

# Islamic Views of Peace and Conflict among Russia's Muslims

Simona E. Merati

Florida International University, Miami, USA.

**Abstract:** In post-Soviet Russia, Islam has flourished, revamping a long-proclaimed faith and reconnecting with the global *ummah*. The combination of old traditions with new Islamic influences from abroad has enriched Russia's Muslim communities, but has also created social friction. Particularly controversial is the (self)-positioning of Russia's Muslims toward the state.

My proposal for this Workshop expands on my research on Russia's contemporary discourse on Islam, started with my Ph.D. dissertation, by focusing on Russia's Islamic narratives of peace and conflict. Different conceptualizations of cooperation with versus opposition to the Russian state are being developed. At stake is the full inclusion of Muslims in Russia's multi-religious society.

Official Islamic institutions embrace the state-supported notion of Russian 'traditional Islam' (that is, the forms of Islam historically practiced in Russia) and its contribution to a 'Russian civilization'. Russian *muftis* (religious leaders) reject the assumptions of Islam being a violent religion and of Muslims being enemies of the state. Some Muslim leaders and some prominent scholars of Islam emphasize Islamic *wasatiyyah* ('moderateness', *umerennost'*) as preventive of social conflict, even in multi-religious societies.

Conversely, other Muslim thinkers find inspiration in the Iranian revolution, reinterpreted through the lenses of Russian-Soviet history and traditional Russian messianism, to envision a new society based on 'justice' (*al-'Adalah, spravedlivost'*).

Additionally, *jihadist* proclamations appear throughout the Islamic discourse, especially in areas of conflict (North Caucasus). Separatist groups like Imarat Kavkaz are close to international terrorism, Al-Qaeda, and the Islamic State, with which they share arguments and purposes. However, they also face counter-narratives of Islam by local *muftis* and by affiliates of Moscow, like the Head of Chechnya Ramzan Kadyrov.

My chapter examines Russian sources about Islam from a variety of outlets to identify leading figures, explain their arguments, trace their intellectual heritage

and domestic and international influences, and assess their impact on Russian polity.

## 1. Introduction

In the Russian Federations, Muslims are estimated to be about sixteen million. Most of them are members of communities that have lived in Russia since imperial times<sup>1</sup>. Today, the most important communities are Tatars (about one third of them living in the Federal Republic of Tatarstan), Muslims in the Republics of Chuvashi'ah and Bashkortostan, and groups of various ethnicity in the North Caucasus. Sizeable Muslim groups also live in major cities, especially Moscow and Saint Petersburg.

The atheist Soviet ideology engaged in violent campaigns to eradicate all religions from the Union, especially Islam, compelling believers to hide their faith, and severing Soviet Muslims' historical international ties. Thanks to the readmission of religion to public life in post-Soviet Russia, Muslims have again been able to practice Islam openly, to restore Islamic institutions, to (re)construct mosques, and to restore their international connections. The Soviet regime had disrupted the religious structures of Muslim communities, emphasizing, instead, their ethnic-national identity<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, the primary task for Muslim leaders has been to strengthen the awareness among Russia's Muslims of their Islamic heritage, including of their belonging to the international *ummah*. Their search for the appropriate place of Muslims in the new, post-Soviet Russian society has generated a broad reflection on the relations of the Muslim community with the Russian culture and the state. Several models of interaction, from full integration to armed opposition, have been elaborated. The restoration of traditional international relations fostered the educational and financial support of foreign Muslim organizations and countries. However, compar-

---

1 The first encounters between Slavic pagans and Muslims occurred in the Volga territories in the 8th-9th centuries CE. Subsequently, the domination of the Mongols in the 13th-14th centuries and, after their defeat, the Russian Empire's conquests in Central Asia (from the 16th century) and the Caucasus (from the 18th century) have increased the familiarity of Russians with Muslims and improved their knowledge of the Islamic world.

2 Through Stalin's policy of nationalities.

isons with Muslims from different Islamic traditions, in particular from Saudi Arabia, challenged Russia's Muslims' own interpretations of Islam.

It is within this context that the debate on Islam conducted in Russia must be interpreted. In this chapter, I focus on arguments of peace and conflict advanced by Muslims in Russia, both scholars and unaffiliated thinkers, mostly in the Russian language, in the last ten to fifteen years. The debate about Russia's Islam is vast. However, some voices distinguish themselves in their authority, sophistication, or forcefulness. Prior to proceeding to the analysis of their arguments, a conceptual premise is necessary.

## *2. Russian traditional Islam*

The forms of Islam historically practiced in Russia (Hanafi Sunnism in the Volga region and Sufism in the Caucasus) are characterized by the presence of Islamic and pre-Islamic habits. Today, they are collectively defined as 'traditional Islam' – a concept introduced in public discourse by the late Evgenii Primakov, an eminent Russian politician and an expert of the Middle East, in the mid-1990s<sup>3</sup>. Although culturally appropriate, this definition was also instrumental in drawing a clear distinction in significance and value between Islam as practiced in Russia and all those forms of Islam that so-called 'foreign agents' allegedly intended to introduce in Russia. According to Primakov, because traditional Islam belongs to Russian civilization and history, it is valuable and non-threatening. Non-traditional Islam, instead, is alien to Russian<sup>4</sup> Muslims' culture. Its aggressive exponents try to impose it on Russia's Islamic communities, encouraging them to adopt an extremist version of Islam (collectively labeled Wahhabism) that uproots their legitimate traditions. Furthermore, foreign Islam is often suspected to constitute a Trojan horse for enemies of the state to establish their bridgeheads in Russia.

