

# The Impact of the Hajj Pilgrimage in the North Caucasus

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The Hajj, a pilgrimage to the holy sites of Islam in Mecca and Medina, is an increasingly common practice among Russia's Muslims. According to various estimates since 2007, at least 200,000 Russian Muslims have officially performed the Hajj since the collapse of the Soviet Union under an annual quota set by Saudi Arabia and allotted within Russia. Most of these pilgrims come from the Muslim regions of the North Caucasus. Despite frequent media coverage and much speculative debate, the impacts of the Hajj pilgrimage on these societies have not been studied systematically.

Two views guide the debate on the significance of the Hajj pilgrimage in Russia. The first emphasizes the power of ideas, while the second highlights the prevalence of material interest in human behavior. Each has distinct implications for the North Caucasus.

## **An “Islamic Renaissance”: Security Concerns**

As observed by Mairbek Vachagaev, a contributor for the Jamestown Foundation, the Hajj is predominantly a charismatic religious experience in the North Caucasus. It reinforces an individual commitment to the values and norms of Islam and increases the desire to live according to Islamic law and norms. Such “Islamization” of society can lead to the Islamization of laws and governments by serving as a social basis for new mainstream opposition movements to those local governments widely perceived as ineffective and corrupt.

Alternatively, however, it can also plausibly empower radical jihadist movements

seeking to liberate the North Caucasus from Moscow's "infidel" rule. The brutal Chechen conflict followed a trajectory from a war for national independence to a radical Islamist insurgency. Radical Islamists, locally termed Wahhabis, perpetuate a war against infidels (*murtady*) and apostates (*kafiry*) when they claim responsibility for their violent attacks.

Underlying this argument is a concern that Wahhabism, Saudi Arabia's state religion, may evoke positive and overwhelming emotions associated with the Hajj, making Wahhabism more socially acceptable. As Evgeni Satanovsky, president of the Institute of Middle Eastern Studies in Moscow, pointed out in late 2007, "We know that Saudi Arabia invests in the propaganda of Saudi Arabian-style Islam, Wahhabi-style Islam, much more than the Soviet Union spent throughout all Soviet history propagandizing Communist ideology." According to Satanovsky, the Russian government supports the Hajj because it wants to keep track of the pilgrims.

### **Pragmatic Motivations for the Hajj: Status and Interests**

This view holds that the Hajj, like most other human endeavors, is driven primarily by material interests. Saudi officials have noted that, based on the amount of merchandise they bring with them, many pilgrims from Dagestan, a republic that accounts for the overwhelming majority of Russian Hajj pilgrims, see the trip as an avenue for barter. As a result the Russian government has imposed a limitation on the amount of duty-free goods that pilgrims may bring back; subsequently, there have been disturbances on the Azerbaijani-Russian border caused by Dagestani pilgrims who refuse to pay customs fees.

Some have also interpreted the Hajj as a form of exotic tourism. A special report on the Hajj by the Russian edition of *Newsweek* in December 2006 noted that most returning pilgrims were more animated while discussing their distinctly secular impressions, such as disappointment about travel arrangements, rather than while discussing the religious rituals in which they participated.

This view is indirectly supported by survey research showing that adherence to basic Islamic norms remains weak among self-declared Russian Muslims. Since the early 1990s, survey research has found that adherence to Islam in Russia, including in the North Caucasus, has been predominantly symbolic rather than substantive. In a 1998 survey of 617 college students in Makhachkala by a local sociologist, K. Khanbabaev, 83 percent of respondents said they were Muslim, yet none could explain the notion that there is only one God (*tawhid*) or almsgiving to the poor (*zakat*), two of the five major obligations (*arkan al-din*) of a Muslim. Ten years later, a Gallup survey in Tatarstan and Dagestan found that about half of respondents who declared themselves Muslim said they never performed *namaz* (prayers) and were not observing most other Islamic practices.

One problem with identifying and measuring the material motivation for the Hajj is that few Muslims would openly admit it. It is also hard to establish whether material interests, regardless of whether they are stated, displace or enhance religious motivations.

## “Islamic Renaissance”: A Complex but Mostly Benign Interpretation

Research on the religious, social, and political impacts of the Hajj outside of Russia challenges both the radical religious and materialist interpretations of the Hajj. In a 2008 Harvard University working paper, “Estimating the Impact of the Hajj,” David Clingingsmith, Asim Ijaz Khwaja, and Michael Kremer assessed the effects of the Hajj on Pakistanis using a 2006 survey of more than 1,600 Sunni Muslim applicants to Pakistan’s Hajj visa allocation lottery. Such a research strategy allowed them to control for initial motivation to perform the Hajj. They then compared the views of successful and unsuccessful applicants five to eight months after the pilgrimage. While confined to Pakistan, their findings contain insights on the impact of the Hajj that may be applicable in the North Caucasus.

