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## **RUSSIAN ISLAM AND THE SITUATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST**

**Akhmet Yarlykapov**

## About the author:

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***Akhmet Yarlykapov***

*PhD in History, Senior Researcher, Centre for the Regional Security and Caucasus Studies at the MGIMO University, Russia*

*The views and opinions expressed in this Paper are those of the author and do not represent the views of the Valdai Discussion Club, unless explicitly stated otherwise.*

Islam is one of Russia's four traditional religions – faiths with longstanding presence in the country. Unlike many European countries, where immigration contributes to the growth of the Muslim population, Russia's Muslims are local people, long-established populations with ethnic traditions reaching centuries back. These communities include the Tartars, the Russian Federation's second-largest ethnic group, the Bashkirs, Crimean Tartars, peoples of the North Caucasus, and communities from Central Asia and Kazakhstan, with long-standing ties to Russia.

Islam's main centres lie well beyond Russia's borders, but except for the years when the Soviet regime pursued a conscious policy of repressing religion, Russia's Muslim community has never been on the distant margins of the Muslim world. Overall, the Volga region, Crimea, and the North Caucasus continue to develop in a dynamic manner, retaining local traditions and colour, and never losing their ties with the Middle East. Russia's Muslim community entered the twentieth century as a rapidly developing group bursting with vision and reformist ideas. The Soviet anti-religious experiment forced this community into regression, not only through a wide-scale repression against Muslim leaders and institutions, but also by cutting Russian Muslims off from their fellow Muslims around the world.

The post-Soviet period has been marked not so much by an Islamic renaissance as it is by a re-Islamization, given that Muslim institutions had been largely destroyed in many regions and that the religion lingered on only at the most basic ritualistic level. This desolation and degradation of local Islamic centres left an empty space easily filled by foreign influences, above all from the Middle East. This coincided with the objective growth in the Middle East's role and influence during the last half of the 20th century and the start of the 21st century, as the 'Islamic globalisation' movement gathered strength. Thus many developments in the Middle East will inevitably have an impact among Russian Muslims. From this point of view it is easier to understand what is happening in Russia's Muslim community, comparing the processes underway here with what we are seeing in the Arab world. The Middle East is in many ways the key to making sense of Russia's own Islamic mosaic and understanding the radicalization and politicization of some communities and the spiritual and ideological distortions and mistaken views that have spread among Russia's Muslim community in recent years.

The political, ideological and religious upheavals in the Middle East have had a direct impact on Russia's Muslim community. Russian Muslims follow the developments in this part of the world closely. They take an active part in these processes, not always in a constructive fashion (think of the thousands of young people who have joined terrorist groups in Syria and Iraq). But at the same time, Russian Muslims display a high degree of general stability and resistance to radicalization. It is important now to help the Muslim community traverse this difficult transformation period and emerge as a constructive, united and positive force rather than as a collection of disparate, radicalized organizations that are hostile toward Russia and other parts of the world.

## Islam in Russia: the Traditional Picture

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Islam appeared in what is now modern Russia a bit earlier than Orthodoxy. This happened back in the 7th century, when the Arab Caliphate conquered Derbent and included it among caliphate lands. Traditionally, Islam in Russia was of the Sunni variety. Sunni Islam in Russia was represented primarily by two main schools of theological thought and jurisprudence – the Hanafi school, and the Shafi'i school. The Hanafi school was widespread among the peoples of the Volga region, Siberia (Siberian Tartars), Crimea, and in the northwest Caucasus. The Shafi'i school was strong among the peoples of Dagestan, Chechnya and Ingushetia (with the exception of the Nogai people of the Hanafi school). Sufi Islam was widespread among Russian Muslims, primarily the Naqshbandi tariqat and the Kadiri tariqat, but while Sufi Islam remained strong in the northeast Caucasus, it declined drastically among Volga region Muslims. Sufi Islam of the Naqshbandi, Kadiri, and Shadhili tariqats is still widespread today among Muslims in Dagestan, Chechnya, and Ingushetia.

Traditionally, Shia Islam was virtually non-existent in what is now modern Russia, with the exception of southern Dagestan, where Azerbaijanis living in the area and the population of one Lezgin village, Miskindzha, were Shia Muslims of the Imami school. Shia Islam has spread beyond these traditional areas now, particularly in the big cities, following immigrants from Azerbaijan, and also through conversions of new followers.

