

Overcounting Russia's Muslims

Implications for Security and Society

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Russia's top Muslim officials, Russian prime minister and former president Vladimir Putin, and Russian and American scholars all typically put the number of Muslim believers in Russia at around 15 to 20 million. Henry Kissinger, in a July 2008 opinion piece in the *Washington Post*, claimed that Russia has 25 million Muslims. These estimates are significantly inflated and unsubstantiated. The demographic base of Muslim communities in Russia is, on the whole, significantly weaker and also more fragmented. The best available census and survey data strongly suggest that the number of Muslim believers in Russia is unlikely to be more than 11 million (see Table 1). Most of these self-identified Muslims rarely attend religious services or perform religious rituals. While these results are based on census data from 2002, the likelihood that the number of Muslims in Russia has increased is statistically insignificant.

For the following reasons, Muslim populations in Russia have not been growing as fast or spreading as far or as rapidly outside their homelands as many might think:

- Two ethnic groups that account for approximately half of Russia's Muslims – Tatars and Bashkirs – have posted the slowest rates of natural population growth among Russian Muslim populations. According to University of Maryland geographer Timothy Heleniak, in terms of median age in 2002 (37.7 years for Tatars and 34.2 for Bashkirs) and mean family size in 1989 (3.3 and 3.5) these groups look more like ethnic Russians than the ethnic Muslim populations of the Caucasus.

Table 1**Maximum Likely Number of Muslims in Russia (by self-identification), 2002-2007**

	Census estimate of traditionally Muslim ethnic groups (in millions)	% Muslims (by surveys)	No. of Muslims (est.) (in millions)
"VOLGA MUSLIMS"			
TATARS	5.56	70.6	3.93
In Tatarstan	2.00	-	1.41
In Bashkortostan	0.93	-	0.66
BASHKIRS (of which 1.22, or 73 percent, are in Bashkortostan)	1.67	[76.5] (N=18)	1.28
BASHKIR-TATAR GROUPING:	7.23		5.21
In titular republics	3.22		2.34

NORTH CAUCASIANS	4.84	81.6 (Adyghes) 81.0 (Dagestan)	3.9
In Southern Federal District			3.69

AZERIS	0.62	91.9	0.57
CENTRAL/SOUTH ASIANS	1.10	81.1 (Kazakhs)	0.9
			(Kazakhs=0.65)

TOTAL:			10.6-11

- The fertility gap between traditionally Muslim ethnic groups and Slavs has been narrowing since 1999. The convergence of birth rates is illustrated by an analysis of the percentages of ethnic male population by age cohort. As Judyth Twigg of Virginia Commonwealth University has estimated using census data, at the time of the 2002 census ethnic Muslims accounted for about 9.5 percent of males among 18-to-19 year olds, gradually rising to 13.2 percent among 5-to-9 year olds, but then declining to 12.7 percent among 0-to-4 year olds.
- The growth of Muslim populations is, in part, an artifact of changing patterns of respondents' ethnic identification between the 1989 and 2002 censuses, as found by Dominique Arel in 2002 and Xavier Le Torrivellec in 2004. The collapse of the Soviet state, in which Russification was a precondition for upward mobility, made claiming Russian ethnic identity less advantageous to people of mixed ethnic background. Ethnographic research conducted at the time of the 2002 census also found that partners in mixed marriages were increasingly choosing the predominant local (non-Russian) ethnicity for their children.
- From 1989 to 2002 the principal trend was not territorial dispersal of ethnic Muslim populations, but reconcentration within their ethnic homelands. Except for Chechens, each ethnic Muslim group increased its share in their homelands. Most notably, between censuses, the number of Tatars residing in Tatarstan increased by 235,000, while the number of Tatars elsewhere in the Russian Federation decreased by 202,000.

These are not mere statistical corrections. They do more than debunk the projections that a quarter of Russia's population is going to be Muslim by 2030 or that Russia may become a predominantly Islamic state by 2050. They suggest that the "consumer base" for Islam in Russia at the national level is significantly smaller, more fragmented, and less dynamic than it may have appeared. This has profound and far-reaching sociopolitical implications.

Not only are Islamic populations more dispersed and smaller than is often believed, but the level of religiosity (understood as the knowledge of religious doctrine, mosque attendance, and performance of rites and rituals) among Russian Muslims is low. Survey research provides strong evidence that Islamic practices are predominantly social and that it is not too far off the mark to define Islam in Russia as an "ethno-Islam" or "folk Islam."

