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Managing Muslim Minorities in Russia

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Abstract

This paper examines the relations between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (Saudi Arabia) and the Russian Federation (RF) in the light of Muslim minority rights through analyzing the history of Islam in the Russian territory, with a focus on the rights of Muslims under the Tsarist rule since 1552 and during the existence of the Soviet Union. The first part of the paper suggests that, although Muslims are minority in modern Russia today, Islam established itself as an official religion in the Volga-Urals region and Caucasus during the early years of Islam. It also shows that the historical relations between Muslims and tsarist Russia were not always in conflict. The second part of the paper, which is based on Russian archival sources, presents a brief description of Soviet and Saudi Arabian diplomatic relations. The third part of the paper discusses the status of Islam and Muslims in modern Russia since the collapse of the Soviet Union and suggests that the tragedy of 9/11 and the US-led “Global War on Terror,” as its consequence resulted in religious discrimination and an anti-Islamic mood throughout the country. In 2002, the RF adopted a new law entitled, “On Fighting Extremist Activity.” This led to the decline of religious freedom, which directly harmed relations between Saudi Arabia and Russia. Donations coming from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia through various channels were blocked, Saudi-funded institutions were banned as a part of the prevention of “Wahhabi” influences (which had been banned in Russia since 2002),¹ and books (both original copies and translations) published in Saudi Arabia were banned as well. At the same time, the two governments continued working together on fighting against extremism, educational and cultural programs, and the development of Islamic banking in Russia. The last part of the essay includes some policy recommendations and concluding remarks.

(1) In a Russian context, all ultraconservative ideas and deeds of practicing Muslims are labelled as “Wahhabi.”

Introduction

The Russian Federation (RF), which emerged from the ruins of the Soviet Union as an influential international power within a span of two decades, draws the attention of the researchers on the rights of the Muslim minority in that country for a number of reasons. First, the RF has the largest Muslim minority population in Europe. According to the 2010 census, the total number of members of Muslim ethnic groups indigenous to Russia was about 15 million,² and there were also significant numbers of labor migrants from Central Asia, who comprise a significant portion of the approximately 10 million officially registered immigrants, and the majority of them are from largely Muslim Central Asian states, such as Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan.³ Ethnic Russian converts are believed to number around 100,000,⁴ and the 2014 Religious Diversity Index (RDI) of the Pew Research Center shows that in 2014, Muslims in Russia constituted at least 10% of the total population.⁵

Second, Islam in Russia should not be considered either a religion of postcolonial immigration or a manifestation of the recent acceleration of globalization and cultural exchange. Unlike other Muslim minorities in Europe, Muslims in Russia are not alien immigrants, but rather ordinary citizens of the country who have lived in their native land for many centuries. Islam spread and established itself as an official religion in the territory of the modern RF from the early years of the faith. Ancestors of Russia's Muslims had built great Islamic civilizations in the present territory of Russia long before Russian imperialism emerged.

Another important point worth mentioning here is that the history of Russian Muslim encounters is not merely one of conflict, conquest, and resistance.

(2) There is no official record of the number of Muslims in the Russian Federation as the 2010 census did not include a question on religious beliefs.

(3) "Kolichestvo Migrantov V Rossii na 2016 God" [Number of Migrants in Russia in 2016], accessed May 3, 2017, <http://topmigrant.ru/migraciya/obshhaya-informaciya/migranty-v-rossii.html>.

(4) Accessed May 3, 2017, <http://voprosik.net/russkie-musulmane-segodnya>.

(5) Pew Research Center, "Table: Religious Diversity Scores by County," April 4, 2014, www.pewforum.org/2014/04/04/religious-diversity-index-scores-by-country/.

Rather, relations between Russians and Muslims, both within Russia and between Russia and other Muslim countries, have also been marked by periods of coexistence, tolerance, and accommodation, as well as outright cooperation. For example, the period of the reign of Catherine the Great (1762– 1796) provides a good early example of such mutual accommodation and cooperation.

Finally, Russia’s considerable weight in the politics of the Middle East and the Muslim world shall not be ignored. Russian politicians thus claim that Russia is, to some extent, “part of the Muslim world.” While addressing the Parliament of the Republic of Chechnya on December 12, 2005, Russia’s president, Vladimir Putin, announced that “Russia has always been the most loyal, reliable, and consistent defender of the Muslim world’s interests. Russia has always been the best and most reliable partner and ally [of the Muslim world].”⁶

The Russian interest in Middle Eastern politics is mainly expressed by the Russian Muslim umbrella organizations, commonly called the *mufliiyats*, and often demonstrated as an initiative of Russia’s Muslims. Therefore, a sound evaluation of Muslim minority rights and the status of Islam in Russia is crucial for a broader comprehension of Russo-Saudi relations. This research accordingly views the relations between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the RF in the light of the Muslim minority rights in Russia.

Historical Background

The Spread of Islam in Russia

It is difficult to establish exactly when Islam first appeared in what we now call “Russia,” as the lands that Islam penetrated early in its expansion were not part of Russia at that time, but rather were annexed to the expanding Russian Empire several centuries later. Islam first entered the territory of the modern Russian Federation through Dagestan starting in the mid-seventh century and

(6) Vladimir Putin, “Address to the First Session of the Parliament of the Republic of Chechnya,” quoted in Elmira Akhmetova, *Islam in Russia: Historical Facts and Modern Developments* (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: IAIS Publications, 2013), 36.

from there started to spread into the entire northern Caucasus. It was the era of the second Righteous Caliph, ‘Umar ibn al-Khattab, when the Muslim army, under the leadership of ‘Abd-Rahman ibn Rabi’ah al-Bakhili, reached the southern Caucasus in 21 AH (641 CE). In 654 CE, the Arabs took the town of Derbent (now in Dagestan), which subsequently became the local point of Islamization of the northeastern Caucasus, which is referred to as *Bab al-Jihad* (the gateway of *jihad*).⁷ In 737 CE, the Muslim army under the then general Marwan ibn Muḥammad, who later became Marwan II, the last caliph of the Umayyad dynasty (r. 744–750), achieved a significant victory over the Khazar kingdom (existed between 652–1016), the strongest military power in the region. At its height, the Khazar kingdom and its tributaries controlled much of what is today southern Russia, western Kazakhstan, eastern Ukraine, Azerbaijan, large portions of the Caucasus (including Circassia, Dagestan, Chechnya, and parts of Georgia), and the Crimea. With the success of Marwan II the northern Caucasus, which previously was a vassal of the Khazar kingdom, as well as the lower Volga region all became part of the Umayyad Empire. Muslims transformed the region into an important administrative center of the Islamic world. Muslim merchants from Bukhara, who traded in the lower reaches of the Volga, contributed greatly to the proliferation of Islam in the kingdom. As early as the end of the eighth century, as Galina Yemelianova, a research fellow at the Centre for Russian and East European Studies at the University of Birmingham has stated, there existed a large central mosque and 30 district mosques in the capital city of the kingdom, Itil.⁸

In the other part of modern Russia, the upper Volga basin, Islam gradually established itself through trade relations and peaceful interactions with the Muslim world.⁹ The first Muslim state in the modern Russian territory was the

(7) Galina Yemelianova, “Islam in Russia: An Historical Perspective,” in *Islam in Post-Soviet Russia: Public and Private Faces*, ed. Hilary Pilkington and Galina Yemelianova, (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), 28.

(8) *Ibid.*, 17.