On one hand, they uphold a number of concerns about the impact of the Hajj on regional security:

- **Universal Muslim practices spread.** The Pakistan Hajj study found that performing the Hajj almost doubled the likelihood of nonobligatory fasting and increased by more than a quarter the likelihood of praying regularly in a mosque. Hajjis were also more likely to engage in supererogatory (optional) prayers.
- **Local (“ethnic”) Muslim practices decline.** In Pakistan, those who returned from the Hajj were less likely to use amulets, insist on giving dowry, believe that widows had a higher marriage priority than unmarried women, visit tombs of saints, perform the 40-day death ceremony (*chaleeswan*), or wear a cap during prayer. In the North Caucasus, similar localized practices have also been challenged.
- **Faith-based social values become reinforced.** Pakistani Hajjis retained their adherence to Islamic doctrine, including unequal inheritance laws for men and women, male authority within the household, and the incorrectness of a woman divorcing her husband. In the North Caucasus, such values run counter to Russian constitutional rights and law. The spread or entrenchment of these views can thus help make more plausible jihadist claims that the Russian government is “infidel” and alien to North Caucasian societies. This lends credence to those in Russia who are concerned that the “Islamic Renaissance” in the North Caucasus is politically destabilizing.

At the same time, research in Pakistan has also shown that the spread of universal Islamic beliefs and practices may instead benefit peace and stability in the North Caucasus. The following five effects of the Hajj, established by the authors of the Harvard study, are notable in this respect:

- **Religious intolerance declines.** Hajjis returned with more positive views of not only Muslims from other countries, but also religious believers beyond the Islamic world. They were more likely to believe that various Pakistani ethnic and sectarian Muslim groups, as well as Muslims and adherents of other religions, were equal and could live in harmony.

- **Support for non-violent conflict resolution increases.** Pakistani Hajjis were almost twice as likely as other Muslims to condemn the goals of Osama bin Laden. Hajjis were also more supportive of peace with India and less supportive of physical punishment in general.
- **Support for Islamization of government decreases.** According to the Pakistan survey, local Hajjis were less inclined to demand that the state should enforce religious injunctions and that religious leaders should have the right to act as judges. Hajjis were about as likely as others to feel that religious leaders should influence government decisions or that the religious beliefs of politicians were important.
- **Social activism fails to increase.** Hajjis paid and received social visits; advised friends and relatives on family, business, or religion; and joined religious, professional, or educational organizations about as often or as much as others.
- **Younger pilgrims are no more likely to become radicalized than others.** The younger Hajjis in the Pakistan survey were about as tolerant as others – and even more inclined to peaceful conflict resolution than older pilgrims.

These findings point to positive impacts of the Hajj that could be relevant in the North Caucasus as well. At the very least, the view that the Hajj pilgrimage automatically increases political instability in the region should be critically re-examined.

### **Voices from the North Caucasus: Islamization with Tolerance**

Focused interviews that I conducted with five local Hajjis in Adygea and Kabardino-Balkaria in June 2009 suggest that the immediate impacts of the Hajj on pilgrims in the North Caucasus are largely similar to those recorded in Pakistan, albeit with local nuances.\*

First, universal Islamist practices were strengthened. One interviewee noted that he started to do the optional early morning prayer more often after the Hajj. Another said the Hajj gave him more authority to purify local ethnic traditions and to publicly confront local religious elders (*effendi*) who distort holy texts at funerals.

Tolerance, too, got a boost. All those interviewed referenced exposure to the diverse cultures of Muslims from around the world. Hajjis expressed amazement at this diversity, as well as a strong emotional sense of unity with these diverse representatives of the Muslim world. Some also reported excellent relations with local Christians. A Kabardinian Hajji said this experience promoted his sense that Allah commanded him to do more good and to be compassionate to others. The Adygean Hajji said that the Hajj made him set self-restraint and tolerance as his primary objectives for personal development.

Religion was presented first and foremost as a deeply personal experience and a means of individual self-improvement and empowerment. None of the interviewees

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insisted on changing government leaders or federal or local laws in order to promote Islamic norms and values.

Additionally, socioeconomic experiences made lasting impressions. When asked about the most vivid memories of their pilgrimage, two Hajjis talked primarily about the bargains they got at local stores, the quality of infrastructure, and the provision of free food and drinks. Others also devoted significant, though not necessarily exclusive, attention to these factors. Some interviewees complained that a significant number of other Russian Hajjis were more interested in shopping and treated holy rituals and visits to holy sites as sightseeing.

The interviews were also consistent with the Harvard study's insight that prior experiences also had an impact on pilgrims, and, therefore, changes in Hajji views and behavior after the Hajj may not exclusively reflect its impact. Support for replacing local "ethnic Muslim" customs with "classic" or universal Islamic rituals, for example, was expressed most strongly by the interviewee who was taught correct Arabic readings of prayers in childhood, whose grandfather completed the Hajj, and who had studied Islam in Egypt.

## **Conclusion**

For the North Caucasus, these preliminary findings suggest that a more important question than how the Hajj affects individual beliefs and practices is how the spread of universal Islamic values affects the politics of Russian federalism and the motivations of extremist groups. After all, Pakistan is not necessarily the best model of sectarian peace and tolerance. Additionally, Pakistani pilgrims cannot experience the feeling that most North Caucasian pilgrims have experienced, namely that their individual Hajj pilgrimages are partial atonement (and compensation) for years of prohibition under the Soviet government of this fundamental Islamic ritual. Finally, Pakistani Hajjis come from a country that is overwhelmingly Muslim and with Muslim leaders, whereas Russia's Muslim population remains a minority in a state whose leaders are predominantly non-Muslim. For all these reasons, the politically stabilizing and destabilizing impacts of the Hajj in the North Caucasus are less clear cut, particularly if social and political grievances increase among local Muslims. One way or another, the spread of "classical Islam" in the region is a new reality that calls for rethinking the old dichotomy between "traditional" and "radical" Islam.

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