptomatically, although the ‘Motherland’ party was eventually removed from the December 2005 elections by a Moscow court on the grounds of inciting race hatred, this decision was selective and politically motivated, since it was instigated by the equally nationalist Liberal Democratic Party, which has used similarly inflammatory rhetoric on many occasions but remains a Kremlin-endorsed entity. The Moscow city authorities have themselves taken increasingly strict measures against immigrants, from penalizing landlords who harbour illegal immigrants to implementing the federal decision to forbid foreign traders (who are predominantly from the Caucasus) from operating in markets or on the streets from 1 April 2007. Public opinion polls show that these measures are very popular. For instance, of 1,600 people polled at the end of April 2007, 75 per cent believed that the reduction of foreigners on the markets was a positive thing, although these attitudes calmed somewhat when promised improvements in produce and services did not materialize.

Moreover, the Russian press has tended to further fuel widespread stereotypical views that migrants (especially from Central Asia) take over the service industries (e.g. taxis and fruit and vegetable markets), increase corruption and establish their own local mafias. Views of immigrants as innately disposed to criminality have also tended to be widely propagated. For example, the Izvestiya journalist Dmitrii Sokolov-Mitrich has written an extremely alarmist representation of the crime situation in Russia. The book proposes to highlight the ‘dark side of xenophobia’, but its key claim is insidious: it presents a succession of offences committed by non-Russians, making it crystal clear to every reader that ethnic minorities are really responsible for xenophobia.

That this migrantophobia has an Islamophobic component is shown by public discussion of ‘ghettoization’. Traditionally, there have been no identifiably ‘Muslim’ areas in Moscow, and, allegedly, town planners have explicitly sought to avoid troublesome ghettos of poorly integrated immigrants like the Paris banlieues. The Muslim population of Moscow is dispersed among over forty separate communities. However, the influx of economic migrants who settle where they work has begun to create new ‘Harlems’ in districts such as between Dmitrovskoe and Korovinskoe shosses, along Yaroslavskoe shosse and the Northern Izmailovo district.

In 2006, the district of Butovo (one of Moscow’s southernmost suburbs, 25 km south of the Kremlin) became the scene of conflicts between locals and the Moscow city authorities, when, exploiting Butovo’s relatively low land costs, the authorities demolished local residences to make way for newer housing projects. With rising real estate prices and demand for land, the potential
Islamization of the area increased public insecurities still more. In late 2007, North and South Butovo became the first area to be regarded as an ‘Islamic quarter’, with the opening of a new Islamic religious centre (Milost) which holds Friday prayers, social and cultural events, collects money for building the new Akhmad Kadyrov mosque, and plans new Islamic shops (e.g. for halal meat) and an Islamic healthcare centre. Around 60,000 Muslims live in Butovo (one-third of the region’s population).

The public reaction to this event was hysterical, expressing fears of Islamic ‘separatism’, ‘self-isolationism’ and indicating a significant intolerance of multiculturalism implicit in the discourse of mnogonarodnost. For example, Moscow comics tapped popular fears when they joked that ‘southern Butovo had seceded from the Russian Federation’. An official reaction, emphasizing the need for Muslims to assimilate, can be judged from interviews published on the website of Russkii Proekt (‘The [ethnic] Russian Project’), a nationalistic campaign associated with the pro-Putin United Russia party, which was particularly active in the run-up to the December 2007 elections. Andrei Tatarinov, a leader of United Russia’s youth wing ‘Young Guard’ declared: ‘If they [Muslims] don’t want to assimilate and live in our city like everyone does, then why are they here at all?’ Dmitrii Sokolov-Mitrich expressed similar themes, seeing ghettos as the harbingers of the social problems of New York and Berlin. Speaking firmly in favour of a common culture, he indicated that Butovo could cause a domino effect whereby each cultural and religious group had its own enclave. This practice allegedly indicated the dual standards of Muslim groups, because if ethnic Russians had similar enclaves they would be judged ‘extremist’. Even academic opinion shared these sentiments: Igor Beloborodov, director of the Institute of Demographic Studies, argued that when Muslim populations of any Moscow district constitute more than 10–12 per cent, this gives rise to demographic fears and xenophobic feelings among the ethnic Russian population. But rather than drawing the conclusion that each community needed greater dialogue and understanding, he implied that Muslims alone were responsible for xenophobia – indeed, he labelled Butovo’s practices as ‘demagogy’. Such a reaction was entirely disproportionate given that Milost has fewer than 100 regular members, and the only similar religious centre is the aforementioned one in Sergiev Posad in Moscow region. Milost Chairman Marat Alimov was keen to stress that ‘our Islam is moderate, we are normal people, the same as everyone else’ and that Muslims were not creating cultural or religious enclaves.

The question thus arises as to whether ethnic Russians’ intolerance can provide the consolidating factor so far absent among Moscow’s Muslims. This potential is clearly present: the absence of Muslim religious and cultural institutions in the capital causes Muslims to congregate in areas where these institutions/communities already exist. In this regard, the Moscow city authorities’ proposals in late 2008 to create immigrant labour districts on the city outskirts might prove entirely counter-productive. As Damir Khayretdinov argues, ghettoization will only happen through active state policy, not through the actions of Moscow’s ‘adapted’ Muslims. Moreover, in 2008, Nafigulla Ashirov argued that given official
indifference to extreme nationalists, Russia’s Muslims had little choice but to form large neighbourhoods with Muslim infrastructure such as mosques, schools and kindergartens. He later admitted that he made this suggestion in an emotional response to another anti-immigrant attack. Although Gainutdin disowned his outburst, it is an indication of the gut feelings of many Muslims. For example, in March 2007 over 3,000 Muslims signed an open letter to President Putin protesting against the political persecution occasioned by xenophobic law enforcement authorities who accused Muslims of ‘extremism’ and ‘terrorism’. In 2007, the Council of Muftis wrote to the President complaining of inadequate measures in response to hate-kilings of Muslims such as 23-year-old Tatar Damir Zainullin in St Petersburg that July.

Echoing similar themes, in June 2008 the Russian Congress of Peoples of the Caucasus (RKNK) was prompted by police indifference to racist attacks to set up a new ‘Operative reaction staff for giving legal aid to migrants from the Caucasus’ aiming to provide legal assistance to victims of anti-migrant attacks and physical protection to migrants. Although the group was committed to co-operation with the authorities and non-violence, it raised the spectre of vigilantism. Groups of aggressive Caucasians who have attacked ethnic Russians with the slogans ‘Caucasus, Caucasus!’ have also been observed in the capital. However, as such slogans indicate, just as most discrimination against Muslims has a racist rather than anti-religious motivation, the most radical Muslim responses have so far adopted an ethno-cultural rather than religious form. Moreover, Russia’s economic decline in 2009 has resulted in a reversal of the migratory influx, which may reduce migrantophobic sentiments in the short term. Certainly, the federal authorities have devoted greater attention to prosecuting hate crimes since 2007, although whether this will result in a substantive reduction of the physical danger to immigrants in the capital remains to be determined. For the time being at least, large-scale inter-ethnic or inter-confessional clashes in the capital remain improbable.

Conclusion

Since 1990, Moscow’s Muslims have become ever more visible actors within the capital’s religious, cultural and public life. Particularly through Gainutdin’s hold over the Council of Muftis and his close relationship with both Moscow and federal government, Moscow has become one of the main centres of Russian Islam. However, just as in Russia as a whole ‘there is no umma, Islamic solidarity and the realization of [Muslims’] own interests are absent’, Moscow’s Muslims remain too ethnically, culturally, socially and religiously divided to represent one integrated and autonomous ‘community’. This stratification is perhaps only to be expected given the non-hierarchical nature of Islam: ‘divisions’ can equally be a source of diversity and initiative. Nevertheless, in the context of Russia’s hierarchical political system, and its vertical integration with the Moscow authorities through the muftiat, the absence of public collective action to address issues of cultural, educational and religious
representation and protection for Muslims in the capital is problematic, and a top-down approach insufficient. Certainly, diverse Muslim organizations are emerging, new mosques are slowly being built, and Muslim initiatives are gaining greater state attention and funding. Official mnogonarodnost and its image of inter-ethnic harmony is substantiated by the generally loyalist attitudes Moscow’s Muslims demonstrate towards the local and federal authorities (as evidenced by the movement ‘Muslims in support of President Putin’, set up in 2007) and the integration of most of the indigenous Muslim population. However, Moscow Muslims’ aspirations to preserve and promote their own cultural and religious customs autonomously are increasingly evident, encountering occasionally discriminatory attitudes from ethnic Russians and the Orthodox Church, and resulting in a latent frustration with the lack of opportunities for self-assertion and representation. Such frustration might potentially manifest itself in disenchantment and opposition to local and federal authorities, and itself increase tendencies towards ghettoization and consolidation among the Muslim population. Mass Muslim migration to Moscow adds another layer of complexity to Islamic revival, increasing xenophobic sentiments in the wider population even as it limits the Muslim population’s ability to counteract such stereotypes in a coherent way.

As elsewhere in Russia, disenchantment with the ‘official’ Islam approved by the Russian state, incipient grass-roots mobilization to defend cultural and religious practices and even to protect Muslim communities physically, can lead towards radical tendencies, although it should be noted that no widely shared Islamic opposition to the authorities is visible, and Moscow’s economic and cultural milieu would hardly sustain it. Indeed the increasing growth, prominence and assertion of Muslims in Moscow is something natural and to be welcomed, rather than an inevitable link in the chain of a pan-Russian Islamic ‘threat’. Nevertheless, the authorities need to show much more sensitive, flexible and responsive policies than hitherto to ensure that this threat does not become manifest.

Notes

1 F. Asadullin, Islam v Moskve, Moscow: Logos, 2007, p. 76.
2 Mnogonatsionalnost was long the official term (for example, Russia’s 1993 constitution talks of the ‘multi-national (mnogonatsional’nyi) people of the Russian Federation’). However, the term mnogonarodnost is a recent neologism that avoids the ambiguity implicit in mnogonatsionalnost (that ‘nations’ have a right to self-determination). Accordingly, and particularly as used by Russian nationalists, the term mnogonarodnost implies ethnic diversity without the autonomy implicit in true multiculturalism. Alexander Verkhovsky, ‘Re: Russian approaches to extremism’. Email (20 July 2009).
3 Unless otherwise stated, the sources for this section are D. Khayretdinov, Muslim Community in Moscow: From 14th till the Beginning of 20th Century, Nizhni Novgorod: Medina, 2008; Khayretdinov, Musul’manskaia obshchina Moskvy v XIV nachale XX veka, Nizhni Novgorod: Makhinur/Medina 2002; F. Asadullin, Moskva Musul’manskaia, Moscow: Umma, 2004; and Asadullin, Islam v Moskve.
4 Abdulla Rinat Mukhametov, deputy head of islam.ru, interview, 14 October 2008, Moscow.
6 Damir Khayretdinov, interview, 29 October 2008, Moscow.
12 For example, Sergei Filatov and Roman Lunkin assert that no more than 10–15 per cent of ‘ethnic’ Muslims are ‘practising’ Muslims, i.e. no more than 2.8 million in Russia in total, with two million of these in the North Caucasus. See Filatov and Lunkin, ‘Statistika rossiiskoi religioznosti: magiya tsifr i neodnoznachnaya realnost’, *Sotsiologicheskie issledovaniya*, 6, 2005, 35–45.
18 As indeed happened in the 2005 UK general elections, when George Galloway (albeit not a Muslim himself) was elected as an MP in London’s most Muslim district, Tower Hamlets, on an anti-Iraq war platform that gained high Muslim community support.
19 Mukhametov interview.
22 Filatov, ‘Vlast pomogaet’.
24 Filatov, ‘Vlast pomogaet’.
25 Shakirov, ‘Putin i Luzhkov’.
29 ‘Ravil Gainutdin: “We are not interested in having Moslems join the extremist ranks”’ Available online at: www.eng.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/1023 (accessed 23 July 2009).
34 Khayretdinov interview.
36 Ibid., p. 413.
40 Interview, 30 October 2008, Moscow.
41 Interview, 31 October 2008, Moscow.
42 Maxim Shevchenko, Channel One TV presenter, interview, 31 October 2008, Moscow.
45 Khayretdinov, ed., *Islam v Moskve*, p. 28; Khayretdinov interview.
46 Khayretdinov interview.
47 Interview, 14 October 2008, Moscow.
51 Khayretdinov interview.
Muslim Moscow?

53 Ibid.
56 Ibid.
59 Kozhevnikova, ‘Radical nationalism in Russia in 2008’.
64 Yudina, ‘Labour migration’, p. 597.
69 Malashenko, ‘The situation inside Russia’.
74 Kots, ‘V Moskve poyavilis’.
Interviewed in ibid.


Kozhevnikova ‘Radical nationalism in Russia in 2008’.


The Republic of Tatarstan represents an area of great scientific and practical interest as an illustration of how Islam is becoming ever more significant in Russia’s social and political life. Historically, Islam made a major contribution to the forming of public identity and the principles of peaceful coexistence between different confessions and nationalities in the Volga-Urals region. Tatarstan, with 2.04 million ethnic Muslims (54 per cent of its total population), is now not just one of Russia’s main Muslim centres, but in the context of the formation of contemporary Russian statehood and national identity, its historical experience and present religious situation are often presented as an emulable embodiment of multi-ethnic and multi-confessional harmony.

The following chapter illustrates the extraordinary revival of Islam in Tatarstan since Gorbachev’s perestroika of the 1980s, concentrating above all on relations between the republican authorities, the national movement and spiritual leaders. First, it outlines the historic revival of Islam and its links with Tatar nationalists, before examining state interaction with the new strata of clerics (within the muftiat in particular). Finally, it examines more ‘unofficial’ forms of Islam and their potential challenges to the officially encouraged image of peaceful religious coexistence. The revival of Islam in Tatarstan must be seen primarily as an integral part of the general process of discovering new ideological alternatives. As Galina Yemelianova notes, the historical experience of coexisting with dominant ethnic Russian and Orthodox ‘norms’ has meant that for Tatars, the terms Islam and Tatar are practically synonymous, with the former being a primary element of Tatar-ness. Indicatively, Islam in Tatarstan has been used mainly instrumentally, by the Tatar national movement in order to reinforce a distinct Tatar identity and buttress demands for greater autonomy or independence, or by the republican authorities to increase bargaining power with the federal centre and to ensure local political stability.

Accordingly, although a revival of Islam’s educational and social role is apparent through the emergence of an official ‘clergy’ organized around the state-sponsored muftiat, Tatar Islam as yet lacks an independent political role, not only because of its structural dependence on the authorities, but also because of ongoing debates over its fundamental principles and the dilemmas of modernization. Overall, Tatarstan remains an exemplar of moderation and stability, with the mass potential...
of unofficial, radical forms of Islam as yet relatively limited. An Islamization of politics was increasingly evident among the nationalist opposition in the 1990s. However, since the marginalization of the nationalists, Islam has been largely confined to the theological and intellectual, rather than political, spheres.

The revival of Islam and Tatar identity: diverse approaches

The revival of Islam in Tatarstan began in 1988 with the founding of the All-Tatar Public Centre (VTOTs). VTOTs was a direct expression of the rise of Tatar national and civil consciousness, and it consolidated the most radical Tatar nationalists. VTOTs clearly envisaged Islam as one of the crucial elements of the nation’s spiritual revival. But in its programmes, the Islamic component had a merely declarative character and was mainly designed to indicate universal values considered fundamental to national culture and morality. At the same time, the role of Islam in the revival of Tatar statehood and national independence was emphasized by a focus on the modernization of Islam through taking into account historical and geographical factors (principally via the ideas of reformist Islam (Jadidism) of the late nineteenth century). VTOTs’s second programme (adopted in 1991) stated that ‘considerable achievements of Tatar society related to Jadidism are … lost and we are facing fundamentalism which is incompatible with the normal life of Muslims. VTOTs considers revival of the noble traditions of Jadidism one of its main goals.’

As the Soviet centre was gradually losing control over Tatarstan, the nationalists became ever more influential. Notably, in 1990, the radical wing of VTOTs established the Ittifaq (‘Union’) party headed by Rafael Mukhametdinov and Fauziya Bairamova. Ittifaq’s main strategic goal was the revival of the Tatar nation as an independent republic. Yet the nationalists’ interests could no longer be confined to politics. One of the most urgent issues was the issue of moving the Spiritual Board of Muslims of European Russia and Siberia (DUMES) from Ufa to Kazan in order to make the latter Russia’s Islamic nucleus, an initiative rejected by the chief mufti of the DUMES, Talgat Tajuddin, although he was himself a Tatar. In response, VTOTs simply started creating its own spiritual board, claiming that it would include Tatar Muslims from other regions. The Tatar nationalists finally achieved this in August 1992 with the creation of the Spiritual Board of Muslims of Tatarstan (DUMRT) separate from the DUMES.

In February 1992, the First Kurultai (Gathering) of the Tatar nation was held and the Milli Mejlis (National Assembly) was convened on the initiative of such nationalist groups as VTOTs, Ittifaq and Azatlyk (Freedom). The Milli Mejlis was intended to become the alternative centre of power in Tatarstan and to represent the interests of the most radical Tatar nationalists (its programmatic positions coincided with those of the Ittifaq party). However, because of its constant opposition to the official government of Tatarstan, the Milli Mejlis had renounced its claims to being the main legislative body of the republic by the middle of the 1990s and now has no influence on Tatarstan’s political stage.
We can observe a continual process of the Islamization of the Tatar national movement. The coincidence of religious, national and political interests of both the leaders of the Tatar Muslim clergy and the national movement led to the Islamic factor being used for the popularization and legitimization of their plans and private interests, which aimed at reorganizing Tatar society. Even in the first half of the 1990s, the Tatar national movement considered joining efforts with religious organizations, a crucial element of the struggle for the freedom and independence of the Tatar nation. The spiritual unity of the Tatar nation based on Islam was considered the only way to achieve Tatarstan’s sovereignty.

Moreover, in the middle of the 1990s, when national movements began losing popularity, they increasingly switched their focus from nationalism to Islamism. In the absence of a state-wide Russian ideology that would take into consideration religious sentiments, still less Islamic ones, it was natural for the leaders of the Tatar national movement to declare Islam as the only unifying national idea for Tatars to revive their lost state sovereignty. For example, VTOTs member Ravil Gumar thought that the only way to overcome the spiritual decline of the nation was to act according to the laws of Allah. Furthermore, in January 1996, the Milli Mejlis adopted Kanunnama (the Tatar code of laws), according to which the main feature of Tatars was that they were ‘the community… who speak the official Tatar language and consider… Islam the spiritual and moral, material and social basis of their lives’. The Kanunnama proposed the revival of the shari’a, and appealed to the authorities to ban alcohol during Ramadan.

The Tatar nationalists were now represented by radical and moderate wings, which had two main approaches to Islam. The radicals declared that Islamic doctrine formed the basis of the Tatar worldview and political culture, while the moderates (a position which the authorities sought to articulate) considered such position as a return to qadimism (traditionalism) leading to the isolation of the nation from modern reality. For instance, one of the co-chairmen of VTOTs, Rashat Safin, represented a moderate position that considered the nation to take precedence to religion. However, he did acknowledge the special role of Islam in forming the Tatar nation as well as in achieving political independence and statehood. According to Safin, Islam had to be ‘Tatarized’ to prevent the Tatar nation vanishing among other Muslim nations. In other words, Islam had to adjust to national geography and living conditions and to evolve in a constant dialectic with a civilization. Jadidism was considered the most effective way through which the process of ‘Tatarization’ should develop.

The concept of the ‘Tatarization of Islam’ was heavily criticized by the radical nationalists and by the Ittifaq party in particular. Its leader, Bairamova, considered the revival of Islam as simply a reaction to Orthodox fundamentalism in Russia, arguing that ‘if predominance of the Orthodox religion in Russia continues, the radicalization of the Muslim movements may be expected’. She spoke of the supremacy of Islam over nation, and rejected more moderate and modern interpretations of Islam such as Jadidism, Sufism and the authorities’ ‘Euro-Islam’ (see below). Increasingly moving towards ‘Wahhabism’
(Salafism), she called for a return to the original and universal Qur’anic traditions of Islam as the essential factor in preserving the Tatar nation. Ultimately, she promoted an Islamic state as the main Tatar goal: ‘pure Islam must strive for national and state sovereignty’, to be achieved by jihad against the Russian *kafir* (unbeliever).  

Moreover, pan-Turkic ideas played a special role in the struggle for sovereignty and national independence. Nationalists consider Tatars an essential part of the Turkic-Muslim nation and advocate Turkic-Islamic unity. As former VTOTs leader, Zinnur Agliullin, argued, the Tatars, despite interacting with the West and East, should not forget their Turkic roots. In *Kanunnama*, Turkism is closely related to Islamism and the decline of the Tatar nation is understood as the result of the Turkic world’s decline. Among the newer tendencies in Tatar society connected with Turkism, the form of neo-paganism known as Tengrism stands out (Tengre was the pre-Islamic sky god of the Turkish peoples and in old Tatar simply means ‘God’). Tengrism became widespread in the second half of the 1990s, especially in the city of Naberezhnie Chelny. Tengrists see the meaning of life as living in harmony with the surrounding natural world. They regard Tengrism not as the religious doctrine of Turkic nations but as a central element of the Turko-Mongol historical way of life and worldview now essential for the contemporary consolidation of the Turkic nations. For instance, according to Agliullin, one of Tengrism’s ideologists, Tengrism must become the ideological basis of the revival of the Tatar nation. The followers of Tengrism reject Islam as an alien religion, moreover, one based on the principle of submission and thereby a tool to subordinate the Tatars. They argue that the absence of a national religion as the basis for a national ideology has led to an ineffective West-oriented ‘Tatarstan model’ which neglects national and spiritual factors. Overall, Tengrism attempts to consolidate the Turkic nations through appealing to their common historical roots. However, despite support from some unlikely quarters, such as Talgat Tajuddin, now head of the Central Muslim Spiritual Board (TsDUM), Tengrism failed to catch hold as the fully-fledged ideology of the Tatars and has lost its popularity.

**Tatarstan’s policy towards Islam in the context of diminishing republican autonomy**

There is no doubt that the relationship between Tatarstan and the federal centre has heavily influenced both the Tatar national movements’ activities and Tatarstan’s policy towards Islam and so it is important to view Tatar Islam within the centre–periphery context.

In the 1990s, Tatarstan’s state religious policy was motivated above all by the need to develop Tatar national statehood. A number of political events, such as adoption of ‘The declaration on the state sovereignty of Tatar SSR’ (1990); holding the referendum on the status of Tatarstan (1992); adoption of the constitution of the Republic of Tatarstan (1992); and signing of the Russia–Tatarstan
power-sharing treaty (1994), determined the creation of the so-called ‘Tatarstan model’ (‘Tatarstanism’) by the republican authorities. According to its doctrine:

In the territory of Tatarstan a multi-national and multi-ethnic community based on the principle of territorial (not ethnic) sovereignty is formed. And all nations of the republic of Tatarstan united into one state community regardless of their ethnic origin are considered the Tatarstani nation. Moreover, the Tatar nation is considered the basic one within the Tatarstani nation.  

One of the most important issues the authorities have to confront is the problem of peaceful coexistence between the two main religions – Islam and Orthodox Christianity. Indeed, since Tatarstan is situated at the junction of various nations and cultures, Western and Oriental, preserving balance and cooperation between different ethnic groups and confessions is considered a vital part of stability in the republic. Therefore, an internationalism that unites all Tatarstani citizens around the goal of republican sovereignty, alongside moderate nationalism and moderate Islam became the tenets of Tatarstan’s official ideology. All these factors led to the authorities’ consolidation of power that was evident after 1994. Official religious policy in Tatarstan is defined by its constitution and legislation and is based on the freedom of conscience, religion and activity of religious organizations. According to the constitution, citizens may be religious believers or non-believers, and engage in religious or atheistic activities. Religion and religious organizations are separated from the state. 

However, the social role of Islam, especially in the moral education of Tatars, is an element of prime importance. The authorities consider Islam the source of spiritual and moral values for the development of national identity. Therefore, the revival of Islam also became a focus of the administration’s activities, as they supported the revival of Jadidism, which ‘combined its traditional canons with the ideas of liberalism’. President Mintimer Shaimiev’s former political adviser, Rafael Khakimov, became Tatarstan’s leading ideologist of Jadidist revival. His neo-Jadidist manifesto, *Gde nasha Mekka?* (‘Where is our Mecca?’), which openly criticized both traditional Islam in Tatarstan and Islamist extremism, became the main doctrine of so-called ‘Euro-Islam’ in Russia (outlined below).

Despite the official separation of religion and state, problems in their relationship cannot be disregarded. In 1992, the establishment of the DUMRT was approved by Tatarstan’s leadership, who no longer saw the feeble federal centre as a major threat to their power and regarded religious sovereignty as an important factor in political sovereignty. The strong support given to President Shaimiev by Tatar nationalists made him invulnerable to the ire of the federal president. But increasingly, Shaimiev saw the popular radical nationalist leaders, especially the Ittifaq party, as the major threat to his power. The radical nationalists did not support the ideology of the republican authorities, considering it undemocratic. They were particularly incensed by the official ideology’s focus on the equality of
Islam and Orthodox Christianity, since they based their own nationalism exclusively on Islam. According to Ittifaq party leader Fauziya Bairamova, the official ideology was aimed at destruction of the Tatar nation and was ‘the promise to create a new society without the Tatars, not taking into account national and cultural components’. She urged the authorities to admit their mistakes, and to live according to the precepts of the Qur’an.15

By the mid 1990s (especially after the Federal Treaty of 1994), when Shaimiev had managed to extract considerable privileges from the federal centre, his policy towards the national movement changed. It became evident that the republican elite would not tolerate any radical nationalist parties, especially Ittifaq, and would seek to marginalize them. For example, Shaimiev persuaded Tatarstan’s parliament to declare the activity of the Milli Mejlis illegal and, in 1995, the Ittifaq party office in Kazan was closed. As a result, the radical nationalist movements lost their activeness, influence and popularity in the second half of the 1990s.

At the same time, Shaimiev wanted to ensure political control over the processes of Islamic revival. The establishment of the DUMRT led to a split among the republic’s Muslims after 1992, between the DUMRT and the Regional Spiritual Board of Muslims of Tatarstan (RDUMT) which was created in 1994, and remained loyal to the DUMES, renamed TsDUM in 1992. The republican authorities actively supported the DUMRT. The schism was gradually overcome by a campaign against TsDUM chairman, Tajuddin, and the mild repression against his supporters.16 For several years after his election as Chief Mufti of the DUMRT in 1992, Gabdulla Galiulla (Galiullin) became a highly influential Muslim leader. However, his policies became ever more independent of the interests of the republican administration, who considered that they undermined the political authority of the whole republic, finally leading to overt conflict between Galiulla and Shaimiev. As a result, the President of Tatarstan decided to create a muftiat loyal to the official authorities (which, of course, presupposed a change of Mufti). On the initiative of the republican government, the third Congress of the DUMRT in 1998 elected Gusman Iskhakov as the new ‘loyal’ chief Mufti.

The relationship between Tatarstan and the federal centre, as well as the situation within the republic, changed radically when Vladimir Putin came to power in 2000. Putin’s policy of recentralization, which was characterized by the centre’s demands to bring local legislation in agreement with Russian federal laws, the cancellation of regional government’s prerogatives (in particular, concerning the use of natural resources) and increasing the share of taxes to be paid to Moscow, caused great displeasure in Tatarstan, and were perceived as Moscow’s attempts to undermine its nationhood. Such a situation could not but influence the political balance in the republic itself. Although the status of the republic was raised in the early 1990s, the elimination of the nationalist mass movement had gradually shifted the balance of power toward the federal centre by the end of the decade. Consequently, it now proved hard for the republic’s leadership to rely on the bargaining power of nationalism when president Putin began revising the relationship between Moscow and Tatarstan.17
In 2000, the Russian federal authorities officially began to struggle against radical Islam. Fearing a loss of control over the radicalization of Islam in the republic, Tatarstan’s leaders felt that they must co-operate with the federal centre’s efforts. Yet, the crackdown on radical Muslims proved counter-productive. Those Tatar nationalists (such as Bairamova) who stayed in opposition to the republican authorities argued that widespread ‘Islamophobia’ was just another ‘con’ to centralize the country. Other nationalists accused official spiritual leaders of themselves propagating Wahhabi doctrines and Islamophobia. By the latter stages of Putin’s period in office, although Tatarstan succeeded in remaining one of Russia’s most influential federal subjects, it had lost much of its former economic and legislative autonomy. In conditions of greater federal and republican centralisation, a union of radicalized nationalists and radical Islamists in opposition looks quite possible. It is not unlikely that even mainstream nationalists might support such a union, if a political opportunity arose. In this situation, Shaimiev had little option but to continue to follow President Putin’s assimilationist general line.

The emergence of the official Muslim ‘clergy’

Of course, since Islam has far less of an institutionalized clerical hierarchy than, say, Christianity, it is only partially possible to speak about a Muslim ‘clergy’. On the other hand, the 1990s saw a process of turning unofficial and untrained countryside mullahs into a registered layer of clerics that began to emerge as a special social stratum. From approximately one hundred in 1990, the number of imams and other religious figures has now surpassed three thousand. In the process, the role of clerics in returning Islamic values to Tatar society has much increased. By the end of the 1990s, the Tatar Muslim clergy was represented by the following groups:

1. postgraduate students of Muslim educational institutions (including local ones) that focus on a religious educational system based on common Islamic principles without taking into consideration the national peculiarities of Tatar Islam;
2. religious figures with higher or vocational secular education who obtained religious education either in local madrasas (secondary schools) or by attending short-term courses in Muslim countries; and
3. representatives of so-called ‘mass Islam’ who traditionally come from rural areas. Most countryside imams often lacked even a basic religious education.

The re-emergence of the clerics as a coherent, stable and influential social force is only beginning, and it compares poorly with the early twentieth century, when religious figures had high status and were considered an essential element of the Tatar social structure. Certainly, it is still too early to speak about distinct world outlooks and modes of behaviour common to the clergy. Indeed, the clergy had a huge difference of views over many fundamental issues, a fact explicable by
the heterogeneity of its structure – for urban and rural imams and madrasa teachers had different social statuses. Besides, as elsewhere in Russia, the clergy are ideologically heterogeneous. The worldviews of the younger generation were mainly formed in diverse educational institutions, giving rise to conflict between ‘young imams’, who usually tended to promote a universalist vision of Islam (often one prone to radicalization) and the older generation who advocated its traditional forms.

However, in recent years, the muftiats have been at the forefront of concerted efforts to consolidate the clergy. After Gusman Iskhakov became head of the DUMRT in 1998, one of the main problems addressed was the preparation of qualified religious personnel in order to avoid splits among the Muslim clergy, which in turn might lead to the radicalization of Islam. Discussing the threat of foreign religious education to Islam in Tatarstan, Iskhakov argued that Muslims in Tatarstan must live according to the Qur’an and Sunna following the Hanafi madhhab (Islamic legal school). He thought that any student not knowing the history of Islam, or the culture and traditions of their nation should not be allowed to study abroad, in order not to foment fitna (discord). Today the DUMRT pays special attention to the educational aspect and controls the functioning of five secondary madrasas (Buinsk, Almetyevsk, Nurlat, Nizhnekamsk and Ak mechet in Naberezhnie Chelny), two higher madrasas (Mukhammadiya and ‘Millennium of Islam’) and the Russian Islamic University in Kazan. Since 2002, all the DUMRT imams have to qualify for special certificates (shahadatnama). Those without such documents are not allowed to engage in religious activities. Overall, however, this educational process remains in its infancy.

The consolidation of the Spiritual Board of Muslims of Tatarstan

Since its emergence in 1992, the DUMRT has played an ever more central role in state–religion relations and the development of Islam in Tatarstan. Under Mufti Galiulla, developing religious preferences was not DUMRT’s main task. Since the national movement (alongside other public and political movements) was trying to use the religious factor for its strategic purposes, the newly founded Spiritual Board had to operate primarily in the national and political spheres. Thus, Damir Iskhakov, an ideologist of the Tatar national movement in the late 1980s and early 1990s, argues that ‘though the Spiritual Board of Muslims was an autonomous organization, it was developing as a faction of the national movement’. Until the mid-1990s, the DUMRT was more political than religious. However, being in opposition to the authorities, it was very weak both organizationally and structurally. For instance, it had no control over periodicals and educational institutions; it had neither structures for on-site activities nor permanent sources of funding; it also had difficulties in identifying its political sphere and could hardly expect to foster common understandings among believers.
Besides, the DUMRT was under constant pressure from TsDUM, which still had influence on the regions.

However, after the 1998 election of Iskhakov as Mufti, the situation began to change. Attending the DUMRT congress, President Shaimiev shared his own view concerning the problem of state–religion relationships, emphasizing the need for common efforts:

Lately you can hear such statements as ‘Why does the government interfere in our religious affairs?’ Here we are not talking about the interference or intrusion in the affairs of religious figures or Muslim authorities but about our concerted service to the people. Though the religion is separated from the state, it is not separated from society.21

With the support of the authorities, Mufti Iskhakov and the DUMRT began, in 1998–2002, to focus on strengthening inter-confessional stability. Most significant was the forming of Muslim institutes (such as Kazan’s Russian Islamic University, founded in 1998) that considerably facilitated interaction between the state authorities and the Muslim clergy, as well as the streamlining of activity within the Muslim religious organizations that were included within the DUMRT. Highly important in this regard was the 1999 republican law ‘On freedom of confession and religious organizations’ that helped regulate, streamline and centralize republican–Islamic relations. In essence, this law made DUMRT the only Muslim actor able to engage the state in dialogue; all Muslim organizations within Tatarstan were to be subordinated to it, including all remaining DUMES affiliates.

Accordingly, the DUMRT has developed a powerful machinery and enjoys multifaceted support from the Tatarstan government’s Council of Religious Affairs. Virtually all Muslim organizations (1041) in Tatarstan are now part of the DUMRT. Moreover, the Spiritual Board has extended its influence outside the republic. In February 2000, DUMRT and the Central Muslim Spiritual Board of Ul’yanovsk oblast (region) established the Kazan Muftiat, which allowed the DUMRT to control more than three hundred Muslim communities in the Volga region in Kirov, Ul’yanovsk and Nizhnii Novgorod oblasts and in the republics of Chuvashia and Bashkortostan.

The DUMRT has naturally been attempting to define the basic working principles of its relations with the state. Those principles have been based around what might be called ‘political indifference’: the DUMRT supports loyalty towards the authorities and the constitutional separation between state and religion. These principles do not help the clerics actively shape religious policy and indeed make them politically passive, thereby contributing to their aforementioned lack of stable social status. Nevertheless, ‘political indifference’ is convenient enough for the DUMRT’s management of religious relations. The principle of loyalty enables the DUMRT to approach the authorities and to highlight that believers have full rights as citizens, and, like all others, need state support. The DUMRT also argues
that failure to resolve a problem at the religious community level will result in it eventually affecting the entire society. Moreover, the DUMRT often uses the principle of separation of state and religion to defend itself against state interference, and in general to uphold the equality of Islam and Orthodoxy in Tatarstan. Mufti Iskhakov argued the need to ‘remember that Tatarstan is a multinational state...If we say that there should be a state religion … others might be better prepared to realize this idea’. Accordingly, he saw the main threat in a multi-ethnic society not of secularization but of de-secularization whereby (as in many Muslim countries), the more vigorously the predominant ethnic group attempts to employ its religion as a means of integration, the stronger the reaction by other ethno-confessional groups, even resulting in their campaigns for autonomy or separatism.

Thus, many official Muslim clerics are apparently satisfied with this lack of correlation between Islam and politics. For example, Talgat Tajuddin disapproves of Muslim political activities, arguing that ‘nations cannot be divided according to religion and politics’. In his opinion, such a division contradicts the Qur’anic principle that ‘people … are divided just into three categories: believers, unbelievers and hypocrites’. Moreover, Tajuddin believes that political parties destroy Russia’s centuries-old tradition of reconciliation and harmony.

Nevertheless, a closer view reveals that there is little unity among Muslim clerics over the role of politics in Islamic renewal. Many so-called ‘young imams’, who joined religious structures during perestroika and received official status in the early post-Soviet era, exploit political opportunities as much as possible. The need of the new wave of Muslims to participate in politics might be explained thus: ‘dependence on the secular authorities, who often have anti-Islamic sentiments, in a situation when there is no one to complain to, engenders a tendency to participate’. Similarly, former Tatar Mufti Gabdulla Galiulla supported political parties and movements, saying that

in a state with a non-Muslim form of government where Muslims comprise the minority, it is only through political movements that the interests and rights of believers can be defended. It is the only way to influence decisions made by the authorities.

Nafigulla Ashirov, the vocal co-chairman of the Council of Muftis, outlined the principles for Muslim involvement in politics:

Consolidation of Muslim organizations is possible only if they share common spiritual and ideological principles, based on Islamic doctrine. Therefore the political activities of Muslims have to be based on the moral and ethical principles of Islam resulting from its common goals, not from national, regional or personal interests.