9 The Russian Orientalists Vladimir Gordlevskii (1876–1956) and Egor Kovalevskii (1811–1868) suggested that Central Asian merchants played the major role in the grassroots Islamization of the Volga Bulgars. See *ibid.*, 19.

Bulghar kingdom in the Middle Volga region, which existed in the territory of the modern republic of Tatarstan from the eighth century until its invasion by the Mongols in 1236. There is no clear evidence on the exact date when the inhabitants of the Bulghar kingdom, the Bulgars, began embracing Islam. Shihab al-Din Marjani, a renowned Tatar historian and philosopher of the nineteenth century, said that, “The city of Bulghar was the third most advanced city in Europe after Rome and Constantinople, and Islam entered this city either right after or at around the same time as it entered Andalusia.”¹⁰ However, there is clear evidence that Islam voluntarily was recognized as an official religion of the Bulghar kingdom in 922 in the presence of a delegation sent by the Abbasid caliph al-Muqtadir (r. 908–932). Bin Salki Belekvar, who was a ruler (Almas or Almish) of the Bulghar between 895 and 925, sent a letter to al-Muqtadir asking him to dispatch Muslim scholars who could teach the religion and Islamic law. He also asked the caliph to send engineers who are skilful in the building of mosques and fortresses. The caliph accepted these requests and sent scholars and skilful construction engineers. Thus, on 11 Şafar AH 309 (921 CE), the delegation set off from Baghdad toward the Bulghar kingdom. Subsequently the Bulghar king declared Islam to be the official religion of the kingdom and changed his name to Ja‘far b. ‘Abd-Allah. Moreover, the relations between the Abbasid caliph and the Bulghar kingdom did not end with that first delegation. A few years later, a Bulghar delegation, together with the king’s son, arrived in Mecca for the *Hajj* rituals. A Baghdad-born Arab historian and geographer, Al-Mas‘udi, in his treatise on the history of the world, mentioned that the Bulghar delegation visited Baghdad and brought gifts to the caliph; he also stated that the Bulghar king was a Muslim who converted to Islam in 310 AH (922 CE).¹¹

Very soon, the Bulghar kingdom had developed into an important center of Islamic civilization, with extensive ties to the rest of the Muslim world,

(10) Shihāb al-Dīn Marjānī, *Mustafād al-akhbār fī ahwāl Qāzān wa Bulghār* (Kazan: Tatarstan Kitap Nashriyatı, 1989), 51.

(11) See Akhmetova, *Islam in Russia*, 6–7.

especially Central Asia and Khorasan.¹² Islam had flourished in the kingdom under the patronage of the ruling family. The Bulgars played a significant role in spreading Islam to other regions of the present-day Russian territory. In 985, the Bulgar king sent some Muslim scholars to Prince Vladimir the Great of Kievan Rus' to introduce Islam to him. However, when Vladimir learned of the prohibition of alcohol in Islam, he refused to accept the religion and instead chose Orthodox Christianity in 988. The Bulgars also brought Islam to the Bashqorts (or Bashkirs) in the region of the Ural Mountains. The Muslim geographer Yaquṭ al-Ḥamawī wrote that he once encountered a Bashqort Muslim in Aleppo. This person informed al-Ḥamawī that seven Muslims came from the Bulgar kingdom and spread Islam among the Bashqorts.¹³

The second wave of the spread of Islam in Russia took place during the period of the Golden Horde (*Altyn Urda*), a western province of the vast empire of Chengiz Khan, which was established in 1242 as a result of the Mongol invasion of the Bulgar kingdom and other neighboring territories. In 1261 Berke Khan accepted Islam. Very soon, under the rule of Uzbek Khan (r. 1312-42), Islam became the official religion of the state and, from the mid-fourteenth century until the demise of the Golden Horde in 1437, the Volga Bulgar elite dominated the cultural and Islamic discourse of the empire.¹⁴

At the beginning of the fifteenth century, a number of independent Islamic khanates emerged from the gigantic Golden Horde, including the Kazan (in Tatar, Qazan), Crimean, Siberian, Noghai, and Astrakhan khanates. These khanates covered almost all the territory of modern Russia except the region between the cities of Moscow and Kiev, where the majority of early Russians lived in a number of principalities. Until these Muslim khanates were defeated by the young, energetic, and centralized Muscovite state (which was an earlier stage of the Tsarist Russian Empire) in the sixteenth century, Islam dominated

(12) Shireen Hunter, *Islam in Russia: The Politics of Identity and Security* (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 2004), 3.

(13) Al-Dīn Marjānī, *Mustafād*, 134.

(14) Yemelianova, "Islam in Russia," 21.

most parts of modern Russia. Due to the importance of the Volga River for transportation, the Volga-Ural region was the first to fall under the newly established, and mighty, Russian Empire. On October 15, 1552, after the conquest of the Kazan khanate—which was previously the strongest state in the region—the way for the Russians to occupy the entire Volga region and the Caspian Sea was clear. By the end of the sixteenth century, the Russian state had annexed most of the khanates of Astrakhan, Nogai, and Siberia, with the notable exception of the Crimean Khanate, which was conquered only in 1783, during the reign of Catherine the Great. In 1859, the Muslims of Dagestan (Chechnya and Ingushetia were then part of that region) also lost their country to tsarist Russia after 34 years of resistance under Imam Shamil (1797–1871).¹⁵

Muslims under Tsarist Russia

Muslim lands conquered in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were annexed by the Muscovite state of Ivan the Terrible (r. 1533–1584) and the first Romanovs, the second and last imperial dynasty of Russia, which ruled the country from 1613 to 1917. This state was purely Russian in orientation and entirely indifferent to the problems of relations between the Russians and other nationalities. Muslim principalities were integrated into the Muscovite state and Muslim inhabitants were treated as Russian subjects to whom the rights reserved to Christians were denied.¹⁶ The suppression of Islam, accompanied by coercive Christianisation and Russification, were central to Moscow's policy of integrating non-Russian territories within a centralized Russian state.¹⁷

From the fall of the Kazan khanate in 1552 until the reign of Catherine the Great (1762–1796), the tsarist government used a policy of systematic repression of Muslims and destruction of Muslim civilization within Russia's borders. By the time Russia began its expansion into Muslim lands during the reign of Ivan

(15) On the Caucasus resistance under Imam Shamil, see Anatol Lieven, *Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 304–318, and Lesley Blanch, *The Sabres of Paradise: Conquest and Vengeance in the Caucasus* (London: Tauris Parke, 1960).

(16) Alexandre Bennigsen and Enders Wimbush, *Muslims of the Soviet Empire: A Guide* (London: Hurst, 1986), 8.

(17) Hilary Pilkington, "Introduction," in *Islam in Post-Soviet Russia*, ed. Pilkington and Yemelianova, 6.

the Terrible, a certain idea of the basis of Russia's statehood and nationhood had emerged. The most significant and deep-rooted aspect of this notion of Russia's statehood was the heritage of Byzantium, which had been founded on the principle of a fusion between religion and state. In the Russian context, this concept was expanded into a fusion between religion, ethnicity, and nationality. Consequently, being Russian meant being an Orthodox Christian and an ethnic Slav.¹⁸ This situation was changed with Russia's conquest and incorporation of Muslim lands, a process that broke up the country's ethnoreligious unity. As the so-called Spanish solution—the complete expulsion of the Muslims—was not a viable option, the next alternative, from the viewpoint of preserving Russia's Orthodox Christian character, was their assimilation. The Muslim ruling elite and feudal leadership were destroyed through confiscating the most fertile Muslim lands of Muslims, to be redistributed among the Russian nobility and Orthodox monasteries. As a result, in many areas—including the Volga-Urals region, the Crimea, and some parts of the North Caucasus—Muslims became minorities in their ancestral lands.