Since the time of Catherine the Great, a system of relations between the state and Islam developed, the main pillar in which were the Spiritual Boards of Muslims, established and controlled by the state authorities. They were headed by state-appointed muftis. This system, with some small changes, existed right up until the end of the Soviet Union. The system has changed greatly in post-Soviet Russia. Formally, the Spiritual Boards of Muslims are no longer under state control and have the status of private organizations. The number grew dramatically as nearly every Russian region set up its own board, and some even established two.

Today, three main Muslim centres act as leaders for the others: the Central Muslim Spiritual Board of Russia (CMSB Russia, headed by Grand Mufti Shaykh al-Islam Talgat Safa Tajuddin), the Russia Muftis Council (RMC, headed by the Mufti of the Muslim Spiritual Board of Russia, Ravil Gainutdin), and the Coordinating Centre of North Caucasus Muslims (headed by Mufti of the Muslim Spiritual Board of Karachayevo-Cherkessia, Ismail Berdiyev). The first two ones are in constant competition for influence over the Muslim community, with the exception of the North Caucasus, and for the title of the country's main muftiate. The Shia Muslims in Russia have no specific centre of their own and look to centres abroad.

## Changes in Russian Islam After 1985

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After the Iron Curtain came down at the end of the 1980s, Russian Muslims re-established their ties with Muslims abroad, particularly in the Middle East. Naturally, ideas circulating throughout the rest of the Muslim world made their way into the Russian Muslim community too, both progressive and aggressive ideas. The fact that the years of Soviet oppression left little of Islam beyond a few rituals with no conceptual substance in many regions has contributed to this spread of new ideas. The old Islamic education system had been destroyed. Only the Sufi communities in Dagestan, Chechnya and Ingushetia had managed to preserve at least something of the old system, albeit hopelessly outdated and based on standards that went back to the start of the 20th century. An Islamic renaissance, or re-Islamization, was driven in the 1990s primarily by the invitation of clerics from abroad or by sending people to study in Islamic education centres abroad, mostly in the Middle East and North Africa. In some regions, this strengthened the traditional forms of Islam. Such was the case in Adygea, for example, where the clerics were often descendants of earlier emigres from Adygea to the Middle East and the former Yugoslavia. These clerics, returning to their ancestral lands, helped to bolster the Hanafi Sunni Islam traditional for the region. But this movement of clerics coming from abroad also opened the way for radical views and ideas and created tensions within the Muslim communities. Radical ideas took root in regions where Islamic traditions had largely been destroyed (Kabardino-Balkaria, for example), or in regions where Islam was particularly strong (Dagestan, for example).

In the 1990s, it was already clear that the traditional picture and spread of Islamic trends and schools was undergoing serious change. Internal and external migration was changing the picture considerably. The movement of people led to the movement of ideas too, complicating the overall picture. The changes included the following points.

- a) *Traditional Islamic trends spread through the movement of the people from the Caucasus, especially followers of the Shafi'i school (people from Dagestan, Chechnya, and Ingushetia) to what had been traditionally Hanafi areas, creating areas where the two schools began to comingle. These new areas emerged in the steppe area settled by the Nogai people, Stavropol and Krasnodar territories, Adygea, and the bigger cities in central Russia.*
- b) *We see an erosion of the homogeneity of what had conventionally been defined as the 'Caucasus' and 'Volga-Tartar' areas of Islamic culture in Russia, and the emergence of a third, mixed 'Siberian' area, formed through the interaction of various migrant groups, internal and external, in the oil-rich northern regions and in Siberia and the Russian Far East. These processes are noteworthy in that while the previous imams remain formally in place in the mosques, and previous muftis continue to hold their places on the spiritual boards, the real influence can often go to informal leaders.*
- c) *After the Iron Curtain came down and the isolation of Russian Muslims ended, many trends and groups never previously present in Russia found their way in. Sprinkled throughout the*

*main mass of Muslims in the regions, these groups added diversity to the Islamic mosaic and there is a clear trend towards even greater diversity yet to come.*