Although in this way some Muslim religious figures approve of political engagement, most Tatars still envisage Islam within the bounds of their confessional
and cultural identity and, as a consequence, Islam does not play a key independent role in regulating social relations. This tendency is only strengthened by the absence of effective mechanisms (such as political parties) which might help create fully-fledged Muslim communities and thereby incorporate Islam more fully into social and political life. As a result, the Muslim clergy lacks clear positions on many important issues, and is unable to contribute to the religious renewal of modern society. The primary problem the clergy has to engage with is the identification of the role of the Muslim umma within the secular state. Though, formally, all Muslims believe that the ultimate mission of Islam is the creation of a global Islamic community-state, the Tatar clergy is far from unanimous in understanding how to achieve this mission, resulting in very different approaches to the role of the national state. Therefore, the official clergy adheres to the idea of a gradual Islamization of Tatar society through its spiritual recovery. It supports collaboration with secular authorities, allowing for the combination of the shari‘a with secular legislation. Notably, the clergy rarely speaks about this issue, since it might mean acknowledging ‘Islamic secularism’. In this connection, jagfar Mubarak from the Iman publishing house offers a possible compromise to reconcile Islam with the secular policy of Tatarstan’s government. He emphasizes that since Islam, unlike Judaism or Christianity, does not have any consolidated clerical institution, it cannot rival a state. Therefore, in Tatarstan:

The positions of President and mufti are created to preserve state and religion, as well as to guarantee a government based on principles of justice. The President represents political and religious forms of government. But at the same time he must not govern the state and religion alone. Religion is governed by the Fathers of the Church and muftis. As for the President, he must become the guarantor of the peace and prevent one religion from dominating the other.28

The debate over the modernization of Islam

If the political role of Islam in Tatarstan is a complex question, then the very nature of Islamic revival, and what kind of Islam Tatar society needs, is still more so. Questions of ‘modernizing’ Islamic society, ‘reforming’ Islam itself, or returning to ‘traditional’ religious values have become of prime importance. In this connection, terms such as ‘Tatar Islam’ and ‘Euro-Islam’ have been widely discussed by Tatar intellectuals and clergy.

One of the key issues with the modernization of Islam is whether Islam should remain the moral foundation of modern society. Modernizers do not approve of everything done in the name of modernization. They argue that Islam should remain a guiding force, while Muslim society should build its life according to the commandments of Allah but guided by its own reason and accepting modern benefits, including the scientific accomplishments of the West. So-called ‘Euro-Islam’,
as developed by Rafael Khakimov, was the principal intellectual engagement, receiving widespread media attention over the last decade, and stirring heated debates amongst followers and opponents.

The main task formulated in Khakimov’s 2003 book, *Where is our Mecca?*, is the reinterpretation of the holy texts in order to develop an understanding of Islam compatible with present-day social and political values. ‘Euro-Islam’ implies a modern form of Jadidism (neo-Jadidism) which reflects the culturological rather than the ritual aspect of Islam. According to Khakimov, the key instrument in achieving this goal is *ijtihad* (interpretation) that ‘allows taking into account the evolution of society, offering contemporary interpretation of Islamic norms in terms of the spirit of the Qur’an’. 29 Khakimov assumed that Muslims should not reject values simply because they are of Western origin, arguing that:

> This is a question of borrowing anything valuable in the world … The West cannot be transported to the East… The East will not take liberalism in its pure form. The East should reflect it through its own traditions… But the East and the West are brought together by *ijtihad* which is nothing else but the beginning of liberal thinking. 30

But how can the Muslim world combine traditions with modernization? Denying the principle of *taqlid* (following the madhhabs), Khakimov argued that Islam might evolve (as has religion in the Western world) into a position whereby every individual independently accepts the belief system suiting them most. Khakimov stressed the need to act according to reason, and suggested renewing religious ideas to solve the problems of post-modernism, whereby Islamic society would again prove progressive. Defining ‘true’ Islam, Khakimov argued that this was faith both in transcendent God and faith in the human mind because ‘Islam is the religion of a free man and the way to freedom’. 31 Khakimov considers faith a free individual choice, because according to the Qur’an, the faithful cannot be slave to Allah because they have chosen of their own free will to practise Islam. Consequently, it is not obligatory to comply with all Islamic precepts in order to be a Muslim. Faith is strengthened by precepts and rituals but not determined by it – the determining factor is an aspiration for good, knowledge, tolerance and justice. 32 Presenting an unfavourable view of the situation in the Muslim world, Khakimov outlined an optimistic image of Tatar society where thanks to ‘Euro-Islam’, Muslims were capable of finding their place in the modern world.

Despite its promotion of ostensibly positive ideas of progress and adjustment to modern realities, many Muslims rejected ‘Euro-Islam’ outright. The official religious authorities and intellectuals led the way with criticism. For instance, Ramil Yunusov, first deputy mufti of Tatarstan and imam-khatib of the Kul Sharif mosque, saw ‘Euro-Islam’ as ‘undermining the principles of Islam’. 33 According to Mukhamed Salyakhedtinov, the head of the influential Moscow-based ‘Sobranie’ association, the use of the term ‘Euro-Islam’ is an attempt to incorporate Islam into the Western liberal system, and results from the absence of a domestic Russian Muslim scientific elite. 34 Similarly, although less subtly, Valiulla Yakupov
(Yakub), former DUMRT deputy mufti, argued that ‘the conception of Euro-Islam was artificially created in order to please the West and certain circles’.\textsuperscript{35} As a result of such criticism, Khakimov lost influence. At the present time, ‘Euro-Islam’ exists in theory only and has almost no supporters in Tatarstan.

Yakupov has offered a markedly different approach to the problem of Islamic revival in modern Tatar society, devoting several publications to revealing the eternal values of ‘Tatar’ Islamic traditions and criticizing religious reformers who, allegedly, aim only at introducing simplified ideas from Western culture. Yakupov argued that the ‘problem is not in Tatar Islam. The choice of our ancestors was, undoubtedly, true and correct. The problem is in the attitude towards our ancestors’.\textsuperscript{36} In order to understand one’s traditions and define ways to revive them, it was important to overcome Euro-centrism, and to respect one’s own people and their achievements.

For this reason, Yakupov argued, considering all the phenomena of Muslim life through terms such as ‘reform’ and ‘conservation’, ‘Jadidism’ and ‘qadimism’ was both artificial and unproductive, since none of these concepts equated to a return to Islamic origins.\textsuperscript{37} Yakupov believes that one of the fundamental issues of Islamic revival is the preservation of the traditional madhhab system, which allegedly reflects the critical but pluralistic spirit of pure Islam, and which has helped it remain essentially unchanged and tested by time. In classical Islam, the madhhab performs conservative functions. Yakupov saw this quality as being of great importance, since it served as a barrier impeding unauthorized and unjustified novelties, though, on the whole, Islam was allegedly oriented towards innovation.\textsuperscript{38} Therefore, the innate conservatism of the madhhab might contribute to solving numerous problems (including Wahhabism) that delay the full return of Islam to Tatar society. In this regard, Yakupov argued that madhhab Islam had also contributed to preserving some Tatar ethnic peculiarities, by taking account of local traditions and including them in the sources of the Shari‘a. What is more, Tatars, who had preserved Hanafi traditions in the purest form without any reform, had managed to live according to pure, prophetic Islam undistorted by later heresies up to the present day.

However, Tatarstan’s claims to be the ‘spiritual home’ of Russian Islam have not been spared encroachments from the federal centre. The most significant of these has been the promotion of the idea of ‘Russian Islam’, developed into a project in 2002–3 by the Nizhnii Novgorod Centre for Strategic Research, and directly supported by then head of the Volga Federal District and former Prime Minister, Sergei Kirienko. The concept of ‘Russian Islam’ has much in common with ‘Euro-Islam’, most notably its commitment to liberal modernism and its celebration of the fusion of Russian and Islamic culture. As project author Sergei Gradirovskii argued, ‘Russian Islam belongs both to Islamic and Russian culture, including its political culture’.\textsuperscript{39}

The chief difference from ‘Euro-Islam’ was that ‘Russian Islam’ aimed at changing Muslim mentality by its adaptation to the present Russian reality, which, it was explicitly stated, could be achieved through instituting federal control over the Russian umma, and a centrally directed fusion with Russian culture.
Gradirovskii argued that ‘Russia needs Russian Islam which would be incorporated into Russian culture and controlled by the state’, specifying that ‘Russian Islam does not mean Russians adopting Islam, but Islam incorporated into Russian reality’. According to the project, prayers and sermons would be performed in the Russian language and Islamic literature would be published in Russian as well. As Gradirovskii saw it, the new multi-ethnic reality justified a more ‘Russian’ rather than Tatar-led, definition and promotion of Islam. He argued that Russian was increasingly becoming the ‘language of communication’ between Russian Muslims, particularly in mosques in urban centres, and was consequently marginalizing the role of the ‘languages of identity’, such as the Tatar language, in practical Muslim life.

When the project’s internal materials were revealed in 2003, it was so heavily criticized by Muslim leaders that the initiative was terminated. The Tatar official clergy and the national intellectuals alike expressed their negative attitude, both to the project overall and to the ‘Russification’ of Islam through sermons and book publishing in particular. Valiulla Yakupov saw the erosion of the Tatar language in mosques as presenting the greatest risk of ‘Russification’. He argued that young Tatar men were partially to blame, since in their adherence to Salafi and Wahhabi ideas, they completely rejected the national component of Islam. It was evident that such ‘processes threaten the future of the Tatar nation...It is quite difficult to consolidate and preserve the nation without such an important centre as the mosque.’

The noted Tatar Islamic scholar, Rafik Mukhametshin, also considers that there is a direct relation between language and religious identity. Consequently, if the Tatar language were to lose its influence as the language of the religious identity among Tatars, there would be a grave risk that they would be assimilated as a nation. Consequently, many Tatars believe (like Yakupov) that their ethnic identity is closely intertwined with the national traditions which were preserved within the Hanafi madhhab, which allegedly helped ‘Tatar Islam’ to create an effective model favouring the adaptability and survival of the nation.

The radicalization of Islam in Tatarstan

Radical Islam has become one of the most serious ideological challenges in Russia, and has constituted a dire threat to its integrity. The problems of radicalization also touched Tatarstan, and had considerable influence on the revival of Islam in the republic, particularly in the 1990s. The initially favourable conditions (poor knowledge of Islam among the population, an absence of the republic’s own financial resources able to develop Islamic education and build mosques and madrasas) led to purposeful Wahhabi (Salafi) penetration of the republic. This began in 1993 when the ‘charitable’ Saudi organization, Taiba, concluded an education assistance agreement with the management of Naberezhnie Chelny madrasa Yolduz. In 1999, Yolduz became notorious for spreading Wahhabi activities after one of its students was proved to be involved...
in the organization of terrorist acts in Moscow. On 1 December 1999, several gas pipelines on the border of Tatarstan and Kirov oblast were blown up by a group of Yolduz students. During the investigation, one of the accused admitted to being recruited by Arabs teaching in the madrasa, and co-operation between the madrasa’s management and Chechen fighters was confirmed. An active republican anti-terrorism campaign ensued, during which some Yolduz students were detained on suspicion of connections with al-Qaeda. The Russian Council of Muftis closed Yolduz in 2000. Outside Naberezhnie Chelny, active Wahhabi groups were revealed in the cities of Al’met’eysk, Nizhnekamsk, Kukmor and elsewhere. There were even rumours that Wahhabis had managed to penetrate official structures of the district level and the Kazan Muftiat.

Emissaries of the Pakistani movement Jamaat-e-Tabligh (Community of the Prophet’s Message), judged as extremist by some, apolitical by others, met in mosques in Kazan and were active in Islamic recruitment until being investigated and deported from the republic. Between November 2004 and January 2005, several dozen members of Hizb ut-Tahrir (The Party of Islamic Liberation) were arrested. In one of his interviews in 2005, President Shaimiev argued that there were real attempts to commit terrorist acts in Kazan on the eve of its 2005 millennium celebrations. Furthermore, in 2007 the Tatar combat jamaat ‘Islamic jamaat’ was on trial for bomb attacks on the fuel-energy complex.

As previously mentioned, the greatest ‘radical’ threat within Tatarstan is perhaps a potential union between disaffected nationalists, the political opposition and Islamists united by distaste at local authoritarianism. This union started to become a reality in 1998 when Ittifaq’s Fauziya Bairamova, who rejected the DUMRT as too moderate and subservient to state power, allied with former mufti Galiulla and the Communist Party against the authorities in the Omet (‘Hope’) movement. However, though regarded as charismatic, Bairamova’s appeal remains limited to ‘the narrow circle of admirers of her literary [poetic] talent’. Besides, the authorities have proved consistently adept at suppressing political opposition – for instance, removing Bairamova from elections from 1997 onwards, and confining the Communist Party to the political margins.

There have been other ‘unofficial’ and quasi-radical movements widespread in Tatarstan. Important in this connection is the Turkish Nurjilar movement (known as the nursisty in Russian), which propagandizes the ideas of the Turkish theologian and philosopher Said Nursi, an apolitical movement that focuses on the promotion of Islamic ideals in education. In Tatarstan, the nursisty directed their efforts towards secondary educational institutions, and established seven Tatar–Turkish lyceums after the mid-1990s. Moreover, they engaged in wide publishing activities to promote their doctrine; Said Nursi’s books could easily be found in many Tatar mosques. The nursisty movement became of prime importance in Tatarstan in the 2000s when the republican security services started pursuing readers of Said Nursi’s books on the grounds that these books contained extremist ideas (principally incitements to inter-ethnic and inter-confessional hostility), and therefore that their readers were an extremist sect. Nevertheless, many politicians
and religious figures in Tatarstan, although disagreeing with the ‘pseudo-Sufist’ ideas the nursisty profess, regard the movement as moderate. According to Rafik Mukhametshin, who has analysed Nursi’s books in depth, neither the books in particular nor the nursisty in general are at all extremist. The main idea promoted in Nursi’s books is achieving spiritual perfection. Mukhametshin thinks that it was probably because of the mythic threat of pan-Turkism that the nursisty began to be closely monitored by the security services.

Despite this array of quasi-radical groups, the overall situation in Tatarstan remains stable, and there is little evidence of a radical threat except at the political margins. The overall number of Islamic radicals appears low and, in any case, the radicalism of those such as Bairamova has a theoretical rather than practical character, with little demonstrable impact. One can certainly argue that the much-publicized Tatar traditions of inter-ethnic and inter-confessional stability are more than a myth and act as a milieu inimical to the spread of radical ideas. Moreover, the authorities’ appropriation of a modernizing, moderate Islam based on the historical traditions of the relatively liberal Hanafi madhhab and Jadidism arguably limit the public appeal of Salafi doctrines, whilst the authorities have actively stamped out any expressions of ‘Wahhabism’. The relatively prosperous socio-economic environment is yet another reason why North-Caucasian style Islamic insurgency has failed to develop. This is not to say that the threat is absent. For example, official figures such as Valiulla Yakupov increasingly espouse a ‘neo-traditionalist’ position, which combines loyalty to the state with the expectation of the gradual Islamization of Tatar society. Such spiritual leaders apparently envisage the contemporary situation as a transitional stage, whereby concessions to the state are temporary before the social influence of Islam increases immeasurably. The potential union of radical nationalists and Islamists may perhaps re-emerge as the era of President Shaimiev (who demitted office in March 2010) draws to a close.

Conclusion

Contemporary Islam in Tatarstan is undergoing an important stage in its revival, with its role in Tatar public, political and spiritual life becoming ever more evident. It has an increasing organizational and structural basis but as yet lacks clear ideological orientations and principles. At the same time, the development of the system of religious education and the emergence of the Muslim clergy as an ever more relevant stratum gives grounds for optimism that such questions will be actively addressed in future, although the lack of possibilities for political engagement may still limit Islam’s role as a factor independent of its utilization in the republican authorities’ nationalist ideology of statehood.

Another important problem which Tatar society has faced is that of the modernization of Islam. Tatar Muslims have long lived in a multi-ethnic and multi-confessional environment. As a result, for most, Islam represents a flexible and tolerant system connected with their national survival. That is why today, when the process of the revival of Islamic values in the republic is in
train, it appears vitally important for Tatars to preserve and promote the national peculiarity of Islam, especially among the younger generation. That means a consensus that Islam in Tatarstan, while being in compliance with the principles of taqlid (traditionalism), should follow the Hanafi madhhab and without ‘opening the doors of the ijtihad’ (independent theological interpretation), which can in Khakimov’s version at least lead to the destruction of the main Islamic principles, should adapt to the challenges of contemporary life. Nevertheless, given the federal authorities’ attempts to mould the debate over Tatar Islam in a more Russo-centric direction through the ‘Russian Islam’ project, and the latent Islamization of the political opposition, this consensus may be less stable than it appears.

Overall, there is much basis to the republican authorities’ mantra that Tatarstan is the epicentre of a moderate, flexible, and modernist Islam. However, to a large extent, this image is also a product of the tight control the authorities have exercised over the republic’s political and religious life. Given that this centralization in itself provides an impetus to unofficial and more radical forms of Islam, destabilization of the political situation in the republic remains a longer-term possibility. Therefore, it is likely that Tatarstan’s authorities will have to prove ever more inventive in their efforts to maintain peaceful coexistence between the republic’s multi-national and multi-confessional community.

Notes

1 Figures according to the last Russian census (2002).
6 R. Safin, Tatar Yuli (Tatar yazmyshyna geoseyesi analiz), Kazan’: Tatarstan kitap nashriyat, 2002.
8 F. Bairamova, ‘Islam dine ham tatar millete deverler useshende (Islam i tatarskaya natsiya v mnogovekovom razvitiu)’ (Kazan’: unpublished manuscript, 1997).
10 R. Mukhametshin, Tatari i Islam v XX veke (Islam v obchestvennoi i politicheskoi zhizni Tatar i Tatarstana), Kazan’: Fan, 2003, p. 244.
Azat Khurmatullin

17 Ibid.
24 Mukhametshin, ‘Islamic discourse’.
28 Quoted in Mukhametshin, *Tatari i Islam v XX veke*, p. 268
30 Ibid., pp. 51–2.
31 Ibid., p. 40.
36 V. Yakupov, *“Tatarskoe bogoiskatel’stvo” i prorocheskii Islam*, Kazan’: Iman, 2003, p. 10
37 Mukhametshin, ‘Islamic discourse’.
38 Ibid.
42 Ibid.
46 Malashenko and Yarlykapov, *Radicalisation*, p. 16.
This phrase is from Makarov and Mukhametshin, ‘Official and unofficial Islam’, p. 130.


Malashenko and Yarlykapov, Radicalisation.
8 Divergent trends of Islamic radicalization in Muslim Russia

Galina Yemelianova

The chapter begins with a brief ethno-cultural background of Russia’s two main Muslim enclaves – the Volga-Urals and the North Caucasus. Then it proceeds to analyse various manifestations of Islamic activism there. It shows how different histories of Islamization and different relations with the Russian political centre and Russian culture influenced the nature and intensity of post-Communist Islamic revival and Islamic radicalization in both regions. In particular, it demonstrates that in the Volga-Urals region Islamic radicalization has occurred largely within the intellectual and theological debate on the essence of ‘regional Islam’ and its relationship with ‘normative’ Islam. The chapter pays special attention to the notions and practices of both ‘traditional’ and ‘non-traditional’ Islam. By comparison, in the North Caucasus radical Islam has transcended doctrinal discourse and fused with politics. The chapter provides an analysis of the doctrine, organization and tactics of Islamists in the region and their relationship with the global jihadist network. In conclusion, the implications of rising Islam for the Russian state and the effectiveness of Moscow’s counter-radicalization policies are assessed.

Following the break-up of the multi-ethnic and poly-confessional Soviet Union, which was home to over sixty million Muslims, around fifteen million Muslims suddenly found themselves living a predominantly ethnically Russian country. Russia’s principal Muslim enclaves are situated in the Volga-Urals (seven million) and the North Caucasus (five million). Muslims constitute over half the population of the autonomous republics of Tatarstan and Bashkortostan in the Volga-Urals region, an overwhelming majority in Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachai-Cherkessia, Ingushetia, Dagestan and Chechnya, and a quarter of the population in Adygea, all in the North Caucasus. There are also considerable Muslim communities in Russia’s Ul’yanovsk, Samara, Nizhnii Novgorod, Penza, Volgograd, Astrakhan, Perm and Orenburg oblasts (regions) and in Krasnodar and Stavropol krai (provinces). The largest Muslim ethnic group is the Tatars with over five million (3.7 per cent of the total population of Russia), followed by the Bashkirs and the Chechens, each with a million or somewhat more. The Avars have over half a million, and after them come the Kabardinians, the Dargins, the Kumyks, the Lezgins and the Ingush, all with populations of between 200,000 and 400,000. With populations ranging from about 18,000 to about 150,000 come (in numerical order starting from the highest) the Karachais, the Laks, the Adyghe, the Tabasarans, the Balkars, the Nogais, the Cherkess, the Abazins, the Rutuls, the Tats and the Aguls. The smallest Muslim ethnic groups are the Meskhetian Turks, the Kurds and the Islamized Ossetians, each with about 10,000 people.
In terms of ethno-linguistic origins, Russia’s Muslims belong to the Turkic, Ibero-Caucasian and the Iranian ethno-linguistic groups. Among the first are the Tatars, the Bashkirs, the Balkars, the Karachais, the Kumyks, the Nogais, the Meskhetian Turks and the Azeris. The Ibero-Caucasian ethno-linguistic family comprises the Abazins, the Adyghe, the Aguls, the Avars, the Chechens, the Ingush, the Cherkess, the Kabardinians, the Lezgins, the Laks, the Rutuls and the Tabasaran. The Ossetians, the Kurds and the Tats belong to the Indo-European ethno-linguistic family.³

Despite these differences, all Russia’s Muslims, like the rest of the ex-Soviet Muslims, share some common features which distinguish them from other Muslim communities. All of them bear the scars of more than a century of Russian/Soviet political and cultural domination, which significantly mutated their Islamic beliefs and way of life. They have largely adhered to ‘folk’ Islam, which presents a synthesis of Islam with pre-Islamic local adat (customary norms) and beliefs and are practically unaware of the intellectual form of Islam. The majority of Muslims of the Volga-Urals region and Central Russia are followers of the Hanafi madhhab (juridical school of Sunni Islam). The dominant madhhab in the north-eastern Caucasus is the Shafi‘i madhhab (the Chechens, the Ingush and the majority of Dagestanis), while in the north-western Caucasus the Hanafi madhhab (the Kabardinians, the Cherkess, the Adyghe, the Abazins, the Balkars, the Karachais and the Nogais). The Azeris are largely Shi‘is of the Ithna-‘Asharite, or ‘Twelver’ group. The majority of Dagestani Muslims, Chechens and Ingush adhere to Sufi Islam of the Naqshbandi, Qadiri and Shadhili tariqas (Sufi orders). The most integrated and secularized are Tatars and Bashkirs, who have been under Russian rule for a longer period. They are also characterized by a higher level of urbanization and industrialization than Muslims of the North Caucasus.

Islamic dynamics in the Volga-Urals region

In the late 1980s, Islam re-emerged as a significant factor of public and political life in Tatarstan and to a lesser extent in Bashkortostan and the wider Volga-Urals region. During that period, various newly formed Tatar and Bashkir national and social organizations began to refer to Islam in their programmes and to campaign for the creation of national Islamic authorities instead of, or in addition to, the Ufa-based Soviet-era Muftiat, the Spiritual Board of Muslims of European Russia and Siberia (DUMES).⁴ It is significant that in 1992 Tatar nationalists backed a secessionist drive of a group of young Tatar imams towards the creation of a separate Muftiat of Tatarstan (DUMRT). During the early 1990s, the region witnessed the emergence of a number of muftiats, which challenged the authority of the DUMES/TsDUM under the leadership of mufti Talgat Tajuddin.⁵ There were 24 Islamic Spiritual Boards (DUMs) in the region. Each autonomous republic and oblast within the Volga Federal District (VFO) had its own DUM. Furthermore, the Republic of Bashkortostan, Ul’yanovsk and Orenburg oblasts each had three DUMs, while the Republics of Tatarstan and Mordovia, as well as Penza oblast had two DUMs.⁶ Among the most assertive regional Islamic
organizations were the Spiritual Board of Muslims of Tatarstan (DUMRT) under the leadership of Gabdulla Galiullin, the Spiritual Board of Muslims of Bashkortostan (DUMRBB) under the leadership of Nurmukhammed Nigmatullin, the Spiritual Board of Muslims of the Volga region (DUMP) under the leadership of Mukaddas Birbarsov and the Spiritual Board of Muslims of Asian Russia (DUMAR) under the leadership of Nafi  gulla Ashirov. All of these new muftis were closely linked to Tajuddin’s main rival Ravil Gainutdin, mufti of the new Moscow-based Spiritual Board of Muslims of European Russia (DUMTsER).^7^7

The newly formed regional muftiats began to compete with the TsDUM for the control over *mahallas* (Islamic communities) the number of which rose many times. Thus, in the late 1980s there were only 18 mahallas in Tatarstan and 19 in Bashkortostan. By the late 1990s there were already over 700 Islamic communities in Tatarstan and over 460 in Bashkortostan, over 110 in Orenburg oblast, over 100 in Ul’yanovsk oblast, 80 in Samara oblast, 77 in Perm oblast, 57 in Nizhnnii Novgorod and 56 in Penza oblast.^8^8 It is worth noting that, during the 1990s, the muftiats’ control over particular Islamic communities was nominal and it was not accompanied by their effective leadership over and material and spiritual support to the latter. New muftis and their entourage were predominantly concerned with regional politics and internal rivalries and paid minimal attention to the needs and concerns of ordinary Muslims. They did not control Islamic education and mass media in their regions.

The *de facto* disengagement of the Islamic establishment from the grassroots Islamic communities contributed to the divergence of Islamic practices and perceptions. An important factor was a considerable financial and ideological presence in the region of Islamic government and non-government charity organizations and funds from the Middle East. Most active among them were the foundations *Al Igatha* (Salvation, Saudi Arabia), *Lashkar-e-Taiba* (Army of the Good, Pakistan) and *Ibrahim bin al-Ibrahim* (Saudi Arabia). Of particular significance were first, the activities in the region of foreign Islamic teachers and preachers; second, the Islamic doctrinal training of young Tatars and Bashkirs both in Islamic universities and colleges in the Middle East (Saudi Arabia above all), and in regional *madrasas* (Islamic schools) which adopted foreign curricula. It is worth noting that by the late 1990s there were 30 madrasas and other Islamic educational institutions in the region. Half of those madrasas and colleges were situated in Tatarstan. Many of them employed foreign lecturers who taught Islam-related subjects according to their curricula and on the basis of textbooks which were produced abroad. The leading Islamic educational institutions were the *Mukhammadiya* madrasa (Kazan), the Madrasa of the Millennium of Islam (Kazan), the Islamic Institute of Mariam Sultanova (Ufa), the Yolduz madrasa (Naberezhnie Chelny) and the Madrasa of Al-Furqan (Buguruslan). The last two soon turned into the centres of non-traditional Islam. As a result, by the mid-1990s, the regional *umma* (Islamic community) acquired a considerable number of ‘young imams’ who were educated within different cultural and doctrinal frameworks.
Of notable impact has also been the growing migration of Central Asian and Caucasian Muslims to the Volga-Urals region. By the end of the 1990s, the region had acquired a significant number of Muslim migrant communities, mainly Uzbek. Migrant Muslims have been characterized by a deeper level of religiosity in comparison to Tatars, Bashkirs and other indigenous Muslims. In some places they have formed a majority at mosques and begun replacing local imams with their countrymen. For this reason, the number of Tatar imams has been declining, while the Tatar language in traditionally Tatar mosques has been replaced by the Russian language, which continues to serve as a *lingua franca* among ex-Soviet Muslims. Sergei Gradirovskii described this phenomenon as the emergence of ‘Russian Islam’. According to him, the region has witnessed a spontaneous development of an all-Russian multi-ethnic Muslim identity, mainly based on Russian culture and language.  

This influx of young imams and Muslim immigrants from Central Asia and the Caucasus split the regional umma along doctrinal and ritual lines. Well-educated young imams began to promote interpretations of some Qur’anic and Sunna provisions and modes of Islamic prayer and other essential practices which differed significantly from those which had been widely accepted in the region for many centuries. Doctrinally, many ‘young imams’ adhered to Islamic fundamentalism, or Salafism, which was incorrectly termed as ‘Wahhabism’. Young imams appealed to young worshippers by providing contemporary interpretations of Qur’anic and shari‘a provisions. They were also prepared to comment on wider socio-economic and political issues which concerned ordinary Muslims. By contrast, most Soviet-era mullahs, who did not know Arabic and lacked structured Islamic education, limited their activity to accustomed Islamic ritual practices and refused to discuss political and social issues. They were incapable of theological debate with their younger counterparts and defended their theological inadequacy and rigidity by reference to the ancestral tradition only.

By the second half of the 1990s, various members of the regional Islamic establishment became aware of the doctrinal and language shift within the regional umma. Some of them publicly admitted that many local Islamic communities experienced the *de facto* replacement of the flexible and tolerant Hanafi madhhab with the more rigid and strict Hanbali madhhab. Representatives of the official Muslim ‘clergy’ responded to the ‘threat’ of ‘Hanbalization’ and ‘Wahhabization’ of local Muslim communities by outlining their own theoretical position. At its core has been the propagation of ‘traditional Islam’, based on a regional version of Hanafi‘ism. ‘Islamic traditionalists’ have stressed their adherence to the principles of *taqlid* (tradition) and rejected the need to ‘open the doors of the *ijtihad*’ (independent theological judgement). Interestingly, they have perceived *ijtihad* as a dangerous way to erode the very essence of Islam through ideological pretensions from either right (Wahhabism) or left (religious reforming and modernizing tendencies, including Jadidism). On the other hand, they have highlighted the role of *taqlid* within the teaching of the founders of the four major madhhabs (imam Malik, imam Abu Hanifa, imam Shafi‘a and imam Ahmad ben Hanbal) and pointed to its non-stagnant and vibrant nature.
Like most post-Soviet Islamist traditionalists, many of their Tatar and Bashkir representatives favour Sufism as a potential antidote to Islamic fundamentalism which rejected Sufism. This is despite the current absence of Sufism in the region. Most official clerics believe that Sufism does not contradict the shari’a and might contribute to the revival of Islam. Some Tatar Islamic clerics justify their pro-Sufi position by reference to the fact that the leading Tatar Islamic thinkers of the past such as Sayyid Kul-Sharif, Utyz Imyani, Shigabetdin Mardjani and Zaynulla Rasulev belonged to the Sufi Naqshbandi tariqa (order). At the same time, a small number of local Islamic clerics oppose tariqas and regard them as bid’a (unlawful innovations in Islam) which emerged under the influence of Christianity. Thus, according to Nurulla Muflikhunov, ‘Muslims who wanted to become ishans (Sufi shaykhs) were influenced by Christian monks’.  

The issue of bid’a has been central in the regional doctrinal debate due to the fact that many features of traditional Islam could be theoretically classified as bid’a. Such features included customs and rituals, which, whilst essentially non-Islamic, performed a significant role in preserving and spreading Islam among the population. They developed in the conditions of four hundred years of Russian Orthodox political and cultural domination and isolation from the Islamic heartland. Therefore, contemporary Muslim clerics face a difficult task of defining criteria of bid’a in traditional Islam.

Leading Tatar Islamic clerics have also been concerned about the ongoing ‘Russification’ of Islam which, they argue, could lead to further Wahhabization of the umma. Thus, Valiulla Yakupov believes that if the current trend persists, Islam in Russia will soon ceases to be Tatar, i.e. in the Tatar language. This linguistic shift is facilitated by the fact that many young Tatars are mono-Russian-speakers. Yakupov also holds that ‘de-Tatarization’ of Tatar Islam would pave the way to its replacement by Salafism, which denies the importance of the ethnic component and would thereby endanger the very essence of the Tatar nation. He notes that in the past Tatar mosques served as the key repositories of Tatar nationhood.

In Tatarstan there has been an interesting locally rooted opposition Muslim community, headed by Faizrakhman Sattarov and known as the Faizrakhmanists. The community’s basic postulate has been the principle, ‘live only by the Qur’an’. In doctrinal terms, it represents a paradoxical mixture of Salafism, Sufism and paganism. Sattarov recognizes that this will restrict his number of followers to only the most ‘worthy’. Sattarov pays lip service to the distinction between Sunnism and Shi’ism and the division into madhhabs, but in practice he casts doubt on their practicality, because ‘Allah forbade disunity’. He emphasizes the necessity of namaz (Islamic prayer) and zakat (obligatory alms) and the community tries, often unsuccessfully, to implement a compulsory zakat among its members of up to two-thirds of their income. The Faizrakhmanists stress their native roots and their lack of links with Muslim religious organizations and foundations abroad. This self-sufficiency is evident in the work of the Faizrakhmanist madrasa which opened in 1997, where teaching is conducted only by trained members of the Faizrakhmanist community, and textbooks are written (or rather literally copied from various books) by Sattarov himself.
Interestingly, most contemporary Muslim clergy equally oppose Salafism (Wahhabism), which is rooted in the indigenous Islamic reformist tradition. For example, Valiulla Yakupov, the former deputy mufti of the DUMRT, criticizes Jadidis (Islamic reformers) of the nineteenth century for their orientation towards adaptation and simplification of Islamic ideas to fit Western European cultural values. He argues that Islam has always had a cult of science and therefore does not require doctrinal modernization to match contemporary scientific and technological advance. Yakupov believes that the successful development of the Tatar nation depends on Tatars’ ability to overcome the current Euro-centrism and to revive their culture based on traditional Hanafi Islam, which ensured the preservation of Tatar ethno-national identity and customs in the hard conditions of centuries-long Christian domination.

The traditionalist position of the majority of Islamic clergy is challenged by the views of a small number of reformist thinkers. For example, Tatar intellectual Rashat Safin promotes a specific Tatar Islam that draws on the traditions of Jadidism and differs significantly from Middle Eastern forms of Islam. He argues against Tatarstan’s gravitation toward Muslim countries on the basis of common religion and advocates the transformation of Tatarstan into the Islamic centre of Eurasia.

By comparison, Rafael Khakimov, a former political advisor to Tatar President Mintimer Shaimiev, sees Tatarstan as the future Islamic centre of Europe. Khakimov is author of the Tatar version of the concept of ‘Euro-Islam’, which exhibits some similarities with the views of Tariq Ramadan. Khakimov views Islam as the religion of a free man and a path to personal freedom. He argues against the blind following of some Qur’anic and shari’a requirements which could not be applied to contemporary conditions. In particular, he mentions external Islamic symbols, as well as many Islamic prohibitions and rituals, especially those which relate to women’s rights, behaviour and dress code.

As mentioned earlier, this debate on the role of Islam has not transcended the theological and academic discourse and has barely any effect on grassroots Muslim communities.

It should be noted that since the mid-1990s there has been a limited proliferation of Islamism in Naberezhnie Chelny, Al’met’evsk, Nizhnekamsk, Buguruslan, Penza and some other locations. The main propagators of Islamism have been members of Hizb ut-Tahrir (the Party of Islamic Liberation), which has been particularly active in the Ferghana valley in Central Asia.

In the late 1990s, the federal and regional authorities began a political, administrative and ideological crackdown on Islamism and all types of ‘non-traditional’ Islam. In the early 2000s, the regional FSB (Federal Security Service – the successor to the KGB) unleashed a campaign against foreign Islamic charitable organizations and foundations. As a result, by the end of the year no openly operating foreign Islamic organizations and their representatives were left in the region. In 1998, the Tatarstani government established the Russian Islamic University (RIU) in Kazan under the leadership of Professor Rafik Mukhametshin, a secular scholar.
of Islam. The RIU was envisaged as the major training centre for home-grown Islamic clergy of ‘traditional’ Hanafi orientation.

However, due to the aforementioned specific historic and socio-economic conditions of the Volga-Urals region, the level of political Islamic radicalization there has been minimal. Islam has remained a major ethno-cultural factor and has not become a factor of political mobilization.

**Islam and Islamism in the North Caucasus**

*‘Traditional’ Islam*

In the North Caucasus the level of Islamic and Islamist activism has been considerably higher than in the Volga-Urals region. This has been due to the more intensive process of Islamic revival in the North Caucasus. Following the collapse of Communism, the Islamic revival has occurred in different forms. Among its most visible manifestations was the decentralization and multiplication of the Islamic Spiritual Boards (DUMs). In 1989–92, the regional Spiritual Board of Muslims of the North Caucasus (DUMSK), which represented ‘official Islam’, disintegrated along ethno-administrative lines. As a result, each autonomous republic acquired its own muftiat. New muftiats were headed by ‘young imams’ who claimed their disengagement from the Soviet-era corrupt and inefficient leadership of mufti Makhmud-hadji Gekkiev. The other manifestation of Islamic revival was the resurfacing of ‘folk’ or ‘parallel’ Islam, which in the north-eastern Caucasus was represented by Sufism (tariqatism). By 1994, Dagestani tariqatists from the *wird* (branch of a tariqa) of the Naqshbandi/Shadhali shaykh Sa’id-afandi al-Chirkawi imposed their control over the Spiritual Board of Muslims of Dagestan (DUMD) and began to embody this ‘official Islam’. In a similar way in Chechnya and Ingushetia, tariqatists of the Qadiri wird of Kunta-Hadji (Kishiev, d. 1867) established their domination over the respective DUMs and began to represent the ‘official’ Islam. However, in the north-western Caucasus (the autonomous republics of Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachaevo-Cherkessia and Adygea, where Sufism is barely present), ‘traditional’ Islam became associated with the ‘folk’ version of Hanafi Islam.

It is worth noting that due to the peripheral location of the North Caucasus and its lengthy domination by Russians, tariqatism acquired some important features which distinguished it from Sufism in other parts of the world. In particular, it is deeply integrated into the system of traditional community and clan, or family ties. Often it is simply ancestral tradition which determines which *wird* a person belongs to. In other words, tariqatism has turned into one of the cultural denominators of Dagestanis, Chechens and Ingush. Tariqatists are characterized by their ‘pretensions to religious exclusivity, a fanatical commitment to their faith, the rigid, closed nature of their organizations, strict discipline and unconditional submission to religious authorities’. While in present day Dagestan, there are 25 living shaykhs of Naqshbandi, Shadhili and Qadiri tariqats, in Chechnya there are no living shaykhs. Also, Sufism in Chechnya is deeply entrenched
within the local ethnic context and most local Sufis do not regard themselves as being part of trans-national Sufi networks. It should be noted that this factor works to their disadvantage in comparison with local Salafis, who appeal to Islamic authorities from different ethnic and national backgrounds.  