In the hope of preventing any further development of Islamic civilization in the rapidly expanding Russian nation, the Muslim state archives, libraries, books and manuscripts were completely destroyed. Tombstones were removed from Tatar (Muslim) cemeteries and were used as the foundations of monasteries and churches. Muslims were expelled from all important cities and from the best lands along the rivers. For instance, after its capture, Kazan was plundered and set ablaze, and, according to the Russian historian Mikhail Khudiakov, its entire male population—with the sole exception of Yadygar, its last ruler—was slaughtered, and the women and children were distributed among the victorious Russian soldiers upon the order of the Tsar Ivan the Terrible.¹⁹ The Muslims' houses, lands, and all other properties were distributed among the Russians, too. Those who somehow survived the systematic massacre were

(18) Hunter, *Islam in Russia*, 7.

(19) Mikhail Khudiakov, *Ocherki po istorii Kazanskogo Khanstva* [Essays on the history of the Kazan khanate] (Moscow: Insan, 1991), 154.

driven out of the city, and an ordinance was issued forbidding Muslims to settle within the 30-mile radius of Kazan.

In 1593, Fyodor Ivanovich (r. 1584–1598), the last tsar of Russia from the Rurik dynasty and the son of Ivan the Terrible, ordered the destruction of all mosques and religious schools in the colonized territories, a policy that was continued for centuries. For instance, on November 19, 1742, the Empress Elizabeth (r. 1741–1762) issued another decree to destroy all mosques in Russia. In the span of just seven years (1738–1745), in the Kazan province alone, 418 mosques out of the total of 536 were demolished. Likewise, in Siberia, 98 mosques out of 133 were destroyed, and in Astrakhan, 25 mosques out of 40. Muslim charitable properties (*waqfs*) also were confiscated.²⁰ In 1740, the Office of the Newly Baptized was established in Kazan under the leadership of Bishop Lukas Konashevich to baptize all Muslims, forcefully if necessary. The imperial edict of the same year exempted the new converts from tax while doubling the taxes of those subjects who insisted on remaining true to their faith, Islam.

This hostile atmosphere resulted in systematic uprisings and revolts among Muslims of the empire, culminating in the second half of the eighteenth century in Pugachev's Rebellion, the largest peasant revolt in Russian history. It is estimated that about 90,000 Muslims took part in this mutiny.²¹ In response the empress Catherine the Great adopted a relatively liberal policy, resulting in a number of significant reforms. In 1773, the empress instructed the Holy Synod to issue a "Toleration of All Faiths Edict," which stated that "As God tolerates all faiths on Earth, Her Imperial Majesty will also permit all faiths, and desires only that Her subjects exist in harmony." The edict further prohibited "all bishops and all priests" from "destroying mosques" and ordered them "not to interfere in Muslim questions or in the building of their houses of worship."²²

(20) Akhmetova, *Islam in Russia*, 13.

(21) Ravil Bukharaev, *Islam in Russia: The Four Seasons* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 301–302.

(22) See Alan Fisher, *The Crimean Tatars* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1978), 71.

In consequence of this edict, Muslims, for the first time in their history under Russian imperialism, were granted the freedom to profess their faith openly, and all types of persecutions on the basis of religious belief were terminated.

Catherine also adopted a policy of co-opting Muslim clergy and utilizing them in order to be able to control and assimilate the Muslim population by bureaucratic means. In 1789, the first Muslim institution, the Ufa Spiritual Muhammadan Assembly (Ufimskoe Dukhovnoe Magometanskogo Zakona Sobranie) was established in the city of Ufa. This system later expanded to other regions as Russia conquered more Muslim-inhabited territories. Usually the *mufti*—the head of the Spiritual Board—was appointed by the decree of the tsar from among the persons that were known to the government to be politically aligned with, and faithful to, the political regime. The mufti was subordinate to the minister of the interior and fulfilled his commands. For centuries this institute of muftis and imams served by decree as a convenient tool for influencing the Tatar population in the way most desired by the Russian tsars,²³ and even today it is a principal organizational form of the administration of Muslim religious needs.

Catherine the Great provided favorable conditions for the economic and cultural development of the Volga Tatars, whom she regarded as “potential promoters of Russia’s interests and as the civilizing force among the culturally less developed Islamic regions within and outside the borders of the Russian empire.”²⁴ From 1784 onward, some Tatar *mirzas* (nobles) were granted the right to trade and to develop businesses in textiles, leather, and some other light industries. Tatar merchants became the main agents in trade between Russia and its Muslim neighbors—Kazakhstan, Central Asia, Iran, Afghanistan, India, and western China—as non-Muslim traders were not welcomed in these countries. As a consequence of these reforms, a new system of incorporating the Muslim community into the governmental structure had been initiated.

(23) A. Arsharuni and H. Gabidullin, *Essays on Pan-Turkism and Pan-Islamism in Russia*, quoted in Bukharaev, *Islam in Russia*, 315.

(24) Yemelianova, “Islam in Russia,” 25.

As restrictions placed on Muslim trade and entrepreneurship were partly lifted, the Muslim cultural life received a boost from the proceeds of international trade and manufacturing. New mosques were built and religious schools were opened in large cities such as Kazan, Ufa, and Orenburg. In 1844, there were four *madrasahs* in Kazan alone. The number of Islamic schools in the villages increased as well.²⁵ In 1787, upon imperial orders, the first Qur'an in the Arabic original was published by the press of the Academy of Sciences in Saint Petersburg, which was an outstanding achievement in the history of Qur'anic publication in Russia. It was distributed freely among Russia's Muslims. In 1801–1802, the Arabic typographic script was passed from Saint Petersburg to Kazan, where the first Muslim printing press was opened by G. Burashev, thus establishing the illustrious tradition of Kazan Tatar book publishing.²⁶

From the 1850s on, methods of religious persecutions again became central to the tsarist treatment of Muslim subjects. Yet again, Russian Orthodoxy was compulsorily foisted onto the Muslim population, and again Russian troops entered the Muslim villages along with Christian missionaries. But in Central Asia and the Caucasus, Russia pursued an essentially colonialist strategy. Its main goal in the region was to establish political control without changing the local administrative structure and to exploit the conquered lands economically. However, in comparison to the Volga Tatars, they allowed their subjects relatively more religious and cultural freedom.

Despite all these imperial attempts to uproot Muslim faith and culture, Islam survived in the villages. The late nineteenth century had witnessed a large-scale intellectual awakening and revivalist movement among the Volga Tatars called *Jadidism*, which culminated after the Russian Revolution of 1905. The overall opening of political space in response to the revolution allowed Muslims to engage in political activities for the first time in their history under Russian rule. All-Russian Muslim conferences were convened between 1905 and 1917

(25) Gayaz Ishaqi, *Idel-Ural* (Naberejniyi Chelny, Tatarstan, Russia:: KAMAZ, 1993), 32.

