

Radicalization of Muslim Immigrants in Europe and Russia

Beyond Terrorism

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In the second half of the 1990s, Islamist terrorism emerged as a serious security threat to both Europe and Russia. For Europe, in contrast to the United States, Islamist terrorism became an increasingly domestic threat, stemming from cells formed primarily by Muslim first- and second-generation migrants. In Russia, the radicalization of an internal armed conflict in the North Caucasus was the main driver of Islamist terrorism. At the same time, Muslims in both Europe and Russia are ethnically diverse and do not compose unified communities. Only a miniscule minority out of millions represents a security risk.

However, in most other respects, there are significant differences between Europe and Russia with regard to both Islamist terrorism and links between sociopolitical violence (including terrorism) and Muslim populations, especially migrants.

Radicalization of Muslim Migrants in Europe

The rise of Islamist terrorism in Europe is often directly or primarily linked to the effects of large-scale immigration of Muslims over the past few decades and problems related to their integration. This link, however, is extremely complex, indirect, and nonbinding.

Labor migration to Europe is a common socioeconomic process. It is driven by a combination of demographic decline in Europe (where immigration is responsible for 70 percent of population growth) and traumatic modernization in “exit” regions that include but are not restricted to Muslim-populated North Africa, the Middle East, and Southwest Asia. An explanation for Islamist terrorism in Europe cannot be reduced to a mere lack of integration or the negative sociocultural experiences of Muslim migrants in their immediate social environment. While such factors may help explain why some of Europe’s Muslims become more susceptible to radicalization in general, they do not explain when this radicalization leads to violence or when violence takes the form of mass-casualty Islamist terrorism, hardly the most common type of migrant violence in Europe.

By stressing the link between Muslim migration and Islamist terrorism in Europe, one also runs the risk of underestimating other possible driving factors behind terrorism that have little to do with problems of social integration. This is especially the case for Islamist terrorists who are well-integrated, second-generation European citizens (a Muslim with migrant origins could hardly be integrated better than Mohammad Sidique Khan, who led the cell responsible for the July 2005 London bombings) or even European converts (whose presence in terrorist cells shows that violent Islamists in Europe do not always have migrant origins). The nature of their conviction and motivation is not always, not only, and not necessarily a product of poor social integration. An excessive focus on the problems associated with the integration of migrants tends to depoliticize terrorism and downgrade the importance of the broader international political agenda to European Islamist terrorists. While some of their own sociocultural experiences may prepare them to advance what they believe is the cause of fellow Muslims suffering around the world, violent Islamists frame their actions in a quasi-religious, politicized, and almost “neo-anti-imperialist” discourse of global confrontation with the West, shaped and visualized, above all, by what they see happening daily in places such as Iraq and Afghanistan.

While the sociopolitical radicalization of European Muslims poses a growing challenge to European societies, terrorism is unlikely to become its main violent form. Radicalization of Europe’s ethnically and confessionally diverse migrants, especially of the younger second or even third generation, is more likely to manifest itself through other less deadly but more widespread and mass-based forms of protest and violence. These range from delinquency, vandalism, and hate crimes to the further consolidation of “grey” suburbs outside police control, public disorder, and revolts. The autumn 2005 urban unrest in France’s *banlieues* (which did not involve Islamists) and the frequently violent street protests against Danish cartoons and Dutch films perceived as “anti-Islamic” may provide a more accurate indication than the high-profile Islamist terrorist attacks in Madrid or London of the kind of violent threats Europe faces from the radicalization of Muslim migrants.

The Limits to Islamist Terrorism and Radicalization of Russia's Muslims

In contrast to Europe, Islamist terrorists in Russia have not had migrant origins. Terrorism in Russia was first generated by an ethnopolitical conflict in Chechnya that rapidly became Islamicized, and later by lesser-scale but more heavily Islamicized and localized violence throughout the North Caucasus. Islamist terrorist attacks have been committed mostly by Russian citizens who are representatives of indigenous ethnic minority groups, especially of North Caucasian origin. Most members of extremist, if not necessarily violent, Islamist organizations active in Russia (such as Hizb ut-Tahrir) also are from traditionally Muslim-populated regions or are Russian converts, not migrants.

The impact of the Islamicization of conflict-related terrorism and the government's harsh suppression of so-called "Wahhabism" (a confusing term applied in Russia to all types of Islamists) have been partly counterbalanced by a centuries-long coexistence of traditionally Muslim indigenous ethnic groups with the Christian population, as well as Soviet-era secularism and emphasis on ethnic rather than religious identity. Even the number of 20 million Muslims used to determine Russia's quota for *hajj* to Mecca is still calculated on the basis of an "ethnic" criterion (the use of a more accurate criterion of religious self-identification produces lower estimates). The dominance of ethnic identity may partly explain why, despite the impact of Islamicized terrorism, interconfessional tensions in Russia have largely remained a byproduct of interethnic tensions and have not been an independent phenomenon. Even the negative public image of Chechens and other ethnic groups of North Caucasian origin is still focused more on their ethnic and regional identities than on their religious one (there is a strong negative perception of them as "Chechens" or "Caucasians," rather than as "Muslims").