Despite the decades of Soviet oppression and deep underground existence, tariqatists preserved their hierarchical structures, affiliated to specific kinship and sub-kinship local formations. In Dagestan, the local Sufis are affiliated to between 40 and 50 wírds which are headed by shaykhs. In Chechnya, there are 20 active wírds. An important characteristic of a shaykh is his alleged ability to perform miracles (karamat). Interestingly, the concept of karamat does not exist in mainstream Sufism and is perceived as a vulgarized deviation. Tariqatists also recognize the ability of one shaykh to teach simultaneously by different wírds, or even different tariqats. For example, the Dagestani leading shaykh, Said-afandi al-Chirkawi, teaches according to the Naqshbandi and Shadhili tariqats. The tariqatists also attribute supernatural characteristics to the mazars (Sufi shrines) and sanction ziyarat (pilgrimage to shrines), reading the Qur'an at cemeteries, mawlids (chanting praise to saints or shaykhs) and using amulets and talismans. They endorse payment to saints and believe that baraka (divine grace) can be passed down through saints, shaykhs and artefacts related to them (such as shrines). Compared to mainstream Sufis, tariqatists prioritize the times and forms of dhikr (repeated reference to Allah), participation in other forms of devotion and fulfilment of the tariqa’s material obligations rather than mysticism and spiritual perfection.

In Dagestan, the biggest wírds are the Naqshbandi and Shadhili ones. In numerical terms, the Naqshbandi wírds also prevail in Chechnya. There are fourteen Naqshbandi wírds and six Qadiri wírds. However, in terms of size and political influence, the Qadiri wírd of Kunta-Hadji, the wírd of the Kadyrov clan, has overwhelming domination. In the conditions of post-Soviet transition, the tariqatist structures merged with semi-illicit ethnic clans. As a result, the tariqas acquired an increasing role in the political and economic spheres, assuming an intermediary function in resolving intra-clan disputes. Since the mid-2000s, Ramzan Kadyrov (President since 2007) has sanctioned an official promotion of the wírd of Kunta-Hadji through both the restoration of old ziyarats to Kunta-Hadji and his relatives and the creation of new ones. At the same time, this Soviet-style imposition of a quasi-official religion has not been accompanied by adequate social and educational policies. As a result, a growing number of young Chechens have begun to turn to Salafism. It is significant that, while in the Soviet period over 99 per cent of Chechens were Sufis, in 2008 about 10–15 per cent of them professed Salafi Islam.  

‘Non-traditional’ Islam

In the North Caucasus, the first manifestations of ‘non-traditional’ Salafi Islam (‘Wahhabism’) occurred in the late 1980s. Wahhabism first emerged in Dagestan against the background of dire socio-economic conditions, the ineffectiveness
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of the governments and the inadequacy of the Islamic officialdom represented by the muftiats. Unlike official Muslim clerics, Wahhabis were prepared to address the key social problems. They regarded tariqatism as bid‘a and a deviation from true Islam, and criticized Sufi teaching and practices. Of special significance was the difference between Wahhabis and tariqatists on the issue of jihad (Islamic holy war). Unlike the tariqatists who interpreted jihad predominantly in terms of Muslim spiritual self-perfection, Wahhabis believed that the jihad also implied a campaign to spread Islam all over the world. Moreover, Wahhabi radicals viewed jihad as a preventive armed advance in order to overcome those obstacles which the enemies of Islam placed in the path of its peaceful proliferation. It is worth noting that this approach opened up the possibility of declaring a jihad against the present government of Dagestan which allegedly resisted the effective al da‘wa al-Islamiya (summons for an Islamic way of life). The Wahhabis strongly criticized the tariqatists for their ideological and political corruption and for their support of the present regime. In particular, they defied Sufis’ alleged legalizing of usury, which was forbidden by shari‘a.

Of special importance was the Wahhabis’ rejection of the archaic clan- and ethnicity-based stratification of local society and their ambition to replace it by an inclusive Islamic identity. It is significant that they were the most potent agents of trans-clan and trans-national solidarity yet. They have particularly targeted young people aged between 10 and 14 years. Wahhabis criticized so-called ‘old imams’ for their distortions of Islam and Islamic practices. In particular, they opposed the existing practice of israf (wastefulness) in events such as funerals, which had a devastating impact on the bulk of the poverty-stricken population. Also, compared to ‘old imams’ who used to memorize Arabic without understanding it, the Wahhabis conducted prayers in local languages which enabled them to explain the meaning of the Qur’an to their parishioners. Most ‘old imams’ resisted these innovations and regarded them as a threat to the ‘traditional Islam’ which they claimed to represent.

Salafi ideas were generated both within local societies and imported from abroad. Among the means by which Salafism was promoted from abroad were the participation of local Muslims in the hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca) and the activities of various Saudi and other Middle Eastern Islamic organizations and foundations in the region. The latter subsidized the construction of mosques and madrasas, the annual hajj of local Muslims, as well as scholarships for those young Muslims who wanted to study in Islamic universities and colleges abroad. Foreign Islamic foundations also supplied teachers for newly opened Islamic schools and colleges, assisted in the establishment of Islamic publishing houses and freely distributed Qur’ans and other Islamic literature of a predominantly Islamic fundamentalist nature. They also invested in the proselytizing conducted by Islamic missionaries and the organization of various Islamic training courses and camps, most of which were located in Chechnya. The peak of their activities was in the early 1990s. Since the mid-1990s, and especially after the beginning of the second Chechen war in 1999, almost all the activities of foreign Islamic organizations have been banned by the authorities. Among a few exceptions has
been the continuous employment (on a yearly contract basis) of teachers of the Arabic language and shari’a from al-Azhar University in Cairo by the Islamic Institute of Abu Hanifa in Cherkessk.33

Until late 1997, local Wahhabis were more or less equally represented by moderates and radicals. Since the second Chechen war in the north-eastern Caucasus, the moderates have been greatly outnumbered by the radicals. However, in the north-western Caucasus the moderates, represented by *novye musul’mane* (new Muslims) maintained their dominance until 2002. ‘New Muslims’ perceived direct political involvement as inappropriate given the region’s political and cultural integration within Russia, its low level of religiosity and its multi-confessional demographic composition.34 They emphasized Islamic education as the major source of the gradual re-Islamization of local societies.

From the early 2000s, the jihadist trend has been prevalent among Salafis all over the region. Since then, Islamists have operated deep underground. Their main organizational units have been youth *jamaats* (communities) which formed cross-regional networks. Jamaat members have been tied by strict discipline and absolute subordination to their *amir* (leader). Most well-organized have been the ‘Shariat’ jamaat in Dagestan and the ‘Yarmuk’ jamaat in Kabardino-Balkaria. Islamists have advocated the Islamic re-unification of the North Caucasus within an Islamic state modelled on the nineteenth-century Imamate of Imam Shamil.35 They have spread their activities in Central Russia. Among their innovative tactics has been *shahidism* (suicide in the name of Islam) which has clashed with their traditional cultural and religious values. Some local Islamists have established close links with the international Islamist centres in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Jordan.

In Chechnya, war conditions predetermined a consistent prevalence of the jihadist form of Islamic activism. The major agents of radical Islam there were foreign *mujahidin* (Islamic fighters), who came to assist their Islamic brethren in fighting the jihad against the Russian invasion; and radical Dagestani Wahhabis, who fled to Chechnya in the late 1990s. The overwhelming majority of Chechen Islamists were marginalized young people who had a very vague knowledge of Islam and treated jihadism more as a profession and means of living than as a religious ideology.

The Islamic dynamic in Adygea has been different due to four major reasons. The first was the quantitative supremacy of non-Muslims (Russians) over the Adyghe, who constituted less than 22 per cent of the total population. The second reason related to the much later Islamization of the region. The third was the superficial nature of the Islamization of the Adyghe. The fourth reason was a large exodus (*hijra*) of the Adyghe to the Ottoman Empire in the aftermath of the Russian conquest of the Caucasus. As a result, the post-Communist Islamic revival in Adygea occurred largely in the context of the Adyghe national revival. It was prompted from abroad by Adyghe repatriates from Syria, Kosovo, Turkey, Jordan and other Arab countries. For them the theme of the nineteenth-century Adyghe hijra to the Ottoman Empire was central. Most of them adhered to Salafi Islam. Their leading authority was Ramadan Tsey, imam of the Friday mosque.
in Maikop. In the aftermath of the Nalchik Wahhabi revolt in 2005, the Adygean authorities have turned against foreign-born Adyghe Islamic preachers and joined their counterparts in Kabardino-Balkaria and Karachaevo-Cherkessia, both in denouncing Salafism and in promoting ‘traditional’ Islam, which in fact hardly existed among ex-Soviet Adyghe.\textsuperscript{36}

**Moscow’s response to the rise of Islam**

In the early and mid-1990s the Kremlin elite, which was pre-occupied with the ‘privatization’ of the Party and Soviet property and funds, had a rather \textit{laissez-faire} approach to the rise of Islam and Islamic activism in Russia’s Muslim regions. The relaxation of the centre’s control over the religious sphere and the Islamic illiteracy of the vast majority of Russia’s Muslims paved the way to the proliferation of ‘non-traditional’ Salafi Islam in Muslim regions of the country. Among the contributing factors were the socio-economic hardships, the ideological confusion and the incompetence and corruption of regional and central governments. Under those conditions, the Salafis often acted as the only genuine supporters of poor and disillusioned people. The symbol of that period was the formation of the shari’a-based Kadar zone (the villages of Karamakhi, Chabanmakhi and Kadar) in Buinakskii raion (district) in Dagestan. Following the 1998 visit of then Russian Interior Minister Sergei Stepashin to the Kadar zone, the local Islamist authorities were granted Moscow’s permission to function on the basis of the shari’a as long as they refrained from proselytizing of Salafism.

From 1994, state policy towards Islam became increasingly affected by the Russo-Chechen conflict which culminated in two wars (1994–6 and 1999–2001). The conflict caused enormous human and material losses (over 40,000 dead and over 300,000 displaced) and it produced a culture of violent lawlessness which spilt over to Chechnya’s neighbours and the Russian heartland. Moscow conducted the first Chechen war under the slogan of ‘the restoration of the Russian constitutional order’ and did not interfere in the Islamic traditionalist–Salafi debate in Chechnya. In contrast, Moscow waged the second war as ‘an anti-terrorist operation’ and sided decisively with Islamic traditionalists against Salafis, who were portrayed as terrorists. Following 9/11, Moscow began to depict its military engagement in Chechnya as Russia’s contribution in the US-led global war on terror. This led to further ‘securitization’ of Moscow’s approach towards Islam.

The Kremlin’s support of ‘traditional Islam’ has been accompanied by nationwide suppression of various manifestations of Islamic fundamentalism, as well as any other forms of Islamic activism which were labelled as ‘Islamic extremism’. Moscow’s tough stance on Islamic fundamentalism and ‘Islamic extremism’ has been echoed in Russia’s Muslim autonomies. In 1999, the Dagestani parliament adopted an anti-Wahhabi law which was copied in several other North Caucasian autonomies. In 2002, those laws were reinforced by the federal decree ‘On fighting extremist activities’. The anti-Wahhabi and anti-extremist legislation has
provided a legal base for a crackdown on religious (or any other) opposition to the ruling regimes in Muslim autonomies. As in Soviet times, the local FSB has begun to compile lists of active and passive Wahhabis, as well as Wahhabi sympathizers. Direct foreign Islamic involvement in the form of foreign Islamic missionaries, teachers and representatives of various Islamic foundations and organizations has been curtailed. In the official political and academic discourse, various forms of Islamic activism, including those of a non-violent nature, have been treated as criminal and terrorist activities.

The pro-government mass media have played a central role in reinforcing anti-Islamist sentiments among the public and in promoting Islamophobia in Russian society. Official periodicals have ‘exposed’ local ‘Islamic terrorists’ and their alleged links with al-Qaeda and other international Islamic extremist centres based in Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the UAE and Syria, as well as Western Europe. The media has denounced Wahhabism as a destructive ideology alien to the mentality and nature of local Muslims. Since the mid-2000s, as the theme of ‘the global war on terror’ subsided, officials and national and regional media have tended to depict Islamists as ordinary bandits and terrorists and to portray Islamism and ‘non-traditional’ Islam in general as a security, rather than a religious, issue.

Conclusion

Since the collapse of Communism, Russia’s Muslim regions have witnessed the rise of Islam, including that of radical nature. However, the nature and scope of Islamic activism, as well as its political impact, have varied significantly from one Muslim region to the other. Islamic developments in the Volga-Urals region and the North Caucasus represent two main trends of the post-Communist Islamic dynamic. In the Volga-Urals, which is characterized by relatively high living standards, Islamic radicalization has largely occurred within the theological and intellectual debate, leaving the bulk of the region’s ‘ethnic Muslims’, mainly Tatars and Bashkirs, unaffected by it. At the core of Islamic radicalization, there has been the creeping replacement of the traditional Hanafi madhhab, which for centuries had ensured Muslims’ productive and peaceful existence within the non-Muslim state, by the more rigid Hanbali madhhab, which was better suited for homogeneous Muslim states and societies.

In contrast, in the North Caucasus, Islamism has transcended theological and intellectual discourse and fused with politics. Its patterns have resembled some Middle Eastern Islamist movements of the past. Thus, like Middle Eastern Islamists of the late 1960s, local Islamists rejected kafir (non-Muslim) oppressive political systems, which were ‘camouflaged’ by a democratic façade, as well as the pseudo-market economy, which in the difficult conditions of post-Soviet transition became synonymous with economic breakdown. They believed that the creation of the North Caucasian Caliphate would radically improve the well-being of the vast majority of its inhabitants through the dissolution of the existing political-administrative borders within the region and the replacement of
corrupt and inefficient governments by fair and competent Islamic administration under the rule of the Caliph. From the late 1990s, Islamists of the north-eastern Caucasus, and from the early 2000s of the north-western Caucasus, have widely embraced jihadist ideology and merged with various pro-violence and terrorist organizations and groupings. An important contributing factor has been the diffusion of Chechen jihadists in the region as a result of the strengthening of the authoritarian rule of President Ramzan Kadyrov in Chechnya. Islamists have been either directly responsible for, or involved in sporadic attacks on, local militia-men and other representatives of various law enforcement agencies in Dagestan, Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria and other parts of the North Caucasus.

By the early 2000s, the Volga-Urals regional authorities, through a combination of political, economic and educational measures, managed to curtail the proliferation of Islamism and to channel Islamic activism within the official theological and cultural discourse. In comparison, in the North Caucasus, the official crackdown on ‘non-traditional’ Islam and its representatives has pushed Islamists further underground and contributed to the formation of pan-regional Islamist networks of jihadist orientation. Meanwhile, Moscow’s unconditional backing of Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov has disguised the creeping sovereignization and re-Islamization of Chechnya.37

Notes

1 In this chapter the term ‘jihadism’ defines a radical political movement under the banner of jihad (Islamic holy war) against the federal Russian and regional authorities.
2 Here the terms ‘Muslims’, or ‘ethnic Muslims’ apply to both practising and non-practising Muslims who historically belong to the Islamic cultural tradition.
4 Most active among those organizations were the All-Tatar Public Centre, the Party of Ittifaq (Union), Milli Mejlis (National Assembly) and Azatlyk (Freedom).
5 In 1992, the DUMES was re-named TsDUM (Central Spiritual Board of Muslims).
7 In 1996, DUMTsER was transformed into the Council of Muftis of Russia (SMR) under the leadership of Ravil Gainutdin. See A. Malashenko, Islamskoe Vozrozhdenie v Sovremennoi Rossii, Moscow: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1998, pp. 116–18.
8 Mukhametshin ‘Islam in the Volga-Urals’.
10 Here the term ‘Wahhabism’ is kept (despite its inadequacies) due to its wide acceptance by politicians, journalists and the general public.
11 Strictly speaking, the use of the Christian term ‘clergy’ in relation to mullahs, imams, muftis, shaykhs and other representatives of Islamic authority is incorrect, because Islam does not accept the concept of mediation between God and believers and therefore does not require an institutionalized hierarchy. A Muslim who leads a prayer
or presents a sermon is trusted by the community to perform these functions simply because of his superior knowledge of Islam compared to his co-religionists. Here the term is used for the sake of utility and simplicity only.

12 The dichotomy between ‘traditional’ and ‘non-traditional’ Islam is characteristic for all Muslim regions of the former Soviet Union. The term ‘traditional Islam’ is widely applied to local beliefs and practices which often present a synthesis of Islam with pre-Islamic beliefs, customary norms and other non-Islamic practices. Since the mid-1990s, ‘traditional Islam’ has de facto acquired the status of the only genuine and indigenous Islam in opposition to ‘non-traditional’ Islam, which is associated with foreignness and Islamic fundamentalism. ‘Traditional’ Islam is regarded as a central element of nationhood and the social cohesion of local Muslim societies.

15 Gabdulla Ahameddin Imam-khatib from Naberezhnie Chelny. Interview, 13 July 2003; Muflikhunov, Kniga propovedei, pp. 50–1.
16 Valiulla Yakupov, the first deputy mufti of the DUMRT. Interview, Kazan’, 17 December 2002.
17 Faizrakhman Sattarov was one of the few Tatar imams of the Soviet period to receive professional theological training from 1955–64 in the Bukhara madrasa. He held the post of imam-khatib in Leningrad, Rostov, Oktyabr’sk and some other large cities of the USSR. From 1972 to 1976 he served as qadi (judge) of the DUMES. Thereafter he fell into opposition to the official religious structures.
18 Faizrakhman Sattarov. Interview, Kazan, 12 April 2003.
21 Yakupov interview.
23 T. Ramadan, To Be A European Muslim, Markfield: Islamic Foundation, 1999.
27 There are considerable discrepancies in the estimated numbers of Sufis in Dagestan. According to some estimates, they constitute over sixty per cent of the Dagestani Muslim population (Magomed Kurbanov, Deputy Minister of Nationalities of Dagestan. Interview, Makhachkala, 30 June 1998). However, according to other estimates their number does not exceed 45,000 people (Personal archive of Kaflan Khanbabaev).
28 Al-Janabi, 26 October 2000.
29 Vatchagaev, ‘Ziyarats’.
30 According to local tradition, during the first three days after the burial the relatives of a deceased Muslim have to treat his/her friends and anybody who happens to pass by to a meal and to provide them with a food package containing one kilogramme of lamb, sugar, flour and sweets. A similar procedure is repeated on the fortieth and fiftieth days after the burial (Ismail Akkiev, an elder of the Babugent village in Kabardino-Balkaria. Interview, 12 September 2000).
32 Among the local ideologists of Islamism have been, for example, Ahmed-qadi Akhtaev, Bagauddin Kebedov, Abbas Kebedov and Ayub Omarov in Dagestan; Rasul Kudaev, Anzor Astemirov, Musa Mukoev and Ruslan Nakhushev in Kabardino-Balkaria; and Muhammad Bizhiev and Ramazan Barlakov in Karachaevo-Cherkessia. They claim
to follow the ideas of local Islamic thinkers of the early twentieth century, such as Ali Kayaev, a Dagestani, Bekmurza Pachev, a Kabardinian and Kazim Mechiev, a Balkar. Their foreign authorities have included Ibn Taymiyyah, Muhammad ‘Abd al-Wahhab, Abul Ala Maududi, Sayid al-Kutb and at-Turabi (Rasul Kudaev, Islamic activist in Kabardino-Balkaria. Interview, Nal’chik, 2 June 2003).

33 Ismail Bostanov, Director of Islamic Institute of Abu Hanifa, Cherkessk. Interview, 6 August 2003.

34 Kudaev interview.


Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the role and nature of Islam in the Caucasus has evolved and developed dramatically and religious life in the region has been transformed. Unfortunately, among Russian and other external observers there continues to be a stereotypical view of Islam in the Caucasus region as being a single, monolithic phenomenon, and Caucasian Muslims are viewed as politicized and radicalized extremists. Such perceptions are due to a degree of exaggeration and the general anxieties of the rise of Muslim extremism in global politics. In reality, there are multiple forms of Islam in the Caucasus so that there is no one form of ‘traditional’ or ‘official’ Islam. There are also, as this chapter argues, multiple forms of radical Islam in the Caucasus which includes not only the Wahhabi-Salafi movement but also a radicalized neo-traditionalist or tariqatist (neo-Sufi) current, both movements of which are actually intertwined in complex ways and often in conflict with one another. Due to the growth and increased organization of these radical movements, this represents a significant challenge to the stability of the region, the authority of the federal government, and the security and prosperity of the general population of the North Caucasus. More broadly, there has also been a core shift in the dynamics of radicalization in the North Caucasus away from ethnic separatism, which was marked particularly by Chechnya’s secessionist struggle, to a pan-Caucasian jihadist movement rebelling against the power of the ‘infidel state’ and seeking to create a Muslim state in all of the Caucasus. It is the developments and reasons behind this dramatic shift in the religio-political landscape of the North Caucasus, which is the principal focus of this chapter.

From traditional Islam to Muslim extremism

Islam in the Caucasus has a rich and ancient history, originating as early as the first century of Islam’s existence. Generally speaking, the religion passed through the Caucasus from two directions. From the south came the infiltration of the Sunni Shafi‘i madhhab (legal school) from Mesopotamia and Imami Shi‘ism from Iran. From the north in Central Asia, splinters of the Golden Horde brought the influence of the Hanafi school of Sunnism. From both directions, there emerged the influence of Sufism and, as a consequence, many different
orders have spread, most notably the Naqshbandi, Qadiri and Shadhili. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the modern map of Islam’s presence in the North Caucasus has dramatically changed. To contextualize these changes, it is necessary to recognize that traditionally the different forms of Islam have been distributed in the region as follows:

- Dagestan, Chechnya and Ingushetia – a region where Shafiʻi Sunnism is dominant but where there is also a strong influence of Sufism;
- Central and Northwest Caucasus – a region dominated by the Hanafi wing of Sunnism.

During the Soviet period, the North Caucasus broadly followed this traditional distribution of Islam and was generally not seen to be threatening. But the authorities nevertheless worried about the phenomenon of Islamic radicalism. For instance, in the 1970s the KGB and the security forces engaged in a struggle with so-called ‘Wahhabism’, which appeared in the mountains of Dagestan, a republic traditionally dominated by local Sufi leaders. The fundamentalist Wahhabi struggle of the 1970s evolved out of conflicts and debates which had been around for decades. There was simply a re-emergence of pre-Soviet debates between traditionalist and reformist Sufi leaders over the nature of Dagestani Sufism and the Brezhnev era brought out into the open many of these same debates. However, in the 1970s the ideological divisions emerged in a spiritually totalitarian Dagestan. The official Sufi leaders in Dagestan opposed the proclaimed religious revolution and labelled the young Sufi reformers Wahhabis because they had ideas that were fundamentalist in nature even though their religious doctrines were ‘home-grown’ and not initially inspired by orthodox Wahhabism. Traditionalist Sufi leaders felt compelled to respond negatively to the rebels because their ideas challenged both religious orthodoxy and their own spiritual power.

Shortly before the collapse of the Soviet Union, Muslims in the region established the Islamic Revival Party (IRP), which sought to promote a reformed Islam within the context of a post-communist Soviet Union. But when the Soviet Union disintegrated and its borders were opened, Muslims of the former Soviet Union (FSU) began to be radicalized. The important changes in the North Caucasus included both the arrival of new forms of radical Islam imported from the rest of the Muslim world and the radicalization of traditional forms of Islam. For instance, contacts among the followers of two traditional Sunni persuasions in the North Caucasus, the Hanafi and Shafiʼi, grew substantially. At the same time, an increasing number of Muslims in the region started to advocate the overcoming of the splits between the different forms of Islam. Today, the growth of Wahhabism-Salafism is one factor behind Muslims all over the world promoting the idea of a borderless ‘Islamic globalization’, which seeks to erase ethnic and state borders. Urban Muslim youth represent the avant-garde of this movement.

The dynamics of the globalization of Islam have directly impinged upon and challenged traditional North Caucasian Islam. In many fundamental ways, ‘global’ and ‘traditional’ North Caucasian Islam are mutually exclusive. Those
proposing a global Islam seek to transcend the divisions of Islam and instead promote the goal and rhetoric of a united Islamic ‘nation’. In many native languages of Muslim peoples, the word *milla* means both Islamic community and nation. For promoters of global Islam, ethnic affiliation takes a secondary or subordinate role to religious affiliation and they believe that people should affirm that ‘first, we are Muslims, and then Arabs, or Persians or Chechens’. Traditionalist Muslims and non-Muslims are left wondering what place civil-political identity has in an identity formed by Islamic globalization. For advocates of global Islam, the answer is clear – one’s civic-political identity should not take first or even second place to a Muslim identity. So traditional Muslims respond to this, asking how global Islam supports and affirms the national homeland and in what ways do such Muslims seek to engage and interact with the civil authorities and the secular government. This is not an idle question, as even ‘moderate’ Sufi leaders in Dagestan affirm that ‘here, in Dagestan, *Insha’Allah* [Allah willing] there will be Islam!’ In reality, in many places in the North Caucasus, Islam is the only basis of social organization and the main goal for global Muslims is the full submission to Islamic values. Inevitably, the diverse and mosaic-like character of local, North Caucasian Islam is ignored. Instead, global Muslims continue to search for a universal ‘ideal’ Islam which will unite the whole Muslim *umma* (community).

The growing divergence in Muslim practice in the region, and especially the spread of global Islam, has led to the phenomenon of fundamentalism. For the ideologues of Islamic ‘globalism’, a universal Islam exists but it must be separated from local traditions which have been accumulated over the centuries. Islam must cleanse itself of foreign elements. The global Islamist’s version of Islam is simple – it is enough only to base Islam on the Qur’an and Sunna (Muhammad’s commentary and the Muslim law supplementary to the Qur’an). They often consequently neglect the achievements of Islamic thoughts collected for over fourteen centuries. Even if this heritage is recognized, the underlying assumption is that Muslims need not apply any special effort to study and comprehend Islam’s sacred texts, which means that their interpretations suffer from a minimal knowledge. Such disdain for learning provides legitimation to the growing radicalism and intolerance of Muslim youth.

Muslims seeking to globalize Islam are forming a network of organizations and activists. Network activism helps spread the movement quickly and to penetrate the different communities in the North Caucasus, including initially adversarial ones, such as in Dagestan, Chechnya and Ingushetia. Initially the highly traditionalist tariqatist communities in these republics found this new type of Islamic activity introduced by young activists, strange and threatening. But attempts to confront these networks with the punitive power of the state have not achieved anything and, as a consequence, these youth network structures have become an integral part of the Muslim landscape in the North Caucasus. These networks make use of modern technology (mobile and satellite communications, the web and the internet among other forms) to develop their organizational activity. These youth Muslim communities have now become effectively extra-territorial.
It is no longer necessary for young radicals to visit the same mosque on Fridays, to live in the same neighbourhood and to know each other by sight, since they can create real networked communities with the help of virtual technology. Following the events in Nalchik in 2005, youth jamaats (groups or communities) have become increasingly driven underground, after the failure to form strong and legally recognized communities through which to implement reforms. The groups’ legal failures have led to increased radicalization. As such, the methods used by globalizers have proved to be successful. Their activities are informal and the initiative comes from the bottom upwards. The globalizers undoubtedly gain strength through their extra-territorial, and often underground, networks.

The background and the expansion of Islamic radicalism

Within post-Soviet Russia, it is the eastern and central parts of the North Caucasus which have become the most radical: the republics of Dagestan, Chechnya and Ingushetia, as well as the sizeable Muslim population of adjoining parts of Stavropol region. Islamic radicalism spread to these republics because the Chechen authorities started to expel radical elements from the republic’s borders. One consequence of this has been the strengthening of the Dagestani-Islamist jamaats (i.e. radical separatists). The Dagestani law enforcement agencies have held regular operations against these religious separatists. Despite these efforts, the Republic of Dagestan continues to be the ‘breeding ground’ for radical youth jamaats.

These associations were originally formed by disciples of local Sufi shaykhs as far back as the 1970s. It was precisely these groups that the Soviet security services dubbed ‘Wahhabi’, which followed the rhetoric of the shaykhs who had lost control over their disciples. At this time, the KGB swiftly suppressed the influence of the so-called Wahhabis through the traditional forms of political repression. It was in the 1990s that Wahhabism-Salafism in Dagestan reached its heyday. It was then that the Wahhabi-Salafi communities in Kizilyurt, Karamakhi, Chabanmakhi, Gubden and populated areas in Dagestan began to gain in strength. Despite the bitter opposition of the Sufis, the Wahhabi-Salafis succeeded in establishing their rule in a number of districts. In particular, they managed to found an independent territory in the so-called ‘Kadar zone’, which included three villages in the Buinaksk district of Dagestan: Karamakhi, Chabanmakhi and Kadar. Even though up to half the residents of the enclave did not support the Wahhabi-Salafi ideology or practice, the separatists were able to sustain their rule and their power for three years from 1997 to 1999.

During this period, the secular authorities were effectively excluded and lacked any authority; and yet the enclave had all the attributes of a self-governing territory. It had a shura or Islamic council of government, its own police force and even its own mahkama shari’iyya or shari’a court. Throughout the three years of the enclave’s independence, the extremist jamaats flourished due to the entrepreneurial activities of its members. The surrounding mountains were also a convenient place for the training of future mujahidin (Islamic warriors).
In the enclave itself, especially in the villages of Karamakhi and Chabanmakhi, the Islamist extremists entrenched themselves and fought like a professional force, which was demonstrated during the course of the military operations conducted against them in 1999. Although the Islamist forces were almost surrounded a number of times, practically all of the extremists’ leaders managed to leave the ‘Kadar zone’ enclave and escape into Chechnya. Those who stayed in Dagestan immediately went underground.

After the collapse of the ‘Kadar zone’, Islamist extremists in Dagestan began systematically to find new ways to protect and preserve their movement. Consequently, they adopted the network principle, which thereafter formed the basis of their activity. This trend of networking the resistance movement spread. Other known networks were formed in Chechnya, Karachaevo-Cherkessia and the Stavropol region. In the mid-2000s, after the end of the war in Chechnya and the suppression of a number of major Wahhabi-Salafi centres in Dagestan, Anzor Astemirov’s Kabardino-Balkarian jamaat became the best-known and best-organized network association. Other networks of youth jamaats which are known to exist are those in Dagestan, Chechnya, Karachaevo-Cherkessia and the Stavropol territory. Currently, youth jamaats are being formed in the in the Republic of Adygea. In general, conflicts between Wahhabi-Salafis and traditional North Caucasian Muslims are less tense in Kabardino-Balkaria and Karachaevo-Cherkessia than in Dagestan, Chechnya and Ingushetia. The Republic of Adygea and Krasnodar krai (region) experience the lowest level of radicalization, mainly due to the fact that in these regions religious radicalism is weaker than ethno-nationalism. So long as nationalist organizations such as the ‘Circassian Congress’ and Adyge-Khasa remain strong in north-west Caucasus, Islamic radicalism will not enjoy a significant influence.

The form, structure and activities of radical Islamic movements

In Russia, differing constellations of individuals, organizations, groupings and mosques have been responsible for the spread of radicalism. In the Northern Caucasus, the basic structure of radicalism is the jamaat. The Arabic word jamaa means ‘society’ or ‘community’. The jamaat is an elementary, grass-roots form of Muslim social organization which unites Muslims as a congregation for prayer. Ideally, a jamaat is a group of Muslims attending the same mosque. The spiritual leader of a jamaat is its imam – the prayer leader in a mosque who delivers the Friday sermon. The imam plays a significant role in the life of the community due to his authority and knowledge. Underpinning an imam’s authority is the fact that, as a rule, the entire community elects him from among the worthiest of Muslims based on a number of criteria. He should not only have the best knowledge of the Qur’an, the Prophet Muhammad’s Sunna and the religious practice of Islam, but also be a model of morality and a fulfilment of the precepts of the Muslim religion. Normally, a jamaat and an imam are closely bound to one another in many ways, not only meeting together on Fridays for communal prayer but also on multiple
other occasions. However, for imams of large jamaats, particularly in major cities, it is difficult to maintain close personal ties with their congregations.

A particular kind of jamaat, the youth jamaat, is the strongest and most cohesive of these communities. Youth jamaats were organized at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s by young opposition figures. These youthful leaders were in opposition to the official Islamic structures, such as each republic’s official Spiritual Board of Muslims (DUM), and to so-called ‘traditional Islam’, meaning the local traditions professed and observed by the older generation. As a consequence, in Russia, the very concept of jamaat implies something ‘radical’. Every time the word jamaat is mentioned in the Russian scholarly press or mass media, it tends to refer to a collective of radically minded Muslims, which more often than not does not correspond to the actual state of affairs. In reality, radical jamaats make up only a minority of the North Caucasus’s jamaats but nevertheless receive the most attention.

Youth jamaats tend to have a distinctive organizational structure and set of activities. In the late 1990s, the Islamic underground in the North Caucasus began reorganizing itself and the leaders of the youth jamaats copied forms of modern Muslim organization from the Middle East. This involved high levels of internal consolidation and discipline, the formation of cells and the securing of widespread domestic charitable support. Following the Middle Eastern example, the Islamist underground began to distribute its forces across a large territory and to create a network of cells. In setting up this network, cell members tend to recruit disgruntled local residents, especially those who have suffered abuse from the law enforcement agencies. Although the organizational structures remain formally independent and autonomous, the networked jamaats communicate and coordinate actions using various electronic and other means. Even back in the 1990s and early 2000s, these networks were connected to one another and exchanged information about their activities, as the leaders were generally well acquainted with one another and were thoroughly familiar with the state of affairs in neighbouring jamaats. Nevertheless, North Caucasian jamaats have always managed to preserve a significant degree of internal independence and autonomy.

Because of their structure, youth jamaats have inevitably attracted extremist forces, including separatists, who gradually managed to infiltrate the organizations and thereby exert an ever-greater influence. As a result, in the 1990s a substantial number of the youth jamaats were transformed into a base for separatist movements. Furthermore, they were instrumental in shifting the ideology of the North Caucasus from ethnic separatism, such as the war for Chechen independence, to a religious separatist movement, with radicals declaring the formation of a North Caucasian emirate as part of a global Islamic state.

The organizational structure of the separatist youth jamaats is not the same as that of the traditional Muslim communities in the region, which are also called jamaats. The traditional jamaats include the population of a single village or one or several city districts grouped around a mosque. While the traditional jamaats are organized according to the territorial principle, the separatist jamaats are extra-territorial and dispersed. One separatist jamaat may encompass many small
groups, united into one or several networks. Such is the case, for example, with the Dagestani jamaats, ‘Shariat’ and ‘Jennet’. They were created on the basis of loyalty to the ideology and practice of the separatist movement. Organizationally, these jamaats do not represent any kind of unified association, although the various units or cells acknowledge a common call. Their structure includes de facto independent cells, made up of a small number of members, who frequently are unacquainted with the members of other cells. It is particularly difficult to unravel such networks since unmasking one cell usually does not tend to lead to the uncovering of others. While it is certainly difficult to manage such a network, this kind of organization helps it to survive confrontation with the security forces.

The separatist jamaats are international in composition. Usually their members include the different ethnic groups of the Northern Caucasus, but there are also representatives of other countries, including Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Pakistan and the countries of the Middle East. Official Russian statements typically describe these foreigners as mercenaries, yet many of them have come to the region for ideological reasons and as participants in a ‘world jihad against kafirs (non-Muslims), Jews and Crusaders’. Those who have extensive battlefield experience work as instructors. But foreigners are not always instructors, they are sometimes just rank-and-file fighters, which is particularly the case for those coming from Central Asia. Through these foreigners, the jamaats establish ties with donors from Islamic countries. Financial aid to the separatists frequently comes from criminal activities with, for example, jamaats laundering counterfeit hard currency. These groups also engage in other forms of fundraising such as soliciting donations from their supporters and collecting ransoms from the relatives of hostages.

To take advantage of ethnic identity, the separatists have formed special units or ‘battalions’ organized along ethnic lines – thus the existence of the ‘Nogai’, the ‘Karachai’ and other ethnic battalions. In reality, no such battalions exist as permanent military units. The members of separatist jamaats of one ethnic battalion or another (even if the jamaat itself is international) carry out armed forays and terrorist acts. The Nogai battalion provides a particularly good example. The battalion typically includes members of the Shelkovskoi jamaat, which is based in the Shelkovskoi district of Chechnya and the Neftekumskii district of the Stavropol territory. The battalion may be labelled according to ethno-national standards as ‘Nogai’, even though it straddles ethnic boundaries. The Shelkovskoi jamaat has become notorious for large-scale actions against the federal troops, including the recent clashes in the village of Tukui-Mekteb of the Neftekumskii district. Its activities receive widespread attention since raids often take place beyond the borders of the Northern Caucasian republics, angering the federal government.