(26) Bukharaev, *Islam in Russia*, 310.

in several Russian cities, and the *Ittifaq al-Muslimin* (Unity of Muslims) Party was established, which represented the Muslim faction in the Russian state dumas from 1906 to 1916.²⁷

These years of freedom produced a number of notable intellectuals, including ‘Abd al-Rashid Ibrahimov (1857–1944), Musa Jar-Allah (1875–1949), Sadri Maksudi (1878–1957), Yusuf Akchura Oglu (1876–1935), Gayaz Ishaqi (1878–1954), and Mir Said Sultan-Galiev (1880–1939?), whose ideas and activities had far-reaching impact in the local, as well as international, arenas. The revival of Islam in Russia and political activism in the part of Russia’s Muslims were, however, short-lived, as in 1917 the October Revolution swept over Russia.

Relations between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Soviet Union

During the decisive years of the Russian Civil War (1918–1922) the young Bolshevik government was obliged to win the sympathy and support of the Muslim population, who constituted about 20 million, in order to secure Soviet power in the territories inhabited by Muslims. When the civil war ended with the establishment of the undisputed authority of the Soviet regime, the government did everything in its power to liquidate everything related to Islam.²⁸ The sufferings of Muslims under the tsarist regime amounted to very little in comparison to what Islam in Russia had to endure in the twentieth century under Communist rule, however. In general, the anti-Islamic policies of the Communist regime had three principal components:

1. The eradication of the Muslim judicial and educational infrastructure.
2. The elimination of the clerical establishment’s financial independence by

(27) On Dumas see, Arsharuni and Gabidullin, *Ocherki Panislamisma*, 65; Dilyara Usmanova, *Deputaty ot Kazanskoi Gubernii v Gosudarstvennoi Dume Rossii* [Delegates from the Kazan Gubernia to Russian State Duma] (Kazan: Tatarskoe Knijnoe Izdatel’stvo, 2006); and Aidar Khavutdinov and Damir Mukhetdinov, *Obshestvennoe Dvijenie Musulman-Tatar: Itogi I Perspektivy* [Social Movement of Tatar Muslims: Results and Perspectives] (Nizhniy Novgorod: DUMNO, 2005), 39-42.

(28) Elmira Akhmetova, *Ideas of Muslim Unity at the Age of Nationalism* (Germany: Lambert Academic Publishing, 2009), 25-26.

dismantling the *waqf* system. 3. Anti-Islamic propaganda: As explained by Shireen Hunter, “All religions were anathema to Communist ideology, but Islam was especially targeted because it was viewed as reactionary and backward.”²⁹

The worst time for Muslims and Islam in the Soviet Russia, however, was during the rule of Josef Stalin (r. 1923–1953). The main assault on Islam started in 1928 and included policies such as the massive closure of mosques and educational institutions and the liquidation of Muslim religious scholars and the Muslim political elite. In the course of the anti-Islamic campaign of the 1930s, almost all mosques, madrasahs, *maktabs* (elementary schools), and other Islam-related institutions were destroyed or, in most cases, were converted into social clubs, shops, secular schools, post offices, barns, pigsties, or storage sheds. Before the October Revolution, there were about 26,000 functioning mosques in the Russian Empire, with 45,000 *mullahs* serving the faithful. By the end of Stalin’s “Great Purge,” in 1942, however, only 1,312 working mosques remained open.³⁰ Moreover, all the 14,500 Islamic religious schools existing in the country were forcibly shut down.

The majority of distinguished Muslim scholars were arbitrarily charged with anti-Soviet activity and executed or sent to the Gulag. Religious scholars and imams were arrested and liquidated as “saboteurs” and, after 1935, as spies. Fewer than 2,000 of the approximately 45,000 religious figures survived. Thousands of Muslim intellectuals were obliged to flee to Afghanistan, Turkey, Iran, or China. The entire heritage of leading Muslim intellectuals, including ‘Abd al-Rashid Ibrahimov, Musa Jarullah, Ayaz Ishaqi, Ismail Gasprali, and many others were blacklisted due to the “ideological danger” they posed, and their names were erased from documents, encyclopedias, and all types of textbooks on grounds they were enemies of the Soviet “nation.”

The publication of Islamic literature was halted, and previously published Islamic books were banned from circulation and ownership. The banning

(29) Hunter, *Islam in Russia*, 25.

(30) *Ibid.*, 29–30.

of Islamic books was accompanied by highly publicized book burnings—something (and apparently not the only thing) Stalinist Russia had in common with Nazism. Moreover, to avoid imprisonment or even a possible death penalty, Muslims possessing “forbidden” books of Islamic literature were obliged to burn or bury their entire library. Muslim children, like all Soviet children, were taught within the compulsory unified Soviet educational system, a central element of which was atheistic communist indoctrination. They were taught a new Soviet version of their history, now defined by class struggle, and with national and religious identities were depicted as insignificant and rudimentary.

The Soviet government endeavored to cause disunity among Muslims by playing upon ethnic and tribal differences, too. In 1919 Soviet leaders divided the Muslim community of the Middle Volga into Tatar and Bashqort states at a time when Muslims were demanding one unified republic for all Muslims living in that region. Following this move, Soviet leaders took steps to enforce a policy of *razmejevanie* (“demarcation”) of the Muslim community of Central Asia during 1924–1925 in order to formulate new nations on the basis of the four criteria of nationhood as propounded by Stalin: unity of territory, language, economy and culture. Accordingly, the 1959 Soviet census divided the Muslim community, constituting about 20 percent of the Soviet population, into 38 different groups. Some of them were called “nations” (in Russian, *natsii*), and others, “subnationalities” (in Russian, *narodnosti*). The largest of these nations were the Uzbeks, who numbered over 6 million, while the smallest were the tiny subnationalities of Dagestan and the North Caucasus, each numbering fewer than 20,000.³¹

At the same time, the Soviets tried to create a Muslim-friendly portrait of the Soviet government in the international arena. Already in 1919, Lenin had set up the organization of the Communist International (Komintern) to export

(31) On Soviet policies aiming at dividing the Russian Muslim community see Alexandre Bennigsen, “Islamic or Local Consciousness among Soviet Nationalities,” in Edward Allworth (ed.), *Soviet Nationality Problems*, ed. Edward Allworth (New York: Colombia University Press, 1971), 178–182.

the socialist revolution to the rest of the world, particularly to Asia, and to “liberate” the oppressed Asian people from the Western imperialist hegemony. Starting in the 1920s, the Muslim Middle East captured the particular attention of the Soviet government in its foreign policy, and by 1925, the Soviet regime had established diplomatic relations with the Republic of Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, followed later by Yemen. When ‘Abd al-‘Aziz bin Sâud declared himself king of the Hejaz in 1926, and, one year later, king of Najd, the first country to recognize these states and to establish full diplomatic relations with them was the Soviet Union.³² Karim Hakimov (1892–1937), a successful politician of Muslim origin with a strong ‘communist heart, was chosen to be the first Soviet ambassador to Saudi Arabia.

Having graduated from a madrasah in the Orenburg region, Hakimov was well-versed in religious matters. In 1918 he became a member of the Communist Party and took part in creation of the Second Turkestan Infantry Division, which was responsible for the sovietization of Central Asia, and the “liberation” of Afghanistan, Iran, and India. After completing his mission as a Soviet secret agent in Bukhara, he became head of the Soviet embassy in Iran from 1921, and in 1924, he became head of the Soviet embassy in Hijaz/Saudi Kingdom. By performing the rituals of the *Umrah* (minor pilgrimage), he won sympathy of the ruling Saudi elite. Very soon, he became a close friend of the king, ‘Abd al-‘Aziz bin Sâud, and gave him personal advice on the formation of the modern state of Saudi Arabia. Eventually King Sâud became the strategic partner of the Soviet Union and the local market became accessible for Soviet commodities. In 1929, Hakimov was appointed as the first Soviet ambassador to Yemen. In 1935, he was again selected to lead Soviet diplomacy in Saudi Arabia. In 1937, however, Hakimov was called back to Moscow and executed on the charge of propagating “bourgeoisie nationalism.” The Saudi king took this action as a personal offense and broke off diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union.

