

The U.S. War on Terrorism

How Do Russian Muslims Respond?

Mikhail Alexseev
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In response to the September 11 terror attacks on New York City and Washington D.C., Russia's Muslim leaders went to great lengths to make a legitimate and valid distinction between Islam as religious faith and Islamism as a radical political ideology calling for a global jihad against the West. Speaking on behalf of Russia's Muslims—whose estimated numbers range from 14 to 22 million out of Russia's population of 145 million—Ravil Gainutdin, chairman of the Russian Council of Muftis, expressed condolences to the American people and dissociated Islam from terrorist acts. He said: “[The] Qur’an evaluates a person who killed another one as having killed the whole [of] mankind” and therefore “anyone who has engaged in terrorism under the cover of Islamic slogans is a criminal before Allah and he must be punished while still in ‘this world’.” Gainutdin added that not only do Russian Muslims have nothing in common with the Taliban, but that the Taliban has nothing in common with Islam: “If they had thought of Islam, they would have taken care of the purity of religion, instead of harming the rest of the Muslim world.”

Another influential Russian mufti, Talgat Tadzhuiddin, based in Bashkortostan's capital Ufa, also denounced the attacks, stressing that Russian Muslims mourned the victims with “the whole civilized world.” Mintimer Shaimiev, the president of Tatarstan—and according to one estimate nearly half of Russia's Muslims are ethnic Tatars—called Islam “a peaceful and tolerant religion inspiring people to do only good things.” He said the terrorists who use Islam as a cover are “committing grievous sins.” The Muslim Department of Tatarstan condemned the attacks as “dangerous acts of vandalism” and said that Tatarstan's Muslims would be part of the “struggle against violence and barbarianism.” Gusman Khazret Ishkaq, chairman of Tatarstan's Muslim Religious Board, told U.S. State Department officials that “the overwhelming majority of Muslims in Tatarstan condemned the terrorist attacks against America” and that any negative statements about U.S. policies—even if coming from Russian Muslims—were “remnants of the Soviet epoch” and had nothing to do with Islam. Even Shamil Basayev, one of the leaders of Chechen *ghazavat* (a Caucasus version of jihad) against Russia expressed “condolences to the victims and their relatives in the United States, on behalf of the mujahedeen [Islamic independence fighters in Chechnya].” Another Chechen separatist field commander, Amir Khattab, who, unlike Basayev, peppers practically every sentence in his press interviews with virulent Islamist rhetoric, made no such statement.

Moderate and secularized Russian Muslims—Tadzhuddin, after all, was first appointed to a position of religious leadership by the KGB in 1980—organized an international conference “Islam against Terrorism” with President Vladimir Putin’s participation. In addition to dissociating Islam from terrorism, the Russian Muslim leaders signaled that they would participate in Russia’s own antiterrorist measures. As part of this effort, the Council of Muftis of Russia concluded an agreement on cooperation with Russia’s ministries of defense and the interior, and with “other power-wielding structures” (a phrase that usually refers to KGB successor agencies). Muslim leaders also indicated they had more in common with non-Muslim Russians than with non-Russian Islamists. According to Farid Asadullin of the Science and Public Relations Department at the Council of Muftis, “For Muslims brought up in the Russian cultural and informational environment, Russians are not infidels.”

Following this wholesale initial condemnation of terror attacks, however, Muslim responses within Russia shifted toward challenging the legitimacy, utility, and ramifications for Russia of the U.S. military operations in Afghanistan that began on October 7, 2001. Whereas this shift exposed major disagreements among Russia’s Muslims, it also suggests that, in Russia, Islam as faith, as ideology, and as an instrument of political and economic bargaining—although distinct and separate—overlap in Islam as a shared social identity. Defining the terms of both agreement and discord among Russian Muslims, this shared social identity has its roots in a perception of relative deprivation and of threat to a group, in the politics of Russian ethnofederalism, and in the history of Russia’s government-sponsored violence against predominantly Muslim ethnic minorities.