**The structure and activities of radical movements – Changes in leadership**

Initially the leaders of local youth jamaats were mainly self-educated. Since their level of knowledge did not match that of the other mullahs, they did not engage
in contestation or debate. The youth jamaat leaders of the late 1980s and early 1990s concentrated on strengthening their organizational structures and cells and left questions of ideology to the next generation of leaders. New leaders appeared in the mid-1990s, when young men, who received a higher education abroad (mainly in the Middle East), started to return home. These young men gradually became well known, forming and subsequently heading their own Muslim youth associations and youth jamaats. The new generation of leaders increasingly gained more influence and, by the second half of the 1990s, the leadership of the radical Islamic movement began to change. Young imams, who had received a thorough Islamic education abroad, mainly in the Middle East, began to replace the movement’s first poorly educated leaders, who received their education, at best, in the late Soviet period. Musa Mukhozhev, Anzor Astemirov (of the Kabardino-Balkarian jamaat) and Kurman Ismailov (of the Mineralnye Vody jamaat), are good examples of this leadership transition.  

A few biographical sketches can help to shed light on this. Kabardino-Balkarian leader, Anzor Astemirov, who is descended from a family of Kabardin princes and calls himself Amir Sayfulla (Sword of Allah), was born in 1976. In the early 1990s, the Muslim religious board of the Kabardino-Balkarian Republic sent him to study at the Imam Muhammad bin Saud University in Saudi Arabia to obtain a theological education. After he graduated from university, Astemirov returned home where he preached at one of the mosques in Nal’chik, the capital of Kabardino-Balkaria. In 1993, Astemirov and his associates founded the Islamic Centre of Kabardino-Balkaria (ICKB) and, soon afterwards, this formed the basis for the Kabardino-Balkarian jamaat. Astemirov was a close friend and deputy to Artur (Musa) Mukozhev, the amir (head) of the jamaat. The jamaat later became the most serious force in opposition to the official Muslim spiritual board of the Kabardino-Balkarian Republic. The numerical strength of the jamaat kept growing and, according to its leaders, reached 10,000 people (in all, there are about 650,000 so called ‘ethnic Muslims’ living in the republic).

Between 1999 and 2001, the federal authorities suspected Astemirov of committing criminal acts on a number of occasions. The law enforcement authorities of Stavropol brought him in for interrogation, expecting to charge him for participating in the preparation of terrorist acts. However, the authorities failed to prove his guilt or his connection to any crime. As the persecution of the members of the Kabardino-Balkarian jamaat gained in intensity, Astemirov increasingly drifted towards more radical positions. In December 2004 in Nal’chik, the capital of Kabardino-Balkaria, there was an attack on the local office of the Department of the Federal Drug Control Service of the Russian Federation. The law enforcement authorities accused Astemirov and Ilyas Gorchkanov, a resident of Ingushetia and leader of the ‘Taliban’ jamaat, of mounting the attack. This time the authorities could not interrogate or even locate Astemirov as he had already gone underground. Ten months later, in October 2005, more than 200 militants attacked all the buildings in Nal’chik associated with the security forces of the Kabardino-Balkarian Republic. During two days of fighting, 80 militants, 33 law enforcement officers and 12 civilians were killed in the city. Subsequently,
according to the security services, about 70 people who had been involved in the raid were arrested and more than 20 others were put on the wanted list.

A few days after the attack, in a statement posted on the Chechen-separatist website www.kavkazcenter.com, Chechen warlord Shamil Basaev claimed that the attack on Nal’chik was carried out by combatants of the Kabardino-Balkarian segment of the ‘Caucasian Front’ under the command of Amir Sayfulla, that is Astemirov. In a video recording attached to the statement, Astemirov appeared beside Basaev in a forest outside Nal’chik on the eve of the attack taking part in a meeting of the majlis (council) of the Kabardino-Balkarian mujahidin. Even before this recording, the enforcement agencies of the Russian Federation had already placed Astemirov on their wanted list.

The radicalization of the North Caucasus youth is not limited to those with religious training like Astemirov. Increasingly, young intellectuals are joining the Islamist movement. One example is the Dagestani Abuzagir Mantaev, who defended his doctoral degree in political science on the topic of Wahhabism-Salafism and then turned up in the ranks of the extremists. Mantaev was killed by the security forces, together with other extremists, in Makhachkala on 9 October 2005. Another example is Makhach (better known as Yasin) Rasulov, who was born in 1975, a graduate of Dagestan State University and who worked as a religious columnist for the newspaper Novoe delo and anchored a religious show on Dagestani television. For over a year, he secretly cooperated with extremists groups and even earned the title of ‘Amir of Makhachkala’, having participated in several audacious attacks on Dagestani police officers. On 10 April 2006, it was announced that he had been killed in the course of a special operation in Makhachkala.

**Extremist propaganda and its influence**

The published propaganda of Islamic radicalism comes in different forms. In the 1990s in a number of bookstores in Russia one could buy fundamentalist literature, such as Russian translations of works by Ibn Taimiyya and Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab (the founders and ideologists of Islamic fundamentalism and of Wahhabism); Hassan al-Banna (the original leader of the Muslim Brotherhood organization, which was first set up in Egypt but now spans the globe); and Sayyid and Muhammad Qutb, who were responsible for the subsequent radicalization of the Muslim Brotherhood. Works by contemporary Islamic radicals, such as Abd al-Salam Farag, Ayman al-Zawahiri, Abbud al-Zumr and Russian authors such as Magomed Tagaev (The Army of the Imam) and Nadir Khachilaev (Our Road to Ghazawat), continue to be widely read.

However, the most common forms of literature are leaflets, brochures and reproduced texts of sermons. Much of the material is home-grown. In the early 1990s, publications of texts in religious newspapers and magazines played a crucial role and their impact can hardly be overestimated. For example, a whole generation of young Islamic radicals in the region was brought up reading the Dagestani newspaper Al-Qaf. Furthermore, sermons were recorded and distributed
on VHS and on audio tape and served as the main means for disseminating radical ideas among local residents during the 1990s. However, by the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s, the internet started to supersede other media forms and currently it is the main medium through which radicals disseminate their propaganda. In the early 1990s, when the internet was not yet a mass phenomenon, newspapers and radical magazines played a central role in radicalizing Caucasian Muslims. Radicals also used seemingly harmless Arabic language textbooks for radical propaganda. Bagauddin/Bagautdin Muhammad (alias Bagauddin Kebedov), who was one of the main radical Caucasian ideologists of the 1990s, incorporated Wahhabi-Salafi doctrines in his Arabic language textbook and this was used in classrooms.11

Among important source of propaganda were lectures given by radical ideologists at religious institutions and in the insurgent training camps active in the Caucasus in the 1990s. Some of the texts of these lectures were disseminated to other regions of Russia, including Moscow. In Dagestan in 1999, I discovered a notebook of a student who attended a rebel training camp.12 His notes included lengthy quotations from the lectures of radical ideologists and demonstrate the extent of the ideological indoctrination that he received in the training camps. After attending these camps, the student adopted radical views drawn from selective quotations from the Qur’an and the Prophet Muhammad’s Sunna and with exposure to partial and selective incidents from history and contemporary international politics. For example, the student recorded the following in his notebook:

the majority of Muslims, who frequently repeat ‘there is no God except for Allah’, are either not sincere or they recite the phrase because of tradition or habit. Most of their acts are simply forms of imitation or acts of conformity.

The nameless Wahhabi-Salafi student adds in his notebook that most Muslims ironically place great store on these words of Allah: ‘We have found our fathers professing this faith and we follow in their footsteps’. In fact, the actual context of these words is explaining why the Arabs at the time of Muhammad remained polytheistic. Moreover, Wahhabi-Salafi teachers tend to make a very pointed comparison between the struggle of the Prophet Muhammad with the polytheistic Arabs of the seventh century and the modern struggle between Wahhabi-Salafis and other Caucasian Muslims. The early Muslims criticized the polytheistic Arabs for their ‘superficial’ beliefs which were preserved only because of tradition. Likewise, the Wahhabi-Salafis consider the majority of Muslims to be insincere adherents of Islam, and Muslims mainly for customary and hereditary reasons. Furthermore, Wahhabi-Salafis are convinced that a majority of Muslims are Muslims only through habit rather than conviction, similar to the polytheistic Arabs during Muhammad’s lifetime. In short, the lecture notes document the student’s radicalization and adoption of the outlook put forward at the training camp.
In the Caucasus, the Wahhabi-Salafi ideology is based on the assertion that the only basis of faith is the Qur’an and its supplement, the Sunna. The student’s notebook confirms this with the statement that: ‘Muslims must wholeheartedly embrace the teaching of Islam, given in the Sacred Qu’ran – the Word of the Allah and the Sunni statements of Prophet Muhammad’. It is this which explains the source of the Wahhabi-Salafi drive to clean Islam of bid’a (unlawful innovations), which they see as pervasive in the North Caucasus. The Wahhabi-Salafis sharply oppose many of the customs and ceremonies of local Muslims, such as the cycle of commemorative rites: reading the Qur’an for the deceased and ritualizing the redemption of the deceased (dur), distributing alms at the graveyard, and celebrating the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad (mawlid). The fundamental belief of the Wahhabi-Salafis is the principle and implementation of tawhid (monotheism), which they interpret literally and implement strictly. This is the area where the Wahhabi-Salafis are most intolerant towards local Sufis and the cult of saints. Among their many practices, tariqatists revere shaykhs, practice meditation (dhikr) and visit the tombs of saints (ziyarat), all of which the Wahhabi-Salafis consider to be a form of voluntary fallacy (dalal), polytheism (shirk) and lack of belief (kufr). Once again, the aforementioned Wahhabi-Salafi student records in his lecture notes criticism of such Sufi traditions:

Mushriks (polytheists) venerating their shaykhs or their graves utter the testimony La-ilaha-illallah (there is no god but Allah) with their tongues but contradict its meaning with their deeds. They utter the testimony and then deify someone else besides Allah, turning their worship to that other being, be it love, praise, fear, hope, dependence, prayer, and its other varieties, for all of these are worship; but Allah, the Exalted and Mighty, is the only one who deserves to be worshipped.

This last statement, which corresponds to the point of view of all Muslim believers, is however treated out of all proportion by the Wahhabi-Salafis. They flatly refuse to recognize any form of religious authority. In particular, Wahhabi-Salafis and tariqatists clash when it comes to the issue of revering community elders, which is a longstanding tradition in the North Caucasus. The Wahhabi-Salafis are explicitly defiant of the tradition of respect of elders and view the tradition as a veneration of feeble old men. Instead, they emphasize the equality of all of members in a community and no one, not even the amir, enjoys special deference. Tariqatists, for their part, have continued to revere their elders and generally, those who adhere to the traditional forms of Islam view this lack of deference to community elders as the most negative trait of the Wahhabi-Salafis. Not only do the Wahhabi-Salafis accuse the tariqatists of loss of faith, they declare that all Muslims who do not share their point of view to be ‘infidels’ and that there is one option for them: they must repent and ‘embrace Islam once again’. The Wahhabi-Salafis argue that the tariqatists have willingly veered away from the faith through these misdeeds and that ‘a Muslim who has committed at least
one of these [deeds] must renew his Islam by doing *tawba* (repentance), and embrace Islam once again, since the abandonment of Islam is above all the gravest sin.'

The ideology of Wahhabism-Salafism gives high priority to jihad, understood as an armed struggle by the faithful against the enemies of Islam. The notes of the earlier-mentioned Wahhabi-Salafi student state that: ‘Islam is the religion of jihad and life. Islam claims that each Muslim should spare neither his possessions nor his strength for the sake of the victory of Islam’. In a statement in 1999 for the ‘restoration of the Islam state of Dagestan’, the ‘Islamic Shura of Dagestan’ stated directly that ‘jihad in Dagestan is *fard ‘ayn* (an individual duty) for every Muslim’. This shows that jihad is seen necessarily to take the form of an armed struggle against the enemies of Islam. One of the main Wahhabi-Salafi ideologists of the North Caucasus, Bagauddin Kebedov, consistently and methodically reiterates this idea. In his textbook, *Arabic Language Textbook for the First Year*, Kebedov includes texts for translation into Arabic such as:

> we are at war with the *giaour* (infidel) and they constantly fight against us. Today they have forces and various weapons at their service, still we have *iman* (faith) and therefore we shall undoubtedly win. We have Allah with us, but they only have Satan.

In the Caucasus, religiously inspired violence can be divided into two kinds according to whom the violence is directed. First, there is violence against non-Muslims, including actions against the state and its structures. Radical Islamists see the modern secular state as ‘godless’ and that it should be destroyed and replaced by a state based on shari’a or God’s laws, which is the only basis for a righteous society. Hence, the separatist jamaats engage in violence against the law enforcement bodies: the army, the special services, the police and other associated bodies. They additionally carry out terrorist acts which seek to spread panic among the peaceful civilian population and to generate anti-Russian sentiments. Terrorist attacks are often directed against prominent figures in the Russian community: ethnic Russians, teachers and representatives of state bodies. Second, there is the violence against those accused of lack of belief (*kufr*) and of moving away from Islam, which gives radicals ample opportunities to declare that a large number of formal Muslims are apostates. As a result, there is extensive use of force against ethnic Muslims who serve the Russian state. Policemen in Dagestan, Chechnya, Ingushetia and the eastern parts of Stavropol region are among the chief targets of the terrorists.

**A ‘portrait’ of the radicals**

At present, the social structure of radical Muslims has changed significantly. They are now generally not poor and uneducated people or deprived of work and other social benefits. These young people, organized in these jamaats, constitute a considerable force. It is through these associations that young Caucasian
Muslims seek to resolve a broad range of problems that are present in the region. Young intellectuals and youth in general are important sources of radicalization, reacting to the problems of societies saturated by corruption, the clan system, and economic problems and disorders. As young people reach adulthood, they are disappointed and frustrated by the limited opportunities offered by society. Throughout Russia, various problems – such as inter-ethnic relations, the absence of civil society and public discussion, and the growth of nationalism (among both ethnic Russians and other nationalities) – nurture the spread of radicalism.

In the North Caucasus, among the titular nationals of the region, these feelings of disillusionment are intensified by the sense of being ‘second rate’ compared to the non-Muslim majority of Russia as a whole. Many of the young Muslim radicals are engaged in various forms of business and, once they join the radical jamaat movement, they begin applying the skills drawn from their work to the Muslim movement. One might have worked, or continues to work, in commerce; another in the transportation of goods; and so on. Skills gained from each trade help the movement to promote three vital attributes: dynamism, energy and sociability. This last attribute is particularly important, since being sociable helps young radicals come into contact with and convert other young people. The radicals’ socialization processes represent a good part of the success of their propaganda. Although it is difficult to name any special group to be the most susceptible to radical propaganda, especially since radicals intend their message to reach everybody without exception, young people have become the main object of propaganda campaigns. In sum, young intellectuals are very sensitive to picking up on the disenfranchization of young people and to use it to their advantage.

Radicalization of traditional Muslims

In the last few years, traditional Caucasian Muslims have begun to radicalize, especially Sufis. This radicalization has occurred in opposition to the Wahhabi-Salafis. People in the Caucasus have begun to refer to this radical version of global Islam as the ‘new’ Islam. This designation itself implies division, with a ‘new’ Islam contrasted to an ‘old’ Islam. This division is dangerous as it pits two groups of Muslims in the Caucasus against one another, who believe each other’s practices to be mutually exclusive. The conflict extends moreover beyond the participants themselves to the whole of Caucasian society. In particular, the search for a universal Islam, which has captured the imagination of a significant proportion of Muslim youth in the Caucasus, complicates the task of the adaptation and integration of Muslims into modern society. Today in Russia we can see not just the alienation of Muslims, but serious tensions and conflicts between Muslims. These tensions moreover extend beyond the Wahhabi/Sufi divide. As the Sufis themselves radicalize, they alienate moderate Muslims. Recently Sufi leaders have led campaigns attempting to forbid the circulation of works by moderate Muslim leaders like the Moscow-based imam, Shamil Alyautdinov. Increasingly, the radical actions of traditional Sufis have alarmed moderate
communities in the North Caucasus. In general, this competitive search for the ‘true’ Islam exacerbates and complicates inter-Muslim relations.\textsuperscript{22}

Disputes between traditional and non-traditional Islam have been the centre of attention, since traditional Islam has become the official Islam and has been recognized as the only form having the right to exist. But in the Caucasus, Islam exists in different forms, currents and schools. It is impossible to make any one of them the true faith for all in the region, although such attempts are made. Many traditional Muslims consider Sufism to be the purest form of Islam and that it should be the only form allowed to exist in the North Caucasus. For example, during the struggle against Wahhabism-Salafism in Dagestan, the local form of Sufism became the embodiment of ‘true’ Islam and all other forms of Islam became non-traditional. In 1999, Wahhabi activity was banned by law in Dagestan.\textsuperscript{23} Nevertheless, the law did not provide a clear legal definition of this activity. But it has given the state and the powerful group headed by Sufi Shaykh Sa’id-afandi al-Chirkawi ample opportunities to remove any opposition. The law recognizes that the so-called Spiritual Board of Muslims (DUM), which exists in each of the republics, represents the region’s official Islam. Consequently, the Dagestani DUM has become the only legal religious organization in the republic.

In general, in the North Caucasus, ‘unofficial’ Islam continues to attract new supporters while the Spiritual boards of Muslims consistently fail to do so. As heirs of the old imperial system of governance, the boards are extremely conservative and cumbersome. Unconditional governmental support guarantees that it is only they who are permitted to represent the interests of Muslims at the national level, which infringes the rights of oppositional Muslim associations. In many cases, the parallel Muslim structures have appeared more effective and influential than the official ones. For instance, the Kabardino-Balkarian Islamic Centre (later named the Kabardino-Balkarian Institute of Islamic Research), which was formed in the mid-1990s, emerged as a serious competitor to the Kabardino-Balkarian Spiritual Board of Muslims. The Centre was the legal administrative organization for the Kabardino-Balkarian jamaat, which was the centralized, hierarchical organization for young Muslims. Both organizations, the jamaat and the Spiritual Board, have long fought for the right to represent the Muslims of the Republic. The Kabardino-Balkarian Spiritual Board considered the leaders of the Kabardino-Balkarian jamaat to be Wahhabis and used the legal and coercive powers of the state against the jamaat. These repressive measures were often frankly anti-Islamic in character.\textsuperscript{24} For example, at the beginning of the 2000s, all mosques in the republic were closed and the local authorities only opened them for one hour for Friday prayer. Young men faced persecution just because they prayed five times a day; women in Islamic clothes were seen as terrorists; and many young Muslims were beaten up in police stations. This atmosphere of repression also helps to explain the process leading up to the violence in Nal’chik in 2005 and the sharp radicalization of the hitherto moderate leadership of the Kabardino-Balkarian jamaat. This repression occurred at the same time as the failure of the jamaat to implement reforms through legal means. In 2004, during a meeting with Shamil Basaev, the two jamaat amirs, Anzor Astemirov and Musa
Mukozhev, fed up with the state of affairs, decided to join the armed struggle against the Russian authorities.

The situation in Dagestan should generally be considered in a separate category, as it is the most Islamized republic in the North Caucasus. For the 2.5 million Dagestaniis, there are two thousand mosques and sixteen different institutions offering higher education to Islamic students. Dagestani Sufis are also followers of live shaykhs, which is not the case for Chechen and Ingush Sufis. The most popular among the shaykhs in Dagestan is Said-afandi al-Chirkawi. He is the shaykh of two tariqas (orders) simultaneously – the Shadhili and Naqshbandi – making Chirkawi the leader of roughly half of all Dagestani Sufis. He controls the Dagestani DUM and exerts influence beyond, with his community being a powerful force in Dagestan and even further afield. A strong group of his murids (followers) is located in Moscow and controls the most popular Islamic internet portal of Russia, www.islam.ru. In Dagestan, his students are even more influential and pervasive, as they have penetrated into the government. Through his students, Chirkawi enjoys access to the ruling structures of many municipalities in the territory of Northern Dagestan. Furthermore, his followers include a significant number of the deputies of Dagestan’s parliament. Not only are Chirkawi’s murids in the republican government, but more importantly, they occupy senior positions there. For example, his student Adilgerei Magomedtagirov was the Minister of Internal Affairs; another, Abusupyan Kharkharov, is the director of the Makhachakala seaport. His links with numerous followers in senior political and economic posts gives Chirkawi an unparalleled access to power in the republic.

With such powerful connections and resources, Dagestani Sufi leaders are able to intervene actively in the social and political life of the country. They ban books and prevent some Russian artists from visiting the republic, among other repressive practices. In March 2009, followers of Chirkawi staged pogroms in several shops which were selling literature that the DUM of Dagestan had banned. Among Dagestani Sufis, widespread Islamic law enforcement is practised. In other words, many Muslims of Dagestan today live under shari’a law. Thus, within the last twenty years, Dagestani society has split along an ultra-religious and secular divide. This split is the source of serious conflicts within society, as the secular intelligentsia seeks to protect the secular foundations of Dagestani society and state, while ultra-orthodox Muslims seek actively to interfere in the socio-political life of society and de facto to change the character of Dagestani society.

Conclusion

As demonstrated in this brief historical survey, there is a deep crisis in the North Caucasus region caused by the radicalization of Islamic communities there. The success of forces favouring instability seizing their opportunities, most notably through organizing young Muslims into network jamaats, has turned a significant part of North Caucasian society against the interests of the secular state and
against the presence of the Russian authorities in the region. The critically important shift in the North Caucasus is the transformation from an ethnic to an Islamist separatist movement. Ethnic separatism no longer exists as an independent force, with the diminution of the type of separatist movements which began with the struggle for Chechnya’s succession from Russia. Today, separatism has turned into a movement rebelling against the power of the ‘infidel state’ and seeking to create a Muslim state.

In response to this instability, the federal authorities have been trying to change the elites in the republics, along with decisive moves to battle corruption and the ineffectiveness of the local economy. The local population of the Caucasus has responded favourably to the replacement of leaders in Dagestan, Adygea and Kabardino-Balkaria; to the demonstrative actions against corrupt officials; and the development of tourism and other economic projects. But given the depth of the crisis in the region, these cosmetic measures are clearly insufficient. In the North Caucasus, it is necessary to conduct systematic reforms, which is something that the federal government has approached with hesitation. Moreover, the federal government does not maintain a monopoly of repression. Most North Caucasians continue to be the victim of one ruling power or another, be it the federal government or not. For example, when the Wahhabi-Salafis were strong in the Caucasus, they did not tolerate other radical Islamist groups and led an active ideological struggle against followers of Hizb ut-Tahrir. It was only in 2007 that this pan-Islamic party was able to register a stable cell in the region, which was a result of the weakening of Wahhabi-Salafis due to repression.

No less important than fighting corruption is the development of a civil form of national identity. The growth in Russia of an anti-Caucasian sentiment has a negative effect on young Muslims in the region. The integration of the North Caucasian Muslims into broader civil society is not moving forward with sufficient decisiveness and dynamism, which is ultimately fraught with serious consequences.

Notes

1 The tendency towards a rather exaggerated view of the dynamics of radicalization in the North Caucasus can be seen in, for example, Roman Silant’ev, Noveishaya istoriya islama v Rossii, Moscow: Algoritm, 2007; Paul Murphy, The Wolves of Islam: Russia and the Faces of Chechen Terror, Washington DC: Potomac Books, 2004; and Gordon Hahn, Russia’s Islamic Threat, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007.


3 For an interesting and detailed account of a similar process in Central Asia, see Vitalii Naumkin, Radical Islam in Central Asia: Between Pen and Rifle, Lanham, MD/Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005.

For analyses of the rise of Salafism-Wahhabism and the issue of definitions of these terms, see V. Naumkin, *Islamskii radikalizm v zerkale novykh kontseptii i podkhodov*, Moscow: KomKniga, 2005; and Aleksei Malashenko, *Islamskaya al’ternativa i islamistskii proekt*, Moscow: Ves’ Mir, 2006.


This notebook is from the author’s personal archives. More in-depth analysis of these notes can be found in A. Yarlykapov, ‘Kredo vakhkhabita’, *Vestnik Evrazii*, 3:10, 2000, 114–37.


Derived from the notebook of the Wahhabi student from the author’s personal archives.

Ibid.


Muhammad, *Uchebnik arabskogo yazyka*, pp. 173–4


The importance of this is brought out well in another context with the successful mobilization of the radical al-Muhajiroun movement in the UK, as set out in detail by Q. Wiktorowicz, *Radical Islam Rising: Muslim Extremism in the West*, London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005.


10 The information jihad of ‘Shariat’ jamaat

Objectives, methods and achievements

Ruslan Kurbanov

The story of the Jamaat Shariat website (www.jamaatshariat.com), which was set up to wage ‘information jihad’, is closely tied to the development of the radical Dagestani ‘Shariat’ jamaat (Islamist combat group) which it represents. Thus, a better understanding of the factors behind the creation of the website, assessing its key objectives and achievements, can help researchers to determine the real potential of the jamaat itself and the degree of influence it exerts on young Muslims. According to RAND researchers John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt, information warfare can be waged as part of a larger, more extensive military strategy or can be applied as a discrete tactical military operation.¹ This chapter examines the creation and development of the website of the ‘Shariat’ jamaat and the conflicts and contradictions it became drawn into as it publicized the achievements of the combat jamaat and sought to explain the logic and rationale of the group’s diversionary insurgent actions. The key argument of the chapter is that the gradual development of the main objectives of the website and its thematic content closely followed the evolution and development of the jamaat itself, as the primary purpose of the website was to reflect the jamaat’s aims, objectives and methods of operation. Inevitably, the website was heavily influenced by the ideology espoused by the insurgents, and by the strategic and tactical steps taken by them. It also reflects their ideological and intellectual weaknesses and even indicates the limitations in their military preparedness.

The beginnings of jihad and the ‘Shariat’ jamaat

By the early 2000s, experts had increasingly recognized that the attempts to prevent militant Salafi ideology from penetrating Dagestani society had failed. In fact, the ideology had become so widespread in the region that no government action could have stopped the ideas from spreading further, especially when the local population was willing to embrace them despite the opposition of the government and the threat of persecution. It had become clear that the process of ‘Salafization’ of those Dagestani areas, such as the Nogai region, Lakiya and Lezginistan, where Islamic traditions had been either lost or eradicated during Soviet times, had become practically irreversible. Furthermore, the growing number of counter-terrorist activities in the 1990s forced many moderate
members of the Salafi communities underground, including those who had previously distanced themselves from the hard-line teachings of the cleric Bagauddin Muhammad. Many of these ‘moderate’ Salafis joined the Chechen rebels in the mountains and then returned to their own republics, radicalized and fully trained in the art of ideological and military warfare. According to Abdurashid Saidov, one of the witnesses of the Salafist defeat in Dagestan in the late 1990s:

> When the authorities fought against this religious ideology with their usual crude methods, persecution and repression…there was a mass exodus of dissidents to Ichkeria…the persecutions and the withdrawal into rebel Ichkeria united the fundamentalists, lifted their spirits, strengthened their will for victory and significantly improved their military capability.  

The second Chechen war, which began in 1999 with an incursion by rebel forces headed by Shamil Basaev and Khattab into the mountainous regions of Dagestan, produced a new breed of Muslim fighters, well-trained ideologically and violently opposed to the Russian state. Experts and analysts realized too late the implications of this inflow and rotation of guerrilla fighters within the Chechen resistance. It was difficult to imagine then that in a few years time resistance movements throughout the North Caucasus would have their own leaders. The Second Chechen War trained a new generation of non-Chechen fighters, more fierce and daring than the veterans of the First War. Having gained their military experience in Chechnya, the Dagestanis, Ingush, Kabardinians, Karachais and Balkars began to create combat jamaats in their own republics, right behind the rear of the Russian federal forces.

Thus, over a relatively short period of time in the early 2000s, the second Chechen War developed from a national struggle for Chechen independence and the liberation of Ichkeria, into a pan-Caucasian Islamic jihad for the liberation of the entire North Caucasus. The war ceased to be a purely ethnic struggle of the Chechen people against the Russian state and increasingly attracted new supporters of radical Islam from neighbouring republics. It is significant that over the last couple of years, fighters in Dagestan have included peoples who were the least Islamized during the Soviet period, such as the Nogais, Laks and Lezgins. Slowly but surely, the jihad began to spread across the whole region of the North Caucasus. Following the defeat in Dagestan and the subsequent retraining of many militants in Chechnya, the re-emergence of the Salafist insurgency was only a matter of time. Shortly after the memorable defeat in 1999, a large number of militants amassed on the Chechen–Dagestani border, in the region of Khasavyurt and even around the Dagestani capital, Makhachkala. In spite of a series of unsuccessful campaigns by rebel groups dispatched from Chechnya to Dagestan, an effective underground network of semi-autonomous terrorist cells had been set up by the mid-2000s.

Rasul Makasharipov, also known as ‘amir Muslim’ and ‘amir of the city of Makhachkala’, proved himself to be the most successful leader of the terrorist underground. He was commander of the ‘Jennet’ jamaat, which was later
renamed the ‘Shariat’ jamaat. He was also the personal interpreter for Shamil Basaev in the Avar language during the jihadist incursion into the Botlikhskii region. Together with his assistant, Idris Bakunov, he developed a terrorist underground network and was responsible for synchronizing the activities of the separate combat jamaats in Makhachkala, Buinaksk, Khasavyurt and Kizlyar. Under his leadership, militants penetrated the previously stable region of South Dagestan. The period of 2003–5 was marked by an unprecedented wave of attacks on law enforcement officers who were themselves engaged in repressive actions against the Salafists. There were regular, almost daily, shootings of personnel from Russia’s Ministry of the Interior (MVD) and Federal Security forces (FSB), and these attacks extended to ordinary militias and patrol units. As the insurgency grew in size, news began to emerge in the media about the jamaat of Rasul Makasharipov and its activities. There were reports that the fighters had renamed Makhachkala, Shamilkala; split the city into sectors; and placed amirs in charge of each sector. Furthermore, after the death of the Ichkerian president Aslan Maskhadov in 2005, the Dagestani jamaat pledged its allegiance to the new leader of the pan-Caucasian Jihad, Abdul-Khalim Sadulaev.

Overcoming the resource and ideological deficit: towards a press office

To understand the conditions under which the militants of the ‘Shariat’ jamaat first began their diversionary and terrorist actions, the following extract from the group’s website is revealing:

In the beginning, [Rasul Makasharipov] and Idris [Bakunov] would take a public taxi and hide their entire arsenal in their loose clothing. Rasul used to carry one machine-gun, two pistols, grenades and cartridges under his puff jacket. He was always ready for battle knowing that he could die at any moment. They lived in a shelter in the forest on the slopes of the Tarki-Tau Mountain, near Shamilkala [Makhachkala]. They survived on dry food rations and a little water they carried with them. In the evenings they would go down to the city to kill munafiquns [hypocrites or Muslim non-believers].³

The fuller account, from which this is an extract, was posted on the website after Makasharipov’s death. It provides researchers with many insights into the evolutionary dynamic of the group. It provides an understanding of how the group developed from a small militant cell consisting of two people into a large and diversified terrorist network, covering nearly all regions in Dagestan. The account notes that gradually:

more and more Muslims joined Rasul’s jamaat. They acquired new weapons, new means of transport…and that’s how it all started. In 2003–2004, under the leadership of amir Rasul, the ‘Shariat’ jamaat numbered dozens of fighters and hundreds of jihad supporters.⁴
In the early days of the jamaat, there was no talk of having an online resource. If we ignore the many Chechen separatist websites, which were not generally interested in furthering the Islamic agenda, there were only two genuine websites that catered for the information needs of the international Caucasian jihad: *Kavkaz-Center* and *Camagat*. *Kavkaz-Center* ([www.kavkazcenter.com](http://www.kavkazcenter.com)), created by Movladi Udugov, claimed to be the key jihadist website, while *Camagat* ([www.camagat.com](http://www.camagat.com)), set up by the Karachai fighters, was the principal non-Chechen information agency. Interestingly, it was at the time of the ‘Shariat’ jamaat’s growing insurgency in 2004–5 that visitors to the now closed *Camagat* website wrote in the comments section that they wished their ‘Dagestani brothers to have a website’.

Without access to their own online resource, the rebels of the ‘Shariat’ jamaat had to publish their statements and declarations on the *Kavkaz-Center* website. This is where the jamaat’s leaders would send their first joint statements and press releases. An example of such a statement was posted by amir Rasul Makasharipov on 21 January 2005, in which he denies the rumours of his death in a counter-terrorist operation in Makhachkala. The statement is preceded by the following editorial comment: ‘The editorial team of *Kavkaz-Center* has received an email with the statement by Rasul Makasharipov, the amir of the Dagestani “Shariat” jamaat, which it provides here in full, without any cuts or omissions.’ Intended as Makasharipov’s personal address to his readers, it follows Muslim traditions by citing heavily from the Qur’an in order to reinforce the obligation for jihad. The call to unite together for the purposes of jihad is a constant element in such public statements from the combatant jamaat: ‘We call on all true believers in Allah and his Messenger to join the jihad, to free their land from the occupiers and to establish the rule of Allah.’

Inevitably, such statements from the jamaats and their leaders contain numerous citations from the Qur’an, the Prophet Muhammad and the commentaries by prominent Islamic scholars. However, as the American military strategist John Boyd notes, beyond how the jamaat defines itself by the call for the establishment of shari’a law, one must analyse the world view and behaviour of the military and political leaders, which are themselves largely determined by the cultural and intellectual traditions within which they were raised. Although Makasharipov identifies the enemies of the jamaat to be ‘the occupation forces, the Dagestani police, the federal forces and the prosecutor’s office’, he clearly denounces acts of violence against the civilian population. The following quotation helps to appreciate the full significance of this stance not only for the ‘Shariat’ jamaat but also for the jihadist movement in the whole region: ‘the authorities cannot do anything against this [new wave of insurgency]. They are weak and feeble and therefore accuse us of crimes and acts of terrorism against the civilian population that we have neither planned nor committed.’ Makasharipov continues by rejecting all charges of engaging in terrorist activities against civilians:

> We deny all such charges and we feel we should warn the people of Dagestan that the authorities in Makhachkala and the federal forces are preparing new
despicable acts of violence against civilians (near schools, kindergartens, markets, hospitals and apartment blocks), similar to the one in the city of Kaspiisk. They are doing this to incriminate the Islamic ‘Shariat’ jamaat and to blacken the idea of the jihad in Dagestan.  

These short extracts from Makasharipov’s statement are very important because they show, arguably for the first time in the history of insurgency in the Caucasus, a leader of a militant unit openly rejecting the use of terrorist tactics against civilians and attempting to make a distinction between terrorism and ‘the idea of jihad’. However, we must also recognize that this clear renunciation of violence was in part driven by Makasharipov’s personal determination to clear his jamaat from allegations of involvement in the terrorist atrocity in Kaspiisk on 9 May 2002, when 40 people died including civilians and even children. In fact, this was indicative of a new strategy adopted by the rebels following the Beslan tragedy, when even Shamil Basaev admitted that he had been wrong to take civilian hostages and that this should never happen again. This critical shift in the joint resistance efforts of the separatists and Islamic fighters suggests a victory of Islamist ideas over the tactics of a less Islamized army of ‘Ichkerian separatists’, who felt justified to use all available means in their struggle against Moscow’s rule. This was a strategic and ideological victory of the ‘ideational’ element of the Islamic resistance as the national liberation of Chechnya became transformed into a pan-Caucasian jihad. This is evident in Makasharipov’s statement as ‘amir of the Islamic “Shariat” Jamaat’:

Our jihad never was and never will be directed against civilians. Our jihad is aimed at protecting civilians from the despotism, injustice and tyranny of the so-called ‘Dagestani authorities’, their security forces, police and the public prosecutor’s office. [Its aim] is to bring justice to Dagestan and free it from Kufr [non-Muslim] laws. 

The true feelings of the militants towards civilian casualties are seen in the following press release:

According to the puppet regime, three civilians were killed in an explosion. If this is the case, they never were the intended targets. They have become innocent victims; when the mujahidin [Islamic fighters] activated the explosive device they did not see any groups of civilians near the occupying kafir [non-Muslim] forces. The responsibility for the deaths of these people rests fully with Rusnya [a derogatory term for Russians] and their Dagestani accomplices and servants who have occupied the Islamic lands of Dagestan and the Caucasus and have waged a war against the religion of God and Muslims. 

In the next phase of the insurgency, such statements and declarations from the ‘Shariat’ jamaat were no longer signed by the amir of the jamaat or by the jamaat itself but were issued by two public affairs units created inside the jamaat – the
press office and the information department. There is a clear indication on the website suggesting the actual date when such a new structure responsible for the jamaat’s information policy was created. On 12 September 2007, it was stated that: ‘In the month of Ramadan [2007], the press office of the jamaat will celebrate its two and half year anniversary.’\textsuperscript{112} We can therefore assume that the ‘Shariat’ jamaat’s press office was established in spring 2005. This was the highest point of the jamaat’s insurgency, marked by daily attempted murders and terrorist acts which led some commentators to compare the capital of Dagestan to Baghdad. The statement goes on to say that ‘the idea belonged to Rasul Makasharipov who was to appoint Yasin Rasulov as the first amir of the press service’.\textsuperscript{13}

The rise and fall of Yasin Rasulov

At the time that he began his activities with Rasul Makasharipov, Yasin (formerly Makhach) Rasulov was one of the most brilliant leaders of the ‘young Muslims’. He was committed to a moderate revivalist form of Islam and he distanced himself from the broader Salafi movement. He graduated from the Islamic university in Makhachkala and from Dagestan State University with a Russian degree in literature and translation. He was one of the key contributors to the religious section of the Dagestani weekly journal, \textit{Novoe delo}, and had his own website, www.yaseen.ru, which he kept regularly updated. He undertook postgraduate religious studies in the Dagestan State University and wrote his thesis on how to bridge the gap between the different schools of Islamic law (\textit{madhhabs}). He was a fluent Arabic speaker and translated \textit{fatwas} (religious opinions) and other works by leading Islamic scholars. He was known throughout Russia as a knowledgeable and talented cleric. He was a regular participant in events organized by the Russian Council of Muftis in Moscow; he was a committee member of the Union of Muslim Journalists and helped to develop its code of practice. In Moscow, the Russian Council of Muftis published his translation of the fatwas of Yusuf al-Qaradawi, the leading Islamic scholar of our time.