(32) See, “Sovetskiy Soyuz i Gosudarstvo Gedjaza-Najda” [Soviet Union and the government of Hijaz and Najd], *Izvestiya*, May 29, 1932.

The Soviet regime played a vital role in organizing the World Muslim Congress of Makkah (June 7–July 5, 1926, during the Hajj season), which discussed the ways to liberate Muslims from colonial dependence on the West, which was considered the main Soviet goal in its attempt to achieve “world revolution.” For the Soviets, owning the caliphate’s discourse meant the victory of communism in the predominantly Muslim East. The Soviet delegation to the World Muslim Congress of Makkah, under the leadership of the Soviet Mufti Riḍa al-Din Faḥr al-Din, was among the largest official delegations, consisting of eight members.³³ A report prepared by Raoul Wallenberg, the deputy of the head of the Soviet VOOGPU (Eastern Department of the Joint State Political Directorate), described this delegation as “our” delegation, consisting of the most excellent internally and internationally respected individuals, carefully selected by the authorities.³⁴ The activities of the Soviet delegation during the Makkah Congress focused mainly on two basic objectives: first, to strengthen the anti-imperial, and particularly anti-British spirit, among those attending the meeting, and, second, to provide backing for the legitimacy and sovereignty of the new government under Ibn Sa’ud.³⁵

(33) Only the Indian delegation, consisting of 13 members from three groups (the caliphate group, the group of scholars, and the group of al-Ḥadīth), was larger than the Soviet delegation of eight members.

(34) See Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI), file 17, op. 85, case 171, pp. 50, 89; and D. Y. Arapov and G. G. Kosach (eds.), *Islam i Musulmane po materialam Vostochnogo Otdela OGPU. 1926 God* [Islam and Muslims in Records of the Eastern Department of OGPU. Year 1926] (Nizhny Novgorod: Medina, 2007), 42, 112–13.

(35) Soon after returning to Russia, the head of the delegation Riḍa al-Din Faḥr al-Din acknowledged that the main mission of the Soviet delegation to the First Muslim Congress of Makkah was (1) to oppose any attempts of the colonial powers to manipulate the religious feelings of Muslims and their aspirations to be united for imperial purposes, and (2) to help the government of Ibn Sa’ud in establishing a reputation of his kingdom as an independent state in the Muslim world. For an interview with the head of the delegation of the Muslims of the USSR, Riḍa al-Din, see, RGASPI, f. 17, op. 85, c. 171, p. 45; and Arapov and Kosach, *Islam i Musulmane*, 96–97. In a top-secret report about the Cairo and Makkah Congresses, Wallenberg determined the main targets of the Soviet authority from the Makkah Congress to be carried out by its delegation accordingly: to utilize “our” presence in the Makkah congress to unite the audience on anti-British mood against the Cairo congress and try to annul resolutions of the Cairo Congress as a product of the British dictatorship; and, on the case of the failure of the Cairo Congress to decide a new caliph (these particular pages of the report were prepared before the Cairo Congress), our delegation should put a greatest effort to refrain the meeting in Makkah from choosing a caliph. See Arapov and Kosach, *Islam i Musulmane*, 111–112.

Within the next several years, the Soviet Union tried to control the situation around the caliphate issue and to chart the course of some important political developments in the Middle East. A contemporary Tatar scholar, Larisa Usmanova, for instance, stated that the Pan-Islamist veteran of Russia ‘Abd Rashid Ibrahimov was sent to the World Muslim Congress in Jerusalem, held in 1931, by the authorities to halt the anti-Soviet propaganda that the other Turk-Tatar emigrants were promoting in the Muslim world.³⁶ In sum, the factor of Islam, the eagerness of local and international Muslims to become united, as well as their brotherhood sentiments and religious feelings had been skilfully exploited by the masterminds of the Soviet regime against its strategic enemy, the British Empire, and later, against the United States. Soviet diplomacy had obviously benefited from the favor of the local Muslim clerics in creating a positive image of the Soviet Union in the Muslim world. Within a decade in power, the Communist regime had emerged as one of the main players in Middle Eastern politics, with an ability to dictate important decision-making processes in the region. At the same time, along the local Muslims, Islam was suppressed to point of invisibility. The antagonistic policies of the Communist regime disturbed the traditional religious, social, economic, and political foundations of Muslim society. Moreover, the Muslim nations were politically deceived; their entire religious and political elites were eliminated. The population of the Muslim nations was significantly reduced due to the mass deportations to Central Asia in the 1940s. Yet Islam again survived on Russian soil, and the collapse of the Soviet Union was followed by the revival of Islam.

The Status of Islam and Muslims in Modern Russia

A General Profile of Muslims in Contemporary Russia

The majority of Russia’s Muslims live today in the Volga-Urals region, western Siberia, and the northern Caucasus. Other parts of Russia, including

(36) However, Ibrahimov was not able to reach Jerusalem, and instead went to Makkah, where he railed against that World Congress in Jerusalem. See Larisa Usmanova, *The Türk-Tatar Diaspora in Northeast Asia: Transformation of Consciousness: A Historical and Sociological Account between 1898 and the 1950s* (Tokyo: Rakudasha, 2007), 22.

megacities such as Moscow, St. Petersburg, and Nizhny Novgorod also have significant Muslim populations. The Muslim population of Moscow alone has been estimated to be more than 2 million, in a total population of about 10.5 million. Saint Petersburg's Muslim community is about 500,000 (according to the 2002 census, its total population is about 4.6 million). According to the London-based Tatar BBC journalist Ravil Bukharaev, today there is no big city in Siberia which does not have a mosque and Muslims are found everywhere from the Urals to the Kamchatka peninsula.³⁷ Modern Russia's Muslims belong to more than 40 ethnic groups,³⁸ including the Volga Tatars (direct descendants of the Bulgars), Siberian Tatars, Chechens, Ingushs, Bashqorts, Dargins, Balkars, Avars, Karachays, Circassians, Kabardins, and many others. In the Dagestan region alone there are dozens of indigenous Muslim ethnicities. Muslims are predominant in seven out of 21 republics of the Russian Federation: the republics of Bashkortostan and Tatarstan in the Volga-Urals region, and the republics of Chechnya, Ingushetia, Dagestan, Kabardino-Balkaria, and Karachay-Cherkessia in the Northern Caucasus.

The majority of Russia's Muslims (more than 90 percent) adhere to two Sunni schools of Islamic jurisprudence: the Ḥanafī and Shafī'i *madhhabs*. Muslims of the Volga-Urals region and the Nogais, Karachays, and Balkars in the North Caucasus practice the Ḥanafī *madhhab*, while the Muslims of Dagestan, Chechnya, and Ingushetia adhere to the Shafī'i *madhhab*. Twelver Shi'ites constitute a small minority that is to be found almost exclusively in the Caucasus, among Azeri Turks and within the Azeri diaspora, as well as a portion of Dagestan's small Muslim ethnic group the Lezgins.