The potential for interconfessional tensions involving Russia's Muslims is limited by other factors as well. With almost 90 percent of the population in support of the idea of a multiconfessional state, attempts by Orthodox fundamentalists to promote the idea of Russia as an Orthodox state would provoke tension, not only with Muslims. At the same time, Orthodox and Muslim religious institutions have many common interests and similarities (both, for instance, reject a secular interpretation of human rights). The overall level of cooperation is quite high, and competition for believers is minimal. From a secular civic standpoint, pressures by fundamentalists from *both* of the largest religious communities against the secular nature of the Russian state pose a more serious problem than interconfessional tensions. These pressures range from attempts to introduce obligatory courses on the fundamentals of Orthodox Christianity into the school curriculum to unconstitutional calls to introduce *sharia* anticrime norms into the secular law in the North Caucasus. Islamic conservatives already have secured legal permission for Muslim women in Russia to appear in state identification photos wearing headscarves. While Russia's constitution and legislation on freedom of religion ban religious organizations from interfering in the functions of the state, this last success has set a disturbing legal precedent, effectively replacing secular law with the

internal regulations of a religious community.

At the same time, the radicalization of Russia's Muslims, especially in the form of violent Islamic extremism, is seriously complicated by several factors. These include ethnic diversity and regional divisions among Russia's Muslims, primarily between those of the mid-Volga region and the North Caucasus, as well as organizational divisions between two competing clerical associations. Also, Russia's Muslims have a unique alternative to Islamism as a form of political activism: "Eurasianism," a loose ideological-political movement combining radicalism with conservatism. A progression of Lev Gumilev's idea of the "union of Slavs and Turks," Eurasianism promotes the notion of a "natural" union of Orthodox Christians and Muslims as the backbone of Russian statehood, national identity, and cultural identity. These ideas appeal to Muslim political activists, including the head of Russia's Islamic Committee Heidar Jemal, as well as to many Russian nationalists.

Radicalization of Russia's Muslim Migrants: Whether, When, and What Kind?

The negative public perceptions of Islamicized separatist terrorism in Russia have not only affected attitudes towards ethnic minorities and internal migrants from the North Caucasus. It has also contributed, together with other social, economic, and cultural factors, to the increasingly negative perception (60 percent in 2006, according to the Moscow-based Levada Center) of labor migrants, primarily from the Caucasus and Central Asia. A link between Islamist violence and migrants is often instinctively made in Russia's political and media discourse. Ironically, however, the most direct way Muslim migrants in Russia have been linked to violence is not by their radicalization into purveyors of violence, but as objects of violence themselves. Muslim migrants in Russia are frequent victims of nationalist or racist violence. Such violence may involve terrorist acts, but it is more commonly marked by other tactics: provocational scuffles, ethnoconfessional vandalism, and attempts to capitalize upon spontaneous mass disturbances or social protest actions to generate interethnic strife.

Migration of Azerbaijani Muslims until the mid-2000s and the growing migration from Central Asian states (dominated by Uzbeks in 2007) have increasingly affected the situation in Russia's large cities and in both non-Muslim and Muslim regions. On the one hand, these effects are positive or neutral. Migrant flows benefit Russia's economy: by the mid-2000s, seven million migrants accounted for 10 percent of Russia's gross domestic product. Like the first wave of labor migrants to Western Europe in the 1960s and 1970s, the current generation of immigrants to Russia, including those from predominantly Muslim states, is completely preoccupied with economic survival strategies and displays a professedly nonviolent and nonactivist character. In sociocultural terms, the fact that 90 percent of Russia's immigrants still come from the post-Soviet space facilitates the integration of migrants to a certain extent. At the same time, the increasing migration of Muslims adds diversity among Muslims in Russia, as Muslim migrants are very fragmented in ethnic, cultural, and even confessional terms

(Azerbaijanis are predominantly Shia, while most Central Asian Muslims are Sunni). As a result, in many Russian regions, Muslims are represented by several different ethnic communities and diasporas.

On the other hand, labor migration flows to Russia have indeed been massive in scale in the past decade, as well as varied by region. This has led in some areas to very high concentrations of migrants that have become increasingly consolidated and isolated, provoking growing tensions with native populations. In fact, tensions between Muslim newcomers and native populations, both in non-Muslim and Muslim regions, may be even more likely than, for instance, interconfessional tensions between Russia's Christians and native Muslims. In a generation or two, it may be among these migrant communities that more politicized groups formed on an ethnoconfessional basis will emerge. This process is likely to affect migrants from Central Asia the most, since they have had the worst initial conditions and are the most heavily exploited and discriminated against. Migrants from the South Caucasus usually have somewhat better starting conditions and integration prospects, having already established stable and well-connected diasporas.

It is unlikely that the Russian economy's demand for migrant labor will decline, and it may even increase. As a result, immigration flows are likely to continue, especially in light of relatively liberal migration rules adopted in early 2007. If Russia does not step up its integration efforts, it may be just a matter of time before ethnoconfessional ghettos, which have not yet consolidated in the manner they have in Western Europe, emerge as sources for the sociopolitical radicalization of migrants. This potential radicalization, however, is likely to manifest itself primarily in ways other than Islamist terrorism. The long tradition of coexistence between Christians and Muslims within Russian society may not be particularly helpful in this regard, as the sociocultural gap between Russia's indigenous Muslims and Muslim immigrants can be very wide.

In sum, as far as the problems of integration and radicalization of Muslim and other migrants are concerned, today's Russia may be compared with yesterday's France. Whether, in this respect, tomorrow's Russia will resemble France today depends on the integration capacity of the Russian state and society.

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