Despite the fact that Rasulov began openly to challenge the Russian state in the mid-2000s, and became a political outcast, his role as one of the brightest and most promising Islamic intellectuals of the new generation of Dagestani Muslims should be given its due recognition. Many young moderate Muslims continue to view his gradual radicalization and membership of the ‘Shariat’ jamaat as a great loss for the younger generation of Islamic scholars in Dagestan. The fate of Yasin Rasulov is tragic not only because he abandoned his Islamic calling and engaged in a futile battle against the state, but also because the jamaat failed to make effective use of his intellectual abilities. Although the continually expanding jamaat placed the young intellectual in charge of its press service, the actual intellectual level of the fighters, their daily tasks and spiritual needs, remained limited. Neither the militants nor their leader, Rasul Makasharipov, could engage their young intellectual recruit with sufficiently challenging duties to match his level of education. Inevitably, the jamaat used Rasulov not as an intellectual resource but as an ordinary fighter and, as a result, he was killed in an attack by the security forces in 2006.
Paradoxically, when Rasulov was in charge of the press office, the jamaat’s rhetoric turned increasingly militant. While earlier declarations rejected the use of violence against civilians, statements issued under Rasulov tended to justify the jamaat’s attacks not only on law enforcement officers but also on their children and other members of their families. This is probably linked to the increasingly violent confrontation with the law enforcement forces, the elimination of a number of the jamaat’s insurgents, and the suffering inflicted on their children and family members as a result of increasingly repressive and ruthless raids and the rounding up of all suspicious individuals.

On 2 July 2005, the information department of the ‘Shariat’ jamaat stated:

Do not assume that your punitive incursion and raids by the so-called ‘special troops and forces’ will be left unanswered. Even if you may escape unharmed, do not think there will be no consequences for your families, your wives and children. This is followed by a direct threat: ‘we will come and find you in Russia. If necessary, we will attack and kill you together with your children and wives the same way you attack and kill ours.’ It is notable that this threat is justified by a little-known saying from the Prophet Muhammad, which allegedly supports such actions: ‘When the disciples told the Prophet Muhammad (may peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) that sometimes during their nightly raids on the kafirs they kill their children, the Prophet answered “They are of them”’. The statements of this period generally reveal that they were issued not just by ordinary fighters but also by somebody with a solid training in shari’a law. This implies that the knowledge of the previously moderate cleric and scholar Rasulov was now being put to use to deliver a most painful blow to the enemy.

Engaging in the ‘war of leaflets’

It was clear then that the ‘Shariat’ jamaat could no longer afford to be without its own information resources. There was an increasing need to recruit new militants and spread the jamaat’s ideas and only a few people in the republic had access to the internet. Therefore, while the fighters continued to send their statements to Kavkaz-Center, they also used leaflets to disseminate their message in the city mosques. Even before the jamaat’s declarations started appearing on the website of Kavkaz-Center, the use of leaflets had been initiated by Rabbani Khalilov, the ‘amir of Dagestani mujahedin’, when hiding in the Chechen mountains.

For example, even before the growing insurgency of the ‘Shariat’ jamaat in 2004, amir Rabbani started the so-called ‘war of leaflets’ by addressing people in the name of the Dagestani mujahedin. At that time, these leaflets generated great interest in the media and were eagerly discussed on republican television and in the press. In one of these statements, anticipating Rasul Makasharipov’s later declaration, Rabbani Khalilov denied involvement in the terrorist act of 9 May 2002 in the city of Kaspiisk and placed the blame for this ‘terrible crime
as well as this act of national genocide on the Dagestani authorities and at the personal responsibility of the [head of the republic] Magomed Magomedov'. However, in the same statement amir Rabbani admits his own responsibility for killing officers from the interior ministry, the federal security services and the prosecutor’s office. He justified this by noting that these forces ‘had unleashed a full-scale war against the Islamic jamaat’ and that they were ‘torturing people, humiliating their human dignity and mocking their religious principles’. In addition, he argued that they had forced innocent people to confess to crimes they had not committed and that they did this ‘through forms of physical violence and repression that the butchers of the Nazi concentration camps would not have thought of using’.

That same evening the Dagestani news programme, Vesti-Dagestan, ran a report on the distribution of radical leaflets in the mosque. The chief press officer of the Interior Ministry, Abdulmanap Musaev, stated that the police could not attribute the authorship of these dubious pieces of papers to any specific group of insurgents. However, just before the news was to be aired, he called the editors of the programme and retracted his statement, saying that he should not have jumped to conclusions and arguing that ‘there is no need to worry the public unnecessarily with these little pieces of paper’. However, the broadcasters were not able to stop the report coming on air, though it was later forbidden for it to run again. According to the opposition journal Chernovik:

> It seems the authors of the leaflet predicted that there would be such a reaction and concluded their text by saying that: ‘we have nothing to do with thrill-seekers, romantics or soldiers of fortune. We do not belong to any Wahhabi sect, as we are labelled by the Dagestani authorities. We do not call anybody to take arms immediately. We just want you to hear us.’

Although the Dagestani police failed to stop the reports of these leaflets in the media and was unable to prevent the growing public interest in them and their authors, they learnt their lesson and this was not repeated again. Despite the ‘Shariat’ jamaat’s efforts to continue the ‘war of the leaflets’ on an even greater scale than the one waged by Rabbani Khalilov, neither the content nor the distribution of these leaflets attracted any media attention. Moreover, such a statement that ‘we do not call on anybody to take arms immediately’ and that ‘we just want you to hear us’ suggest how important it was for the leaders of the jamaat to make the Dagestani public hear their point of view at a time when the media was blocked and they needed to clear themselves from allegations of involvement in the terrorist act in Kaspiisk. The jamaat was desperately seeking channels of communication to preach to a wider Muslim public in Dagestan. But this was increasingly difficult as virtually nobody among the fighters was a good communicator capable of reaching a wider audience.

Another interesting piece of information which was later posted on the website mentions the jamaat’s original intentions to start publishing their own newspaper Shariat Jamaat. This did not extend beyond publishing the first issue.
The failure to launch a newspaper may have been connected to the lack of more sophisticated printing technology, given that basic office photocopiers were sufficient to print leaflets. It was also more difficult and indeed dangerous to distribute newspapers compared to sneaking quietly into mosques and leaving some leaflets there.

The launch of the website

As a consequence, the militants felt an increasing need to disseminate their news online and on 15 March 2007, the jamaat set up its own website – www.jamaatshariat.com. According to one online account:

Amir Muslim [Rasul Makasharipov] intended to launch the website of Dagestani mujahedin as early as 2004, but it was not possible for technical reasons. Nevertheless, the jamaat continued to publish its messages on websites of their [Muslim] brothers and delivered its statements through leaflets and video materials.  

The same statement talks about the objectives behind the website:

The most significant achievement of the jamaat’s information service is that it has given Dagestani Muslims an independent online source of information which seeks to provide a truthful account of events in Dagestan and in the Caucasus region. Equally important is the fact that the mujahedin of the Dagestani front can now address their audience directly and issue press-releases, audio and video materials which explain the ideology of jihad and what the Dagestani Muslims are struggling for. The mujahidin could now express their views while staying in the forests and mountains.

The editors reported that in the first days following its launch, the website had received over 10,000 hits. And half a year later, they proudly announced that:

Our website has had over 360,000 hits which means an average of about 2,000 hits a day, that is 60,000 a month and it is growing. Our weekly audience is as large as that of the most popular Dagestani weeklies.

The future plans for the website reveal an even greater ambition: ‘in response to the wishes of our brothers abroad we will even try to provide them with the news in English, *Insha’Allah* [Allah willing].’ As will be explained later in the article, the editors have not as yet been able fully to deliver on this promise.

The next statement contains an even a broader set of new activities:

The ‘Shariat’ jamaat continues to expand its media operations. With the help from our brothers, we have set up the Islamic TV *ShariATVideo* and some of these broadcasts have already been made available on our website. We plan
to re-launch the newspaper *Shariat Jamaat* for those Muslims who have no access to the Internet. And we continue publishing leaflets with statements from the mujahidin, Islamic books and pamphlets.26

This statement, unlike the previous ones, is signed by four information units within the ‘Shariat’ jamaat: the editorial team of the website jamaatshariat.com; the Islamic Television *ShariatVideo*; the news and analysis section of the ‘Shariat’ jamaat; and the press office of the ‘Shariat’ jamaat.27 Considering the jamaat’s rather limited human resources, it seems likely that all four services were run by the same people. The list suggests that some of the jamaat’s members had begun to realize the importance of each of these different media services for the jamaat and were trying their best to develop them. However, the jamaat never gave any indication as to whether anybody had been placed in charge of the press office or any of the other units following the death of Yasin Rasulov.

It is notable that the website anticipated the paradigm shift in the jihadist strategy in the Caucasus, which involved new leader Doku Umarov’s replacement of the goal of a national state for the Chechen people (which previous Ichkerian leaders had espoused) with the objective of a pan-Caucasian Islamic state. The website of the ‘Shariat’ jamaat, which was launched in March 2007, had anticipated this idea of an Islamic, military-political entity of the Caucasian Emirate, which was formally established by Umarov in October 2007. This eventual establishment of an Emirate was warmly welcomed by the ‘Shariat’ jamaat since it mirrored their own Islamic aspirations. For the Dagestani mujahedin, the war was always about a jihad for an Islamic state rather than a Chechen war of national liberation for Ichkeria.

A typical feature of the website is the lack of regular updates and fresh information about the life of the jamaat, its key events, new appointments and deaths, or statements from its leaders. There is also a high ‘staff turn-over’, which may be due either to the same people writing under different names or to the underlying conditions of the Dagestani resistance, when anybody writing for the website is just as likely to be killed in a military operation as any other fighter. The website is also not original in its design, interface and layout. It mirrors a number of similar jihadist websites, including the Avar–Russian website of Dagestani Salafists, www.guraba.net; the independent news portal of the North Caucasus Emirate, www.kavkazanhaamash.com; the website dedicated to ‘Poetry of Jihad’, www.djihadpoetry.jamaatshariat.com; and the *Chechen Times* (www.chechentimes.net). All these websites are based on the same template, probably designed by the same group of people.

The content of the website demonstrates a poor level of knowledge of shari’a law. After Yasin Rasulov was shot by the Dagestani police on 10 August 2006, there were no more Islamic scholars in the jamaat of his academic stature. Although in the two decades following the collapse of the Soviet Union tens of thousands of young Dagestanis received Islamic education at home and abroad, only a small number of them decided to join the jamaat. The majority of Muslim fighters, including those working for its media services, were uneducated. As a consequence, most
of the material available online provides either official statements and reports from the jamaat’s military wing, or attempts to address issues of shari’a law with the help of well-known Qur’anic verses, or, most frequently, personal articles with their own musings and limited sophistication. What is most notably missing from the website is a deep shari’a-based scientific and ideological exposition of issues which confront Dagestani Muslims in their everyday life, such as the pressing contemporary issues of war and peace; the boundary between peaceful missionary activity (da’wa) and armed jihad; and the questions of the establishment of Islamic rule and the degree of flexibility in Islamic law (fiqh). The editors try to address this lack of theologically sound shari’a-based analyses by reprinting material from other online resources or uploading selected articles and lectures of leading Islamic scholars which had originally been delivered to other audiences.

Judging by the content, the editorial team is short of people with an adequate knowledge of Arabic or English. There is no sign of the type of literature on jihad which features prominently on Arabic or English-language websites. This may also explain why the editors have not been able to launch a proper website in English or at least in Arabic. Some texts are available in English but they are badly translated and mostly taken from the English version of Kavkaz-Center.

The content and the language of some of the articles are rather dubious and fall short of what would be expected for a jamaat which claims to be fighting under an Islamic banner and which views itself as the only legitimate military and political force in the region. For example, there are many articles written by Abdullah Aleksei Dagestanskii, which are nothing but his own loosely interpreted Dagestani adaptations of Russian and Soviet classics. He retells the stories of his favourite Russian writers such as Mikhail Saltykov-Schedrin and Anton Chekhov by simply substituting the names of Dagestani politicians and bureaucrats for the names of the bad characters. A striking example of Dagestanskii’s approach is his own interpretation of Saltykov-Schedrin’s story about ‘The Dry Caspian Roach’, in which he ridicules the Dagestani President Mukhu Aliev by comparing him to the fish:

Kafirs caught Mukhu, cleaned out his insides and hanged him to dry in the sun. And so Mukhu spent three years ‘hanging out’ in a teachers’ training college and felt through his own skin what it was like to be a member of a trade union and the Komsomol. And in the fourth year, the skin on his belly all shrivelled from an overdose on the history of the Communist Party, and his head was shrinking with what little was left of his brain withering away, turning all weak and flaccid.28

A reader in search of enlightened debates on the jamaat’s political agenda of social, economic and cultural reforms for Dagestani society, or a critical assessment of the power of the authorities backed up by statistical analysis, would be thoroughly disappointed. The only exception is a theoretical work by a Chechen political analyst, Saad Minkailov, ‘Key issues in the formation of the Islamic state’. However, even this work has been taken by the jamaat from the website
In contrast, the website has plenty of articles on the leaders of Dagestan, using terms which are extremely insulting for Caucasian men. The presence of such materials on the website of the combat jamaat, which claims to be the only legitimate authority in the region, does little to help the already deepening intellectual crisis of the jihadist underground.

Another interesting part of the website is the regularly updated section with letters from the readers, specially selected by the editorial team. This is how editors explain the way they make their choices:

Dear brothers and sisters, we receive many of your varied emails. We are grateful for your attention and support. We regularly publish your letters online because they provide our authors with many useful thoughts, comments and potential leads for our future stories. However we have to inform you that we are unable to publish the letters in which you ask us to help you find the way to the mujahedin. We receive such letters in their tens and hundreds but unfortunately, we have to ignore them for a number of reasons.

Regular press releases on the ‘Shariat’ jamaat’s insurgency offer a detailed list of the jamaat’s military operations together with the promises of victory and the paradise awaiting the jihadists. The following statement issued on 17 March 2007 is typical of their style:

In the Kaiakentskii region, the special Badr brigade responsible for Dagestan’s southern region, has killed three thugs, the servants of Taghut [idolatry], the chief of the local group of transport police and two of his partners in crime [then follow their names]. In Khasavyurt, the Islamic brigade Jundullah has blown up a group of kafir field-engineers who were checking the area in the vicinity of the occupying troops. Two occupation kafir soldiers were eliminated together with their dog....They then carried out a successful operation in Shamilkala (formerly Makhachkala) directed against the Russian occupying forces, the so-called ‘102 Brigade of the Interior Forces of Rusnya’.

This press release includes a characteristic appeal for civilians ‘to stay away from the occupiers and the personnel of the so-called “MVD, FSB and Prosecutor’s Office” and not to be anywhere near patrols, stationed troops or next to their vehicles and buildings’. There is a further call on the personnel of these federal and republican forces to ‘repent before the Highest and Almighty Allah, to resign from their kafir dog-like service, to accept Islam for their own good and to defend the religion of Allah’. The ‘Shariat’ jamaat promises ‘new jobs in the Islamic Army after victory and the establishment of the Shari‘a law’ to all those who leave ‘their kafir and servile employment’ and repent of their sins and convert to Islam.
As the website developed, short videos started to be uploaded. While some were borrowed from other jihadist websites, others, largely dedicated to the jamaat’s military activity in Dagestan, were allegedly prepared by the jamaat’s Islamic TV agency ShariAT Video. Some of these videos include direct appeals from the jamaat’s leaders, its combat units and ordinary fighters, while others report on the everyday life of the militants between military operations. These videos are either borrowed from other TV sites or filmed with mobile phone camera and then sent to the information agency.

Achievements and results so far

With the Jamaat Shariat website celebrating its second anniversary in spring 2009, the editors summed up the achievements of the website over this period. They claimed that the website had received 2 million hits which represented a real ‘information blow to kafir propaganda’. Some of the earlier progress reports noted that the number of visitors had doubled from its initial launch from 2,000 to 4,000 a day. At the time of writing (in June 2009), the website tracking software registered 2,245 million visits. At any time of day, the website has up 20 visitors:

Therefore our weekly audience is 28,000 a week, which is higher than the circulation of the most popular Dagestani newspapers. Our internet edition is more popular than all the puppet publications of the so-called ‘government of the Republic of Dagestan’ taken together, and more popular than the other Dagestani websites, where Jamaat Shariat is the undisputed leader in terms of number of visits and their geographical distribution.

The ‘Shariat’ jamaat admits that the website is regularly monitored by their ideological and political opponents: ‘the materials published by the “Shariat” jamaat shock and infuriate Dagestani officials. Some of our articles have cost them their jobs; others live in fear of seeing their names printed and their crimes exposed.’ The President of Dagestan Mukhu Aliev, in the words of the editors:

recognized the superior quality of our website on a number of occasions. He held it up as an example for his own incompetent ministers to follow and demanded that stricter measures be taken to improve the level of the population’s ‘patriotic’ and ‘moral’ education.

They further note that:

our material is studied by Russian journalists and foreign analysts. We have evidence that Russian newspapers and journals, as well as foreign journalists, use our website to understand the situation in the Caucasus, the level of
corruption in Dagestan, and the extent of organized crime among government officials.  

The editors of the website claim that all these facts and figures show that their readers in Dagestan find the content both interesting and timely. Despite the poor level of shari’a knowledge and the unsophisticated analysis, the published materials remain very popular among members of the Islamic opposition in Dagestan, the Caucasus and even in Russia. This is probably linked to the fact that this is the only website where you can find the jamaat’s official statements and where you can follow their military activities. You can also find there harsh, if immature, criticisms of the official religious leaders and the politicians of Dagestan and of Russia. Anyone familiar with the mentality of the Caucasian peoples, and how they admire and how easily they can become inspired by selfless acts of bravery, can understand why the texts and video reports calling for a righteous jihad under the Islamic banner are so popular among young people in the region.

In addition, the editors claim that the Russian authorities are especially worried about this online resource and make regular but ‘unsuccessful attempts to persuade internet providers to restrict public access to the website of the Caucasian Emirate’. They note that ‘in some Russian regions, in Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan and Belarus, our website, together with that of Kavkaz-Center, is subject to controls by the security services’. Official efforts to shut down the website have resulted in number of much talked about legal cases. For example, the media reported in summer 2008 that the prosecutor’s office of the Novosibirsk region had requested that local internet providers prohibit access to extremist websites. Natalya Markasova, senior aide to the prosecutor of Novosibirsk region, said that in the course of their investigation she had found uploaded web content which included extremist propaganda. She noted that some websites called for ‘a violent change in the fundamental constitutional system of the Russian Federation, supported terrorism, justified the denigration of national dignity, and provided incitement to racial and religious hatred.’ The prosecutor’s office found this to be the case for the following websites: Kavkaz-Center, Jamaat Shariat, Chechen-Press, Imam-TV, Ichkeria-info, Svobodnyi Kavkaz and Kavkaz-info. In spring 2009, the prosecutor’s office in Ufa in the Republic of Bashkortostan ordered the local internet providers to restrict public access to a number of websites which it deemed extremist. Acting on the prosecutor’s instructions, 11 local providers blocked internet access to such websites as Ahmadov.biz, Chechen-Press, Chechen-Times, Jamaat Shariat, Imam-TV and Kavkaz-Center. According to Il’dar Gil’manov, a senior aide to the Ufa regional prosecutor, these websites sought to incite ethnic conflict. In a report posted on Expert-Ural, Jamaat Shariat was described as a religious, extremist website of a jamaat which was responsible for a series of terrorist acts.

The measures recommended by the procuracy of Novosibirsk are typical of the methods generally used by the authorities to block such websites. Natalya Markasova, who was put in charge of this matter, noted that all the local internet providers
had been informed of the need to observe Russia’s federal law on ‘Countering Extremist Activities’, which forbids the use of any communication network to upload extremist materials. This was also not the first time that the local prosecutors had tried to restrict the region’s access to the extremist websites. In 2007, the Sovetskii district court in Novosibirsk upheld the prosecution in its claim against the local internet provider ‘Pervaya Milya Limited’. The company was ordered to filter out the IP-addresses of four extremist websites to prevent the public from accessing the sites. However, the company representatives stated that this measure would not stop people from visiting the websites, since they could easily be re-activated through a small change of the default IP-address.  

**Defining the information jihad**

This section of the chapter focuses on some of the key articles posted on the website *Shariat Jamaat* and discusses how the jamaat’s information agencies understand, interpret and explain their role. The online content suggests that they consider their work to be nothing short of an information jihad, which they interpret as the duty ‘to spread Islam, explain the views of the Caucasian mujahedin, to profess monotheism and to call for jihad’. One article, entitled ‘The information Badr’ appeared on the website in 2008. The title alludes to the very first and greatest victory in the history of Islam, the great battle of Badr, in which Muhammad’s army defeated the numerically superior pagans from the city of Mecca. For many Muslims, the theme of Badr is sacred and awakens their collective sense of historic memory. It acts as an eternal symbol, on a psychological level, which mobilizes Muslims to fight unbelievers and serves as a reminder that even small Muslim jamaats are capable of defeating large armies. The article uses an *ayat* (verse) from the Qur’an (17:81), ‘the truth has arrived and falsehood has vanished; indeed falsehood had to vanish’ to show that ‘the same words can be used to describe the creation of the website *Shariat Jamaat*’, which enabled the ‘mujahedin and Muslims of Dagestan to explain why there is a need for jihad in Dagestan and in the Caucasus region’ and why the call to Islam.

After emphasizing the great ‘success the creation of the website has had in the information realm of the Dagestani media’, the jamaat’s press service uses colourful images to describe its distinctive jihadist mission: ‘a pen is like a bayonet. Today each pen is an instrument of information warfare.’ Its principal success in the information jihad is taken to be breaking through ‘the information blockade imposed by the kafirs’. Later the article talks about victory in purely psychological terms:

What is most important is that by the will of Allah, the Muslims’ way of thinking is changing. They grow in confidence in their victory and in their faith in Allah. Today, almost everybody knows that the enemy will leave our country and Dagestan will become the land of shari’a.
The ‘Shariat’ jamaat considers this change in Muslim consciousness, and its own role in bringing this about, as their most important victory:

Today many of us... no longer feel lost or lack self-confidence. We are free from depression or confusion. We do not suffer from a slavish attachment to Russia or from a hopeless condition of thinking that we cannot survive without her.44

The jamaat accords a great significance to the fact that the website was created on 15 March 2007, which is the anniversary of Badr.

Like their Muslim brothers in the early days of Islam, our small group of poorly armed men secured a great victory over the numerically stronger and more powerful enemy. With Allah’s help and His mercy, the ‘Shariat’ jamaat’s website managed to defeat a more powerful enemy and its more superior technologies. Our ideological enemies have on their side a number of radio and television channels, the whole ‘ministry of information’, and the research departments of the police and federal forces. They have the support of the office of the ‘President’ and other ministries as well as a number of internet sites and newspapers with hundreds of employees. These organizations spend tens of millions of dollars to spread lies and disinformation.45

Another article providing an interesting insight into the internal dynamics of the information jihad is one by Abdulla Khaidar, entitled ‘Information warfare from the Shari’a perspective’. He believes that Muslims’ first priority is to provide people with a real opportunity to think freely and understand their country’s politics. As such, it is necessary to counter the information provided by Russian propaganda, which is in ‘contradiction to the truth of Islam’ and which ‘spreads false ideas, propagates mistaken doctrines, praises the followers of lies and shuns the truth and those who believe in it’. He further notes that ‘there can be no doubt that Muslims have to struggle decisively against kafir propaganda in all its manifestations.’46 Khaidar uses the example of Yasin Rasulov, the first ‘information amir’ of the ‘Shariat’ jamaat, who ‘warned kafirs that in the modern age of easy access to information technologies, the crude methods used over the centuries to oppress Muslims will prove to be fruitless and ineffective’.47

As well as these psychological factors, the editors of the website emphasize the ease with which the website was created and can now be regularly updated. They also celebrate the freedom that the internet offers in terms of exchanging information and in engaging in information warfare against the Dagestani authorities. These factors are particularly important for the success of these media operations against their ideological, political and military opponents. The press service of the jamaat claims that ‘after Muslims were forbidden publicly to express their views, to preach Islam and to publish Islamic books, the internet remains one of the few avenues left to tell the truth about Islam, the mujahedin and jihad.’48
Later in the article mentioned above, Khaidar identifies a number of additional tools which can serve as powerful weapons in the hands not only of the fighters but also of ordinary Muslims so as to wage information jihad against the ‘forces of disbelief’. These include: the widening expansion of the internet; access to DVD technology; the spread of MP3 audio format; and laser printing. Khaidar’s message is directed not only at the mujahedin, but also at all followers of Islamic monotheism (tawhid) which means the Muslim Salafi communities. He wants to convince them that, without these new technologies and expert knowledge, there will be no ‘triumph of faith’. Muslims have to master these technologies in the same way ‘they gain knowledge in shari’a, however difficult this may be’. He then illustrates the way in which these information technologies can be beneficial to contemporary Muslims.

Any schoolgirl needs to be shown only once how to burn a DVD or to use a computer to print out a brochure. Similarly, no special training is required to persuade relatives to connect to the internet and use it to read the news rather than to watch the news on TV. Many Muslims can afford to buy MP3 players and give them to their relatives and friends to assist them to listen to Muslim sermons and to read from the Qur’an in their own free time.

It should be noted that even before joining the jamaat, Yasin Rasulov expressed doubts about Russia’s ability to deal with militant armed Islam, in an article entitled ‘The mirror of the Caucasian destiny’. He did not think that the post-perestroika Russian state – with its democratic principles and ideals, the right of freedom of expression and other individual and minority rights – would sensibly use the methods which had failed both the Tsarist and Soviet totalitarian regimes. He spoke in the media of the impossibility of such a victory over Islamic forces in today’s modern world. He used the following examples to support his argument:

Punitive measures only succeed in turning the conflict into a prolonged resistance struggle with permanently recurring outbreaks of military violence and terrorist acts against the authorities and their security forces. Discrediting [radical Islamic] propaganda through the ‘official’ representatives of Islam only escalates and deepens the conflict.

Conclusion

The spokesmen of the ‘Shariat’ jamaat are clearly confident that the government is unable to resist the militant Islamic underground or to deal effectively with the opposition’s Islamic ideas, the ever growing popularity of an Islamic state, armed jihad and the establishment of shari’a. As such, the jamaat has declared a strategic victory despite its losses. The information wing of the jamaat claims
that now ‘through the mercy of Allah’ the Caucasian Emirate has constructed a unified information ‘vertical’ and that the website of the ‘Shariat’ jamaat has proudly joined the ranks of the information front.52

Despite rumours, the militants of the ‘Shariat’ jamaat have no intention of closing down any TV or information channels in the future but would rather seek to redevelop them to fit the needs of the Islamic jamaat: ‘when, Allah willing, Muslims will take control of different TV centres in the cities and regions, there will be a new task at hand. We will need to create an Islamic television in line with all the modern requirements.’ The media agenda of the jamaat is thus looking for:

- directors, sound operators, graphic designers etc… We need talented people to create and develop the Islamic information space, to make it educational and enjoyable for the large number of people who are looking for Islamic sources of information, such as radio and TV broadcasts, magazines and journals.53

Therefore, over a very short period of time, the information Jihadists have not only understood the benefits of modern information technologies but have tried to use them in the most effective way possible in the struggle against the political system of modern Russia with its vast information machinery. Despite the jamaat’s low level of professionalism, the mastering of these technologies not only helps them to keep the public informed of their activities, but also assists them in resisting the state’s propaganda and educational initiatives. In today’s world of asymmetrical warfare, such an asymmetrical structure of information resistance by the underground jamaat network gives it a clear advantage against the massive political and information structures of the state.

The underlying reason for the successful resistance of the ‘Shariat’ jamaat may be summed up in the words of Evgenii Messner, who notes that in today’s world ‘of insurgency movements, psychological factors have gained an upper hand’.54 According to Messner, these insurgency movements represent a profoundly psychological phenomenon. In this asymmetrical war waged by the Islamic jamaats against the military-political system of the modern state, such factors as psychological mobilization, the ‘contagious’ effects of incidents of outstanding bravery and of the readiness to die for one’s ideals, have become particularly important, especially in the light of their cumulative effect in the increasingly religious environment surrounding Muslim communities.

Notes
The information jihad of ‘Shariat’ jamaat

4 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
8 R. Makasharipov, ‘Zayavlenie amira dzhamaata’.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
15 Ibid.
18 B. Abdulatipov, ‘Listovki v mecheti’.
19 Ibid.
20 ‘Informatsionnyi front’.
21 Ibid.
22 Ibid.
24 ‘Informatsionnyi front’.
25 ‘V seti poyavilsya sait’.
26 ‘Informatsionnyi front’.
27 Ibid.
31 ‘Zakonnoi vlast’yu Dagestana’.
32 Ibid.
35 Ibid.
36 Ibid.
37 Ibid.
38 ‘Zhitelyam Novosibirsk mogut blokirovat’ dostup k ekstremistskim saitam’, 15 July
40 ‘Zhitelyam Novosibirsk’a’.
41 ‘1,5 milliona za 1,5 goda’.
content/view/708/34/ (accessed 1 June 2009).
43 Ibid.
44 Ibid.
45 Ibid.
Available online at: www.jamaatshariat.com/content/view/853/34/ (accessed 1 June
2009).
47 Ibid.
48 ‘Informatsionnyi Badr’.
49 Khaidar, ‘Informatsionnaya voina’.
50 Ibid.
Available online at: http://chernovic.narod.ru/29/article_05.htm (accessed 1 June
2009).
52 ‘Informatsionnyi Badr’.
53 Khaidar, ‘Informatsionnaya voina’.
On 16 April 2009, an official announcement proclaimed the end of Russia’s counter-terrorist operation in Chechnya, thus formally ending the second Russo-Chechen war – a 10-year campaign against so-called Islamic international terrorists in the North Caucasian republic. In a mood of euphoria reminiscent of then US president George W. Bush’s notorious ‘mission accomplished’ speech about Iraq in 2003, Chechnya’s president Ramzan Kadyrov declared that, henceforth, 16 April would be marked as a day of national celebration. Within days, however, the Itar-Tass news agency was reporting that the local Russian military authorities had reintroduced a state of emergency in several districts of Chechnya to counter an upsurge in rebel activity. Although few Russian, let alone Western, commentators shared Kadyrov’s expressed belief that the struggle was over, there was widespread, albeit begrudging, recognition that the young president’s strategy against Islamic extremists had had remarkable successes. This chapter examines the evolution and execution of this strategy as well as its ramifications so far and those that it might be predicted to engender in the near future.

It is paradoxical that under Ramzan Kadyrov the Chechens, having used violence, and at times terrorism, in their fight to escape from colonial rule ever since the collapse of the Soviet Union (and arguably for centuries before), alone amongst the non-Russian nationalities have managed to secure for themselves an unprecedented degree of autonomy and control within the Russian Federation’s rigid vertical of power. A related paradoxical outcome has seen a renaissance in Chechnya of Sufism. Long regarded by the Soviets as such a dangerous form of Islam that every effort was taken to eradicate it, Sufism has been fostered in Chechnya by the federal authorities in an attempt to neutralize and eradicate the perceived threat emanating from an even more radical and extreme brand of Islam in the North Caucasus – ‘Wahhabism’ or jihadism. A third paradox to be examined seeks to explain why, seemingly alone among Chechens, the Kadyrovs of all people were able to combine apparent loyalty to the Kremlin with the role of Chechnya’s nation builders. After all, first Akhmad but particularly his son Ramzan – a brutal, headstrong, patriotic, uneducated Chechen warlord – had once fought against the federal forces and almost certainly had the blood of Russians on their hands.

Although, especially since 9/11, the Russo-Chechen conflict in general, and the Sufi–Wahhabi confrontation in particular, have often been presented as essentially
religious clashes (i.e. issues of creed), it will be demonstrated, by applying Zartman’s analysis of what he calls ‘the intersection of need, creed and greed’,⁵ that issues of both ‘greed’ and ‘need’ played a considerably more important role in this struggle than did religion. ‘Greed’ in Chechnya has tended to be manifested in clannish, warlord-like struggles for power, resources and influence, whereas ‘need’ refers not only to the survival instincts of the Kadyrovs, but also to their ability to fill, albeit by means of dubious legitimacy, the dangerous vacuum in Chechen society’s political, economic and social life produced by more than a decade of brutal warfare and the accompanying destruction of civil infrastructure. Ramzan Kadyrov’s overall strategy of ‘separatism-lite’ has been analysed by this author in an earlier publication.⁶ How and why such an uncompromising strategy against radical extremism in Chechnya helped, apparently, to achieve a historical compromise in the long-running Russo-Chechen confrontation, however short-lived it may prove to be, is the central question which this chapter addresses.

Islam in Chechnya prior to the first Russo-Chechen war of 1994–6

The Chechens, like the majority of Muslims in the former Soviet Union, are Sunnis. However, the Islamic movement that came to dominate Chechnya (and neighbouring Dagestan and Ingushetia) from the late eighteenth century was Sufism – the so-called ‘parallel’ or ‘non-official’ Islam. Initially, Sufism in the North Caucasus was adapted to local customary law – adat – to form a syncretic religion, known popularly as the ‘People’s Islam’.⁷ Despite its internal conservatism, Sufism came to articulate a popular-based resentment against the existing authorities and, as such, has been the target of imperial Russian and, subsequently, Soviet regimes.

As a Russian expert on the region, Aleksei Savataev wrote of this period:

> Conservative by nature, People’s Islam resigns itself to the archaic belief of its followers, whose community was traditionally organized on the basis of the adat norms, and actually supports these in certain ways. Paradoxically, traditional social structures thus ultimately enabled Islam to survive under the conditions of the Soviet political system and economic reforms and to descend from the mountains to the towns.⁸

Although Sufis honoured the concept of jihad (struggle), they interpreted this as being the greater jihad – the inner struggle against individual and collective vices – not the jihadism (the struggle for the worldwide caliphate) or lesser jihad practised and preached by extremists within the Wahhabi movement. It is important to note that, in this respect, by no means all Wahhabis were jihadists and that they themselves formed only a particularly ascetic tendency within the overall Salafi Muslim movement. However, what Salafists of all persuasions would agree upon is that the Sufi mystical reverence of saints smacked of a heretical
‘Muslim paganism’ that had to be rejected. As the Chechen academic Vakhit Akaev explains:

The North Caucasus Wahhabis call themselves ‘unitarians’ or ‘salafs’ (followers of pure Islam, the Islam that existed at the time of the Prophet and under the reign of the four pious caliphs) and their organizations – jamaats. Wahhabism is contrary to Sufi Islam, which is traditional for the north-east Caucasus.\(^9\)

The organizational strength of Sufism lay in its brotherhoods – *tariqa*– which ‘represent perfectly structured hierarchical organizations, endowed with an iron discipline which is certainly stronger than that of the Communist Party’.\(^{10}\) This organizational discipline, coupled with the secrecy of an Islam that became under Soviet rule not just ‘non-official’ but proscribed and persecuted, enabled the faith to survive the periodic anti-religious campaigns launched by Stalin, Khrushchev and Brezhnev. The tariqas were, one might conclude, the perfect local antidote to atheistic Soviet communism and, under Ramzan Kadyrov, seem designed to cope equally well with Putin’s authoritarian brand of ‘sovereign democracy’ (a concept, ironically, introduced by Vladislav Surkov – real name Dudaev – who is of mixed Chechen-Russian parentage and has been a key official in both Putin’s and Medvedev’s administrations).

Two Sufi tariqas have dominated Chechen history from the first arrival of ‘parallel’ Islam in the North Caucasus until the present day: the Naqshbandi (founded in the fourteenth century in Bukhara) and the Qadiri (a Baghdad order founded in the twelfth century but influential in the North Caucasus only after 1865 following the final defeat of the Naqshbandi-led *murid* (Sufi adherent) revolts against the Russian colonial regime in the Great Caucasian War (1815–64)).\(^{11}\) Despite the conservative nature of both tariqas and their deeply ingrained anti-communism and anti-Russianism, there are subtle differences between them. The Naqshbandi is more intellectual and aristocratic, practices the silent meditative *dhikr* and regained its pre-eminence under the Soviet regime, especially in the Chechen lowlands and foothills. The Qadiri is more popular and more conspiratorial (making it a more natural underground organization), practices the loud dhikr (dancing and chanting), dominated the highland resistance until the arrival of the Wahhabis and has re-emerged under the Kadyrovs as the more influential tariqa in Chechnya today.

It is not easy to quantify the depth of religious belief in Chechnya prior to the collapse of the USSR. According to 1970 data provided by V. G. Pivovarov, while 69.1 per cent of Russians living in the Chechen–Ingush autonomous republic declared themselves to be atheists, only 21.5 per cent of Chechens did. On the other hand, 53 per cent of Chechens declared themselves to be believers, compared to 12 per cent of Russians.\(^{12}\) A 1975 Soviet survey went as far as claiming that over 300,000 Chechens belonged to Sufi orders.\(^{13}\) Certainly, most Muslims in Chechnya, including even Communist Party officials, were buried in Muslim cemeteries, indicating the existence of a strong counter-culture to
all-pervasive Soviet doctrines. The key point is, as Chechen historian Mairbek Vatchagaev has written: ‘Islam is part and parcel of the Chechen ethnic identity’. In other words, the Sufi Islam practised in Chechnya is not only an inalienable part of the Chechen creed, it also meets the perceived ‘need’ of differentiating the indigenous population from their ‘other’, i.e. Russian settlers.