According to surveys I conducted in Russia in 2005-2007, most Muslims do not regularly attend mosque, but the level of attendance varies by ethnic group. Almost 66 percent of Tatar Muslims in Tatarstan, 80 percent of Adyghes in Adyghea, 74 percent of Kazakhs in the Volgograd region, and 74 percent of Azerbaijanis in Dagestan said they did not attend mosque at all in the previous six months. Of the remainder, the majority attended a mosque or house of prayer fewer than three times in that same half-year period. Respondents were asked not to count attendance of predominantly ethnic ceremonies such as weddings, funerals, or baptisms. In a randomized quota sample of

1,026 young ethnic Tatars (age 15 to 29) conducted by Yekaterina Hojaeva and Yelena Shumilova in Tatarstan in October 2001, only 28.3 percent observed at least some Muslim rituals. In Dagestan, in a survey project managed by Enver Kisriev from 1997 to 2002, only 20 percent of respondents defined themselves as “deeply religious.” Most of these were professional beneficiaries of Islam such as *alims* (Islamic scholars and experts), mullahs, imams, other members of the clergy, or activists of the Wahhabi movement. These percentages, however, varied widely by ethnic group.

Security Implications: Why Islam Is Not Driving Mass Mobilization in Russia

Even at the height of the Chechen wars, Russia did not experience broad-based national-level mobilization and public action by its Muslims similar to that which rocked Europe in response to the Danish newspaper cartoons depicting the prophet Muhammad. This is not for lack of potential touchstones of conflict. Instead, the absence of mobilization reveals the weakness of Islam’s demographic base in Russia and the predominance of nonreligious values and motivations in shaping collective action among Russia’s Muslims.

The issue that might have been most expected to produce broad-based Islamic solidarity in Russia was the disproportionate use of force resulting in mass casualties among civilians in Chechnya, a majority of whom were Muslim. For the most part, however, this type of solidarity turned out to be sporadic and elusive. As Alexei Malashenko has noted, widely disseminated stories about the 700-strong “Nogai battalion,” “700 Tatars,” and “300 Arabs” that joined Chechen separatist forces and reports about the Islamic group *Amanat* (Silence) that planned the use of cyanide gas against Russian troops proved to be hoaxes. The mass anti-conscription movements that emerged in the early 1990s with the start of the first Chechen war also did not gain widespread support and were notable by their absence during the second Chechen war and in the early 2000s. The radical “Islamic combat” groups in Ingushetia, Karachaevo-Cherkessia, and Kabardino-Balkaria proved to be small and relatively isolated groups formed primarily after the Russian military made it harder for separatist militants under the command of Shamil Basayev to operate within Chechnya. Their emergence and activity might have been seen as portending the rise of Islamist radical networks poised to sweep through Russia’s Muslim communities, but nothing like this happened. My systematic analysis of approximately 400 media reports in the last seven years shows that stories about such groups peaked around 2003-2006 and that their number and prominence declined after Basayev was killed.

National-level (or nationally visible) Islamic mobilization in Russia appears likely to occur only if an issue that has distinct practical resonance emerges simultaneously throughout areas where Muslim populations are concentrated or if several such issues emerge at the same time. One indication of such mobilization was a series of local protests against a ban on women taking passport photos in headscarves. The conflict was diffused after the Russian minister of internal affairs stated that the federal

government had no such ban and cancelled any already authorized by regional authorities.

Occasionally, international issues have demonstrated that Russia's Muslims articulate positions distinct from those of non-Muslims and of the Kremlin. The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, provide one example, when Muslim Tatar leaders said that Islam had nothing to do with terrorism and warned that the majority of victims in the West's war against terror would be Muslim. Muslims in Russia also diverged from non-Muslims and the government on the topic of the former Yugoslavia, largely supporting the causes of predominantly Muslim Bosnia and Kosovo. They also opposed the U.S.-led war in Iraq and supported the Palestinian cause more strongly than did Russia's non-Muslims. Still, none of these issues has become a lightning rod to ignite large-scale and cross-regional Muslim mobilization.

One counterintuitive element of these responses is that Muslim leaders in the areas with the largest and densest concentrations of Muslims and the highest levels of religiosity (Dagestan and the North Caucasus more generally) have proven to be reluctant unifiers or mobilizers of Islamic collective action. This is consistent with the ethnic and local grounding of these Muslim communities, their values and their practices. Paradoxically, the more religious the Muslim populations in the North Caucasus, the less likely they are to see Islam as a mobilizing force for Muslims in its own right.