- d) *Islam has become an active influence not just in the ideological field, but also in law, the economy, education and other areas. This creates situations where we have the de-facto coexistence of different legal systems in Dagestan, and has generally narrowed the secular space in the Caucasus. At the everyday level, customary law (adat) and sharia law now dominate in some parts of the North Caucasus, and people have only rare and formal contact with secular law. This is not just because of the rapid Islamization of the population, but also to a large extent because secular law is not working in vital areas of life. In Dagestan, for example, communities increasingly use sharia law in their relations because of problems with the unregulated legal status of land used as livestock pasture.*
- e) *Practically everywhere, the spiritual boards have to compete now with alternative groups and informal Islamic centres that attract young people and recent converts, and also people with radical and opposition views. The crisis that so-called 'traditional' Islam is traversing increases the flow of young people into alternative groups.*
- f) *The rapid development of new technologies has also had an impact on Islamic communities, especially among young people. Virtual communities now exist, and members can be thousands of kilometres apart, linked only by a charismatic leader, who might also be physically very far away. These 'online' muftis and imams are sometimes far more influential than the local imams that hold formal authority. The ISIS<sup>1</sup> propagandists have turned this to their advantage, putting the emphasis primarily on aggressive propaganda via the Internet. This distance and break from traditional Muslim communities tied to a particular location creates a situation of total ideological transparency and mobility among Muslims, who might belong for all external appearances to a particular location and community, but in reality follow completely opposing ideas.*
- g) *A closely related trend is the transition to online organization and activism. Online activism makes it possible to spread movements rapidly and make inroads into communities, even those that seemed to offer unreceptive environments. Such was the case in Dagestan, Chechnya and Ingushetia, for example, where the traditional Sufi Islam had kept a strong hold, but by the mid-2000s, this new type of Islamic activism was present, promoted by numerous young leaders. The state's efforts to combat these developments with punitive measures were not successful and these online youth groups have become an integral part of the Islamic landscape in these three republics.*

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<sup>1</sup> *Forbidden in Russia.* – **Editor's Note.**

## Middle East Turmoil and Russian Islam

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The Middle East has been going through political and socioeconomic upheavals since the new century began. These upheavals are closely related to religion. Essentially, we are witnessing the dramatic reformatting of this region, and this is creating serious turmoil in the region's countries. Political borders are splitting at the seams, and some of them have already changed de-facto and probably for good. The real concern here is that these changes are often taking place along sectarian lines.

The religious landscape is undergoing great change too. With Iran's active help, Shia groups are gaining influence, especially Hezbollah, and these groups' confrontation with Sunni forces is also growing. Sunni-Shia tensions are increasing before our very eyes. At the same time, Sunni groups are increasingly fragmented and split by differences. The Salafi movement, very popular among Sunni youth, is increasingly disparate. In Saudi Arabia, the modern Salafi movement's ideological centre, several groups have emerged. Along with the official Wahhabi movement, there are also jihadist groups that supported Al Qaeda<sup>2</sup> at one point and are represented by well-known sheikhs such as al-Maqdisi and others. Salafi groups supporting the ideas of well-known mufti Yusuf al-Qaradawi, close to the Muslim Brotherhood in views, have also gained influence of late. Representatives of these groups are prominent not only in Saudi Arabia itself, but also elsewhere, with sheikhs such as Salman al-Audah.

Russian Islam is also undergoing rapid change as the Middle East transforms. Following the Middle East, the Salafi groups present among Russian Muslims are also becoming more diverse. In many Russian regions (Dagestan, for example) the general situation in the Middle East and the growing rivalry between Sunni and Shia countries and forces, there is an increasing awareness of a Sunni identity and growing sympathy for Sunni parties in the conflicts underway. The growing influence of political Islam in Egypt and Turkey has led to a 'hijra,' movement of some Salafi Muslims in Russia – relocation to countries with Islamic governments. This movement could be seen with people moving to Egypt while Morsi was in power, and after his government fell, the trend shifted to Turkey with its 'light' Islamist regime. The extent of this movement is often exaggerated, but it nonetheless involves hundreds of young Muslims, mostly from the North Caucasus. This movement has its own networks and infrastructure, which includes services to help the new arrivals settle in, including help with building houses.

This Islamic immigration movement should not be confused with another type of 'hijra' – the departure to war-torn Syria, a movement, which has intensified since 2011. Thousands of young Muslims from around Russia have been caught up in this movement, particularly people from the North Caucasus, but also from other regions, large towns in Central Russia and the Far North. The peak of those wishing to fight in Syria (with increasing numbers joining ISIS) came in 2013–2014.