However, at a superficial level Chechens did not appear particularly pious during the Soviet period. As the Russian political commentator, Pavel Felgenhauer noted at the outset of the first Russo-Chechen war: ‘most Chechens drink, eat pork, and don’t really know the Qur’an’. Even the current leader of the Chechen resistance, Doku Umarov, in an interview with Radio Liberty’s Andrei Babitsky, admitted that ‘he did not really know how to pray before the conflict with Russia’. Sebastian Smith, one of the several British journalists covering the first war in Chechnya, observed that: ‘many people across the region were so ignorant about Islam that this was often less a revival than a rediscovery’. What was deeply embedded in the Chechen psychology, however, were the intense anti-Russian feelings inherent in their cultural narrative, something that was difficult to calibrate or express during the repressive years of Soviet power. From the massacre at Dadi Yurt and the *mukhadzhirstvo* (deportation) of the Great Caucasian War to the massacre at Khaybakh and the wholesale deportation of the Chechen nation to Siberia and Central Asia by Stalin in 1944, until the unleashing of a the massive Russian assault on Chechnya fifty years later at the start of the first Russo-Chechen war in 1994, the saga commemorating the heroism of Chechen resistance to their hated oppressors was handed down from generation to generation.

As in so many parts of the Soviet Union, Gorbachev’s policies of glasnost and perestroika provided the stimulus for a rapid revival of Chechen culture and the Muslim religion, as well as the freedom to articulate the Chechen cultural narrative. Mosques were built, *madrasas* (secondary schools) opened and Sufism re-emerged from the underground. It is claimed, for example, that in 1985 there were only 12 mosques in Checheno-Ingushetia, whereas by 1999 there were 400 in Chechnya and, by 2000, 200 in Ingushetia. According to a sociological survey carried out in 1991, 94 per cent of Chechens considered themselves Muslims. However, the years of persecution and repression had left its mark, with many of the Sufi shaykhs having a very rudimentary knowledge of Islamic law and literature. Although the first emissaries of the Salafi school, including locals returning from their *hajj* to Mecca, entered the North Caucasus in this febrile atmosphere, their influence during the first period of *de facto* Chechen independence from 1991–4 was limited. At the same time, conditions for the hitherto dominant 400,000 Russian-speakers in Chechnya deteriorated rapidly, initiating what the Russian political scientist Sergei Markedonov has called ‘the genocide of the Russian-speaking population’ in Chechnya.

**The emergence of the Sufi–Wahhabi Split, 1994–2004**

The outbreak of the first Russo-Chechen war really united the disparate Chechen Muslim factions in December 1994. The arbitrary brutality, coupled with the
disproportionate nature and indiscriminate use of force, against the freedom-loving Chechens provoked virtually all of them to take up arms in the nationalist cause. As Anssi Kullberg has noted: ‘the Chechen nation was fighting amazingly united in the first war, and the heroic myths of the Sufi resistance and the traditional sense of honour were very strongly alive.' The resistance included both the Chechen Grand Mufti Akhmad Kadyrov, who, in 1995, declared ghazawat (holy war) on what he termed the Russian ‘dogs’, and his teenage son Ramzan, who, it is claimed, had already killed his first Russian some years before.

The leader of the Chechen resistance from its first declaration of sovereignty in 1991, former Soviet Air Force general Jokhar Dudaev, was quite clear at the outset what kind of independent Chechnya he wanted, stating: ‘I would like the Chechen Republic to be an institutional secular state’, adding that ‘if religion takes priority over an institutional secular system, a more striking form of the Spanish inquisition and Islamic fundamentalism will emerge.’ This articulation of the perceived ‘need’ for a secular state was shared by most Chechens engaged in the first conflict.

The sheer weight of firepower employed by the Russians to ‘punish’ the Chechens, however, meant that even the well-organized and disciplined tariqas were incapable of operating effectively in resistance. By way of an example, while at the height of the siege of Sarajevo in Bosnia, 3,500 heavy artillery detonations were recorded in a 24-hour spell, at one stage during the attack on Grozny in the first days of 1995, 4,000 detonations of air and ground shells were logged in a single hour! The militant rebel spirit of the jihadists, who were far better funded, structured and motivated to counter such aggression, really started to make an impact after the arrival from 1995 of such Arab veterans of the wars in Bosnia and Afghanistan as the Saudi-born Khattab. Although, initially, there were clashes between Sufis and Salafists, a combination of the barbarity of Russian behaviour towards Chechens both civilian and military, the intensity of the war, the considerable money on offer from foreign Islamic funds to the extremists, and their proven military prowess, raised the Salafists’ profile, especially among younger Chechens.

News of the heroic Chechen struggle was attracting mujahidin (Islamist fighters) from all over the Islamic world. Many of the newcomers were genuinely shocked at the impact of Russification on their fellow Muslims – alcoholism, atheism, poverty, and ignorance of Islam and its literature – and were keen to provide an example of a stricter interpretation of the religion. The Wahhabis were particularly critical of the tariqa, the veneration of shaykhs and bid'a (local innovations brought into Islam). Young Chechens, disillusioned by the patriarchal nature of Sufism, with its emphasis on respect for elders, were attracted by the accessible, coherent and rewarding (both financially and ideologically) aspects of Wahhabism. The success achieved by militants such as Khattab during the war, not only attracted these younger Chechens to jihadism, but appeared to win over such key warlords as Shamil Basaev, the architect of the June 1995 Budennovsk hospital siege that changed the course of the first war. The high-profile role played by the jihadists in the final rout of the Russian forces in Grozny in August 1996 further enhanced the popularity of the extremists.
The military command, however, was held by ex-Soviet Army colonel Aslan Maskhadov, who shared with Dudaev (until the latter’s assassination by Russian forces in April 1996), a preference for an independent Chechnya based on secular rather than religious norms, even though he had been forced into concessions by some of his more fundamentalist field commanders. The Chechen people’s preference for the moderate Islam of Maskhadov over that of Basaev was reflected in the presidential elections of January 1997, in which the former polled 64.8 per cent of the popular vote against the latter’s 23.5 per cent.26

Basaev was hailed as a national hero for his exploits against the Russian occupiers, by the Kadyrovs amongst others, and any action against him would be regarded as unpatriotic according to the Chechen national creed. However, he was not widely trusted amongst ordinary Chechens, who clearly preferred a leader such as Maskhadov much more than they did Basaev or other leaders of the Wahhabi persuasion. Vakhit Akaev cites an opinion poll from the Groznenskii rabochii newspaper, in which ‘nearly half of the 1,200 people polled trust A. Maskhadov, while only 6 per cent trust S. Basaev’. This figure approximates the ‘six to seven percent of the Dagestan population’ said at this time to ‘sympathize with the radical fundamentalist ideas’.27 This ambiguity in the popular attitude towards Basaev was to present both the warlord and his president with a dilemma that effectively stymied the latter’s attempts to fulfil the basic need of the Chechen people: the building of a sustainable and prosperous state in Chechnya-Ichkeria.

Rather than accept the people’s verdict, and anxious to retain as much power, resources and influence in a ravaged post-war Chechnya-Ichkeria that had been cut off effectively from the outside world, many Chechen field commanders instead behaved more like Afghan warlords, opposing their president with arms as well as ideology. This could be perceived as excess vanity on the part of Basaev, a form, I would argue, of ‘greed’. As a result, an orgy of criminality, hostage-taking, intimidation and killing (of foreign nationals as well as of Russians) not only isolated Maskhadov’s regime, as the world recoiled in horror at ritual beheadings, public executions and blood feuds, but forced him to make major concessions to the religious radicals ranged against him, led by Basaev.

Although Maskhadov was supported by the leading Sufi amongst anti-Wahhabi Chechens – the Mufti Akhmad Kadyrov – he was caught between a rock and a hard place: the irreconcilables on both the Russian and Chechen sides, neither of whom, for totally different reasons of perceived ‘need’, but arguably identical motivations of ‘greed’, had any interest in assisting the beleaguered president of Chechnya-Ichkeria in his attempts at rebuilding his shattered country. Indeed, Russia’s then Minister of Foreign Affairs, Yevgenii Primakov, persuaded President Yeltsin to obstruct Chechen independence by all means, including the threat to sever diplomatic relations with any country that accorded recognition to the Maskhadov regime.28 In the event, only the Taliban in Afghanistan did recognize Chechnya-Ichkeria. The basic needs of the fledgling state – security, stability and structure in the political, economic and social spheres – were thus absent, making any construction of a law-governed state virtually impossible.
As it was, Maskhadov had to rely on the support of Kadyrov and the local warlord Sulim Yamadaev to beat off a serious assault in July 1998 by Chechen Wahhabis, led by Arbi Baraev and Abdul-Malik Medzhidov, in Chechnya’s second city Gudermes. Only the intervention of Vice-President Vakha Arshanov and Shamil Basaev, together with the neutrality of Khattab, saved the extremists from total annihilation. In 1996, after Dudaev’s assassination, acting president Zelimkhan Yandarbiev replaced secular courts of justice with shari’a courts. On 3 February 1999, in order to counter a pre-emptive move by Basaev to establish his own fundamentalist ‘military-patriotic’ administration, Maskhadov finally announced the establishment of a shari’a government. This further alienated the struggling republic from its supporters in the West whilst providing a victory for Islamic radicals throughout the Muslim world.

This move also left Akhmad Kadyrov, hitherto one of Maskhadov’s strongest allies, in an extremely vulnerable position, both politically and physically (he had already survived assassination attempts). The Mufti is reported to have recognized as early as the first war the utility of ‘Chechenizing’ the Russo-Chechen conflict, whereby, rather than fighting the Russians, Chechens should side with them against the Wahhabis and thus be subsidized by Moscow while running their own affairs as they saw fit, so creating an intersection of creed, greed and need that was extremely favourable to his family and clan. Russian presidential adviser, Emil Pain, had also recommended such a course as early as 1995, it being rejected because the Kremlin was unable to identify an acceptable Chechen leader through whom to implement this policy. Having failed to stiffen Maskhadov’s resistance against the extremists, Kadyrov recognized early in 1999 that his only chance of survival was to throw in his lot with the Russians. By the outbreak of the second war in October 1999, Russia had a leader who would not miss the opportunity to shift the burden of fighting the rebels to local forces led by Chechens avowedly loyal to Moscow.

The opportunity to strike such a deal first arose in November 1999, when Kadyrov and the Yamadaev brothers surrendered the city of Gudermes to the federal troops without a fight, an act broadcast on nationwide TV. Putin skilfully exploited the apparent division in the Chechen ranks, ostensibly between adherents of traditional Chechen Sufism and Wahhabism, but, in reality, between those that linked their personal future with Russia and those who did not. It is significant, however, that the period immediately following the surrender of Gudermes was characterized by some of the worst war crimes committed by the federal forces during the second conflict, including the bombing of Grozny, the closing of the main border crossing for refugees into Ingushetia, the deliberate targeting of fleeing civilians and the commencement of the dreaded ‘mopping up’ operations (zachistki). Such atrocities did little to enhance Kadyrov’s legitimacy in the eyes of ordinary Chechens and led to a further series of assassination attempts on the much-maligned ‘traitor’.

In July 2000, in the first practical step towards the indigenization of the conflict, Putin appointed Kadyrov as his head of administration in Chechnya. On the ground, however, the second war was disintegrating into the same stalemate as the first, with Russian excesses being countered by Chechen terrorism.
When Putin launched this war, it certainly contained the element of a ‘counter-terrorist operation’. Once the generals were given the go-ahead to flatten Grozny again and occupy the entire territory of Chechnya, however, Russia entered the same impasse of guerrilla fighting in the mountains and an intifada (uprising) in the foothills and on the plains, with casualties on a scale similar to those of the first war. Russia’s inability to carry on the war to a victorious military victory (not least because of the greed of both Russian commanders and opposing Chechen warlords, both of whom were interested first and foremost in a continuation of hostilities); and Putin’s steadfast refusal to countenance any talks with Chechen separatists, all of whom he labelled ‘terrorists’ (famously stating after a terrorist bombing in Moscow in February 2004 that ‘we don’t negotiate with terrorists, we destroy them’) left him with little option but to follow the course of ‘Chechenization’.

Bearing in mind the perceived success of ‘talking to terrorists’ in the Good Friday agreement in Northern Ireland, there had always been a lingering doubt among Western academics, if not politicians, as to whether even Shamil Basaev was basically little more than an opportunistic separatist. However, since 9/11 and, in particular, since the ‘terrorist spectaculars’ at the Dubrovka theatre (Moscow) in October 2002 and Beslan school in September 2004, for which he claimed responsibility, Basaev has been characterized almost exclusively, in Russia and the West, as an Islamic extremist and terrorist. The French scholar, Laurent Vinatier, claimed, none the less, that Basaev’s ‘political programme was neither Islamist, nationalist, nor an Islamo-nationalist admixture’. According to his own words, he was fighting to ‘defend freedom and independence, to stop the undisguised genocide of the Chechen people’. His only clear political aim was the withdrawal of the Russian forces (in other words, the strategy of the separatists). However, if Putin was so determined not to negotiate even with Maskhadov, there was never any realistic chance of Basaev being considered as a potential interlocutor in the search for a lasting resolution to the Russo-Chechen conflict. The weakness of Putin’s entire Chechenization strategy, which had effectively been completed under Ramzan Kadyrov by 2007, was the Russian leader’s inability, or refusal, to differentiate between separatists, extremists and terrorists, a failure manifested in the growing strength of Islamic opposition to Moscow throughout the rest of the North Caucasus to this day.

Putin, in truth, had relatively little room for manoeuvre for, as regional expert Sanobar Shermatova has explained:

Corrupt Russian army officers and local Chechen officials have a financial stake in keeping the war going, getting rich from black market deals on everything from oil to weapons sales. On the other side, many Chechen field commanders long ago stopped answering to Chechen separatist leader Aslan Maskhadov. With whom, then, can the Russian government negotiate?

The twin policy of physically eliminating the separatist and Wahhabi opposition while reincorporating a Chechnya led by pro-Russian factions under Kadyrov,
met the perceived Russian need of preserving territorial integrity at all costs, overrode the greed-based objections of Putin’s own siloviki (armed forces people) and promised the Chechen population a light at the end of the very dark tunnel of more than a decade of the most brutal war. For the essence of Chechenization was the outsourcing of violence by the Russian federal forces to their local Chechen supporters. This thus addressed the central issue of the Chechen cultural narrative – the desire to end Russian occupation – while achieving the prime perceived needs of the population for an end to the fighting, both against the federal forces and the Wahhabis and at least some semblance of autonomy that would allow the vast majority of Chechens to rebuild their lives according to the Chechen creed, i.e. Sufism as adapted to local adat. Those on both sides who opposed this deal underestimated the desire for a life free from arbitrary violence by a war-weary Chechen population. Those that supported it mistook the preparedness of ordinary Chechens to compromise on the issue of self-determination for a readiness to forgive and forget the traumas visited upon them by federal forces for more than a decade.

One of the weaknesses inherent in this manifest compromise is that the integration of Chechnya into Russia’s vertical power structure under a single leader runs totally contrary to the traditions of a clan-based balance of power between Chechnya’s regions. The Chechen jurist and ‘Eurasianist’, Khozh-Akhmed Nukhaev, claimed that the Chechens were ‘not Europeans or Asians but Caucasians’, calling for a government structure headed by a Mekhl Khel (Council of the Country), drawn from the heads of Chechnya’s taips (clans). 34 Thus, although manifestly preferable in the short run to a continuation of the military confrontation with Russia, the Putin–Kadyrov policy is of an essentially short-term nature, resting largely on continued non-interference by the federal authorities in Chechnya’s internal affairs and an acceptance (even by those Chechens not sharing directly in the massive subsidies flowing from Moscow) that the population desperately needed a period of peace and reconstruction.

Moreover, were Moscow’s patience and/or money to run out, as appears to be the case at present, the Putin–Kadyrov deal might look decidedly shaky. For all of Ramzan’s boasting, the Chechen resistance seems to be still alive and active in the mountains and has shown itself quite capable of inflicting serious blows, when it so desires, on the pro-Russian administration. Thus the elimination in 2004 of both separatist (Ruslan Gelaev) and Wahhabi (Khattab, Abu Walid and Yandarbiev) oppositionists was avenged by the assassination of Akhmad Kadyrov himself, an act that threatened the derailment of Putin’s entire Chechenization policy. Yet even here, the opacity of politics in the region led some to believe that Kadyrov was the victim not of Chechen rebels led by Basaev, but by forces close to the Kremlin seeking to retain their hold over Chechnya’s oil revenues.35

In the name of the father – Ramzan’s rule from 2004

For as long as the nominal heads of both elements of the Chechen resistance (Maskhadov for the separatists and Basaev for the Wahhabis) remained alive,
after Akhmad Kadyrov’s death in May 2004, there appeared to be no one Chechen figure of sufficient stature or legitimacy who could replace him in the pro-Russian administration. Although heading his father’s protection force – the *kadyrovtsy* – 27-year-old Ramzan was not only too young to be president according to the Chechen Constitution, but had neither the religious nor the political status of Akhmad Kadyrov. Putin thus took a calculated risk in throwing his considerable political clout behind the young Kadyrov and, effectively, allowing Ramzan to emerge as *de facto* the most powerful single force in Chechen politics, a situation that became *de jure* in March 2007, following his nomination by Putin for the presidency.

The risk was considered worth it by Putin because he recognized that a continuation of the indigenization of the conflict promised to hand Russia considerable tactical, operational and strategic advantages. Tactically, the indigenous forces could ‘eliminate insurgent leadership, cadre and combatants’, operationally they could ‘help restore government control and legitimacy’ and strategically ‘serve as a shield for carrying out reform’. In effect, it has been claimed, Putin’s strategy is little more than ‘a projection onto Chechen society of the Russian model of autocracy’. Crucially, however, the projectionist seems to have been the Chechen, not the Russian, president.

For his part, Ramzan immediately made an impact with all Chechens in 2004, with two very public appearances, first celebrating the victory in May of his Terek Grozny soccer team in the Russian Cup in Moscow and in August on NTV standing alongside Vladimir Putin at his father’s grave. On both occasions, the bearded Ramzan wore the traditional Chechen skullcap, something Alu Alkhanov, the former police chief initially chosen to replace Akhmad Kadyrov as president, signally failed to do in public. Suddenly, the Chechen creed had a high-profile new figurehead, whose personal standing was enhanced by surviving at least four assassination attempts by rebels between May 2000 and May 2004. The young Ramzan expertly exploited the religious and political standing of his father in Chechen society to gain the elevated status of an elder, so important in Sufi tradition, while manifestly sharing a young Chechen’s passion for fast cars, guns, high-rolling lifestyle and celebrity-laden events such as rock concerts, a visit by ex-world boxing champion Mike Tyson and the staging of a Chechen beauty competition. Indeed, one observer has characterized Ramzan’s rule thus:

> The prevalent atmosphere in Kadyrov’s Chechnya is an outlandish mish-mash created from the preferences of Kadyrov himself (among other things, his passion for noisy, glittering contests and sumptuous festivals), national customs, Chechen messianism, twisted fragments of shari‘a, secular social practices, abstract slogans of unity with Russia, and many other things. With the best will in the world, it is hard to call this a coherent social doctrine.

This eclectic mix, in the person of one man, of positive and negative characteristics paradoxically seems to appeal to broad sections of Chechen society, while the relative prosperity and stability that his accommodation with Russia has achieved,
albeit temporarily, appears to have offset the instinctive repugnance in Chechen society for the kind of cult of the personality that is building around Ramzan. His Chechnya has been described as ‘a “soft dictatorship” which permits no serious divergence of opinions or criticism of the authorities’. This style of rule has made Kadyrov many enemies both within Chechnya and amongst Russian military and political figures, a fact which, combined with his racy penchant for fast cars, an exotic menagerie of wild animals and the proportion of ex-rebels now in the ranks of his kadyrovtsy, makes it difficult to disagree with the Carnegie Foundation’s Aleksei Malashenko that Ramzan has only a 50 per cent chance of being alive to celebrate his fortieth birthday.

As a Chechen, Ramzan Kadyrov undoubtedly understands both the intricate rules of the exercise of power and the cultural norms of his society better than any Russian leader possibly could. He merges aspects of warlordism (ruling through a monopoly of power, through direct personal, rather than institutional, rule, by the use of force, terror and intimidation and by plundering available resources), with attributes of a ‘nation builder’, who not only genuinely believes in his mission to lead Chechnya’s renaissance, but has acted decisively to fulfil this goal.

The young leader is at least partially fulfilling his end of the Putin–Kadyrov bargain. Under his watch, not only have the federal forces had some significant successes in assassinating successive leaders of Chechnya-Ichkeria (Maskhadov in 2005 and Sadulaev in 2006) and Wahhabis (notably Shamil Basaev and the head of the Arab fighters Abu Hafs in 2006), thus significantly reducing the threat to Russia’s citizens from Dubrovka and Beslan-type terrorism, but he has delivered Soviet-style results (99.2 per cent participation and 99.9 per cent in favour of Putin’s ‘United Russia’ party) in the December 2007 elections to the Duma.

On the other side of the equation, he has manifestly failed to eradicate the Chechen resistance altogether and, judging by an opinion survey of 400 people in Grozny between 5 and 11 November 2007, which revealed that only 26 per cent of those polled indicated support for United Russia, has allowed gross interference in the election process.

More worryingly for the Medvedev administration’s domestic and international prestige, Kadyrov appears to be acting ever more independently of Kremlin control. The targeted assassinations of pro-Moscow Chechen opponents of Kadyrov on the streets of Moscow (Baisarov in 2006) and Dubai (Sulim Yamadaev in 2009); the continued accusations of human rights violations by his kadyrovtsy; and the idiosyncratic actions and pronouncements, particularly on religious and cultural matters, of the young president that often appear to contradict the norms of the Russian Constitution all have the potential to embarrass the new Russian president. Perhaps more importantly, his seemingly insatiable financial demands on the centre are becoming less and less tolerable as the economic crisis deepens throughout Russia. The issue as to whether the Russian leadership can and should trust Kadyrov to continue to act in their interests, rather than his own, raises more questions than answers.

Although still relatively unknown in Russia, Ramzan Kadyrov has clearly had a considerable impact on the Chechen creed. He has also addressed the manifest
need to fill the vacuum of power that led to Chechnya becoming a ‘black hole of lawlessness’, by monopolizing both power and economic activity and providing the springboard for a considerable reconstruction programme in the republic. He has taken on with aplomb the role of Moscow’s roving ambassador to the Islamic world and as such serves as a figure of reference and identity with Muslims in Chechnya and beyond. Creed and need intersect most dramatically and literally in the construction in Grozny, on the site of the former communist party headquarters, of Europe’s largest mosque, built with Turkish assistance and named after Ramzan’s father Akhmad Kadyrov.

However, even more importantly, perhaps, creed and need intersect in a recognition that Ramzan has managed to achieve what no Chechen leader before him has managed: the effective end of Russian control of the country. Akhmed Zakaev, one of the few remaining representatives of Chechnya-Ichkeria still in circulation, has articulated this by suggesting that the decolonization of Chechnya is now a fact, adding that Kadyrov had done very important work for the liberation of Chechnya. Improbably, therefore, the ‘political’ wing of the Chechen resistance has shifted its support away from the militants under Doku Umarov, who now seek a North Caucasus-wide emirate, and appears to be more comfortable dealing with the hitherto ‘quisling’ regime under Kadyrov, a case, perhaps, of the creed of Chechen autonomy and the need for post-conflict recuperation and reconstruction being recognized by each of these erstwhile enemies.

There remains, nonetheless, more than ample evidence that the ambitious Kadyrov is significantly motivated by greed – a seemingly insatiable lust for power, wealth and status which will brook no opposition. His well-known control and exploitation of the Akhmad Kadyrov Fund, to which all who wish to do business in Chechnya are obliged to contribute, enables Ramzan to dispense largesse as he pleases, while presenting himself as the earnest guarantor of Chechnya’s future prosperity. More significantly, he is unrelenting in his pursuit of Chechen oil revenues, thus creating a potential clash of monetary interests with the powerful head of Rosneft, Igor Sechin.

Moreover, his manifest preference for family, clan and trusted supporters has alienated large sections of the Chechen community, while his unrefined conservatism has led to the implementation of unpopular restrictions, for example, on female attire at Grozny University. Objectively, it would appear to be only a matter of time before one or other of the Russian or Chechen factions alienated by Kadyrov’s idiosyncratic behaviour will take matters in hand to remove a leader who is threatening to become a liability, rather than an asset of Russia’s policy in the North Caucasus. There is currently no obvious successor capable of delivering, however inadequately, Putin’s ambitious but risk-laden blueprint for Russia’s troublesome south.

**Conclusion**

Although it would be less than generous not to acknowledge the genuine successes that the Kadyrovs have had in countering the influence of Islamic extremism in
Chechnya, one cannot but ask the question: at what cost? Could not a similar deal have been struck previously with Dudaev or Maskhadov, thus saving the lives of hundreds of thousands of Chechens and tens of thousands of Russian service personnel? Chechnya today is still ranked at the bottom of the scale for civil liberties by Freedom House and is run by an Idi Amin-like medieval tyrant, whose vision of a prosperous and autonomous Chechnya is realizable only with the continuing support of Moscow, be it new President Dmitrii Medvedev, or Ramzan’s adopted protector and mentor, Vladimir Putin. To what extent Kadyrov has outlived his usefulness to the Kremlin remains to be seen. Certainly, as long as money from high oil prices kept flowing into the Russian coffers, the leaders in Moscow appeared to be willing to pay whatever price is necessary to keep the rebellious Chechens under the firm control of one who professes loyalty to the Federation. Now that the economic crisis is beginning to bite, this policy is bound to come under renewed scrutiny.

The Putin–Kadyrov deal, essentially, remains a private understanding between two powerful individuals: one in Moscow and the other in Chechnya. To some extent, the longevity of the arrangement depends on Kadyrov himself: does he have the ability and common sense to display the political maturity and restraint required to keep on the right side of his protectors? For as long as he does, and as long as Putin considers him to be the key player in Russia’s North Caucasus strategy, Kadyrov should be relatively safe. However, Putin’s ‘grand strategy’ in the North Caucasus does not seem to be working anywhere other than in Chechnya, with the security situation deteriorating fast in both Ingushetia and Dagestan. Moreover, there appears to be no appetite in the Kremlin, let alone in the neighbouring republics, for a ‘kadyrovization’ of the North Caucasus in order to drive out perceived Islamic extremists. What appeared to Putin (and the West) to be an acceptable political solution to the conflict in Chechnya might yet turn out to be but a short-term fix. It does not depend entirely upon Kadyrov, however. For how long, for example, will it be Vladimir Putin, rather than his erstwhile protégé Dmitrii Medvedev who will be calling the shots not just in Chechnya, but also throughout Russia? It is hard to see the more urbane, educated Medvedev displaying as much tolerance for Kadyrov’s crude eccentricities as the streetwise Putin did.

As a result of the Kadyrovs’ anti-extremist strategy, the leadership in Moscow must be less concerned that the people of Chechnya still regard Russians as ‘dogs’, but rather that ever increasingly the Chechen tail does appear to be wagging the Russian dog, with undesirable and as yet unforeseen consequences for the Federation as a whole. Change, clearly, is afoot in both Russia and the Caucasus and there are far too many factions and individuals waiting in the wings anxious to appropriate the substantial fruits of Kadyrov’s greed. What we may be assured of, however, is that this will all be done in the name of Chechnya’s (and Russia’s) creed and need!

**Notes**


8 Quoted in E. Souleimanov, *An Endless War. The Russian–Chechen Conflict in Perspective*, Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, p. 132.

9 Akaev, ‘Religious-political conflict’.


22 This claim was made by both Yulia Latynina on the *Ekho Moskvy* radio station on 15 July 2006 and reported by John B. Dunlop, ‘Putin, Kozak and Russian

25 Yemeliana, ‘The rise of Islam’, p. 82.
27 Akhmedov, ‘Religious-political conflict’; and Roschin, ‘Sufism and fundamentalism’.
28 Kullberg, ‘The background of Chechen independence’.
34 Akhmedov, ‘Religious-political conflict’.
40 Ibid.

Ever since the Central Asian republics gained independence from Moscow in 1991, they have sought to consolidate their independence, diversify their foreign policy and develop a pragmatic and non-exclusive set of relations with post-Soviet Russia. However, a critical element in the continued salience of Russian–Central Asian relations has been the ‘Islamic factor’. From the emergence of informal Islamic groupings such as Adolat and Islom Lashkarlari in Namangan and Marghilan (Uzbekistan) in the winters of 1991 and 1992 to the suicide bombings of Andijan in May 2009, the region has been exposed to occasional episodes of terrorism. Such occurrences have prompted the local elites of Central Asia to seek external security guarantees, primarily but not exclusively from Russia, and provided external powers with a justification to assert their influence and presence in the region. Cooperation has been predicated on a converging security discourse, whereby failing to counter the threat posed by Islamic militants would allegedly jeopardize not only the security of individual Central Asian states but also broader post-Soviet and international security.

This chapter analyses and assesses the security predicament of those Central Asian states which have been most severely exposed to Islamic radicalism, principally Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and how this has framed their security discourse and approaches and their relations with Russia. The key argument is that the best way to understand the foreign and security policies of the Central Asian states is through the concept of the ‘insecurity dilemma’. The presence of this ‘insecurity dilemma’ in Central Asia, itself a result of state weakness, has led to the framing of the Islamic factor as an existential threat to the local regimes. This pervasive sense of regime insecurity and state weakness has driven Central Asian elites to make urgent requests for Russia to provide the external support and stability which they see as critical to the survival of their power and authority. While it is not disputed that the threat should not be seen as pure invention (terrorism is present in the region), the argument is that its significance and impact have been greatly exaggerated by the local elites for regime security purposes and, in Moscow’s case, for justifying closer cooperation and enhancing Russia’s strategic re-assertion in the region. Russia has also benefited from being perceived by the Central Asian leaders as having a similarly repressive approach, both to political opposition and to the threat of Islamic radicalism.
The chapter first explains the concept of the ‘insecurity dilemma’ and how this provides insights both into the Central Asian security predicament and the ways in which the ‘threat’ of Islamic radicalism has been presented as an all-consuming existential threat, requiring external intervention. This dilemma is then assessed in the context of the 1990s when, despite the increasing urgency of the perceived threat of Islamic radicalism, Russia’s weakness and the inconsistencies of its approach appeared to accelerate, rather than arrest, its withdrawal from Central Asia. The next section then examines the considerable success of Russia in re-asserting its presence in Central Asia in the aftermath of the worldwide ‘War on Terror’ after 9/11 and in the context of the re-assertion of its foreign policy objectives. The chapter concludes by questioning whether Russian–Central Asian security cooperation has ultimately been successful or is durable over the longer term. Changing perceptions of threat and the effectiveness of existing security ties have contributed to sudden foreign policy changes before, most notably in shifts towards securing support from the United States in the early 2000s. Moreover, Russia’s uncritical support for the status quo has made contemplating alternatives to the current Central Asian regimes unthinkable. Should these regimes collapse or succession crises lead towards protracted instability, Russia may find itself in a position where complacency with the current stable ties to Central Asian authoritarianism would become a liability. The Russian–Central Asian compact over counteracting the ‘Islamic threat’ has, therefore, weak and fragile foundations.

The ‘insecurity dilemma’ and the Central Asian predicament

Islamist insurgencies have come in waves in Central Asia. In the spring and summer of 2004, suicide attacks and various bombings shattered the roads of Tashkent and Bukhara in Uzbekistan. The embassies in Tashkent of the US and Israel, Uzbekistan’s close partners at the time, were also targeted. In May 2005, the storming of a local prison in the Uzbekistani town of Andijan was followed by the take-over of government buildings by insurgents, urban demonstrations and protests and finally a government crackdown. Four years later, on 26–27 May 2009, a new series of incidents involving Uzbekistan’s law enforcement personnel led to the Ferghana Valley being sealed off from the rest of Uzbekistan and its neighbours, and to increased security measures. Uzbekistan’s official sources immediately ascribed blame to Islamic radicals. Then, in late June 2009, an operation led by Kyrgyzstan’s security forces in the republic’s southern provinces led to the arrest and killing of a dozen militants, many of whom were in fact Uzbekistani citizens. Meanwhile, the Tajikistani authorities have engaged in an operation called ‘Poppy 2009’, officially to counter the drugs trafficking and poppy growing that is rampant in the country. Given that the area at the heart of such operations, the eastern Rasht Valley, is climatically not suitable to poppy growing, speculation has mounted that behind the official smokescreen of an anti-trafficking operation, the authorities may be seeking to crack down on militants (including Abdullo Rakhimov, better known as Mullo Abdullo) allegedly
returning to Central Asia from the valleys at the Afghanistan–Pakistan border, where they had previously found refuge after the start of US-led operations in Afghanistan in late 2001.

Without overstating their overall modest impact, the attacks of summer 2009 are merely the latest in a series of events that date back to the early post-independence period. Although the transnational dimension of such activities – with Central Asian militants finding refuge in Afghanistan and Pakistan – has become increasingly evident over the years, one should be wary of overlooking the domestic origins of what is widely regarded as one of the main security threats in the post-Soviet space. Traditional security concerns, such as inter-state rivalry and the resulting security dilemma, are only partly applicable to the Central Asian context. Here, threats are a direct consequence of weak statehood, and thus are of a primarily internal nature. Lack of national cohesion, as well as weak coercive and institutional capacity, mean that the Central Asian states exist in a condition of insecurity, facing powerful domestic challenges to the very existence of the ruling regime (which in these countries is indistinguishable from the state). To counter these challenges, the regimes have resorted to seemingly endless repression of the activities of opposition groups, banning them and often forcing them into exile. This has resulted in a permanent condition of ‘crisis politics’ for the Central Asian states similar to that observed by Joel Migdal in other post-colonial settings. Accordingly, ‘short-term strategies of regime security substitute for long-term state-building policies’.

Therefore, instead of a security dilemma, Brian Job’s notion of an ‘insecurity dilemma’ appears more suitable to capture the security predicament of the Central Asian states, where state weakness and regime insecurity have led the local elites to seek outside help to enhance their own position. In this sense the ‘war on terror’, both in its Russian (as a result of the Chechen campaigns in 1994–6 and 1999–2004) and US variants (following the 9/11 attacks and the ensuing Afghan war) provided the opportunity for making a discursive link between transnational terrorism and the domestic turmoil to which the Central Asian states have periodically fallen prey.

In understanding the theoretical context of the ‘insecurity dilemma’, advances in the study of security in non-Western settings over the past two decades need to be taken into account. While traditional security studies greatly overlooked the nature of threats affecting the security of non-Western states, recent scholars have noted how sources of threat differ greatly in the ‘North’ and the ‘South’. With the traditional security dilemma, arising from inter-state rivalry in an anarchic international system, becoming less pressing, security threats in the North have tended to comprise issues that are non-military in nature and cannot be tackled via military means (e.g. climate change, migration and the global financial crisis). In contrast, as Richard Jackson contends, people in the Global South continue to ‘face profound security challenges, including perennial threats of intrastate war and communal violence, poverty and famine, weapons proliferation and crime, political instability, social breakdown, economic failure and, at its most extreme, complete state collapse’. 
Job’s ‘insecurity dilemma’ concept captures well the conditions whereby non-Western states face a growing number of challenges from domestic actors. He argues that the consequences of this domestic competition are:

less effective security for all or certain sectors of the population, less effective capacity of centralised state institutions to provide services and order, and increased vulnerability of the state and its people to influence, intervention, and control by outside actors.\(^{15}\)

The insecurity dilemma is therefore composed of two distinct components:

1. an ‘internal predicament in which individuals and groups acting against perceived threats to assure their own security...create an environment of increased threat or reduced security for most, if not all, others within the borders of the state’; and
2. a ‘resulting paradox regarding the external security environment’.\(^{16}\)

The paradox is that, unlike the typical security dilemma where a state is vulnerable to the threat of the international anarchic system and therefore has to protect itself from what happens outside its borders, the insecurity dilemma regards the external environment as the source of security guarantees, rather than threats. Instead, threats come from inside: domestic threats fundamentally undermine state capacity and the only way for the regime to secure its security and/or survival is to secure external support.\(^{17}\)

All Central Asian regimes, but Uzbekistan in particular, have emphasized the external roots of their security predicament by articulating a discourse predicated on a dichotomous approach to Islam, one local and peaceful, and the other foreign and militant and thus threatening to state stability and national values. The direct consequences of such an approach have been the introduction of measures aimed at enhancing the domestic security of each country and the instrumentalization of the threat in order to justify authoritarian measures domestically. Yet, such measures have engendered an internal predicament whereby the population and the regime itself actually live in a condition of extreme insecurity (the first dimension of the insecurity dilemma). Accordingly, since the greatest threats now come from inside the state and not abroad (despite being discursively articulated as ‘external’), the ruling elites have increasingly sought outside support, both political and military (the second dimension).

**Islam and the state after the Soviet collapse**

One of the most critical sources of the ‘insecurity dilemma’ in Central Asia is the role of Islam as a potential source of opposition to the state. In the late Soviet period, Central Asia’s Muslim societies quite naturally underwent a phase of religious revival, seeking to overcome the effects of the Soviet atheistic culture
which had made Central Asian Muslims disconnected from and very different in outlook to Muslims in other parts of the Muslim world.  