Perception of Relative Deprivation and Discrimination

Several Russian Muslim responses to the U.S. war on terrorism made implicit reference to what Daniel Pipes of the Middle East Forum described as “the trauma of modern Islam” that is rooted in a shared sense of relative deprivation and encroachment. Asked by *Argumenty I Fakty* in late September 2001 to describe “the essence of conflict between the United States and Europe and the Islamic world,” Mufti Nafigula Ashirov, head of the Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of Asian Russia, said: “I’d put it differently. This is a conflict between the United States and Europe on the one side and the Third World on the other. The United States is essentially an extension of Europe. Almost 70 percent of the world’s population are not Europeans; but 30 percent dictate their conditions, set the rules of conduct, and impose their culture on the rest of the world.” This perception underwrites the extreme sensitivity on the part of Muslims anywhere toward Western influence in general and Western military intervention in historically Muslim areas in particular. Thus, for example, Mikaddas Bibarsov, chairman of the Volga Muslim Religious Board stated on October 11, 2001: “The [United States], the global policeman, and its allies are reshaping the world and killing civilians—using the slogan of combating terrorism as a pretext.”

Addressing some of the specific concerns about discrimination among Russian Muslims, Tatarstan's president Shaimiev said in an interview on October 17, 2001, that federal legislation on religion "disproportionately favors Orthodox Christianity, prompting questions from Muslims who call Russia their homeland." Shaimiev complained, "Official events are usually attended by the patriarch or other representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church, and Muslim leaders are less common there..." Echoing this perception, Mufti Ashirov said Russian Muslims would appreciate it if "our state leaders could show some respect for Islam." "Whenever there's a Christian holiday," said Ashirov, "our state leaders always go to the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow, and this is shown on television nationwide. We invited Putin to our Sacrifice Festival last December—but he apparently had other urgent business to attend to that day." According to Mufti Gainutdin, both former Russian president Boris Yeltsin and Putin have consistently failed to address grievances brought to them by Russian Muslims. For example, the Mufti mentioned lack of opportunities for Russian Muslims to receive religious education in Russia—something that he said caused these Russians to seek Islamic education in Arab countries. "After living in these countries for seven or eight years," said the Mufti, "they seek the same conditions for our Muslims that exist in Muslim countries." In addition to perpetuating a sense of anti-Muslim discrimination, Gainutdin suggested that religious education in Arab states increased intolerance among these young Russian men: "There they were educated exclusively in a mono-religious atmosphere where adherents of Islam do not have the experience of living and cooperating with others, as we have in Russia," he said.

Group Threat

Survey research in several countries—including my own survey of interethnic hostility between the Russians and the Chinese in Primorskiy krai in 2000—shows that negative ethnic and cultural stereotypes and "hatreds" emerge among groups when one group believes its security is threatened by ethnic or religious "others." An attack on one member of a religious group is commonly perceived as an attack on the entire group. Promises by religious or ethnic "others" not to resort to violence and discrimination are hard to trust amid these fears.

Among Russian Muslims, U.S. military operations in and around Afghanistan and the Russian government's support for these operations gave rise to fears that the political and economic interests of Islamic populations in Russia would be harmed by increasing association of Islam with terrorism among ethnic (and predominantly Christian) Russians. A press statement by Tatarstan's moderate Muslim Religious Board on October 8, 2001, the day after the United States launched air strikes on the Taliban positions in Afghanistan, expressed this perception of group threat most succinctly: "Although it is said that Islam is not an enemy in this war, it is a Muslim population that will suffer." Interviewed on the same day, Rashit Yagafarov, leader of the Kazan branch of the moderate nationalist group Tatar Public Center, called the U.S. military action in Afghanistan "an assault on the Muslim people of that country, which can be interpreted by Muslims in our republic as an assault on them." Several other Russian Muslim leaders

warned that the Muslims would interpret the U.S. attacks as the start of a world war against Islam. Ravil Gainutdin, although saying the Muslims “treat with understanding acts of just retribution against real masterminds of terror,” objected to military operations in Afghanistan and said retribution “should not affect whole nations.” This heightened sensitivity to potential attacks on Muslims as a group makes even moderate Muslims increasingly likely to question Osama bin Laden’s role in the September 11 attacks on the United States. The chairman of Tatarstan’s Muslim Religious Board expressed such doubts on October 11, 2001.