The distinction between traditional and foreign Islam entails a series of important consequences in Russian social and political spheres, which go beyond the purpose of this chapter. For the present discussion, it is impor-

---

3 Former Russian prime minister and foreign minister, and lately Director of the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Academy of Sciences.

4 If not otherwise specified, with "Russian" I intend either *rossiiskii* (all-Russian) or *Rossiian* (Russian citizen) – to be distinguished from *russkii* (ethnic Russian).

tant to note that traditional Islam has been adopted by the Russian official doctrine of religion as a legitimate component of Russian history and civilization. Most importantly, it is incorporated into President Vladimir Putin's project of a new Russian patriotism, based on the idea of an all-Russian (*rossiiskii*) fatherland constructed on a multi-ethnic and multi-religious civilization of which each component, including Muslims, is equally legitimate. Many official Islamic organizations have embraced this view and granted their support to the central state. In this way, they have been able to establish themselves as authoritative spiritual centres as well as influential political entities. They have also become allies of the state on all religious issues, in particular Islamic education and the integration of Muslims recently immigrated from the former Soviet republics.

Primakov's analysis had distinguished Islamic fundamentalism, interpreted as a strict application of Islamic precepts, from Islamic extremism, which conducts an incorrect and biased reading of sacred texts<sup>5</sup>. As such, in the official view of both the Russian state and Islamic organizations, traditional Islam has lost its threatening character, while Islamic extremism has been increasingly identified with an ideology of terror, and not with a (deviant) manifestation of a religion. At the same time, despite state policies towards religious extremism still being blurred, a safe space has been created in which the discourse about Islam has acquired a high level of sophistication and includes discussions on political Islam, inter-religious dialogue, and violence<sup>6</sup>.

---

5 Primakov, Evgeny. *A World Challenged: fighting terrorism in the twenty-first century*. Washington DC, 2004.

6 Sagramoso and Yarlykapov assert that the official distinction of traditional Islam has been superseded by the acceptance, in the North Caucasus, of moderate Salafi groups, which are new to Russia, to participate into official Islamic institutions. It seems to me, instead, that the concept of traditional Islam has been implicitly modified by the process of securitization/desecuritization of Islam. It has been extended to define all those forms of Islam in Russia that accept the secular Russian state as political form – thus ceasing to be a threat (Sagramoso, Domitilla/Yarlykapov, Akhmet. 'Caucasian Crescent: Russia's Islamic Policies and its Responses to Radicalization.' In: *The Fire Below. How the Caucasus Shaped Russia*. Robert Bruce Ware (Ed). London, 2013. pp. 51-94.

### 3. Muslims as supporters of the secular state: official Islamic institutions

After more than a decade of internal rivalries for doctrinal, social, and political supremacy<sup>7</sup> Russian official Islamic institutions have clustered around a few representative centres. Today, the most influential of them is the Russian Muftis Council (*Sovet Muftiev Rossii* –RMC)<sup>8</sup> based in Moscow and led by the Tatar mufti Ravil Gainudtin, which now enjoys access to the Kremlin and a prestigious position as representative of Russia's Muslims in several official Councils (at par with the Orthodox Church).

Like many Tatar Muslim leaders, Gainudtin is close to (neo)*jadidism*, inspired by the Islamic modernist movement which emerged in Russian Turkestan at the end of the nineteenth century. Of *jadidism*, many Tatar leaders today emphasize the importance of a modern, Western-style education (which does not, however, rejects Islam) and the necessity for Muslims to actively contribute to economic development and the socio-political life<sup>9</sup>. After an initial, unsuccessful separatist attempt in the early 1990s, now Tatars have undertaken to contribute to the shaping of Russian polity from within<sup>10</sup>. Unsurprisingly, Muslims inspired by *jadidism* openly claim the necessity and desirability of Muslims' active participation to state policies.

---

7 Silant'ev, Roman. 'Chetvertaia sila rossiiskogo islama.' In: Novaya Gazeta- Religion. 7 April, 2010. [http://religion.ng.ru/events/2010-04-07/2\\_islam.html](http://religion.ng.ru/events/2010-04-07/2_islam.html) [26 April, 2010]; Hunter, Shireen/ Thomas, Jeffrey L. / Melikishvili, Alexander. Islam in Russia: the politics of identity and security. New York, 2004.

8 Official website: <http://www.muslim.ru> (in Russian, English and Arabic).

9 *Jadidism* aimed at the modernization of Muslim society within the Russian Empire. It advocated the necessity to improve and update the general level of education of Turkestan's Muslims, including women, with the acquisition of Western modern knowledge. Through education, it also aimed at a broader and more effective participation of Muslims in administrative positions. Very popular among the merchants, but opposed by the conservative muftis, it looked at Europe for progressive knowledge, but also at the nationalist movements that were developing there. In particular, it was exposed to the pan-Turkism of Ismail Gasprinski's (or Ismail Gaspirai, an inspiring figure of *jadidism* and equally a Tatar, but from Crimea). *Jadidism* blossomed during what is considered by Tatars to be their Golden Age, until the October Revolution. Today, as neo-*jadidism*, it influences many Tatar religious and secular thinkers. See Khalid, Adeeb. The Politics of Muslim Cultural Reform: Jadidism in Central Asia. Berkeley, 1998.