The Constitution of the Russian Federation of 1993 stipulates that Russia is a secular state, that "no religion can be installed as the official or compulsory

(37) Bukharaev, *Islam in Russia*, 265.

(38) Including the tiny ethnicities of the Caucasus region may make this number even higher. For instance, Russia's then-president Dmitry Medvedev noted during his visit to the Grand Mosque of Moscow on July 15, 2009, that 57 of Russia's 182 different ethnic groups identified themselves as Muslims. See, Elmira Akhmetova, "Russia," in *Yearbook of Muslims in Europe: Volume 2*, ed. Jorgen Nielsen (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill Academic Publishing, 2010), 438.

[religion],” and that “religious associations shall be separate from the State and shall be equal before the law” (Article 14). It also guarantees that “freedom of conscience and religion, including the right to profess individually or collectively any religion or not to profess any religion, and freely to choose, possess and disseminate religious and other convictions and act in accordance with them” (Article 28) and prohibits “all forms of limitations of human rights on social, racial, national, language or religious grounds” (Article 19). However, Islam is identified as a “traditional religion” in the RF, along with Orthodox Christianity, Buddhism, and Judaism, according to the Law on Freedom of Conscience of 1997.

Islam is repeatedly affirmed to be part of Russian society by the Russian authorities and political leaders. In 2005, the RF earned an “observer status” at the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). Since then, Russian leaders have claimed that Russia is, to some extent, a “part of the Muslim world.” While addressing the Parliament of the Republic of Chechnya on December 12, 2005, president of Russia Vladimir Putin announced that “Russia has always been the most loyal, reliable, and consistent defender of the Muslim world’s interests. Russia has always been the best and most reliable partner and ally [of the Muslim world].”³⁹ During his official visit to Egypt, on June 23, 2009, Russia’s current president, Dmitry Medvedev, gave a speech at the headquarters of the Arab League in which he declared that Russia is “an organic part” of the Muslim world and opposed Western efforts to promote democratic change in the Middle East. “Islam,” Medvedev told his audience, “is an inalienable part of Russian history and culture, given that more than 20 million Russian citizens are among the faithful.” Consequently, “Russia does not need to seek friendship with the Muslim world: Our country is an organic part of this world.”⁴⁰

(39) Vladimir Putin, “Address to the First Session of the Parliament of the Republic of Chechnya,” quoted in Akhmetova, *Islam in Russia*, 36.

(40) “Rossiya: Chast’ islamskogo mira,” *Institute of Religion and Policy*, as quoted in Akhmetova, *Islam in Russia*, 36.

The Well-being of Muslims in the RF

Muslims of Russia are legally entitled to the equal rights with other citizens of the country. Their voice is mainly represented by so-called official *ulama*, comprising several institutions of the *muftiyat*. The most active among these umbrella organizations is the Russian Council of Muftis (Soviet Muftiyev Rossii, RCM), founded in July 1996 that unites Sunni religious Muslim organizations in the RF on a voluntary basis. The government willingly assists Muslim institutions by financing educational and cultural development. Consequently, Muslims in Russia have succeeded in restoring the positive presence of Islam in Russian society after long years of religious persecution and the triumph of atheism.

However, the tragedy of the attacks of September 11, 2001, and the US-led global “war on terror” as their consequence were the catalyst for Russia’s decision to get serious about so-called religious extremism. Earlier attacks within Russian territory, such as the September 1999 apartment bombings in Moscow, were seen in most instances as an overspill from the localized conflict in Chechnya and the product of separatism rather than a result of religious ideology. Along with the beginning of the “war on terror,” in June 2002 the RF adopted a new law entitled “On Fighting Extremist Activity,” which was commonly known as the “Extremism Law.” It defines extremist activity in a specifically religious context: incitement of religious hatred; committing a crime motivated by religious hatred; obstruction of the lawful activity of religious associations accompanied by violence or the threat of violence; and propaganda on the exclusivity, superiority, or inferiority of citizens according to their attitude toward religion or religious affiliation. In the wake of the 2002 Extremist Law’, cases of discrimination and violation of Muslim rights under the pretext of fighting against religious extremism or Islamic terrorism’ have significantly increased in Russia.

Dozens of mainstream Islamic books. such as the *Riyadh al-Salihin* (The gardens of the righteous), *Sorok Khadisov* (Forty hadiths) of Al-Nawawi, *Mizan al-A’mal* (Balanced criterion of action) of Imam Ghazali, *Jizn’ Proroka Muhammada* (The

life of the Prophet Muhammad) of Ibn Hisham and al-Mubarakfuri, and parts of the *Risale-i Nur* of Said Nursi have been indiscriminately banned in various district courts in Russia for allegedly inciting interreligious and interracial hatred and promoting exclusivity and superiority on the basis of religion. In 2016, Islamic literature continued being ruled “extremist” and placed on the RF Justice Ministry’s Federal List of Extremist Materials, although most lacks violent or racist content. An Islamic account about teaching about prayers for everyday occasions, called “Fortress of a Muslim,” for example, was ruled as “extremist” literature for a second time in August 2016 by the regional court in Buryatiya, and it has been blocked across multiple sites as well as banned in hard copy.⁴¹ The Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology, and Mass Media (Roskomnadzor) also has the authority to block sites, apps, and webpages without recourse to the courts. Libraries, educational institutions, and even cafes are also frequently reprimanded for failing to put in place adequate content filters to prevent users of their networks from accessing ‘extremist’ material online.⁴²

Besides many Muslim organizations, movements, and societies such as Hizb al-Tahrir, Jama’ a al-Tabligh, Nurcular (followers of Said Nursi), the so-called Ahl al-Sunna, Islamic Jamaat, Salafism, Wahhabism, and others have been banned in Russia as being “extremist” and “contradictory to the traditional Hanafi madhhab,” according to the 2002 Law on Extremism. These bans have inevitably led to the arrests of dozens, if not hundreds, of Muslims in Russia on allegations of belonging to so-called extremist groups. Since 2002, many practicing Muslims have been detained for organizing an organization which, according to human rights activists and lawyers, does not exist. In fact, only the Hanafi *madhhab* is considered acceptable and traditional in Russia, while the other schools of thought and *fiqh*, apart from the Shafi’i *madhhab* (which can be tolerated as indigenous Muslims of the northern Caucasus, such as

(41) <http://islamreview.ru/news/krepost-musulmanina-snova-pod-zapretom>, accessed 1 May 2017.

(42) Arnold, “Russia: “Extremism” Religious Freedom Survey,” *Forum 18*, Sept. 13, 2016, http://forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2215.

the Chechens and Ingush, are Shafi'is), are “non-traditional” and unwelcome.⁴³ The monopoly of the Spiritual Directorate and regional authorities over the lives of Muslims arouses feelings of suspicion about everyone who does not follow the “traditional” Hanafi *madhhab*.