**Official Islam and (enduring) state control in the post-Soviet era**

After independence, all the local leaders, already in place at the time of Soviet atheism, paid formal homage to Islam as a source of popular legitimacy. However, the reality was that they remained attached to the traditional Soviet management of Islam and of state–religion relations. As the old Soviet Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan (SADUM) was disbanded, spiritual boards on the same basic lines were set up in each of the new states and new state-sanctioned organs (Religious Affairs Committees) were established to overlook the activities of local Muslims and local clerics. Overall, little changed from Soviet times. Officialdom continued to remain suspicious of independent religious activities and groups. Islam was not declared the state religion; the post-Soviet republics remained secular and a clear division between state and religion was emphasized in official documents. The local population was also largely secularized and was not generally interested in the introduction of shari’a law or establishing Islamic states. Public debate was de-Islamized, and the elites made sure that any potential challenge to their power and authority was neutralized. The new Religious Affairs Committees sought to control religion. Their duties included the nominations of imams, who in turn were handed texts for their sermons and were asked to issue *fatwas* (theological rulings). Alongside the establishment of formal institutions, the post-Soviet states enacted laws aimed at curbing religious activities. The 1998 ‘Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations’ in Uzbekistan is one such kind: formally introduced to guarantee religious freedom, the law *de facto* made unregistered religious activism illegal, banned private religious education and introduced state censorship for imported religious literature.

Over seventy years of Soviet control had contributed to secularizing elites and ordinary people. After a religious revival began in the late Soviet period, government policies sought to control it by creating and then codifying a stark dichotomy between official (and good) Islam and foreign (bad) Islam. Yet it was precisely this context of a highly authoritarian control of religious activity which provided the opening for radical Islamic groups to play a greater role and thus, paradoxically, fulfil the worst fears of the regimes themselves.

Such groups had existed in a very limited form as far back as the 1950s but it was only in the 1980s that radical ideas began to spread more significantly and that the greater presence of foreign missionaries from the Gulf States and Pakistan became a matter of concern. Central Asia’s Islamic radicalism brings together an extremely diverse range of groupings. Some advocate radical change through violence (the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, IMU; the Islamic Jihad Group, IJG; and the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan, IRPT, during the civil war). Others reject the use of violence despite aggressive rhetoric (*Hizb ut-Tahrir*, HT)
and others choose to work within the boundaries of formal politics (IRPT). Some groups remain small and local in constituency and range of actions (Akromiya in Uzbekistan, Jamaat-e-Tabligh and Bayat in Tajikistan), whereas others have connections to broader transnational organizations (HT) and even the global jihadist network (IMU). In short, Islamic radicalism in Central Asia is difficult to label and not prone to an easy categorization. In addition, one should note that the region has not been exposed to the rise of Islamic radicalism in equal measure. Turkmenistan and, partly, Kazakhstan are far less affected and, consequently, the so-called ‘Islamic threat’ has hardly figured in official discourse. Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, in contrast, have fallen prey to occasional insurgencies, although some regions (primarily in the cross-border Ferghana valley) have been more targeted than others. It is in these three countries that the sense of an ‘Islamic threat’ has been central to their security discourse and in perpetuating the ‘insecurity dilemma’.

**Islamism in Tajikistan**

One of the oldest Islamist groups to develop in Central Asia was the Nahzati Javononi Islomii Tojikiston, or ‘Renewal of the Islamic Youth of Tajikistan’, which emerged as an underground network in the early 1970s and advocated a purified version of Islam. During the period of glasnost, some elements of the local Islamic movement took part in the establishment of the all-Union Islamic Renaissance Party in Astrakhan in 1990. Despite expressing a preference for the creation of an Islamic republic in Tajikistan, the party’s leadership acknowledged that this would be a long-term goal as the population was hardly receptive to such idea. At the same time, debates over the role of Islam in society were very much at the centre of cultural and political debates. Eventually the Islamic groups joined the ranks of the extremely heterogeneous opposition, the United Tajik Opposition (UTO), which also comprised urban intellectuals, liberals and democrats, and fought the Russia and Uzbekistan-backed government forces during the bloody 1992–7 civil war.

In practice, however, as Adeeb Khalid notes, Islam, and the goal of Islamization of society, was ‘not a central issue in the war’. All sides used Islamic symbols and references. The war arose primarily due to competition over power and resources, as the implosion of Soviet power had opened a window of opportunity for shifting the balance of power, which had existed since the 1940s. Russian troops, stationed in Tajikistan even after the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan, took an initially neutral position in the war, but soon turned their support to the pro-government forces. Russia played a fundamental role in bringing the conflict to an end, and years-long negotiations finally culminated in the Peace Accord in 1997, based on a power-sharing agreement between government and opposition. After the war ended, many former warlords returned to the country to take up official positions. Paramilitary forces seemingly de-mobilized and disbanded, but did not decommission. The Accord was hailed as a success,
where an Islamic party was legalized in the first and only case in Central Asia and brought into the ordinary political game, as part of a power-sharing agreement.

**Islamism in Uzbekistan**

In Uzbekistan, a collapse of state institutions and public order, alongside a more general revival of religious identities and sentiments led to informal radical groups such as Islom Lashkarlari (‘Warriors of Islam’) and Adolat (‘Justice’) challenging the state authorities and de facto taking control of cities like Namangan and Marghilan. Repeatedly over two winters (1991–2 and 1992–3), Islamic militants called for the introduction of shari’a in Uzbekistan and the establishment of an Islamic state. After a long hesitation, President Islam Karimov finally ordered a crackdown. Opposition groups, not just Islamic but also secular, were banned and militants were arrested or forced into exile and order restored. Calm (apparently) reigned until 16 February 1999, when it was shattered by bombings in central Tashkent. Militants of the (until then largely unknown) Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan had staged an assassination attempt on President Karimov. The IMU had been formed in Kabul in 1998 by Uzbek militants, the most well known among those being Tohir Yo’ldash, a mullah from Andijan, and Juma Namangani, a former Soviet paratrooper and now the movement’s military commander. They had fled from Uzbekistan into Tajikistan after Karimov’s crackdown, had fought in the Tajik war and subsequently found refuge under Taliban rule in Afghanistan.

The 1999 Tashkent bombings brought out the most intense sense of insecurity, and associated repressive actions, among the Uzbek governing elite. The growing sense of domestic insecurity was reinforced by a wave of cross-border incursions of IMU militants across the Ferghana Valley over the summers of 1999 and 2000. Taking advantage of Tajikistan’s porous borders, militants crossed into Kyrgyzstani territory in the Batken province and attempted to cross into Uzbekistani territory. The two Batken crises in 1999–2000 highlighted not only state weakness, such as the failure to control the borders of Central Asia, but also regional inter-state rivalry, with mutual accusations of failures of coordination. More generally, this was the point when there emerged the discourse of the ‘geopolitics of danger’ acting as a powerful master-frame used by the ruling elites to explain Central Asian and domestic politics, where stability and security were claimed to be under immediate threat, unless promptly countered. Aware of the lack of domestic capabilities to do so, the Central Asian states had been calling for greater external engagement for years, especially since 1996, when Afghanistan fell under Taliban rule. When the 9/11 attacks brought the threat posed by transnational jihadist terrorism to the forefront of the global policy agenda, the Central Asian elites felt vindicated.

The fears of the Central Asian states towards radical Islam extended not only to armed Islamist groups but also, and arguably in even more intense form, to the principal non-militant and non-violent Islamic radical group Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT).
HT reached Central Asia in the early 1990s, where its popularity has spread gradually but steadily over time. HT shares the IMU’s goals, namely the ousting of Uzbekistan’s Karimov regime and its replacement with an ill-defined caliphate. Though short on concrete details, HT militants advocate radical change, though not through violent means. HT’s ferocious rhetoric and the condoning of terrorist actions (accompanied by the claim not to be engaged in any) have made the organization a target of official policies, resulting in its ban across the region. This group and Akromiya (an HT splinter group) do not pose a military challenge to the regime so much as a political one. Social and economic grievances are articulated in Islamic terms which not only resonate with the population but also provide the group with an aura of legitimacy.

In sum, almost two decades of post-Soviet Islamic radicalism have shown the following. First, in Central Asia the phenomenon has concentrated on Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan – unsurprisingly because they are not only now the more religious states, but also because they have a historical tradition of radicalism that dates back to the early twentieth century. Second, the targets tend to be official institutions and state representatives. Bombings have targeted border guards (the Kyrgyz–Tajik border in May 2006 and Andijan in May 2009); representatives of security partners of the regime (bombings outside the US and Israeli embassies in Tashkent in July 2004); and state officials (the assassination attempt on Karimov in Tashkent in 1999, suicide bombings against the police in Tashkent in March–April 2004, attacks against the khokimiyat (urban administration) and the FSB (security services) in May 2009). Nevertheless, the impact has been far from impressive. Although the Islamic opposition – as well as pro-government militias – caused great havoc during the Tajik war (the most catastrophic event in the post-Soviet period), the IRPT has since renounced violence; moreover, militancy has brought Central Asia no closer to the creation of an Islamic state. The authorities, in turn, have (arguably more so than elsewhere in the post-Soviet space) adopted a starkly dichotomous approach to Islam, opposing the externalized threat posed by militants with a combination of co-option and control via official (state-sanctioned) Islamic institutions. This confrontation, though real, was often exaggerated by the authorities who justified their repressive measures as a necessary means to counter the Islamic threat. This domestic polarization, real or imagined, also served another purpose: to secure external support. As expected in conditions of insecurity dilemmas, external security strategies were enacted to enhance domestic security. Relations with Russia are a case in point.

The ‘Islamic factor’ in Central Asian–Russian relations – the 1990s

As argued in other chapters in this book, Russia has increasingly perceived there to be an existential threat to its own security from the penetration of radical Islam among the Muslim population within Russia. Moreover, as with the Central Asian elites, the dominant view in the Russian leadership has been that this
threat finds its roots and sources of material and ideological support externally in the ‘south’.

Central Asia is central to this ‘discourse of danger’ as the region is perceived as a critical buffer zone between Russia and radical Islamic countries like Afghanistan and Iran. However, the intellectual perception of Central Asia as the purveyor of radical Islam into Russia occurred simultaneously with Russian political and economic collapse during the 1990s. For large part of that decade, Russia resembled those weak states in the post-Soviet periphery that it was trying to insulate itself from, more than it would care to admit.

Consequently, although the Central Asian states increasingly desired external support to counter radical Islam, the reality of Russian–Central Asian relations during the 1990s was a drastic loss of Russian influence at both political and cultural levels. Russia’s economic difficulties were augmented by an erratic Presidential Administration with no clear Central Asian policy, and Central Asian elites who sought to defend independence from Moscow. Even so, the Kremlin was aware that a full retreat from the region would be not merely impracticable, but also counter-productive. A porous border might lead to instability spilling over from Afghanistan into post-Soviet Central Asia, and from there into Russia itself. Religious extremism, but also drugs and arms trafficking, constituted security threats to Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Russia alike. There was little doubt in Russia that failure to tackle threats from the ‘south’ would be a source of threats to the very existence of the Russian state. There was a consensus that Tajikistan needed to be defended since, as Andrei Kozyrev noted:

around Tajikistan there is an abundance of inflammable material…it is impossible to allow the zone of complete instability and violence to move from the southern borders, to other borders of Tajikistan, right up to Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, threatening the entire Central Asian part of the CIS.

The 1993 Russian Military Doctrine, by identifying instability from Afghanistan and the threats coming from localized conflicts at the periphery of the former Soviet space as key strategic priorities, indicated that Central Asia was a region of vital strategic interest to Moscow. The collapse of the Tajik state meant that insecurity in Afghanistan and Tajikistan were becoming intertwined issues, with far greater regional and international ramifications:

Those same political-extremist forces that are active today not only in Afghanistan, but in Iran and Pakistan as well, are causing havoc on the Tajik border. These very forces are recklessly driving the waves of instability towards the north; they are whipping up religious extremism, conflicts and international terrorism.

As a consequence of this discourse of ‘Islamic threat’, Russia did not engage in reflection about Central Asia’s place in its strategy but instead decided to intervene in the Tajik civil war. This was no unimportant event, of course. Though officially
neutral, Russia’s 201st Motorized Rifle Division, stationed in Tajikistan at the time of independence, sided with the pro-government faction, crucially contributing to its success in the conflict.\textsuperscript{33} Russian troops patrolled the Afghan border, and played a significant role in retaining stability following the signing of the Russian-sponsored Peace Accord between opposing factions in 1997.

At the same time, even in the second half of the 1990s it was unclear what place, if any, Central Asia had in Russian foreign policy: Russia lacked any vision, clear goals and, most crucially, resources. It was an unappealing partner for the local republics. Only under Yevgenii Primakov (first as foreign minister then as Prime Minister) did the situation begin to change. Primakov sought to re-assert Russian influence in the region, albeit within existing military, economic and political constraints. Under Primakov, pragmatism replaced the ideological pro-Western orientation and Central Asia appeared as the ‘natural’ place to start for Russia to re-engage with the post-Soviet periphery. However, even under Primakov, despite his considerable knowledge of the Middle East and the Muslim world, exaggeration of the Islamic threat to Russia’s interests in Central Asia was common. As Primakov declared:

Islamic extremism has been gaining strength as a movement with the aim of spreading Islam by force and suppressing all who oppose this, and of changing the secular character of the state. A ‘current’ of this extremism appeared in Tajikistan and in the Caucasus conflict zone. Furthermore, the problem of the spread of Islamic extremism is not a local phenomenon.\textsuperscript{34}

Although a strategic priority for Russia, Central Asia’s continuous calls for concrete support in the face of advancing radical groups, particularly from the Taliban in Afghanistan, met with rhetorical support but little practical action from Moscow. Russia sought to combine the use of bilateralism and multilateralism. Close bilateral ties were established with Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, leading to the stationing of Russian bases near the capitals. With the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) failing to provide an effective framework for managing post-Soviet relations, let alone ensure Russia’s continuing influence, Moscow also began to insist on multilateral frameworks and regional organizations. However, the Collective Security Treaty (CST), initially signed in Tashkent in 1992 to shape security and military relations in the post-Soviet space, also yielded hardly any practical consequence, even though Russia, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan had signed an agreement in 1998 specifically to articulate a common response to the Taliban. Eventually Uzbekistan left the CSTO (the institutionalized version of the CST) in 1999. Russia’s disengagement from Central Asia seemed unstoppable. After 9/11, the US-led Afghanistan campaign and the establishment of two US military bases in the region (Qarshi-Khanabad in Uzbekistan and Manas/Bishkek in Kyrgyzstan) alongside security cooperation with Tajikistan meant that Russia’s influence in the region was at its apparent nadir, only to sink even further when in 2002 Uzbekistan and the US signed a strategic partnership.
Islamic radicalism and the insecurity dilemma

In contrast, the 2000s has marked both a resurgence of Russian influence and power projection and the Central Asian states’ increased sense of trust in Russia’s reliability as a partner to counter the ‘insecurity dilemma’. As is well known, Vladimir Putin’s ascent to the Russian presidency in 2000 was crucial in turning Russia’s fortunes around; even as an economic boom fuelled by energy prices provided the Kremlin with the resources to re-assert state power and authority domestically and internationally as the decade progressed. Putin’s ‘power vertical’ strengthened the presidency and rationalized the then chaotic formulation of Russian foreign policy, allowing the strategic re-conceptualization that was evident in the 2000 Military Doctrine and in the 2000 National Security Concept. Here the country’s strategic objectives were unequivocally identified: the aspiration for a multi-polar international system and the containment (removal if possible) of foreign influence in the post-Soviet space. The use of energy as a foreign policy tool and a security-centred discourse, partly built around the notion of a struggle against global Islamic terrorism, operating from Chechnya to Afghanistan and traversing Central Asia, helped Putin translate his vision of ‘new realism’ into practice.

The Central Asian states, however, have no automatic preference to turn to Russia to relieve their security predicament and, even with the re-assertion of Russian power, have wanted to keep their foreign policy options open. As such, these states have been far from selective in seeking whomever they felt could best provide a security guarantee, even if at times this meant some very precarious balancing of their ties with foreign powers. The most obvious case is that of Kyrgyzstan which managed to combine strong security support from Russia and the United States simultaneously. While former Kyrgyzstani President Askar Akaev candidly acknowledged that ‘small countries need big friends’ what he did not make clear was that for the small mountainous republic this could easily entail entering a simultaneous security relationship with Moscow and Washington. Kyrgyzstan largely remained in Russia’s orbit in the 1990s, despite also seeking to attract Western aid and investment. Soon after the 9/11 attacks, however, the country’s leadership manifested the intention to allow US troops to be stationed at the Ganci airbase, near the capital’s Manas international airport.

While the stationing of US troops and the opening of airbases in Central Asia was initially supported by Putin within the context of the ‘war on terror’, as Russia’s economy recovered and the focus turned from domestic reconstruction to projection of power on the international stage, Russia also opened a military base at Kant, 20 miles from Manas/Ganci. This unusual situation turned even more peculiar in 2009. In February 2009, notwithstanding the 2006 renewal of the lease for the use of the base, the US was asked to vacate the base within 180 days. Subsequent bilateral discussions culminated in Kyrgyzstan’s announcement in early July 2009 that the US base would remain, though under different
terms and name. Soon thereafter, reports began to circulate that Russia was considering opening a second base, in the southern city of Osh.\textsuperscript{38}

Uzbekistan is another case where oscillation between Russia, the United States and other powers has been a continual theme in both its tackling of the militant opposition and its use of counter-terrorism operations to legitimize its domestic rule. Initially, the formation of a ‘strong state’, based on the need to crush any opposition and justified on the basis of the ‘Islamic threat’, was conflated with the attainment of ‘true independence’ from Russia. Karimov tried to achieve this through the reduction of Russian cultural influence (by emphasizing the public role of Uzbek language and culture), but especially politically, distancing Tashkent from Russia’s embrace in the security realm. However, Russian–Uzbekistani relations went through different phases. Tashkent oscillated between membership in Russia-centred multilateral organizations (CSTO, from which it withdrew from 1999 to 2006, and the CIS) and membership in pro-Western organizations and frameworks (GUUAM, which it joined in 1999–2006, and NATO’s Partnership for Peace since the mid-1990s). Even at times of ‘frosty relations’ in the early 1990s, Tashkent cooperated with Moscow in areas where security interests converged, most notably in the Tajik civil war where both aimed at preventing the takeover of the Islamic opposition, the collapse of the Tajik state and the internationalization of the Afghan problem. Bilateral relations worsened when it became apparent to the Uzbekistani authorities that the state of affairs consolidated by the 1997 Peace Accord would be favourable not to Tashkent but to Moscow.\textsuperscript{39}

However, it became apparent in 1999–2000 that Uzbekistan was not capable of extinguishing the militant opposition on its own, particularly since the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and Hizb ut-Tahrir were intensifying their calls for the replacement of the Karimov regime by an Islamic caliphate. So, the Uzbekistani authorities stopped distancing themselves from the outside world and actively sought support from whichever external power could provide it. Yet, requests that Russia intervene in Central Asia to counter the growing threat received no concrete response. The US-led ‘War on Terror’ was therefore a ‘blessing’ for the Uzbek regime as it allowed it to construe the country’s image as a victim of international terrorism and a partner in the war against it. In addition, being part of the ‘coalition’ enabled the ruling elites to consolidate their grip on power and at the same time benefit from the external legitimacy which new ties with the US provided.\textsuperscript{40} Thus, in October 2001, Karimov allowed the US to open the K2 military base in Qarshi-Khanabad in the south-west of Uzbekistan. The apparent apex in the bilateral relations came with the signing of the strategic partnership in Washington in March 2002. Karimov emphatically announced that ‘Americans should not leave our region until peace and stability is established throughout Central Asia … they should stay as long as needed’.\textsuperscript{41}

Yet even as US–Uzbek relations seemed at their zenith, they were already in decline. The United States and Uzbekistan sought very different things from the bilateral relationship.\textsuperscript{42} Washington demanded comprehensive support for its Afghanistan operations (including the base, but also intelligence sharing and
various kinds of logistical support), and hoped for political reform and the improvement of the abysmal human rights situation in Uzbekistan. Tashkent simply craved support for regime security, centred on an external security guarantee.\textsuperscript{43} It is this that Russia was willing to provide, resulting in a marked improvement in Uzbek–Russian relations from 2004 onwards, as relations with the West deteriorated. In both Moscow and Tashkent, the ‘coloured revolutions’ were interpreted as foreign (i.e. Western) plots to oust the ruling elites. Karimov regarded any concession to the West as a sign of weakness:

I hope we do not get to this [overthrow of power] and that in Uzbekistan there will be no repetition of events in Georgia and Ukraine…People should understand what is being prepared for them and resist such plans. Otherwise, they will regret it.\textsuperscript{44}

The West (the US especially) came to be seen as a liability, as Washington expressed only a limited condemnation of the terrorist attacks in Uzbekistan in 2004, emphasizing the restraint that the regime should have exercised in its response. In the aftermath of the Andijan events, once again, the United States sent contrasting messages to Tashkent. The Department of Defense continued to emphasize Uzbekistan’s valuable contribution to the ‘war on terror’, whereas the State Department persisted in its criticism of the domestic situation in the country. Tashkent understood that it could no longer rely on the US for support in countering the Islamic threat.

Rather than sliding into international isolation following the Andijan events, Uzbekistan’s handling of the events received immediate backing from Moscow and Beijing.\textsuperscript{45} Initial calls for discussions over the time frame of the K2 base agreement, voiced at a Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit in July 2005, were followed by a direct request for the US to vacate the base within 180 days.\textsuperscript{46} In November 2005, the last US soldiers left Uzbekistan. The signing of the Treaty of Allied Relations between Russia and Uzbekistan in Moscow on 14 November 2005 completed the re-alignment of Uzbekistan’s international position, and was welcomed with particular warmth by Uzbekistan. President Karimov saluted the alliance as a long-term strategic choice for Uzbekistan that reflected the long historical ties that have united the two countries: ‘Today, we are reaching an unprecedented level in our relationship…I understand and we all understand in Uzbekistan that it is unprecedented that Russia signs such a partnership agreement with Uzbekistan’.\textsuperscript{47} After the signing of the treaty, Russia intensified lobbying for Uzbekistan to rejoin the Collective Security Treaty Organization it had abandoned in 1999. Tashkent finally rejoined in August 2006.\textsuperscript{48} Accordingly, Russia had consolidated its position in the region, restoring ties with one of Central Asia’s more independent states and assisting in the gradual sidelining of US influence.

From Tashkent’s perspective, cooperation with Moscow seemed to deliver. Western pressure decreased dramatically and threats to regime security declined.
Indeed, the latter half of the 2000s saw a significant decrease in militants’ activities. Intelligence sharing, joint training and support for Uzbekistan’s defence sector through the CSTO and Shanghai Cooperation Organization frameworks, as well as increased internal repression, were part of the explanation. Yet, in May 2009, the new wave of terrorist attacks in the Ferghana Valley shattered this long phase of apparent calm. However, Uzbekistan’s recent response is a perfect indication that Tashkent’s major perceived threat is not terrorism per se but regime survival. Disagreements with Russia over the deepening of security cooperation within the CSTO showed that non-interference in Uzbekistan’s internal affairs is non-negotiable. In June 2009, the CSTO members gathered to sign an agreement that would have led to the formation of Rapid Reaction Forces (RRF), designed to fight terrorism, extremism and drugs trafficking. The recent attacks notwithstanding, Uzbekistan (and Belarus, albeit for different reasons) refused to join, fearing that its military would come under de facto Russian control.  

Tashkent’s position was that it would only opt in if the agreement stated that the RRF would not be used to resolve conflicts within the CSTO and could only be deployed on non-CSTO territory (therefore excluding deployment within Uzbekistan). In addition, Uzbekistan refused to make its troops permanently available for deployment as part of the RRF. Even when predicated on a common definition of the threat, security cooperation, and therefore Russia’s influence in the region knows clear limits: regime security.

**Conclusion**

The collapse of Soviet power was accompanied by a general revival of religious sentiments and religious activities in Central Asia, similar to those elsewhere in the post-Soviet space. However, the authorities in the region appeared even less keen to allow religion to play a public role than did the Russian authorities after independence. The elites used a combination of co-option and control of religious institutions and organizations, and feared any autonomous and un-sanctioned form of Islam, in which they saw a potential challenge to their authority.

Since independence, Central Asia has been exposed to the activities of radical Islamic groups. The threat was not invented; at the same time, given the overall modest impact of such actions (the resilience of most regimes were never under serious threat and sustained insurgencies have not materialized) its significance was greatly exaggerated. In the name of anti-terrorism and guided by a starkly dichotomous view distinguishing between good (local, state-sanctioned) Islam and bad (alien, foreign, militant) Islam, the local authorities have introduced restrictive measures to curb the activities of domestic actors, secular and religious alike. The regimes have articulated a discourse centred on an existential threat posed to state and regional stability whose origins had to be found outside the state. However, state policies did not result in greater security for state and society but greater insecurity, as the ‘insecurity dilemma’ highlights, as a result of widespread repression and the securitization of dissent.
This chapter has also shed light on the external dimension of the insecurity dilemma; unable to secure their own position, local elites have sought help (security guarantees) outside the state. External actors (including Russia and the United States) have been all too ready to lend support and emphasize the convergence of interests, as highlighted in the official discourse. This carries similarities with analogous developments in other parts of the Muslim world, where external powers have played an important role in enhancing regime security in the Global South.\textsuperscript{51} It confirms expectations in the insecurity dilemma literature by showing not only that domestic threats seem to concern the regimes more than external ones but also that the external security environment is used instrumentally in order that security cooperation enhances regime security. In this regard, Russia has not been perceived as a threat, but as an important security guarantor, although the case of Uzbekistan shows clear limits to permitted Russian involvement. Indeed, Uzbekistan finds itself in a strategic bind: increased emphasis on the domestic Islamist threat invokes Russian security guarantees that increasingly impact on regime sovereignty. However, decreased emphasis on the Islamic threat would remove the need for domestic repression, and thereby impact on regime stability.

In turn, Russia’s security guarantees have served Russia’s own interests well, because in the name of a convergence in security perceptions it has restored its influence in the region by a combination of bilateral and multilateral measures, while also marginalizing other external actors. Two notes of caution are necessary though. Russia’s consistent status quo orientation has made the possibility of alternatives to the current regimes unthinkable. Should the ‘unthinkable’ occur, Russia would find that close ties to the incumbent elites could be seen as a liability. Moreover, Russia’s influence has evident limits too. Throughout the post-Soviet period, Uzbekistan (also Kyrgyzstan and even Tajikistan to a lesser extent) has tried to balance its ties with external powers, and has not refrained from spectacular shifts in foreign policy orientation. Although the justification of such moves has always been located in a consistent and coherent security discourse, past and recent controversies over the form and extent of security cooperation show that the local republics are not prepared to sacrifice their own independence even in the name of (principally Russia’s) external security guarantees.

Notes

1 I am grateful to Michael Denison for comments on earlier drafts of this paper.
2 Due to space constraints, discussion focuses mainly on Uzbekistan, as this country has been more exposed to acts of terrorism. The chapter does not examine Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan because the activities of Islamist movements there have been either neutralized by the government’s harsh repression (Turkmenistan) or have been marginal overall (Kazakhstan).

5 ‘Kyrgyzstan says slain militants were Uzbek nationals’, RFE/RL, 25 June 2009. Available online at: www.rferl.org/content/Kyrgyzstan_Says_Slain_Militants_Were_Uzbek_Nationals_/1762715.html (accessed 7 August 2009).


7 Militants have moved easily across the porous borders of the Central Asian states: Uzbekistan’s militants have fought alongside the opposition in the Tajik civil war; Islamic militants in both countries have found refuge and received training and funding in Afghanistan under Taliban rule; again forced to move, many have turned to the Afghanistan–Pakistan frontier to reorganize. Their greater activity in Central Asia in 2009 has followed increased pressure from the Pakistani forces and increased intolerance for their presence from the local population in the border regions, forcing militants to go to Yemen, Somalia and back to Central Asia.

8 Examples of a more traditional security dilemma include the meddling of Uzbekistan in Tajikistan during the civil war (1992–7) and the 1999 border conflict between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan; and more generally the impact that poor relations between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have on state security. I am grateful to Michael Denison for this observation.


14 Ibid., p. 147.


16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

18 Khalid, Islam after Communism, p. 117.

19 In the early post-Soviet period, the SADUM broke down along republican lines; in Uzbekistan the Muslim Board of Uzbekistan, or MBU (O’zbekiston Musulmonlari Idorasi) was established.
Islamic radicalism and the insecurity dilemma

25 Ibid.
26 Adolat, essentially a neighbourhood militia, was one of the two wings of *Islom Lashkarlari*, a religious-political group (Naumkin, *Radical Islam*, p. 58).
35 On Russia’s foreign policy under Putin see R. Sakwa, *Putin: Russia’s Choice*, London: Routledge, 2008, (esp. Ch. 6); and on Putin’s Central Asia policy during his first term as president see Jonson, *Vladimir Putin and Central Asia*.
43 Fumagalli, ‘Alignments’.


50 Ibid.

Geographical proximity has meant that Russia and Iran, despite legacies of historical distrust and differing ideological systems, have nevertheless had to accommodate their mutual geopolitical and economic interests. In the Cold War era, despite Iran belonging to the American-led capitalist camp, there was substantial economic exchange between the two countries and the Shah sought, at times, to play off the United States with the Soviet Union. With the Iranian Revolution in 1979, Soviet–Iranian relations remained strained and, during the eight-year Iran–Iraq war, Moscow supported both Tehran and Baghdad, and sought to bring a settlement to the war. With the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, a new era of Russian–Iranian relations was initiated with new possibilities for developing and improving relations, which reflect their important bilateral interests and geographical proximity.

Initially, the prospects for a newly democratizing Russia to develop relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran, given the differences in political and ideological systems, appeared limited. However, as this chapter demonstrates, there has been a remarkable convergence of interests between post-Soviet Russia and Iran, which has been marked by a high level of pragmatic accommodation on both sides and a willingness to ignore the ideological differences which might otherwise weaken and undermine relations. The first section details how this shift towards a more pragmatic accommodation emerged during the 1990s as both Iranian and post-Soviet Russian interests converged on the need to maintain regional stability and limit US expansion. The different factors behind this convergence – geopolitical, military, nuclear and economic cooperation – are then discussed in greater detail. But, Iranian and Russian relations are not without their tensions and conflicts, and the final part of the chapter highlights some of the key areas of dispute, most notably over the Caspian Sea delimitation but also over Russian support for UN Security Council Resolutions imposing sanctions on Iran in relation to the nuclear issue. What is striking, though, is that differences over the role that Islam should play in domestic and global politics have had very limited influence in the evolution of bilateral relations. The Iranian–Russian relationship has been driven almost exclusively by pragmatism rather than by ideology.
From idealism to pragmatism

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the dominant view in Russian foreign policy was liberal and pro-Western and Iran was seen as the centre of the Islamic threat. Andrei Kozyrev, the new Russian Foreign Minister, developed a foreign policy approach which sought, like the radical economic reforms, to transform Russia, allowing it to ‘cross over to another civilized, democratic side of the barricades, so that Russia would finally become a “normal power”’. It was clear that for Kozyrev and his liberal allies, Iran was on the other side of the barricades and that their first priority was towards the United States and Europe and, closer at home, to the so-called ‘Near Abroad’ of the former Soviet newly independent states. However, this pro-Western orientation was challenged internally, notably by the influential Russian Council of Foreign and Defence Policy, who argued that Russia’s foreign policy needed to reflect the fact that three-quarters of Russia’s territory lies in Asia and that Russia is surrounded by many strategically important non-Western states. The emergence of a new Eurasianism, which challenged the pro-Western direction, was also driven by the presence of some 25 million Russians living outside the Russian Federation, mainly in the other newly independent states of the former Soviet Union. The ‘new’ Eurasianists argued that not all of Russia’s interests were necessarily compatible with the United States and that Russia should pursue an independent approach in its foreign and security policy, which would reflect Russia’s distinctive national interests.

The successes of the Liberal Democratic Party, under the leadership of Vladimir Zhirinovskii, in the 1993 parliamentary elections and of the Communist Party, under Gennadii Zyuganov, in the 1995 elections added to the momentum for a shift in policy. It sent a clear signal to the Kremlin leaders that Russian foreign policy needed to be significantly changed. In terms of thinking through and implementing these changes, Yevgenii Primakov, who became Foreign Minister in 1996, was highly influential. He was an expert on Middle Eastern affairs, as he was formerly Director of the Oriental Institute in Moscow, and had been in charge of the Foreign Intelligence Service (FSB) – a successor to the KGB – during the early 1990s. He was a Eurasianist by inclination, seeking to promote a more independent Russian foreign policy, which would build on Russia’s global geopolitical influence due to its geographical extension from Europe to Asia. In so doing, he sought to define a more equal and less subordinate role to the United States. He also emphasized the importance of Russian relations with its neighbouring countries and the need to consider this ‘post-Soviet space’ as of vital interest to Russia. In the Middle East, he saw Russian interests in pursuing an open and dynamic policy, which would critically include both Iraq and Iran.

As the 1990s progressed, Russia faced the perceived external threat of NATO expansion towards the East and, internally, strong Western criticism towards its military operations in Chechnya. In response to this, Russia focused more attention on Iran in its attempts to forge a more independent and Eurasianist orientation. The geopolitical and pragmatic importance of forging closer bilateral
relations with Iran were seen increasingly to transcend the strictly economic dimension, as an article in the newspaper *Segodnya* expressed in May 1995:

Cooperation with Iran is more important than economic benefits for Russian atomic industry. Iran as an enemy can provide Muslim insurgents in Northern Caucasus and Tajikistan with arms, money and food; and Iran as our friend, can be an important strategic partner. NATO expansion toward East has made us look for a strategic ally. An anti-American and anti-Western government in Tehran can become our natural ally. To equip Iran with Russian arms, including the latest submarines, anti-ballistic missiles and taking advantage of the Hormoz Strait’s strategic importance can strike a blow against the West. Russian weapons must help Iran in such a crisis.  

On his visit to Moscow in March 1996, Dr. Velayati (the Iranian foreign minister) commented that Iran and Russia relations were now their closest and most dynamic in many decades.

At the same time as this shift towards a more Eurasianist, independent and pragmatic Russian foreign policy, the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran was also being significantly transformed. Initially after the collapse of the Soviet Union, there was much expectation that the return to the Islamic world of millions of Muslims in Central Asia, the Caucasus and within Russia itself would lead to a real chance for the establishment of Islamic governments across the region. This unrealistic presumption seriously weakened the influence of the Islamic Republic with the newly independent states and harmed relations with Russia. This became critical when civil war emerged in Tajikistan in the early 1990s and conflict from Afghanistan spilled over into Central Asia, potentially affecting other Central Asia countries, such as Uzbekistan. The role that Iran subsequently played in Tajikistan in bringing the civil war to an end in 1997 highlighted the shift from a more ideological to a more pragmatic regional policy, which sought to consolidate the importance of Iran as a vital regional actor in keeping peace and stability in the region. It also reflected the end of the illusion that there would be an expansion of the model of Islamic government, not least because the Central Asian Muslims are Sunnis rather than Shi’ites as in Iran.

Due to this convergence of a Russian shift away from its pro-Western stance and Iran’s increasingly less ideological foreign policy, there emerged a significant expansion in bilateral relations. The two countries expanded ties as Iran’s foreign policy became increasingly pragmatic during the 1990s. Iran’s restraint in criticizing the Russian repression of the Chechen secessionists, which contrasted with the more vocal criticisms of other Muslim countries such as Saudi Arabia or other Arab Gulf states, sent clear messages to the Russian leadership of the seriousness of Tehran’s desire for closer relations. It also underlined the fact that Iran had no intention of promoting an Islamic agenda in Russia’s domestic affairs. Although Iranian officials always talked about the need for a peaceful settlement of the conflicts in the Caucasus, their supportive stance towards Russia on the
Chechen issue was meant to convey the pragmatic non-ideological interest of Iranian foreign policy in Central Asia and the Caucasus. Iran’s constructive role in helping to end the civil war in Tajikistan was similarly a clear indication to the Kremlin about its ambition to expand bilateral cooperation. The Taliban victory in Afghanistan, which was perceived negatively in both Tehran and Moscow, added to the dynamic for a substantive improvement in relations.  

### The role of geopolitical factors

As the Tajik civil war highlighted, instability in the space of the former Soviet Union drove Russian and Iranian interests and policies increasingly to converge. Iran and Russia were immediate neighbours to a host of conflicts in Central Asia (Tajikistan) and in the Caucasus (Chechnya, Nagorno-Karabakh and Georgia). Iran itself tried to act as a mediator in the Armenian–Azeri dispute over Nagorno-Karabakh in the early 1990s, but realized that this needed to be done in cooperation with Russia. 12 Russian and Iranian concerns were particularly troubled by the geopolitical vacuum in Central Asia in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union, which was perceived to be filled with a growing number of other external actors, such as Turkey and the United States. This was reminiscent of Russian and British rivalry in the nineteenth century that Rudyard Kipling had named the ‘Great Game’.

Iran and Russia certainly sought to promote their social, economic and political interests in the Central Asian states but also took their immediate neighbours’ sensitivities into consideration. These states, which sought new international partners and wanted to diversify their foreign policy, were unfortunately land-locked, which limited their efforts to find alternative routes that did not utilize Iran to the South and Russia to the North. Russian leaders, although focused on integration into the global political and economic system, increasingly paid more attention to their own geographical region. Due to the increased salience of geopolitics in Russian foreign policy, Moscow’s interest in the Middle East was transformed, and Iran’s importance in Russian foreign policy increased. 14

This general increased level of interest was also seen in the establishment of the Shanghai Forum in 1997 (subsequently named the Shanghai Cooperation Organization), which included Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. 15 Uzbekistan joined the organization in 1999 and Iran was admitted as an observer member in 2005.