Reflecting the increasing sense of group threat, the Russian uftis called to stop “Islamophobia” inside and outside of Russia. “Even after the Moscow blasts [which destroyed two multistoried apartment buildings in September 1999] there wasn’t such an anti-Islamic hysteria,” commented Ali Polossin, counselor of Russia’s Mufti Council. This environment makes ordinary Muslims feel disproportionately threatened by the Russian and international media coverage of the terror attacks and U.S. responses. One, a 33-year-old named Yuri, told AFP: “There are Muslims and there are terrorists. Those are different things, but the media confound the two and do it more often lately.” Another, a 35-year-old called Umar, added: “This hysteria in the television and newspapers already begins to affect the society. I sense a lot of hostility toward me, especially on the part of government agencies.” Saratov governor Dmitri Ayatskov’s speech on September 15, 2001, at the meeting of the oblast administration in response to the terror attacks on the United States illustrates why Russian Muslims like Yuri and Umar feel that government agencies are hostile. Aytskov said that the “revival” of Orthodox Christianity in Russia would be the best response to the “tragic events in the United States.” He called on local officials to struggle against “adherents of Islam, Hari Krishna, and other sects.”

A “technocratic” response to group threat came in statements questioning the effectiveness of the U.S.-led air strikes against the Taliban. Timur Akulov, the head of Tatarstan’s presidential foreign affairs department, was more circumspect, but made a statement consistent with these fears that “more efficient measures could be taken in order to find and annihilate bin Laden.” Ruslan Aushev, president of the overwhelmingly Muslim republic of Ingushetiia and a former Soviet general who fought in Afghanistan [see PONARS Policy Memo 203 by Georgi M. Derluguian], expressed doubt that U.S. “revenge operations” against bin Laden and the Taliban would succeed. “Afghanistan is not the Balkans,” he said. “There are no important communications to be destroyed to paralyze activity of the Talibs. Their bases are in the mountains.” Adding that Moscow should limit its backing of the United States’ war on terrorism to “moral support,” Aushev warned: “Islam on the whole should not be associated with this evil.” Russian Muslims imply that the longer the military operations proceed the harder it will be to dissociate Islam from terrorism.

Russian Muslims also fear that outside pressure will create tensions and conflict within their group. In fact, Russia’s two leading muftis—Gainutdin and Tadzhuiddin—while both condemning the terror attacks on the United States and both warning against Islamophobia, also started an internecine struggle accusing one another of embezzlement and of support for Wahabism, a puritanical form of Islam predominant in Saudi Arabia.

Wahabism gained limited but increasing and dedicated support in Chechnya, Dagestan, and, more recently, in Tatarstan. Dmitri Makarov of Moscow's Institute for Arabic Studies and Alexei Malashenko of the Moscow Carnegie Center have suggested that precisely this type of intra-Muslim elite struggle opens the way for the radical Wahabite strain of Islam to get entrenched and spread in Russia.

Ethnofederalism

Ethnicity defines 32 of 89 constituent units of the Russian Federation and in eight of these units the largest non-Russian ethnic groups are predominantly Islamic. Under ethnofederalism Christianity and Islam in Russia represent not only religious, but also territorial and ethnic divisions. If politicians in these republics ignore Islamic sensitivities arising from perceptions of relative deprivation and group threat, they risk losing support among key constituencies. Thus, some of the harshest condemnations of U.S. military strikes in Afghanistan have been coming from moderate nationalist opposition groups in Tatarstan and Bashkortostan, home to approximately 60 percent of Russia's Muslims. The Tatar Public Center (TPC), in a statement on October 10 declared that the United States "violated international law by striking Afghanistan before bin Laden's guilt is proved." TPC urged the United States, instead, to "call Israel to order in its relations with Palestinians" and ended by reassuring the local Islamic population that "Afghanistan is impossible to conquer" and that "Muslims will win."

Mukhamat Sabirov, former prime minister of Tatarstan and leader of Tatarstan's Republican Party, on October 9 commented on President George W. Bush's decision to strike against the Taliban by saying: "The Texas cowboy didn't have enough wisdom. No matter how precise his weapons are, civilian losses are inevitable, and this will cause a storm of fury among Muslim people, thus beginning a conflict on a global scale." Akulov, a specialist in Arab studies, suggested that the United States would achieve its goals in Afghanistan more efficiently if its strategy was "to bribe field commanders within the Taliban military rather than to shoot half of the population."