10 Khakimov, Rafael. Rafael Khakimov. Gde nasha Mekka?. Interros, March 2, 2007, [http://www.intelros.ru/2007/03/02/rafajel\\_khakimov\\_gde\\_nasha\\_mekka.html](http://www.intelros.ru/2007/03/02/rafajel_khakimov_gde_nasha_mekka.html) [August 13, 2015].

Among the official Islamic institutions in the Russian Federation, the RMC is considered the one that most effectively expresses an independent Muslim point of view, while confirming its support to the state<sup>11</sup>. After 1991, Russia's Islamic leaders had to face doctrinal and institutional challenges. A series of Islamic terrorist events, in the North Caucasus and elsewhere in Russia, and the September 11, 2001 attacks challenged the authority of the Islamic Boards<sup>12</sup>. In general, most Russian Islamic leaders have repeatedly condemned what they called 'Wahhabism' as a distorted interpretation of Islam, and as alien to Russia's Muslim traditions. Initially, their arguments were not very sophisticated, with few references to sacred texts and only scattered theological reasonings. Like other Muslim minorities in non-Muslim countries, the Russian community also seemed to be more preoccupied to counter the perception of Islam in general as a religion of violence, than to counter *jihadist* claims on their doctrinal terrain. Indeed, some leaders proved less sure of their position on sensitive issues: In 2003, the Head of the Central Spiritual Directorate of the Muslims of Russia (CDUM), Talgat Tajuddin, publicly approved of terrorist attacks by Palestinians against Israel (harshly criticized, he withdrew his comment)<sup>13</sup>. Gradually, Islamic leaders in Russia have deepened their theological expertise. Their growing mastering of the details of the Hanafi and Sufi precepts is evident. The results of an intense reflection on their identity, which has been supported by the higher doctrinal sophistication of both leaders and believers, are particularly visible in a programmatic document recently published by the Russian Muftis Council<sup>14</sup>.

The text recurs to Qur'anic verses (10:19; 49:13) to maintain the equality of all nations and the particular respect owed to the peoples of the Book (Qur'an 2:109). It firmly rejects the idea of a chosen people who would be superior to all others. As far as Russia's Muslims are concerned, the document underscores how they are aware to belong simultaneously to the *ummah*, to their national and ethnic group, and to Russia. The idea of

---

11 Curanović, Alicja. *The Religious Factor in Russia's Foreign Policy*. London, 2012.

12 Russian Spiritual Boards were created by Catherine the Great to harmonize the administrative structure of Muslim communities to the Imperial model (and control them).

13 As quoted in Laruelle, Marlène. *Russian Eurasianism: An Ideology of Empire*. Baltimore, 2008.

14 *Sotsialn'aia doktrina rossiiskikh musul'man* (The social doctrine of Russia's Muslims). <http://muslim.ru/actual/13636/> [28 July, 2015].

Russian patriotism is essential in the argument of RMC, because it counters the idea that Muslims are extraneous to Russia and, therefore, should fight to free themselves from its dominance. Instead, Muslims are encouraged to strengthen the Russian state, to participate to military service out of love for their fatherland and not because it is imposed, and in general to support the central government.

The RMC's call to loyalty to Russia, based on 'historical reasons' of coexistence and civilizational community, is further strengthened by religious arguments. The document makes reference to the *fiqh* of the minority (*fiqh al-aqalliyyat*) to legitimate the position of Muslims abiding by the laws of a non-Muslim government that allows them to practice their faith. According to the RMC document, state laws are the social expression of a dialogue that is essential among peoples and individuals – within the *ummah* as well as between Muslims and non-Muslims (Qur'an 5:1, 8:58, and 2:177 are quoted).

Quoting the dialogue between Mohammed and Muadh ibn Jabal, the author(s) point at the necessity to integrate the Sharia with rules adequate to face the challenges of the contemporary world. In full agreement with *jadidist* interpretations, they emphasize that 'the *fiqh* of the minority does not prevent from working in the government, in some cases it even requests such activity', and cite the case of the Prophet Joseph mentioned in the Sura 12. The document highlights that neither the Qur'an nor the Sunna mention the Caliphate, which was a historical phenomenon, as a form of Islamic government. Instead, it praises the cooperation of Muslims with the governments of their fatherlands, as it happens for Russians and Europeans who 'consider their fatherland *Dar-as-Salam* (abode of peace), *Dar al-'Ahd* (abode of dialogue) and *Dar-ash-Shahada* (abode in which it is possible to profess one's religion)'.

The document is very specific in denouncing the incorrectness of extremists' interpretations of *jihad*. After defining *jihad* as 'the internal and external focus to follow the right, straight path', it quotes a series of sacred sources to emphasize the much greater importance of the internal *jihad*. Interestingly, it immediately points out what it defines as the fundamental error of many young people, who leave for the external *jihad* without their parents' consent (a clear address to a worrisome Russian trend). The author(s) continue by explaining that the external *jihad* is not to be completely rejected; however, it is allowed only in connection 'with socio-political, and not individual, responsibility', and it can be launched only by religious authorities.