Anti-Americanism provides an important clue to the improvement of relations between Russia and Iran. Influential philosopher and leading Eurasianist, Aleksandr Dugin, who is a leading expert on geopolitical issues in Russia, has always emphasized Iran’s importance for Russian foreign policy. He has consistently argued that Russian cooperation with Iranian fundamentalists can not only improve bilateral relations but also make Islam a positive phenomenon in Eurasia, providing a barrier to Western imperialist encroachments. 16 With increasing Russian concerns about NATO expansion towards the East, Iran’s anti-American rhetoric became more attractive. Both countries increasingly saw themselves as
facing the threat of US unilateralism which, in the absence of the Soviet Union, was trying to establish a hegemonic world order. For Russia, the expansion of ties with the Islamic Republic became a symbol of nationalist re-assertion in foreign policy. This promotion of an independent conduct by Moscow satisfied many Russians who were feeling humiliated in the post-Soviet global and international order. In developing this Eurasian approach, Russian leaders sought to construct a more independent foreign policy which would defend and promote Russian national interests.

Iran also looked upon this shift in Russian policy as an opportunity to reduce the pressure from the West, especially from the United States. It is to counter the US that engagement with Russia has become a major foreign policy priority for Iran. The Iran–Libya Sanctions Act (ILSA), which was ratified in 1996 in US Congress, greatly damaged US relations with Iran, and led to serious protests from American as well as European companies. Washington’s decision in May 1998 to impose a legal suspension on Iran as a response to the oil and gas contracts signed with Total (French oil company) and Gazprom (Russian oil company), was a further indication of the change in American foreign policy.

But, it should be noted that the anti-American basis of Russian–Iranian relations means that the relationship is vulnerable to potential shifts in US engagement with Iran. Thus, the election of Khatami to the Presidency in 1997 opened a potential new opportunity to improve US–Iranian relations, which would have had a detrimental affect on Russian–Iranian relations. When President Khatami was interviewed by CNN in 1999, many Americans hoped that there was a genuine prospect for substantive changes in US–Iranian relations. But the attempts by the US President, Bill Clinton, and by his Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, to initiate a dialogue did not receive any response from the Iranian President. The Iranian sixth parliamentary elections even included discussions of Russian concerns about this matter. Many of the reformists inside the Islamic government had come to the conclusion that continuation of the Iran–America conflict was not beneficial for either the American or the Iranian peoples. But the reformist parliament made it clear fairly soon that it did not have the political will to seek a real breakthrough in US–Iranian relations. Nevertheless, this missed opportunity demonstrated that Russian–Iranian relations were potentially vulnerable to any improvement in US–Iranian relations, which only emphasizes their essentially pragmatic and geopolitical nature.

Military and nuclear cooperation

Military cooperation was one of the areas where Iran and Russia intensified their relationship and which contributed to overcoming the early Russian fears that saw the Islamic Republic as a threat to international peace. During 1999–2000, three submarines, more than 200 T12 tanks, ten Sukhoi aircraft and eight Mig 29 were delivered to Iran. In so doing, the agreement between Vice President Al Gore and Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin, the Gore–Chernomyrdin memorandum, which had sought to set constraints on fresh arms deliveries to Iran, was unilaterally
abrogated by Moscow. As a consequence, Iran became the third largest arms purchaser from Russia, after China and India.

Russia has permitted Iran to produce some Russian-sourced military equipment locally. The number of Russian military advisors in Iran has increased, as well as Russian experts from both the private and public sectors. With the refusal of Western countries to supply arms, advanced weapons systems have been delivered by the Russian arms industry to fulfil Iran’s defence needs. The sending of Iranian military personnel to Russia for training is a further indication of this expanded bilateral cooperation. Iranian–Russian military cooperation has also been developed so as to contain US–Turkish military cooperation, reflecting the increasingly zero-sum competition between the two blocs, which is reminiscent of the Cold War period. Both Russia and Iran have responded negatively to the increased presence of the US and Turkey in the Caspian Sea. The emergence of the new ‘Great Game’ has increased the prominence of Iranian–Russian military cooperation. 19

But it is noted in Tehran that Russia and Israel have also developed increasingly close relations and that there is therefore nothing exclusive about Russian–Iranian relations. 20 The 1995 Gore–Chernomyrdin agreement was also made in the context of seeking to improve US–Russian relations, and sought to limit the export of military equipment and advanced weapon systems to Iran. But, the two sides had different views on this matter. The Russians believed that these restrictions were limited to missiles and nuclear technologies, while the Americans wanted to generalize it to include all kind of advanced weapons. After Vladimir Putin’s abrogation of this agreement and expanded military sales to Iran, increased military cooperation not only provided Russia with bargaining power in relation to the US, but also offered significant economic benefits. Particularly given Russia’s dire economic problems in the 1990s, military contracts with Iran brought both reputational and economic benefits.

Iran’s potential access to advanced nuclear and missile technologies in the framework of this broader military cooperation has been one of the most important concerns of the West in relation to Russian–Iranian relations. 21 Russia has always defined this cooperation as a fulfilment of Iran’s defence needs based on international legally binding commitments. President Putin has also tried to respond to these Western concerns through the reinforcement of federal controls. 22 But, overall, in terms of nuclear issues, Russian officials have always emphasized the controlled and peaceful nature of Iranian activities. 23 Russia has also denied all allegations about technical support for the production of ballistic missiles for Iran. Russian experts dismiss the claims of the US that Iran is seeking Russian help to complete the Bushehr nuclear power plant so as to gain access to nuclear weapons. For some Russians, this looks like jealousy that Russia rather than US companies secured the contract. The inconsistency in the US approach is seen in how the US has promised exactly the same kind of nuclear cooperation with North Korea as Russia is providing Iran at Bushehr, if Pyongyang were to stop its nuclear enrichment activities. Indeed, Washington eventually conceded this when the Bush administration agreed in 2005 that Bushehr was actually a
model for how outside powers could promote civil nuclear energy without endangering the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

For Russia, Iran’s readiness to permit international inspections has always been an indication of the transparent nature of her conduct in this domain. Cooperation between Iran and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has continued. Although there have been US accusations of Russia helping Iran with its nuclear military aims, the US has not been able to offer any concrete proof to justify this accusation. The US and Israel have often joined in their concerns about the advances in Iran’s missile technology and whether Russia is directly or indirectly helping Iran in this endeavour. Russian officials have responded that these leaks to the media about such purported clandestine technology exports to Iran are highly detrimental to Russian national security.24 The Israel connection is interesting in this regard. Natan Sharanskii, Israel Commerce and Industry Minister, and a former Soviet dissident who emigrated to Israel, has strongly blamed Russia for not paying enough attention to cases of missile technology deliveries to Iran. This is a sensitive issue, since Israeli and Russian relations have expanded in the post-Soviet period and there are one million Russians in Israel who continue to have strong ties to Russia. Russian officials have always strongly rejected these allegations.

In summer 2000, Iran and Russia agreed on a regular and continuous schedule for exchange of ideas about military matters. Defence Minister Sergei Ivanov’s visit to Tehran in the immediate aftermath of the US intervention in Iraq in 2003 represented a further step in Russia’s commitment to transferring arms and weapons systems to Iran. Based on a number of reports, the Russian and Iranian senior officials agreed to pursue their common interests in three domains, aimed at:

• limiting the increasing influence and presence of the US in the South Caucasus region, where Russia has traditionally seen itself as enjoying a privileged influence;
• balancing power relations in the Middle East, particularly in relation to the Palestine issue; and
• closely monitoring developments in Afghanistan, to ensure that Russian and Iranian interests are included in any settlement within the country.

Some American experts believe that Russia is using Iran as a buffer zone against America.25 After the Iranian Shahab missile test in summer of 1998, the American propaganda campaign against Russia increased. In a CIA report in the same year, Russia was accused of helping Iranians to obtain nuclear technologies for their military goals and it was alleged that this cooperation could provide Russia with a better opportunity at the bargaining table with the United States. The fact that Russia has taken so long to complete the Bushehr power plant construction indicates that Russia is not entirely altruistic in its cooperation with Iran. But this cooperation is nevertheless likely to continue and will not stop.
Economic cooperation

In contrast to their military–political cooperation, the broader economic and business cooperation between Iran and Russia has not developed as much as might have been hoped. Since 1990, especially after the collapse of the Soviet Union, economic ties between the two countries have not increased in proportion to the real opportunities for trade and technical ties. But, starting with the March 1998 agreement to establish the ‘Iran–Russia Commission for Economic and Trade Cooperation’, there has been a noticeable increase in economic activity. Both countries have signed agreements in support of investments, in facilitating cooperation in the transport and communication fields and over the issue of double taxation. Many meetings of local and national Iranian officials with representatives from Tatarstan, Kalmykia and Astrakhan have sought to accelerate regional and cross-border economic cooperation. But because of the lack of political will as well as the negative perceptions among Iranian executive elites about Russia’s economic and technical capabilities, there has been limited effort to substantively improve the level of economic interaction.

It is notable in this regard that bilateral trade has remained relatively modest, reaching about $3 billion in 2007, particularly when compared to the rapid expansion of economic relations with neighbouring Turkey (estimated at $30 billion) or even with Israel (about $3bn as well). Most of Russia’s economic attention has been on the military side. Both countries are dependent on their oil revenues and the oil price has an immediate impact on their economies. Both of them have significant natural gas resources and both supported the idea for a separate organization – similar to OPEC – to coordinate policies towards gas production. It is, in part, the fact that Russia and Iran are both energy-exporting countries with a limited range of other competitive sectors to their economies, which has restricted their mutual economic exchange, as compared for instance to Sino-Iranian relations where there is greater economic complementarity.

The Caspian Sea issue

The Caspian Sea is another issue area which has negatively affected the development of Russian–Iranian relations. After the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the transformation of the two coastal countries (Iran and the Soviet Union) into five (with the addition of the newly independent states of Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan), the issue of the exploitation of the Caspian Sea resources developed into a serious multilateral dispute. Prior to 1991, Soviet–Iranian cooperation over the Caspian Sea was based on the 1921 and 1940 agreements. Although the full details of these agreements were never fully implemented, both countries had agreed practically on the principle of mutual exploitation of the Caspian Sea resources.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Caspian Sea became the arena of a new ‘Great Game’. Multinational oil companies began to seek to gain access to the vast energy resources in this region, and other regional countries, like Turkey, encouraged the penetration of their influential patrons into the region. In the early
post-Soviet period, Iran and Russia continued to emphasize the need to respect the traditional agreements and to share the Caspian resources according to this delimitation. However, in 1998, Russia significantly shifted its position, reaching an agreement with Kazakhstan on a separate agreement on the division of the Caspian Sea sectors along their borders.\textsuperscript{28} Russia repeated this deal with Azerbaijan in 2001. As a consequence, Iran remained isolated in emphasizing the need to respect the legal regime of the Soviet era, protested against these other agreements and called them illegitimate.

Although Khatami’s government tried to remove disagreements between Iran and Russia in a cautious and incremental manner, it was due to pressure from parliamentary representatives (including the author), which forced the government to deal with the Caspian issue with a lot more circumspection. A national committee consisting of parliamentary representatives was given the task of monitoring the discussions over the new Caspian legal regime and this was a symbolic affirmation of the concern of the Islamic parliament to ensure the respecting of the basic principles of international law.\textsuperscript{29}

At the Ashgabat Summit in 2002, in the midst of George Bush’s criticism of Iran as one of the countries in the ‘axis of evil’, the Turkmen government tried to impose an imaginary Astara–Husseingoli line on Iran.\textsuperscript{30} There was also an attempt by the four former Soviet states to continue negotiations on a 4+1 model, thus isolating Iran. At the Summit, Iran’s President, in defence of Iran’s national interests, did not retreat from the country’s legal position. The Summit, which was the first which brought the five countries together in the post-Soviet era, ended without any results.\textsuperscript{31} Iran and Azerbaijan could not agree to delimit their interests in the Caspian Sea. After the summit, Azerbaijan established security cooperation with Turkey and Georgia in Trabzon, with the Turkish Defence Minister declaring that provision of security for the Baku–Ceyhan pipeline was the principal reason for this security cooperation. The American representative in the region clearly supported Azerbaijan. Even Russia initiated a military manoeuvre following this summit, which led to political experts interpreting it as confrontation between Iran and Russia. The Ashgabat Summit showed that the new ‘Great Game’ in the Caspian Sea was in fact very complex.\textsuperscript{32}

In fact, the 9/11 attack in the US brought Russia and America closer together in the war against terrorism. While Iran had insisted on its 20 per cent share of the Caspian Sea and the preservation of the Soviet-era legal regime, it could not take advantage of its geopolitical advantages in relation to the Caucasian and Central Asia states. Iran is the only country in the region that can provide direct access for these countries to the world’s free waters.\textsuperscript{33} This is something that has a potentially negative effect on Russia’s own interest in preserving its exclusive control over the access of these post-Soviet states to world energy markets. Russia has always benefited from its transit role in providing the key connections between the Caspian region states and world markets. Russia is thus suspicious of the potentially powerful transit and communications role that Iran could play, and thus has not been adverse in principle to the expansion of US influence in this region to the extent that it maintains Iran’s weakness and isolation.
Russia’s main concern, which is closely connected to its position concerning the legal regime over the Caspian Sea, is to ensure that its traditional transit routes are preserved. The Eastern route toward China is a very long and expensive one and the southern route through Iran has always been rejected by the United States. Washington has supported the highly expensive Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan pipeline, a route that passes through Georgia and Turkey, and which imposes heavy costs on the environment. There was a fear in Moscow that relations between the US and Iran could change during the Khatami period but these never materialized, allowing Russia to improve relations with Tehran without fear that Iran would compete as a transit route for the energy resources of the Caspian Sea region. Also, the continued presence of the US in Central Asia after 9/11, most notably with increased cooperation between Uzbekistan and the US and the expansion of the US military presence in the region, helped to further strengthen Russian–Iranian relations.

The Tehran Summit

In October 2007, President Putin paid a historic first visit to Tehran by a Russian leader and, soon afterwards, there commenced the delivery of 82 tonnes of enriched uranium, which was needed to start operations at the Russian-built nuclear reactor at Bushehr. This visit represented the continuation of recent Russian foreign policy toward Iran, which emphasizes the pragmatic and non-ideological nature of these relations and the multiple common interests given their geographical proximity. However, at this meeting there was also clear Iranian concern and disagreement over the position taken by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) action concerning Iran’s alleged nuclear activities. It was very surprising for many Iranian officials that Russia voted to refer the Iranian nuclear dossier from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to the UN Security Council and then supported three resolutions against Iran which included the imposition of economic sanctions. Moscow appears to have been motivated to take these steps due to at least three factors:

- the growing fear that Iran was indeed trying to acquire nuclear weapons;
- the desire to be seen by Western governments to be upholding the international nuclear non-proliferation (NPT) regime; and
- the expectation that Iran would inevitably become more amenable to Moscow’s wishes through its dependence on Russia to protect it from the imposition of more UN Security Council sanctions.  

While Iran had long declared the right to enrich its own uranium for its civilian nuclear energy programmes, the US and Europeans had consistently opposed this for fear that Iran would enrich its uranium beyond commercial to weapons-grade level. Russia had proposed resolving Western concerns about this issue through establishing a joint Russian–Iranian nuclear enrichment plant on Russian territory. Some officials in Iran expressed a positive understanding of this
Russian initiative. But the general view was of a deep distrust of Russian intentions, which reveals the underlying tensions and practical limits to the strategic relationship between Moscow and Tehran. The Iranian rejection of this Russian offer also frustrated and annoyed the Russian leadership, and resulted in a cooling of bilateral relations.

**Conclusion**

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia’s relations with Iran were initially framed by a pro-Western orientation in Russian foreign policy, which later gave way to a more Eurasianist framework. The Eurasianist perspective paved the way for the improvement of mutual relations. Iran’s foreign policy after the independence of the Caucasian and Central Asian states emphasized pragmatism and economic cooperation with these countries, rather than the export of radical Islam. This also helped promote Iranian–Russian cooperation. The joint efforts to end the war in Tajikistan were indicative of Iran’s constructive role in support of Russia’s security needs. Over the years, Iran’s willingness to contribute constructively to Russia’s security–military considerations in the Caucasus and Central Asia has been regularly demonstrated. The way that Iran refrained from overt criticism of Russia over Chechnya has been testimony to this. The emergence of the Taliban in Afghanistan, along with the US efforts to foster a hegemonic world order, has further contributed to the strengthening of Iranian relations with Russia.

But in spite of the increasingly strong Iranian–Russian politico-military cooperation, the development of a more intensive economic relationship has been disappointing. Although their nuclear cooperation has reached a high level and Russia has continued its nuclear cooperation with Iran under the IAEA, Moscow has also benefited from (and voted for) the UN Security Council resolutions which have imposed heavy economic sanctions. The unresolved problems about the exploitation of the resources in the Caspian Sea have created further constraints in bilateral relations. Continued ignoring of Iran’s interests in this field will inevitably have a negative impact on Russia’s relationship with Iran. The American factor also plays a very influential role in Russian–Iranian relations, and when the US relations improve with either country this tends to negatively affect the bilateral relationship. Russia’s policy in the UN Security Council has also damaged relations seriously. All of these various sources of potential discord also raise the many negative memories in the history of the two countries’ relations. Thus, despite the many successes of the Russian–Iranian relationship since the end of the Cold War, their disagreements have not disappeared over a number of key strategic areas, including the nuclear issue, the completion of Bushehr nuclear reactor, natural gas and oil transit routes, and the delimitation of the Caspian Sea basin.

**Notes**


6 Primakov’s ideological vision is developed in Stephen Blank, ‘Russia’s return to Middle East diplomacy’, Orbis, 90:4, 1996, 517–19.


8 Iranian News Agency (IRNA), 7 March 1996.

9 Koolaee, Politics and Government in Central Asia, ch. 2.


11 For a good account of this, see Shirin Akiner, Tajikistan: Disintegration or Reconciliation? London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1998.


17 Despite the efforts of Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, who pointedly apologized for American involvement in the coup against Dr. Mohammad Mossadegh in 1953.


21 For an extensive account of this, see Fred Wehling, ‘Russian nuclear and missile exports to Iran, The Non-Proliferation Review, 6:2, 1999, 134–43.

22 Antonenko, ‘Russian military involvement’.


24 Antonenko, ‘Russian military involvement’.

27 Myers Jaffe and Manning, ‘The myth of the Caspian Great Game’.
28 Freedman, ‘Russian–Iranian relations in the 1990s’.
29 This committee consisted of the author, Hassan Ghashghavi, Kazem Galali and members of Foreign Policy and National Security Commission of the Parliament.
30 The Astara–Husseingoli line marked the old Soviet–Iranian maritime border.
31 It was primarily President Khatami’s resistance and his defence of Iran’s interests which led to nothing being ratified by the five leaders.
33 US policies in preventing Iran from playing the role of connecting Central Asian states with the open seas have imposed heavy costs on these states.
14 Conclusion

Roland Dannreuther and Luke March

The key objective of this volume has been to provide a fresh and wide-ranging assessment of the role of Islam in Russia during a historical period when not only Russian but also international attention has been greatly exercised by the political and security implications of Islamic radicalization. Russia has not been alone in seeking to find durable solutions to the integration of Muslims in complex multi-ethnic and multi-confessional societies and in a global context where Islam has increasingly become a powerful form of transnational identity and potentially explosive political opposition. The volume has sought to provide a historically rich account of the discourses and ways of conceptualizing the multiple faces of Islam in Russia, which examines Soviet legacies, the approaches taken by Russian leaders and academics, and which articulate the voices and views of Russian Muslims (Dannreuther). These discourses and approaches towards Islam were then located within general shifts in post-Soviet Russia of understandings and conceptualizations of extremism, nationalism, religion and terrorism (Verkhovsky). The ways in which the political and legal frameworks dealing with these issues have become increasingly arbitrary and repressive was underlined. This led to studying these Russian developments in a broader international context, where Russian discourses and approaches to Islam, and the policy implications of this, were compared to similar, if also critically different, dynamics in other countries, most particularly in France and the United Kingdom (Braginskaia; Hutchings et al).

Our volume recognizes that there is no single undifferentiated Islam in Russia but multiple Islamic expressions which reflect various complex historical, regional, ethno-national and inter-generational cleavages. Yemelianova provides a general comparative overview of the differences in particular between Islam in the Volga-Urals region and in the North Caucasus. There are specific contributions which assess the complex manifestations of Islamic expression in Tatarstan (Khurmatullin), in Chechnya (Russell), in Dagestan and in other parts of the North Caucasus (Kurbanov and Yarlykapov). There is also an innovative chapter which provides a first assessment of the role of Islam in Russia’s capital city, Moscow (March). The final section of the book provides insights into how Islam mixes and suffuses with geopolitics in the articulation of Russia’s foreign policy, assessing the extent to which the struggle against the ‘Islamic threat’ emanating
from the south has contributed to strengthening Russian–Central Asian relations (Fumagalli) and how the issue of Islam has been effectively marginalized or consciously ignored by both sides in the strategic calculations of Russian–Iranian relations (Koolaee).

Although the contributions to this volume have been diverse and multi-faceted, seeking to provide a broad and innovative account of Islam in Russia, a number of common themes and issues can nevertheless be identified. Three such themes are explored in greater detail in this concluding chapter:

• the prevalence of a differentiation which is frequently articulated, if in varied ways, between a national Russian (and therefore loyal) Islam and a universal, transnational (and therefore foreign and potentially disloyal) Islam;
• the consequences of the centralization of power in Russia during the Putin period both on Russian Muslims in general and their identities in particular; and
• the ways in which Russian experiences and state practices towards its Muslim communities are comparable with other countries.

A national and a universal Islam

A common theme throughout the volume is the pervasiveness in post-Soviet Russian discourse of a distinction between a national Islam, whether that be a Russian, Tatar, Dagestani or other regional manifestation of Islam, and an Islam which is universal, transnational and cannot be reduced to a national or ethno-national categorization. This is not just a conceptual but also a highly charged normative issue which is the source of considerable ideological and political contestation. For some, ‘national’ Islam is the Islam which is rooted in the historical evolution of Russia and its regions, which has demonstrated its loyalty to the Russian state, and which is moderate and pluralistic in its outlook and committed to the principles of multinational and multi-confessional diversity; the ‘universal’ Islam is, in contrast, an Islam which has been formed in a foreign non-Russian culture, which seeks to erode and undermine the Russian national identity and its cohesiveness, and is extremist and potentially violent, wedded to jihadist or ‘Wahhabi’ fundamentalist principles. For others, it is the national Islam which is tainted by non-Islamic or even anti-Islamic legacies of Soviet atheism and ethno-national fragmentation, which is divisive and sets Muslims against other Muslims, which encourages ignorance about the basic precepts of the Islamic faith, and which is the instrument through which Muslims become co-opted and subservient to the dictates of the secular state; conversely, it is the ‘universal’ Islam which overcomes the Soviet heritage of ethno-national divisions and ignorance of Islamic precepts and which brings Muslims in Russia back into the community of the universal faith.

As Braginskaia brings out particularly well, this fundamental conflict over the very substance and meaning of Islam, whether it is primarily a marker of a national
or a universal transnational identity, is not specific to Russia but can also be found in Britain and France. In these countries also, there are strong state-supported attempts to promote a ‘British’ and ‘French’ Islam which might counteract the subversive ideological appeal of a universal and radically anti-Western Islam, which calls for armed struggle and jihad. Even in its non-violent forms, the claims of a universal Islam challenge traditional modes of state–religion relations, whether that be multiculturalism in the UK, *laicité* in France, or the commitment to a secular state system and to *mnogonarodnost* (multi-ethnicity) in Russia. In their comparative study of the principal state-funded TV stations in Russia, the UK and France, Hutchings *et al* explore how, even in more consolidated liberal societies, it is challenging to maintain commitments to toleration and impartiality when reporting on incidents of Islamist terrorism or discrimination and acts of violence against Muslims. In a more general sense, one can also argue that this conflict is present in all universal religions (such as Catholicism) where there is an inherent potential contradiction between national and transnational religious identities.

Nevertheless, in Russia there are distinctive features in the ways of conceptualizing of a national as against a universal Islam. There remains, as Dannreuther highlights, the Soviet legacy of designating certain forms of Islam ‘official’ and others as ‘unofficial’ within an authoritarian and repressive state system. This legacy remains evident, if in somewhat different forms, in post-Soviet Russia where Russian leaders and Russian academics habitually make an unpolarized distinction between a loyal Russian Islam and a disloyal foreign Islam, which is pejoratively designated ‘Wahhabism’. But this is not just limited to government officials and academics but also to many of Russia’s Muslim elites, most notably among the leaders of the officially approved Muslim organizations, who view themselves as the sole legitimate representatives of Islam as traditionally practised in Russia, or in Tatarstan or Dagestan or elsewhere. The often tenuous claims that they have to assert such a universal jurisdiction means that other Muslims who challenge their authority, even if holding relatively moderate and non-Salafi views, are frequently unjustly condemned as extremists, Wahhabis, and threats to national and state security. Both Kurbanov and Yarlykarpov, who are themselves young Russian Muslims from Dagestan, highlight the damaging effect of such a closure of the multiple avenues for Muslim expression and identity, and emphasize how this has led to the radicalization of those Muslims in the North Caucasus who seek to articulate alternative Muslim identities which transcend the official and unofficial division. Both authors call for recognition of the essential pluralism and diversity of Muslim expression within Russia. Such voices advocating a pluralistic approach, particularly from the new emerging Russian Muslim intelligentsia, are critical for providing a more sophisticated and ultimately more tolerant conceptualization of Islam in Russia, which is the only sure and effective way to deal with the root underlying causes of Islamic radicalization.

A further specific feature of Russian conceptualizations of Islam is its regular conflation with and subordination to ethno-nationalism, which again has a long Soviet heritage. As several chapters emphasize, a particular Soviet-rooted expression of this is the concept of ‘ethnic Muslims’, which designates those ethno-national
groups within Russia who are traditionally marked by a Muslim religious dimension. The continuing salience of this concept in contemporary Russia highlights the strength of the Soviet tradition whereby ethno-national identity was prioritized over a Muslim identity and where religion generally was seen as a marker of culture rather than of faith. This prominence given to ethno-national identity is reflected in the multiple divisions between Muslims in Russia, with their differing ethnic and regional identities, and which is a source of their relative weakness and lack of cohesion as a distinct ‘community’ in Russian society, as March particularly brings out in his chapter on Moscow. Such ethno-national fissures intensify intra-Muslim rivalries and are a key factor behind the vulnerability indicated by Tatar Muslims because of the encroachment of Russian language and culture into Muslim discourse (and mosques in particular), as both Khurmatullin and Yemelianova note. In general, Russia’s intra-Muslim divisions make them feel particularly insecure when confronted with the relative homogeneity of the majority ‘ethnic Christians’ who are almost exclusively Russian Orthodox.

Yet what is also evident throughout this volume is how ethno-nationalism, although still a principal identity marker, has declined relative to a religious and more transnational identity. This is most dramatically evident in the North Caucasus where the Chechen secessionist movement has turned into an inter-Chechen struggle and where, as Kurbanov and Yarlykapov highlight, there has been a distinct shift from the struggle for Chechen national independence to a pan-Caucasian jihad for an Islamic state. Similarly, if in less dramatic form, the Tatar national struggle has moved perceptibly from its originally almost exclusively ethno-national form of the 1990s to one with a much stronger Islamic dimension, with nationalist opposition leaders, as Khurmatullin notes, asserting the primacy of an Islamic over a Tatar identity, and pro-government elites stressing how traditional forms of Tatar religious identity are the best guarantor for preserving Tatar identity against assimilation into the dominant Russian culture. There is also an inter-generational dimension to this, as many of the young Russian Muslim intellectuals, who are generally more knowledgeable about Islamic doctrine and practice, are attracted to a global and universal Islam which connects them to a worldwide movement, as opposed to local, ethnic forms of Islamic identity which appear retrogressive and passive. Clearly, this is not a dynamic which is specific to Russia and is connected to more general developments in Muslim societies throughout the world, but its particular manifestations in Russia are especially complex and tangled given the multinational and multi-confessional composition of Russia and the specific legacies of Soviet and post-Soviet political developments.

The centralization of power and the dynamics of radicalization

A second major theme running throughout the volume is the implications of the recentralization of power since the accession of Putin as President in 2000, the associated increasing authoritarianism in Russian politics and society, and the impact this has had on Muslim communities within Russia. A significant conclusion
to be drawn from the various contributions in the book is that the assumption of a clear causal link between the centralization of state power and Islamic radicalization, which is asserted in some recent analyses of Islam in Russia, is in practice more ambiguous and the evidence more contradictory.1

Certainly, there is evidence which supports this assumed causal pattern. As Verkhovsky highlights, Muslims who are in some way or other alienated from or in opposition to the official Islam find themselves in an increasingly arbitrary and repressive legal framework, where recourse to legal address is distinctly limited. Even if this is something which extends beyond Russian Muslims to other ‘non-traditional’ religious believers, and also increasingly to suspect ‘liberals’, it has certainly contributed to the sense of vulnerability and alienation of many Muslims. It is also the case, again as Verkhovsky points out, that the centralization of power under Putin has contributed to a rise in a more assertive Russian national identity, which includes movements who have espoused strong anti-migrant and anti-Caucasian sentiments and which have contributed to the growth of Islamophobia in Russian society. In his chapter on Moscow, March notes potentially damaging consequences if these societal developments are left unchecked.

In Tatarstan also, as Khurmatullin points out, it is clearly the case that there is a significant degree of disappointment regarding the reduction in the autonomy and sovereign rights of the republic, which has led some Tatar nationalists to promote a radical version of Islam so as to counter-balance the shift in power from Kazan to Moscow. In the North Caucasus, the abolition of elections for republican leaders, and the failure to deal with the endemic corruption in the region, has contributed to the radicalization of the jihadist movement and the espousal of a pan-Caucasian Islamic state. Moreover, as Kurbanov expertly brings out, the absence of a pluralistic media domain in the context of an ever-powerful state machine has led to asymmetric modes of opposition being developed, such as through the use of the web and the waging of an ‘information jihad’. Finally, in his study of the ‘war on terror’ in Russia–Uzbekistan relations, Fumagalli provides the clearest evidence of ‘anti-terrorism’ campaigns being used by insecure elites to justify authoritarian centralization in ways that rarely reduce Muslim radicalization, and often exacerbate it.

Nevertheless, there is also evidence that the recentralization of power and the creation of a power ‘vertical’, has actually contributed to processes of de-radicalization. The most significant evidence of this is in Chechnya itself where a full-scale civil war has gradually subsided, victory has not implausibly been proclaimed and significant reconstruction is now taking place. Although Russell identifies multiple sources of continuing vulnerability and fragility in the political situation within Chechnya, he also notes that ‘it would be less than generous not to acknowledge the genuine successes that the Kadyrovs have had in countering the influence of Islamic extremism in Chechnya’ (p. 187). Elsewhere in the North Caucasus, there have also been attempts to replace corrupt and ineffective republican leaders, although the success in effectively curtailing the dynamics of radicalization has been less evident than in Chechnya. In Central Russia, as
March and Khurmatullin set out in their accounts of Moscow and Tatarstan, there is certainly evidence of increased frustrations and alienation but little trace of serious religiously motivated radicalization. This is due in part to the increased costs of active opposition.

However, the absence of radicalization is also due, as a number of the chapters highlight, to the more pro-active engagement of the state with its Muslim communities; and the support that it has offered for the official Muslim structures through initiatives such as imam training, the building of mosques, the publication of scholarly materials on Islam and the provision of more professional and academically rigorous Islamic education. Clearly, there is a strong element in these initiatives of state ‘control’ of Muslim activity. This itself alienates many Muslims who fear that those who are recipients of such support are ‘co-opted’ by the state and thereby lose their religious credentials. Yet, on the other hand, such state support does provide resources which would otherwise not be available and offers a symbolic commitment of the Kremlin’s concern for its Muslim communities. Federal officials have also been fairly scrupulous in upholding commitments to multi-ethnic and multi-confessional civic statehood (Rossiiskoe rather than Russkoe), based not primarily on ethnic Russians (Russkie) but Russian citizens (Rossiyane) of whom Muslims are an integrated part. Russia’s admission as an observer member of the Conference of Islamic Organization is a similarly symbolically important gesture which has been positively received by Russian Muslims.

The lesson to be drawn for Western and other analysts is to avoid making an unproblematic assumption that the Muslims of Russia are inevitably alienated from the state and that they are in a continual condition of implicit ‘disloyalty’ towards central authority. To make such an assumption is, in a perverse way, to fall into the same error as many Russian analysts who make a hard-and-fast distinction between a ‘loyal’ Russian Islam and a ‘disloyal’ foreign Islam. As this volume demonstrates, many Russian Muslims have been as satisfied with the centralization and reassertion of Russian power as their Christian co-citizens. A further lesson for outside analysts is not to view all evidence of radicalization and violent opposition as being solely driven by conflict with a repressive Russian centre. As Yarlykapov brings out in the North Caucasian context, the sources of radicalization are as much intra-Muslim as centre–periphery. Indeed, the current situation in Dagestan is best seen as a tripartite struggle between the secular political authorities, the radical jihadist opposition, and the state-approved ‘traditional’ religious authorities, who are themselves seeking to Islamize society against the secular authorities and to consolidate their monopoly of religio-political authority vis-à-vis other centres of religious power. Yarlykapov interprets this assertion of power by the official religious authorities as itself a form of radicalization of traditional tariqatist Islam or ‘neo-traditionalism’, which is as intolerant of a pluralistic society as radical jihadism, and which is also observable in Tatarstan. This again highlights the urgent need to recognize this diversity and pluralistic expression, if a healthy and non-antagonistic relationship between Islam and the Russian state, both in the centre and the periphery, is to be secured.
Russian Islam in comparative and international perspective

The third theme present in this volume is to challenge the assumption that Islam in Russia is somehow unique or *sui generis* and that it is inappropriate to seek to compare the Russian experience with other national and international contexts. As noted in the introduction, there have been few attempts to compare Russia’s engagement with its Muslim communities with other countries in Europe. This comparative dimension has, though, been a staple feature of many academic studies of state–Muslim relations among different west European countries, such as between the UK, France, Germany and Italy. On the international level, there have been few attempts to assess the significance of the ‘Islamic factor’ in Russia’s foreign policy, particularly in its foreign policy to the Middle East and the broader Muslim world, or to examine whether Russia’s domestic political concerns about its Muslim communities have an external dimension.

Although this volume has only managed to provide a tentative attempt to broaden the study of Islam in Russia to include these comparative and international dimensions, it is clear that there is much to be gained from including this broader perspective. Braginskaia and Hutchings *et al* offer compelling accounts of how there has been a marked convergence in state–Muslim relations and in state media reporting, between Russia, the United Kingdom and France, particularly since the events of 9/11. Although these authors note that the cultural and socio-political specificities of Russia’s experience must be recognized, they nevertheless argue that instructive parallels can be made and that relevant and significant cross-national policy learning can be adopted. March’s case study of Moscow reveals dynamics and processes in the capital city that have striking similarities with other large cosmopolitan conurbations, such as Paris, London or Rome. These include the increased salience of large-scale migration of Muslim groups, the disruption of traditional ethnic patterns and of the longer-term indigenous communities, the problems of provision of religious spaces to satisfy the spiritual needs of the incomers, and the potential problem of religious and religio-ethnic ghettoization.

In terms of the more explicitly international dimension, most of the chapters have shown how Muslims in Russia have increasingly connected to the broader Muslim world since the collapse of the Soviet Union and how ‘global’ or a ‘universal’ Islam is intellectually and ideologically attractive to many of them. Kurbanov’s interesting study of the development of a dedicated internet site for the Dagestani jihadist group, ‘Shariat’ *jamaat*, has clear parallels with the use of the internet by other jihadist groups in the Middle East and elsewhere and illustrates the emergence of a deterritorialized ‘virtual’ *umma*, to use Olivier Roy’s phrase. Just as radical groups in the North Caucasus are linked to global transnational networks, so the Russian state has found that its foreign policy also needs to make links and connections to other states engaged in containing radical Islam. As Fumagalli highlights, the sense of a common Islamic ‘threat’ has brought Central Asian elites to seek the external support of Russia as well as providing Russia with a strategic rationale to be more engaged in Central Asia, which overall has
resulted in Russia regaining much influence in the region. In the case of Russian–Iranian relations, Koolaee highlights how restrained both Russia and Iran have been in not provoking bilateral conflicts over political Islam and how much their relationship has focused on their mutually beneficial geo-strategic interests.

These fruitful if inevitably partial studies of the comparative and international dimensions of Russia’s engagement with its Muslim communities point to a potentially rich and unexplored research agenda. Possible other areas for study could include: still more detailed comparative case studies comparing Russia and other European countries (for example, analysing the impacts of migration and inter-ethnic division on indigenous and international Muslim assertion in each country); assessing the ways in which large federal states with longstanding indigenous Muslim populations, such as China and India, compare with Russia in managing majority–minority and state–Muslim relations. Kurbanov’s case study of the Jamaat Shariat website, which has many similarities to other websites used by jihadist groups in the North Caucasus (such as kavkazcenter.com), suggests that there might be clear parallels and links with jihadist websites in the Middle East and in the rest of the Muslim world. In the international domain, Russia’s recent rapprochement with Saudi Arabia and with Turkey suggest differing ways in which Russia’s Muslim identity has been promoted so as to further its foreign policy goals. Similarly, the ways in which Russia manages its growing social and economic links with Israel and how this is balanced with its commitment to the Palestinian cause is another area of potential interest. In general, these are indicative of an emerging research agenda which seeks to go beyond a narrow internally driven focus on Russia and Islam to a study of Islam in Russia within a comparative and global context.

Notes

1 As is particularly the case in Gordon Hahn, Russia’s Islamic Threat, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007.
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