The political significance of the linkages between Islam and ethnicity in Russia has been illustrated by divergent reactions to the U.S.-led antiterrorist operations by two Russian State Duma deputies from Tatarstan. An ethnic Russian representative, Mikhail Rokitsky, strongly endorsed Putin's support of U.S. policies, seeing in Moscow's position "a good chance [for Russia] to enter the international community as an equal member." In contrast, an ethnic Tatar deputy, Fendes Safiullin, protested "getting involved in a conflict where the actors are unknown." In Ufa, Ekhter Bosqynov who heads the Ural Bashkir People's Center, which is modeled on the TPC, associated Moscow's collaboration with Washington against terrorism with threats to Tatar and Bashkir political status within Russia. In particular, Bosqynov fears that Putin would downgrade both republics to the status of administrative provinces (oblast or krai). Such a move would decrease the republics' bargaining power for allocation of resources. Bosqynov called for setting up popular fronts in both republics to defend "the right to self-determination of the Muslim peoples of the Russian Federation." Tatarstan president Shaimiev, Bashkortostan president Murtaza Rakhimov, and Dagestan president

Magomedali Magomedov abstained from commenting publicly on U.S.-led air strikes, whereas leaders of non-Muslim regions of Russia stated their support for Putin's backing of the United States.

Memories of Past Violence

In Russian Muslim areas, especially in the North Caucasus, memories of incalculable brutality by Russian forces who systematically targeted local civilian populations in the last two centuries make many locals see Russia's federal government policies as more "terrorist" than acts by group such as Al Qaeda. When authorities in Adygea (a Muslim enclave in the Krasnodar Territory) called for the closure of a Maikop branch of the Libya-based World Islamic Call (WIC) organization in the aftermath of the terror attacks on the U.S., ethnic Adygs protested. When Russian authorities emphasized that WIC documents revealed that the local branch supervised "money-collection into the jihad fund," efforts to ban it triggered hostile responses to Russian authorities such as this one, by a local woman identified as Zaura, reported in *Izvestiia*:

"During the Caucasus war you forced 90 percent of the Adygean people to leave their native places; you butchered the entire male population of Cherkessia aged from 10 to 70, brutally killed women, children, the elderly, and all who had been protecting their fatherland—the Caucasus! How can a federation be created among our nations if you hate us and want to dispose of the native population who have been living in this area for 5,000 years already, as soon as possible? Yes, we need to separate from each other if things continue like that in the future."

In Tatarstan memories of oppression go back longer but are vigorously expressed and motivate demands for political independence from Moscow. On October 15, 2001, more than 2,000 people hit the streets of Tatarstan's capital Kazan to mourn the Tatars who died defending the city and the Muslim Khanate of Kazan from Ivan the Terrible in 1552. Speakers from the moderate TPC at the rally called Putin's reforms "colonialist" and likened Putin to Ivan the Terrible. The demonstrators chanted "Flush Putin down the Hague Tribunal"—echoing Putin's pledge in 1999 to "flush terrorists in Chechnya down the toilet." They called for legislation to ensure "Tatarstan's full independence and to create an Idel-Ural confederation," to reject Russian passports and introduce Tatarstan passports, and to transfer law enforcement agencies to Tatarstan's control. A local reporter said some 100 demonstrators volunteered to fight on the Taliban side.

In the experience of Russian Muslims Moscow used antiterrorist policies as a guise for anti-Muslim policies, including the extermination of predominantly Muslim ethnic minorities. This sensitivity is particularly acute because Moscow's wars in Chechnya, which resulted in thousands of civilian casualties from Samashki in 1995 to Grozny in 2000, have been officially classified as "antiterrorist operations."

Conclusion

Russian Muslim responses suggest that although Islam and Islamism are worlds apart and while even Islamists have also opposed horrific terrorist acts against the United States, moderate and secularized Muslims are less likely than non-Muslims to support militarized antiterrorist responses directed at radical Islamist groups. At issue are not their views of terrorism but of group identity, political and economic opportunity, and past repression. These responses also suggest that to diffuse opposition to antiterrorist operations among Russian Muslims the Kremlin needs to be more sensitive to political and ethnic divisions within Russia and to the devastating legacies of Moscow's recent policies with respect to Russian Muslims. A political settlement and atonement for massive human rights violations in Chechnya, for one, could not come at a more propitious moment for Russia and would be a powerful signal of Russia's willingness to join the Western coalition not only as an ally against terrorism but also as a member committed to respecting human rights and political freedoms. If Putin wants a place in history as a visionary statesman this is something he could do now and Washington would be wise to encourage him every step of the way.

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