In the effort to counter extremists on their own terrain, the document repeatedly quotes Ibn Taimiya's 'full traditional' interpretation of *jihad*: 'your jihad is love, truth, hope, utterance of the name of Allah. For what concerns the fought jihad, this is a satanic deception for unresolved conditions and requirements'.

The motivations of *jihadists* – to substitute a secular or unfair regime with a true Islamic one – are misplaced, the document explains, because *jihad* is not an instrument to ease discontent deriving from political or economic issues – that is the role of the dialogue with the state. For the RMC, the overall underlying argument that Muslims must live under a Sharia regime is incorrect. To prove this point, the document reports several passages from the Qur'an and the Sunna underscoring Islam's clear preference for political and social stability as conducive environment for the prosperity of Muslims. The reader is reminded that the Qur'an abhors any disorder or instability and that a stable government, able to ensure peace and prosperity, is to be preferred to any form of social unrest or revolution – even Islamic ones (Qur'an 2:217; 16:90). This precept is so strong, the authors comment, that it must be applied even in the case of a slightly unjust or repressive government, and even if the intentions of the revolutionaries are to rectify the authorities' wrongdoings and to establish Islam as the supreme model of justice.

The RMC identifies in a proper Islamic education the solution to the fundamental problem of the misinterpretation of Islamic texts and the diffusion of extremism. Many other authoritative Muslim scholars share this view. Rafik Mukhametshin, the Director of both the All-Russian Islamic Institute in Moscow and the Russian Islamic University in Kazan', in particular sees in the complex combination of juvenile idealism, doctrinal ignorance, and the failure of foreign-educated young Muslims (including teachers) to grasp the specific character of Russia's Islamic traditions, the primary cause of young Muslims' sensitivity to religious extremism. This analysis reveals the influence of neo-jadidist and modernist Islamic thought<sup>15</sup>, and it is shared by many observers, including the Russian state<sup>16</sup>. However, even when one discards isolated comments that relate Is-

---

15 However, this is not a perspective exclusive to the Russian Muslim community.

16 '*Sistema islamskogo obrazovaniia v Rossii dolzhna gotovit' musul'manskikh bogoslovov mirovogo masshtaba*' – mufti Mikaddas Bibrasov ('The system of Islamic education in Russia must prepare Muslim religious leaders of world level', says



lamic terrorism to mental illness<sup>17</sup>, not everybody agrees on the degree of responsibility that Russian Islamic religious leaders bear in countering extremism.

#### 4. *Islam as an element of Russian political system.*

Leonid Siukiianen, Professor of Islamic Law at Moscow's Higher School of Economics and an authoritative commentator on Islam, emphasizes that Islam is not just a religion, but also the carrier of a strong socio-political model<sup>18</sup>. The complex nature of Islam requires a trained mind to be comprehended in its entirety, he notes, and it is not understood by Islamic extremists, who interpret religious precepts incorrectly. However, Siukiianen observes, such errors do originate from within the Islamic doctrine, and it is therefore a mistake to consider Islamic terrorism a non-religious ideology.

In Siukiianen's analysis<sup>19</sup>, the fundamental error made by Islamic extremists lies in their vision of the Sharia. Contrary to what they argue, the

---

mufti Mikaddas Bibrasov). 16 April, 2014. <http://muslim.ru/articles/96/5397/> [13 August, 2015].

- 17 The possibility is suggested by the rector of the Moscow Islamic University, Damir-khazrat Khairetdinov. Vzglyad.ru. *'I tut nachinaiutsia variant vrode dzhihad'* [And then an option like *jihad* begins] <http://vz.ru/society/2013/10/24/656211.html>. [14 July, 2014].
- 18 Siukiianen, Leonid R. *Musul'manskii opyt mirostroitel'stva: bazovye tseli i tsennosti, formy poznania i sotsiokul'turnoi organizatsii. Istoricheskii opyt i rossiiskaia situatsiia*. [Muslim experience of the construction of the world: basic objectives and values, forms of knowledge and of socio-cultural organization. Historical experience and the Russian situation]. <http://www.intelros.ru/pdf/doklad.pdf> [July 7, 2012]; Syukiyanen, Leonid. 'The State Policy toward Islam in the CIS Countries: Problems and Perspectives.' In: Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue for Sustainable Development. Proceedings of the International Conference. 13-16 September. Moscow, 2007. Russian Academy for Public Administration under the President of the Russian Federation; Siukiianen, Leonid. 'Umerennost' kak strategiiia sovremennogo islama' [Moderateness as strategy of contemporary Islam]. In: NG Religii, March 1, 2006. [http://www.ng.ru/ng\\_religii/2006-03-01/4\\_umerennost.html](http://www.ng.ru/ng_religii/2006-03-01/4_umerennost.html). [7 July, 2012].
- 19 Siukiianen, Leonid. 'Islam protiv Islama. Ob Islamskoi al'ternative ekstremizmu i terrorizmu' [Islam against Islam. On Islamic alternatives to extremism and terrorism]. In: Tsentral'naia Aziia i Kavkaz, 2002, 3/21. [http://www.ca-c.org/journal/2002/journal\\_rus/cac-03/09.sikru.shtml](http://www.ca-c.org/journal/2002/journal_rus/cac-03/09.sikru.shtml) [10 August, 2015].