The prosecutions of practicing Muslims usually begin with (often armed) raids on the homes of people whom law enforcement agencies suspect of continuing the activities of a banned extremist organization (Nurdzhular, let say). Such raids involve the seizure of computers, phones, and religious literature, and the arrest and interrogation of individuals. Suspects are sometimes then kept in pretrial detention, or are put under house arrest or travel restrictions as the investigation continues—which may take several months. Under Article 109 of the Criminal Procedural Code, individuals can initially be held in custody for up to two months, and investigators must seek any necessary extensions to this period by application to a district court. Pretrial detention in extremism-related prosecutions can generally be extended to a maximum of six months, with a maximum of one year in serious cases.⁴⁴

Through monitoring alleged “Islamic terrorism” criminal cases, the Memorial Human Rights Center asserts that Russia today—under the pretext of fighting “international terrorism”—is waging a wide-scale campaign against various Muslim groups, accompanied by serious violations of fundamental human rights. Most cases of abuse of the fundamental rights of Muslims are the consequence of the 2002 Law on Extremism. In fact, the Russian government does not have a policy of restricting freedom of religion or belief, but a too broad definition of extremism in the Law on Extremism has opened a space for corrupt officials to gain financial benefits under the pretext of fighting against extremism. As an example, in 2016, eight Muslims were detained in the republic of Bashkortostan for reading the banned Hizb al-Tahrir literature

(43) The Oslo-based Forum 18 News Service has reported on the existing Hanafi monopoly in Russia. See G. Fagan, “Russia: Any School of Islam, as Long as It’s Hanafi,” July 9, 2009, <http://www.refworld.org/pdfid/4a55f93c2.pdf>. See also Akhmetova, “Russia,” 440.

(44) Arnold, “Russia.”

and received prison-sentences up to 10 years on charges of “establishment of a terrorist organization.”⁴⁵

As Forum 18 observed, the state’s “counterextremism” strategy in the North Caucasus is far cruder. In the republics of Chechnya and Dagestan in particular, those dubbed “Wahhabis” (a term used loosely by officials to mean Muslims they dislike)—and sometimes men merely with a devout Muslim appearance—may be detained as extremists by the law enforcement agencies. Local residents report that they are frequently tortured, and in some cases disappear, allegations very occasionally confirmed by state officials.⁴⁶

The phenomenon of Islamophobia and the politics of hatred toward all things Islamic is a reality in Russia. There are many cases of public and official objections by the Orthodox Church, regional administrations, and non-Muslim populations to the construction of new mosques or to the celebration of Islamic festivals, the refusal to give jobs to headscarf-wearing women and bearded men, dismissing headscarf-wearing women from their jobs, and not allowing headscarf-wearing girls to enter educational institutions. In fact, the most integrated traditional Russia’s Muslims such as Tatars and Bashkorts, whose religious adherence is not noticeable, do not face serious adverse public opinion on the part of non-Muslims. Muslims of the North Caucasus region and Central Asian immigrants, however, are unwelcome in Russian cities.

Muslims and Russo-Saudi Relations

In early 1930s the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia cut all kinds of relations with the Soviet Union due to the Soviet assault on Islam. However, Saudi Arabia annually allowed 20 Soviet Muslims to perform the *Hajj* rituals from 1946 to 1990. Later, the Saudi support for *Mujahedeen* in Afghanistan deteriorated the relations between two countries.

(45) “Fabrication of Islamic ‘extremism’ criminal cases in Russia,” quoted in Akhmetova, “Russia,” 440..

(46) Arnold, “Russia.”

The RF was established in 1991 following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Since then, Russia's foreign policy in the Middle East is a multidimensional endeavor, which calls for something akin to strategic relations to be built with influential regional actors. Pursuing a partnership with Saudi Arabia is a comprehensive task for the RF, as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is a leading country in the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf (GCC) and, like Russia, it is a serious player on the global oil market.⁴⁷ Russo-Saudi diplomatic relations were restored since 1991, although bilateral engagement is not always stable. In 2003, King Abdullah visited Russia as Crown Prince opening a high level contacts between the countries. Russian president Putin met King Abdullah in Riyadh during a high level delegation visit on February 11–12, 2007, making the first official visit for a Russian leader to the kingdom.

One of the key dimensions for bilateral cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Russia is the joint fight against extremism and terrorism, as a policy issue paper prepared by the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC) in 2016 observes.⁴⁸ The positions of Riyadh and Moscow often coincide with regard to Egypt, the Middle Eastern conflict, and Tunisia, yet tend to differ with regard to the processes currently underway in Syria or over the Iranian issue. These differences do not prevent Saudi Arabia and Russia from supporting the transformation of the Persian Gulf, and the Middle East as a whole, into a region free from weapons of mass destruction, while recognizing the right of all of its countries to the peaceful use of nuclear energy.⁴⁹ However, Saudi Arabia and the RF have never achieved the full strategic partnership due to the lack of mutual trust. This mistrust is primarily related to the Russian interpretation of Wahhabism.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia played a vital role in rebirth of Islam in a Russian soil by generously sponsoring the

(47) G. Kosach and E. Melkumyan, *Possibilities of a Strategic Relationship between Russia and Saudi Arabia* (Moscow: Russian International Affairs Council, August 2016), no 6, 3.

(48) Ibid.

(49) Ibid.

construction of mosques and Islamic educational institutions. In 1980s, there were only 179 functioning mosques for the entire Soviet Union, but by 1998, there were already over 5,500 registered mosques in Russia, 2,000 of which were in Chechnya, 1,670 in Dagestan, around 1,000 in Tatarstan, and 400 in Ingushetia.⁵⁰ Today, mosques may be found in almost every Russian city as well as small towns with a Muslim community. New mosques were opened in several ancient Russian cities such as Tver, Kostroma, Yaroslavl, Ryazan, Nizhny Novgorod, and others. Experts estimate that today there are at least 11,000 officially registered mosques and about 12,000 Muslim prayer houses functioning in Russia—and their number continues to increase. According to reports, many of these mosques and madrasahs received financial support from Saudi Arabia. Only in Central Asia for example, Saudi Arabia and Qatar sponsored 2,500 mosques and educational institutions, spending about US \$5 billion.⁵¹ In addition, hundreds of Russian youth of Muslim origin traveled to Saudi Arabia to get Islamic education. Islamic books were translated into Russian and other native languages, and published with the generosity of Saudi-based organizations as well. These activities of the rebirth of Islam in the post-Soviet Russia were soon labeled as a spread of the Saudi-backed religious extremism and Wahhabism in Russia.⁵² The affiliation of Russia's Muslims' endeavors to practice the tenets of Islam with religious extremism jeopardizes their security and well-being. Saudi Arabia views these religious discriminations against Russia's Muslims as a manifestation of Islamophobia.⁵³ Russia, on the other hand, views Saudi Arabia as the “reserve” of the West. Such attitude of being suspicious about everything related to Saudi Arabia decreased the cultural and educational relations between Muslims of two countries sharply, retaining it primarily the *hajj*-related dealings. In 2016, 16,400 of Russia's Muslims performed their *hajj* duties.

(50) Yemelianova, “Islam in Russia,” 54–55.

(51) “Politika Saudskoi Arabii i Qatara v Tsentral’noi Azii” [The Politics of Saudi Arabia and Qatar in Central Asia], *CA Portal*, Nov. 27, 2016, <http://www.ca-portal.ru/article:25278>.

(52) “Skhemy Finansirovaniya Islamskogo Radikalizma v Rossii” [Scheme of financing of Islamic radicalism in Russia], *APN*, April 3, 2017, <http://www.apn.ru/index.php?newsid=36175>.

(53) Kosach and Melkumyan, *Possibilities of a Strategic Relationship*, 8.