This also suggests that sporadic and rapid mobilization of Muslims on locally salient issues is more likely than nationwide Muslim mobilization. Because Islam is tightly integrated into the societies and political establishments of these areas, it retains its local mobilizing potential and could quickly galvanize social protest. In particular, experts on Russian Islam indicate that the key mobilizing issue for Muslims that cuts across ethno-local divides is social justice.

One example of this involved the mobilization of radical Islamist groups in Karachaevo-Cherkessia in response to the murder of businessmen who challenged the hold of the republic's government elites on the local economy. The Yarmuk group (Ruslan Nakhshiev, Anzor Astemirov, and Musa Mukhozhev) that participated in the deadly 2005 attacks on police and government agencies in Nalchik, the capital of Kabardino-Balkaria, originated in 1993 as a moderate "Islamic Center" with the hope of facilitating a dialogue between officials and ordinary Muslims. In 1998 they denounced Shamil Basayev's call to launch a jihad in their republic. The local government declined offers of dialogue and instead persecuted the group's leaders. In response, as Malashenko describes, they later turned to Basayev with tragic consequences.

Social Linkages

The strongest linkages among Russia's Muslim communities are not religious in nature. They are predominantly ethnic/clan/family, institutional, commercial/economic, and/or secular-ideological. This applies to both physical and symbolic linkages. The

crucial role of ethnocultural factors in the shaping of beliefs and practices of Russia's Muslims makes these traditional bonds strong, and most likely the strongest ones.

The migration of Central Asian Muslims both to areas of traditional settlement in Russia's regions on the Volga and to Moscow reinforces the linkages between the Volga-Urals Muslims and Russia's capital. Moscow has significant advantages in terms of establishing physical interactions because of Russian airline transportation patterns; it is the only major airline hub in Russia. Ethnic ties are strong among large Azerbaijani concentrations in southern Russia (Dagestan and Astrakhan), Moscow, the Urals, and West Siberia (all the way to smaller communities in the Far East). The wars in Chechnya produced an outflow of Chechens and Ingush to neighboring predominantly Slav provinces such as Volgograd, Astrakhan, and Krasnodar. Emergent linkages to watch are those between ethnic Muslim homelands in the North Caucasus, the new ethnic Muslim settled diasporas that have emerged in Moscow since the Soviet collapse, and newer communities in western Siberia, particularly in the centers of energy industry in Tyumen and the Khanti-Mansi district.

My field observations and research indicate that these linkages are strongest when they are reinforced by economic or other communal interests. In addition, it appears that while location in large cities offers more opportunities for travel and physical interactions, emotional attachments and symbolic bonds are stronger in rural or small-town Muslim diasporas. A case in point concerns Chechen communities in central Russia. In the summer of 2007 I conducted focus groups with ethnic Chechens in Tver region, including the Spirovo district which reported the largest Chechen population growth in Russia outside of the North Caucasus between 1989 and 2002. Chechens in Tver, Staritsa, and Spirovo all described their local communities as strong and united. They also talked about other North Caucasus ethnic groups having their own communities (*zemliachestvo*).

While Islam was mentioned as an important factor in these ethnic communities, economic interests were clearly at stake and many participants did not discuss Islam or its role. Membership in a community, particularly the one led by a successful operator of timber businesses in Spirovo, was important to secure jobs and to generate business. A shared sense of economic opportunity for themselves and their children, given the ending of large-scale military activities in Chechnya, was also expressed or implied by several participants who said they were planning to return to Chechnya to participate in the rebuilding of their homeland. They noted that in ten years the number and size of local Chechen communities would decline as most people returned to Chechnya.

Conclusion

Demographic limitations and internal fragmentation explain why Islamic values have failed to fuel nationwide movements or protests, even on issues such as the war in Chechnya. Additionally, the elimination of the principal leaders advocating violent jihad against Russian domination explains why less violent extremism has been reported since 2006.

It is important to consider Islamist activism as a manifestation of ethno-political localism, rather than as part of a putatively inexorable and fervor-driven spread of Islamic doctrine and practice (to which perfunctory demographic analysis erroneously lends credence). The analysis of media reports on militant Islam in Russia over the last three years suggests that understanding of social justice issues within regional political, socioeconomic, and cultural contexts is the key to understanding the linkage between Islam and security, particularly in traditionally Muslim areas such as the North Caucasus.

It also suggests that Muslim linkages are not predominantly Islamic, in the sense of being faith-based, but the same as linkages that unite any social group. In these interactions, a mixture of motivations including kinship, economic interests, group and personal security, regional affiliations, personal attractions, and sometimes faith and faith-based lifestyles all play a role.

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