Sharia is not a granitic, immutable set of rules that must be applied by the letter. Instead, Siukiianen explains, the Sharia must be considered in its deep meaning and general intent as divine law. Its precepts must be interpreted in the light of historic and socio-political circumstances, according to the Islamic process of *ijtihad*. Siukiianen quotes several Qur'anic verses, along with ancient and contemporary authoritative Islamic scholars like Ibn Taimiyya and Yusuf al-Qaradawi, in support of his own statements.

If *ijtihad* is correctly conducted, Siukiianen remarks, several core principles of the Sharia reveal themselves not only compatible with, but even beneficial to modern socio-political systems, including democracy. The core of Siukiianen's argument lies in the Sharia concept of moderateness (*wasatiyyah*, in Russian *umerennost'*), which expresses Islam's true vision of politics and which he translates as 'prudence, temperance, equidistance'<sup>20</sup>. The acceptance of *umerennost'* by all Russians (Muslim and non-Muslim) as a shared value – and not as an imposition – would contribute to prevent the insurgence of social conflict, thanks to each individual's self-restraint.

Islam's fundamental approach to the state, Siukiianen argues, is one of cooperation and support – not of opposition. For Siukiianen, the matter is not only how to 'place' or 'regulate' Islam. He advocates the elaboration, in the Russian system, of a positive conceptualization of Islam intended as a system of (political) values, and deplores the incapability (at the time of his writing) of Russia's Muslims to elaborate a valuable proposal for the incorporation of Islamic concepts into state legislation<sup>21</sup>. He admits that the secular state should abstain from theological debates; however, in the face of Muslims' inadequacy, he explicitly encourages the Russian government to undertake this task in their place.

Like the RMC (and Russian state patriotism), Siukiianen reminds his audience that Russia's Islam is inextricably connected to Russian history and culture. Some general Islamic principles, he notes, have already entered Russian society through *jadidism* in Tatarstan and Sufi *tariqats* in the Caucasus. A deeper comprehension of Islamic political precepts is therefore both possible and desirable. To strengthen his argument, Siukiianen adds that the concept of *umerennost'* is being gradually adopted in the

---

20 Siukiianen, *Umerennost*.

21 Siukiianen, 2007 a, 2007 b, 2007 c, 2006.

most dynamic parts of the Islamic world, particularly in Kuwait, successfully proving the benefits of its introduction in modern, democratic societies. In Russia, besides reducing social conflict, a deeper acceptance of Islamic values would enhance Russia's internal inter-civilizational and inter-religious dialogue. Additionally, he notes, it would upgrade Russia's standing in the Muslim world, improving their mutual relations from the current level of 'dialogue' to that of full 'understanding' – a much more promising perspective.

Although Siukiianen openly proposes the adoption of Islamic precepts by Russia's legislative system and, in a way, by all its citizens, he is very clear that he does not intend to threaten or uproot the state's secular, modernist essence. Instead, his discussion reveals the strong influence of *ja-didist* principles, even when they are not explicitly mentioned. In the end, Siukiianen offers a strong model of a multi-ethnic and multi-religious polity that does not just preach tolerance but, on the contrary, solicits the active contribution of all its parts to the common good.

##### 5. *Islam as revolutionary force*

A different scenario, in contrast, is depicted by Geidar Dzhemal'<sup>22</sup>, the Head of the Russian Islamic Committee and a popular commentator on issues of religion and geopolitics. Like other observers, Dzhemal' emphasizes the crucial role that Islamic values can, and should, play in contemporary societies. At the centre of his argument, though, he puts another Islamic concept, very important in Shi'ah theology: justice (*al-'Adalah*, in Russian *spravedlivost'*)<sup>23</sup>. For Dzhemal', *spravedlivost'* holds a universal

---

22 In his early political career Dzhemal' had joined the extreme right circles around Aleksandr Dugin and the Eurasianist movement. Although he distanced himself from the Eurasianist movement in the late 1990s, he maintained relations with many of its exponents. Until his death in December 2016, Dzhemal' regularly appeared on the most important Russian mass media, television or radio programmes. His arguments have a deep, if eclectic, theoretical foundation, and focus on the interconnection between (Islamic) religious and political factors.

23 Dzhemal', Geidar. *Perspektivy vosstanovleniia politicheskogo Islama kak global'nogo faktora* [Perspectives on the restoration of political Islam as a global factor]. St. Petersburg, 26 September, 2013. <http://kontrudar.com/lekcii/perspektivy-vosstanovleniya-politicheskogo-islama-kak-globalnogo-faktora>. Half Azeri by birth, Dzhemal' makes no mystery of his close connection with Iranian religious

meaning, the application of which would solve the social tensions of contemporary societies. However, he remarks, it does not come about through conciliation, but through revolution.

According to Dzhemal', after the collapse of the Soviet communist model, world societies experienced the 'enslavement' to economic forces, in which most humanity is treated as 'mere biomaterial'. Dzhemal' notes that this condition resembles that of pre-revolutionary Russia. However, he declares, Marxism can no longer be a solution, because it deals with outdated issues (class relations and economy). Today, Dzhemal' claims, 'the most essential protest is the protest about the religious'<sup>24</sup>. For him, the civil movements that criticize capitalism and liberalism are also inadequate, for they merely pursue better economic standards of living, but not a better human condition<sup>25</sup>.