The Muslim-majority republics of the RF, particularly, Tatarstan and Bashkortostan are the key players in the Saudi-Russian relations. The economic crisis of 2008–2009 obliged the Russian government to draw its attention to the Islamic banking sector, which has been seen as a potential to channel substantial capital and investments from the oil-rich Gulf countries to Russia. Moscow continues seeking closer contacts with Riyadh in this area and the government of Tatarstan plays the vital role in this agenda yet without considerable results. In May 2005, the Russian-Saudi Business Council was established to expand cooperation between small and medium-sized businesses in the two countries. This work is facilitated by the “Russia–Islamic World” business forum, which includes OIC countries. Yet, until the present date, Russian business is poorly represented in the Saudi market, and there are no Saudi businesses in Russia.⁵⁴ Accordingly, Saudi-Russian relations remain at an initial stage, and are often strained due to the interests of world powers in the Middle Eastern conflict.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

After a concise revision of the Russo-Saudi relations in the light of the Muslim minority rights in the RF, this paper proposes several concluding remarks and policy recommendations. First, Russian-Muslim relations must not be confined in a simple scheme of postcolonial immigration or viewed simply as a manifestation of the recent acceleration of globalization and cultural exchange. Muslims in Russia are not alien immigrants, but rather have been ordinary citizens of the country, who have lived in their native land for many centuries. In fact, in 2000, the Muslims of Russia celebrated 14 centuries of Islam on Russian soil. Throughout these centuries, Muslims took an active part in building what we call today Russian civilization. Also, the history of Russian (Christian)-Muslim encounters is not merely one of clash, conquest, and resistance. Rather, the relations between Russians and Muslims, both within Russia and between Russia and other Muslim countries, have also been

(54) See *ibid.*

marked by periods of coexistence, tolerance, and accommodation, as well as cooperation. The mindset and attitude of Russian citizens, both of Christian and Muslim origins, have been shaped and affected by these historical experiences and current political realities.

Second, the global war on terror following the attacks on New York City on September 11, 2001, badly affected the well-being and security of Russia's Muslims in general, and Russo-Saudi relations in particular. The law titled "On Fighting Extremist Activity" led to the decline of religious freedom and a new cycle of anti-Islamic feeling in the RF. The Russian government took the position of being suspicious about all types of international relations and influences coming from the Muslim world, and particularly from the oil-rich countries of the Gulf. Donations coming from Saudi Arabia through various channels were blocked, and Saudi-funded institutions were banned in Russia as a move to prevent illegal "Wahhabi" influences. Religious pamphlets and books (mostly their translations into Russian) published in Saudi Arabia were ruled as "extremist" and "dangerous for national security."⁵⁵ At the same time, two governments continued working together, although cautiously, on fighting against extremism, promoting educational and cultural programs, and fostering the development of Islamic banking in Russia.

Third, Russia's Muslims and their activities are marginalized due to international and Middle Eastern conflicts. Extensive media attention on the transgressions carried out by the militant group Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) have had a major impact on the well-established image of Muslims in Russia. The presence of Russia's Muslims, mainly from the regions of Chechnya and the North Caucasus, in the ranks of ISIS, however, aggravated the situation. Speaking to the Executive Committee of Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure of the Shanghai cooperation organisation (SCO) in September 2013, Sergey Smirnov, deputy Director of the Federal Security Service of the RF (FSB), declared the presence in Syria and Iraq of around 300–400 militants

(55) Fagan, "Russia: Any School of Islam, as Long as It's Hanafi."

of Russian origin.⁵⁶ Consequently, cases of arrests of Muslims on allegations of being involved in terrorist activities had significantly increased. Amnesty International reported that respect for the rights to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly, and association largely declined in Russia following the Russian intervention in Crimea in March 2014. The authorities dominated the print and broadcast media, and further extended their control over the internet. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) faced further harassment and reprisals under the “foreign agents” law, while their access to foreign funding was further restricted by a new law banning “undesirable” organizations.⁵⁷ Consequently, local Muslims who expressed their sympathy toward the Crimean Tatars’ strong anti-Russian position or criticized the Russian policies toward Ukraine were arrested.⁵⁸

Finally, Saudi Arabia and Russia have a potential to engage in broader economic and cultural relations and play more substantial roles in regional and global security. However, these opportunities are jeopardized due to the absence of a proper definition of Wahhabism with a clearly defined scope and meaning, and of its alleged association with terrorism and so-called Islamic extremism. At the end, this analysis proposes the following policy recommendations to enhance the well-being of Russia’s Muslims and Russo-Saudi relations:

- The Russian Law on Religion should be reexamined by taking the current Russian reality into account. As the present religious hierarchy is totally opposed to the notions of religious freedom and the 1993 Russian Constitution, all religions should be given equal rights to exist and be practiced in Russia.

(56) “V Sirii Voyuyut do 400 ‘Russkikh’ Boevikov” [Around 400 Russian militants fight in Syria], Sept. 20, 2013, www.newsru.com/world/20sep2013/naem400.html. However, the BBC News Agency claimed that, according to security services, nearly 2,500 Russians were currently fighting for ISIS and thousands more had gone to join ISIS from other former Soviet states. See Olga Ivshina, “Russia’s Muslims Divided over Syria Air Strikes,” October 7, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34454391>.

(57) Amnesty International, “Report 2015/16: The State of the World’s Human Rights,” Feb. 23, 2016, 303; <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/pol10/2552/2016/en>.

(58) Elmira Akhmetova, “Russia,” in *Yearbook of Muslims in Europe: Volume 8*, ed. Oliver Scharbridt (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2016), 578–580.

- Since the main damage to the religious freedom of Russian citizens emanates from the 2002 Extremist Law, its articles and, most importantly, the question of its necessity today should be reconsidered. This is critical because the global “war on terror” both the law’s has demonstrated its wrongness and its futility.
- The process of banning religious literature, organizations, and societies should be placed strictly under the direct control of the government and subject to the supervision of impartial unbiased scholars and qualified religious experts.
- The federal system of providing financial support to regional administration and security forces to combat religious extremism, which allows corrupt officials to gain financial benefits under the pretext of fighting such extremism, should be reevaluated by adding more layers of transparency and accountability.
- Regional authorities should recognize that Russia’s Muslims are living in their native lands, that they are free to move from one region to another, and that their presence in the country is not temporary. Therefore, the authorities in the regions inhabited by have to accept and practice ethnic and religious equality as promoted by the constitution.
- Tolerance and respect toward Muslims and other citizens of the country must be instilled in the hearts of Russia’s Muslims. The ethnic divide that separates Muslims of different regions and nationalities must be effectively demolished, leading to greater understanding and acceptance. All kinds of suspicion on the basis of nationality, worldviews, and physical appearance must be combated with great effort by all Muslim leaders and their followers. It is the responsibility of all leaders in Russia—Muslim and non-Muslim alike—to learn and teach how to live together in a diverse community, striving for peace and social harmony, which will naturally result in unity and prosperity.
- Local and central authorities should understand that there is no threat emanating from strength, unity, and harmony among Muslims, which instead will bring more efficiency and contribute to the economic and political development of Russia at large.

- A clear-cut definition of Wahhabism and its affiliation with religious extremism must be established as a way of achieving better Russo-Saudi relations and improving the security of practicing Muslims in Russia. Economic and cultural cooperation between these two states may benefit well-being and national security of both countries.
- As the major players in the global oil market, Saudi Arabia and the RF both have the potential to play a larger parts in regional and global security. To achieve this, deeply rooted mutual mistrust must be challenged, and both parties must take further steps in creating trust and respect between the two states.

About the Author

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