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<sup>2</sup> *Forbidden in Russia.* – **Editor's Note.**

It was around 2014 that ISIS started not just encouraging fighters to come to Syria, but also tried winning over commanders and fighters from the Al Qaeda affiliated Caucasus Emirate. This policy was producing results by late 2014 – early 2015. One after another, commanders from the main units swore their allegiance to the self-proclaimed ‘caliph’ al-Baghdadi. This success was solidified by the announcement in 2015 of the establishment of Wilayat Qawqaz (Caucasus Province) in the North Caucasus as part of ISIS. In late 2015 – early 2016, terrorists from this group carried out four terrorist attacks in Dagestan, mostly in the south of the republic. Noteworthy here is that this terrorist brand-changing activity follows hot on the heels of evidence that these groups are getting financing from the Middle East. The fact that old and now near-forgotten methods such as attacks on columns of vehicles have returned to the terrorists’ arsenal in the North Caucasus is also cause for concern.

Not only Internet propaganda but also a well-organized recruitment network is helping to ensure a flow of new fighters from Russia to the Middle East. This network has spread across the North Caucasus now, and also into other regions, including big towns and the oil and gas regions of the north. One of the hidden dangers in this network’s existence is that it can easily be transformed into a terrorist network. In other words, today’s recruiter could become a potential terrorist.

The Syrian crisis is a matter of concern for the Sunni majority in Russia. This is reflected in growing Sunni solidarity that does not lead to active steps, and also in the number of people joining the fighters’ ranks. These people that are going off to fight are something that must be considered, though we should not exaggerate their numbers. Even the boldest estimates suggest that only a tiny fraction of Russian Muslims actually go to join the various groups in Syria.

## Possible Solutions

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We see that events in the Middle East are having a substantial influence on Russia’s Muslim communities, despite their autonomy. There are contradictory processes at work. There are negative trends, such as the establishment of a branch of ISIS in the North Caucasus, but at the same time, the increasingly complex picture Russian Islam presents today creates conditions for Muslim leaders to become more involved in local communities.

Muslims account for about 15% of the total Russian population, and Russia can make use of this potential to promote its interests in the Middle East and in the Muslim world in general. The situation in the Middle East and Russian military operations in Syria were used



for propaganda purposes to paint Russia as taking part in a 'Shia-Orthodox' coalition against Sunnis. This is a dangerous and harmful image for Russia, where the majority of Muslims are Sunnis. But this should not push Russia into hurrying to make itself the defender of Sunnis around the world to the detriment of its established good relations with non-Sunni forces. Russia has a unique opportunity to become a neutral player on this field and can take on the role of non-engaged intermediary in complex and contradiction-ridden Middle East political processes. This policy of equal distance from all forces is the most advantageous for Russia in terms of its interests and the interests of Russian Muslims.

It is crucial now to get a sense of the dynamics of change taking place in Islam in Russia. Russia's Muslim community is in a state of contradictory transformation, the results of which are not yet clear. The increasing diversity and complex nature of the Islamic mosaic in Russia that follows in the wake of the Middle East, creates difficulties for the authorities who are not used to dealing with such a fragmented world religion, all the more so as it had traditionally been organized through spiritual boards for the sake of easier interaction. After the Soviet Union, only a few of these spiritual boards retained any real authority. The rest face fierce competition from informal Muslim leaders, whose lack of official status is a hindrance to normal interaction between the state authorities and the communities they head.

It is important now to develop clear approaches to state religious policy that take into account the change in the Muslim community and the mosaic-like nature of this community today. The system of spiritual boards is going through a deep crisis and can no longer be the state's only support and the sole mouthpiece for the Muslim community's hopes and desires. Constructive cooperation with as great a number of Muslim communities as possible will require prospects for integrating groups outside the spiritual directorates into the system of state-Muslim community relations. This does not mean that Russia should abandon the system of spiritual boards. They cover part of the country's Islamic landscape and their potential should be put to greater use. The question is simply one of also developing cooperation with a new and growing part of the landscape that for a long time had been outside partnership relations because of its lack of official status.

How can we achieve this without damaging existing relations between the state authorities and the traditional organizations representing the Muslim community? Clearly, this can only be done through dialogue and cooperation within the Muslim communities, when their leaders will look at each other not as rivals but as partners. The only grounds on which the state authorities can refuse to acknowledge Muslim leaders and communities' legitimacy is if they follow the extremist approach of an armed struggle against the Russian state and reject its constitutional foundations. Leaders and communities that do not spread such extremist ideology or engage in extremist action should become partners with the state along with the traditional leaders and organizations.