Dzhemal' deems the other religions of the Book (Judaism and Christianity) particularly unfit to counter world injustice. In his analysis, because Christianity and Judaism modify the message of God through the interpretation of their clerics/ministers, they preclude humanity from a direct knowledge of the Divine. This reveals how, historically, they have actively aimed at preserving the 'pyramidal' structure that has been imposed on world society since the times of Plato and Aristotle. Indeed, he continues, they still strive to preserve the 'pyramid', or 'matrix', in place<sup>26</sup>.

Islam's fundamental characteristic, instead, according to Dzhemal' is to 'open a break' into the 'mainstream' conceptualization of social structure. Dzhemal' juxtaposes the systemic 'matrix' (which regulates social coexistence through a rigid normative system) to a 'spirit' (*dukh*) that is free from the matrix – and always against it. The spirit represents the essence of religion: It 'belongs to God'<sup>27</sup> and, as such, it is 'meaning' (*smisl'*)<sup>28</sup>. Islam provides the channel through which human beings can connect to God and therefore discover the meaning of their own existence. The meaning

---

and political circles. He is a friend to the late Imam Khomeini's son, and he has spent a few years in Qom. The influence of Shi'ah theology and, in general, of Iranian intellectuals is apparent throughout Dzhemal''s works.

24 Dzhemal', Geidar. *Politicheskii Islam segodnia – analog kommunizma 19 veka* [Today's political Islam is analogous to nineteenth-century-communism]. 22 February, 2014. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V3Q3h\\_mhfYk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V3Q3h_mhfYk), 7 m:47 s.

25 Ibid, 10 m:04 s.

26 Dzhemal', *Politicheskii Islam*; Dzhemal', *Perspectivy vosstanovleniia*.

27 *Politicheskii Islam*, 27 m:00 s.

28 Ibid., 34 m:35 s.

(*smisl'*) is the basis of justice: This, for Dzhemal', is the core message of the Revelation of the Prophets and the fundamental significance of political Islam<sup>29</sup>.

Today, he claims, the only way to free humanity from its enslavement is an eschatological struggle, where the flag of the oppressed can only be the solidarity in the name of a sacral and metaphysical understanding of justice. But justice lies only in Islam<sup>30</sup>.

In Dzhemal''s analysis, every religious protest is about the formation and nature of the system – not about external formalities such as obtaining legal permission to interrupt daily activities to pray five times a day. Politicians avoid defining protests 'religious', and label them 'extremism, terrorism' because they fear the formidably subversive nature of the protest. Indeed, he notes, Islam is a revolutionary force, which has maintained the same characteristics of its origins, when Muhammad and his companions were alive and 'fought against Byzantium and Iran'<sup>31</sup>. Instead, Dzhemal' points out, to achieve the purpose of Islam, which is the revelation of the connection between the spirit and human existence, a complex matrix is not necessary. He claims that the Sharia alone can regulate the relations among people, replacing society (matrix) with (Islamic) community.

Like Siukiianen, Dzhemal' rejects the official position of the Russian state that deprives Islamic terrorism of its religious character. Instead, he emphasizes the deep Islamic nature of what he sees as an upcoming revolution. He shares with *jihadists* the praise of Islam as it was practiced at Muhammad's times, and the condemnation of Islamic legal traditions as corrupted. Like Islamic extremists, he sharply criticizes the religious, economic, and political conditions of contemporary societies, although he does not support the idea of a Caliphate (in his opinion, a historical, not religious, institution). However, he considers most Chechen separatist leaders 'Soviet kids', actually ignorant of Islam and driven by secular, ethnic-based motives. He also declares that suicide terrorists are not true Muslims and that they are 'manoeuvred' by not better specified 'anti-Islamic forces'. Further, he refrains from using harsh tones against non-Muslims. Contrary to terrorists, he rejects *fitnah* and chaos, and makes as-

---

29 Dzhemal', *Perspectivy vosstanovleniia*.

30 Ibid.

31 Dzhemal', *Politicheskii Islam* 37-38 m.

surances that a proper Islamic regime will not allow ‘bandits’ to act violently ‘under the green flag’.

Dzhemal’s conceptualization of political Islam reveals a composite, sophisticated intellectual background. Similarly to Qutb and, especially, Khomeini, who elaborated Islamic political theories constructed on different foundations than Western ones<sup>32</sup>, Dzhemal’ identifies in Islam’s doctrinal, religious nature the source of its strength as an original political model. The centrality of *spravedlivo*, in Dzhemal’s intellectual construction, reveals the influence of Shi’ah theology. In particular, the systemic connivance of sacerdotal and political great powers (the matrix) had been indicated – and condemned – by the Iranian Islamic intellectual Ali Shari’ati, prior to the Iranian revolution<sup>33</sup>. Like Shari’ati, Dzhemal’ reinforces his critique of the Bible with constant references to Western philosophy, starting from the ancient Greeks and proceeding through Enlightenment and rationalism.

The truly interesting characteristic in Dzhemal’s position is the explicit, direct connection to Russia. The association of Marxism and Islam had already been made by Ali Shari’ati, among others. Shari’ati, though, was discussing Marxism in its intellectual formulation, rather than in its empirical implementation. Dzhemal’, instead, specifically refers to the reality of the Soviet Union. He claims<sup>34</sup> that, like in the early twentieth century, the situation in Russia today is both universal and unique. Russian social revolutionaries and populists had embraced Marxism because of its promises of stronger revolutionary ideas and international connections. Despite the success of the October Revolution however, he concludes, in the end the situation of Russia was too specific to allow real cooperation among global activists.

In 1989, Iran’s Ayatollah Khomeini had expressed to the then Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev his vision of the beneficial role of Islam as substitute of the crumbling Communist ideology<sup>35</sup>. Today, Dzhemal’ announces, thanks to Islam Russia can – again – be connected to the global

---

32 Euben, Roxanne L. *Enemy in the Mirror: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Limits of Modern Rationalism: A Work of Comparative Political Theory*. Princeton, 1999.

33 Shari’ati, ‘Ali. *Man & Islam*. Houston, 1981, p.15 and following.

34 Dzhemal’, *Politicheskii Islam*.

35 Khomeini. “A call to Divine Unity”. (Letter to Mikhail Gorbachev). 1989. [http://www.en.imam-khomeini.ir/en/c5\\_3153/Book/English/A\\_Call\\_to\\_Divine\\_Unity](http://www.en.imam-khomeini.ir/en/c5_3153/Book/English/A_Call_to_Divine_Unity).

forces that can stir the 'mainstream'. Indeed, Dzhemal' considers Islam the successor of Bolshevik-Marxism<sup>36</sup>. Asked to clarify what is the 'meaning' of life that should be unveiled by an Islamic revolution, he answers: 'it's Islamic Marxism under the name of *jihad*<sup>37</sup>. Indeed, he claims, independent of the level of self-awareness, every individual who is somehow 'against the matrix' has 'his or her heart beating with a religious beat [and] sooner or later [he or she] takes to revolutionary struggle<sup>38</sup>'. He announces that 'Muslims will be the organizers of the political process' that, he predicts, will inevitably unfold all over Europe, and '[t]he Westerners will be fined for their hindering of the truth'<sup>39</sup>.

Dzhemal's arguments are clearly revolutionary, although elaborated in a sophisticated philosophical and theological scheme. However, he does not attack the idea of a Russian nation or state in favor of an Islamic regime – on the contrary, Dzhemal' envisions a leading role for Russia as initiator of the Islamic revolution, which will restore the greatness it had enjoyed in imperial and, especially, Soviet times. His project is *for* Russia, not against it.

## 6. A Russian interpretation of *jihad*

Scholarly works praise the long tradition of Islamic practices in the Caucasus, the doctrinal knowledge of Dagestani communities, and their contribution to Russian and Islamic civilizations<sup>40</sup>. Fiercely anti-Soviet during the Communist persecution<sup>41</sup>, in the 1990 s Sufi *tariqats* of the North Caucasus joined other Muslim Spiritual Boards in the region to defend tradi-

---

36 It is noteworthy that one of the fundamental accusations against Ali Shari'ati was his being a 'Marxist'.

37 Solov'ev, Vladimir. *Poedinok Vladimir Zhirinovskii i Geidar Dzhemal'* [Duel with Vladimir Zhirinovskii and Geidar Dzhemal']. 28 February, 2011. Rossiia 1. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ecPkh9I4AY>. [15 March 2011].

38 Dzhemal', *Politicheskii Islam*, 1 h.

39 Ibid., 1 h:10 m.

40 Bobrovnikov, Vladimir O. *Musul'mane Severnogo Kavkaza: obychai, pravo, nasilie. Ocherki po istorii i etnografii prava Nagornogo Dagestana* [Muslims of North Caucasus: habits, law, violence. Essays on history and ethnography of law of Nagorny Dagestan]. Moscow, 2002.

41 Bennigsen called 'parallel Islam' the forms of Islam practiced under the Soviet domination by Sufi *tariqats* that opposed the anti-religious, anti-Islamic and often colonialist practices of the Communist regime.

tional Islam. Throughout the Chechen conflicts<sup>42</sup>, Sufi leaders condemned Islamic extremism brandished by *jihadists* and separatists as both non-Islamic and non-Russian<sup>43</sup>.

For this reason, terrorist and separatist organizations have looked for affiliations in the international Islamic extremist scene<sup>44</sup>, most notably with Al-Qaeda. Today, separatist groups, since 2007 reunited under the umbrella of the Imarat Kavkaz (Caucasian Emirate, IK), openly challenge the traditional establishment of Sufi leaders (and other local Muslim leaders), who in turn are becoming reliable allies of the government<sup>45</sup>.

The main purpose of the IK is to establish an independent Caliphate in the Caucasus that, possibly, would expand into Southern Russia. The Caliphate should have an Islamic government strictly following the Sharia. To reach its objective, the Imarat does not hesitate to employ terrorist and even suicide techniques – although the details of the attacks have been revised in time. While former charismatic leader Doka Umarov (killed in 2014) allowed the targeting of the whole population, including Muslims, his successor Aliaskhab Kebekov, better educated in Islam, has banned attacks on civilians and targeted security forces alone. Further, Kebekov has revoked the admissibility of women suicide bombers (but not of suicide attacks by men), which Umarov had tolerated<sup>46</sup>.