The experience of the 1990s showed that rivalry between the different Muslim leaders and communities was mostly about leadership and power issues. One way to reduce conflict in the Muslim communities could be to create greater collegiality in the muftiates by including informal leaders on the councils of Muslim scholars that are attached to the spiritual directorates. There are successful examples of this principle in practice, with a resulting drop in conflict levels and integration of informal leaders into the system of relations between the state and the Muslim communities. For example, Nurbi Yemizh, then-mufti of the Adygea Republic and the Krasnodar Territory, followed this policy in the early 2000s and was able to avoid the kind of conflict seen in nearby Kabardino-Balkaria. The Russia Muftis Council, headed by Ravil Gainutdin, also has much experience in this area.

Overall, consistent implementation of the principle of equal distance of the state authorities from all Muslim organizations should help to affirm secular principles, which have lost much ground in some parts of the North Caucasus. Bans and repressions do not help in this area. One of the most effective solutions could be for the state authorities to become involved in a competition between the different legal systems by resolving through legal regulation the region's entrenched problems. If Muslims see that secular law can offer fair and just solutions to land disputes, for example, they may be happy to accept secular provisions and will not turn to sharia law, all the more so as there are no real experts in Islamic law in these regions at the moment. This could be the most realistic means of reconciling customary and religious law, and secular law.

The latest developments in the Middle East have led to ISIS coming under pressure from all sides, and it is now attempting to step up efforts to develop its international networks. In this situation, it is essential to not allow the terrorist underground in Russia to develop. The Caucasus Emirate is being side-lined as the main terrorist group in the North Caucasus by Caucasus Province, which declared itself part of ISIS and is already receiving funding from the Middle East. The number of active fighters is still small, but the series of terrorist attacks in Dagestan at the end of 2015 showed that this group wants to unleash a terrorist war against Russia on its soil and under this new 'brand.' In addition, the ISIS recruitment network should not be forgotten. It has already reached out across Russia and could easily be transformed into a terrorist network. In other words, not only the North Caucasus republics are vulnerable to terrorist attacks, but so are other regions, especially large cities and the oil-rich regions in the north. Identifying and liquidating terrorist recruitment networks and 'sleeping' cells is a priority task today, along with cutting off funding channels.

ISIS can take specific steps to organize and coordinate terrorist activity in Russia. First, as noted, they can fund groups that pledge their allegiance. The second promising avenue from their point of view is the return of fighters from the Middle East to Russia. The experience and skills they have gained in battle and their knowledge of Russia's specific conditions and ties to

local terrorist networks are too valuable for ISIS to ignore. We must block these attempts by all possible means, including by close cooperation with 'non-traditional' Muslim communities.

On the agenda now is also the issue of reintegrating Russian citizens who return from the Middle East. This is a very sensitive and complicated matter. It is clear that many of these young Muslims coming back from their time with ISIS are disappointed with their experience and sincerely regret what they now feel was a mistake. But there are also people who could come with specific aims in mind, namely, to organize local ISIS networks, even if only as a so-called 'sleeper' cell ready to set into action at the needed moment.

As regards to reintegration the young people coming back from ISIS, we should make a thorough study of the experience of the state-backed adaptation commissions that worked in official capacities in the North Caucasus, helping people returning from rebel groups in the region to readapt to normal peacetime lives. These commissions worked with best result in Dagestan and Ingushetia, where they helped dozens of young people, who had not been involved in killing, to return and readapt to everyday society. Perhaps it would be worth setting up such a commission at the federal level, since ISIS recruiters, sadly, now work all around the country.

As for the methods of bringing about this return to normal life, first of all, we need to end the practice of pushing radical Muslims into leaving Russia and heading for the Middle East. This was a tactic that produced the desired results in the run-up to the Sochi Olympics, but it is not a good strategy overall and could do a lot of harm to Russia. There is a lot of demand for people from Russia as fighters, and they receive experience and training abroad that they can later use directly against Russia itself. Furthermore, by encouraging the departure of radical young people, we indirectly contribute to terrorist groups' growing strength, giving them the people they need to swell their ranks. Radical Muslims of all kinds leave Russia and concentrate themselves in various Middle Eastern countries, thus creating a potential religious and political force with no sympathy for Russia. The task now is to work at de-radicalizing Muslim youth in Russia. Success in this area is possible only through a comprehensive approach that goes beyond formal measures alone and involves action in the sectors of importance to youth, including the socioeconomic sector.

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[www.valdaiclub.com](http://www.valdaiclub.com)

[valdai@valdaiclub.com](mailto:valdai@valdaiclub.com)



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