Overall, the rhetoric of the IK and the other, smaller separatist groups in the North Caucasus is very similar to international *jihadist* narratives,

---

42 The so-called Chechen conflicts (or Chechen wars) are in fact a series of armed conflicts that escalated during two periods, from 1994 to 1996, and again from 1999 to 2009, with alternating levels of confrontation.

43 Rossiiskii.

44 Vatchagaev, Mairbek. 'The Role of Sufism in the Chechen Resistance.' North Caucasus Analysis [now: North Caucasus Weekly]. 6/16, 28 April 2005 [15 July, 2015]. [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/nc/archivesnca/nc2005/?tx\\_publicationstnews\\_pi2\[issue\]=16](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/nc/archivesnca/nc2005/?tx_publicationstnews_pi2[issue]=16;); Malashenko, Alexey/ Dmitrii Trenin. Russia's restless frontier: the Chechnya factor in post-Soviet Russia. Washington, 2004.

45 Kavkazkii Emirat (Imarat Kavkaz) [Caucasus Emirate (Imarat Kavkaz)]. Kavkaz Uzel/Caucasian Knot, 15 July, 2013. <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/158730/> [15 July, 2015]; 'The North Caucasus: The Challenges of Integration (I): Ethnicity and Conflict.' Crisis Group Europe Report No. 220, 19 October, 2012. <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/europe/north-caucasus/220-the-north-caucasus-the-challenges-of-integration-i-ethnicity-and-conflict.aspx> [10 August, 2015].

46 Fuller, Liz. 'New North Caucasus Insurgency Leader Seeks To Avoid Suicide Bombings.' Radio Free Europe, 3 July, 2014. <http://www.rferl.org/content/caucasus-report-suicide-bombings/25444420.html> [7 July, 2015].



which confirms the extension of their global contacts. In the case of North Caucasus, a strong anti-Russian element, in the sense of anti-colonial resistance, is present. It is not infrequent for reference to be made to historic figures of national resistance revered as heroes, the most important of whom is Sheik Mansur, who rebelled against Catherine the Great in the 18<sup>th</sup> century<sup>47</sup>.

Moscow's harsh repression of Islamic terrorism in the region has been effectively supported by the Head of Chechnya Ramzan Kadyrov, a Muslim who has embraced the concept of Russian traditional Islam. Partially for this reason, many Caucasian *jihadists* have left to fight in Syria and Iraq. Some of them have reached high positions in the ranks of the Islamic State<sup>48</sup>. This fact, and the growing, solid prestige that the IS is gaining among Islamic extremists, according to many observers has weakened Imarat Kavkaz to the point that, in July 2015, it announced its alliance with the IS<sup>49</sup>. The consequences of this decision have become immediately apparent, with the diffusion of messages in the Russian language according to a strategy that, regarding their content and methods, follow that of IS<sup>50</sup>.

However, because of its stronger image and real capabilities, the IS is expected to take the lead over the Imarat<sup>51</sup>. As the Islamic State is focused on conquering Syria and Iraq, and it does not seem to be interested in attacking Russia, the Imarat may be forced to reduce or eliminate the specific anti-Russian, anti-colonialist character of its mission. Indeed, it seems to have already de-facto abandoned it, as most of its fighters are engaged abroad<sup>52</sup>.

---

47 Kavkazkii Emirat, 2013.

48 Caucasians in the ranks of IS (ISIL). <http://eng.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/30056/>, 28 November, 2014 [14 July, 2015].

49 Imarat Kavkaz (Kavkazkii Emirat) [Imarat Kavkaz (Caucasus Emirate)]. Kavkaz Uzel/Caucasian Knot, 11 August, 2015. <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/158730/> [11 August, 2015].

50 Paraszczuk, Joanna. IS Boosts Russian-Language Propaganda Efforts. Radio Free Europe, 6 July, 2015. <http://www.rferl.org/content/is-boosts-russian-language-propaganda-efforts/27112518.html> [7 July, 2015].

51 Caucasians in the ranks of IS (ISIL), 2014.

52 The completion date of this chapter did not allow to take into consideration the most recent strategy of Islamic fighters in the North Caucasus, which indeed reflects the developments of the war in Syria.

## 7. Conclusion

The official doctrine of the Russian Federation identifies Russia's Muslims as one of the founding (*korinnnye*) groups of the Russian state and an important contributor to Russian civilization. Historically, though, this condition has not always been acknowledged by the Slavic dominant majority, which has affected the relations among the communities. After 1991, Russia's Muslims have acquired a stronger awareness of their Islamic as well as national and civic heritage. Depending on their historical and specific experiences, such awareness has translated into cooperation with or opposition to the Russian state. Today, many Muslim communities and their leaders have embraced the idea of a composite all-Russian (*rossiiskii*) civilization, in which Islam has played a significant role, among religions second only to that of Orthodox Christianity.

Many Muslims intend to participate in the construction of a new Russian identity and polity – sometimes through radical processes. Other groups, instead, reject the vision of a common civilization and fight against what they perceive to be a colonial domination by Moscow.

In any case, because Russia's Muslims have belonged, at least de jure, to the Russian state (be it the tsarist Empire or the Soviet Union) for centuries, their actions are necessarily those of citizens toward their 'fatherland' (even if it is rejected), and not those of newcomers. For this reason, Muslims' relations with the Russian state are much more complex and closely intertwined than those of Muslim minorities in non-Muslim, secular states elsewhere, for example in Europe.