

The Islamic Renaissance or Radicalization of the North Caucasus Region?

Emilia Alaverdov
GTU, PhD Student III Year

Islam started its revival in 1970-1980, but we have to mention that the event that took place in the year 1990 was called a Religious Renaissance: the whole Dagestan's Muslim community started to unite, they began to restore mosques, open Muslim's schools (Medresse), institutes and universities. In the January, same year was founded a council of Muslims, 345 citizens of Dagestan took part into the first Soviet Union pilgrimage (Hajj). The number of people participate in the Hajj grew over the years.

The above mentioned events that took place in the North Caucasus: the unifications of Muslims communities, the restoration of mosques, opening religious schools, institutes and universities, the foundation of Muslim council and last but not least Hajj turned out as a great danger for Russian Federation and began to threaten seriously both its territorial integrity and national security.

It is very strange but in the modern, XXI century Muslims try to return back for many centuries - in the days of the Prophet Mohamed - the VII century and live according to the Fundamental Islamic courses - Quran and Hadith. This style of social life they call the Fundamentalism or pure Islam which is inspired by well-known religious movement Wahabbizism - an ultra-conservative branch of Sunni Islam.

In 1990 in North Caucasus began to the distribution of religious literature, from Arabic and other languages was translated A. Tamim's, M. Usemin's, A. Magdis's and other Wahhabi's literature authors literature. In order to encourage young people to learn Arabic some of the literature were spread in Arabic language. In the region was spread the literature written by of religious-political groups and extremists. The main author were - Bahaudtin Magomedov, Magomed Tagaev, Akhmad-Kadi Aktaev and others. The aim of literature were the introduction of Islamic Laws (Sharia), to ruin the state security system, create chaos among society and propagated the religious and national clash.

Muslims may be divided into 3 groups: 1- traditional, who try to keep religious, political and social institutes unchanged and remain them as they are, 2- modernists (reformists), its followers are intelligentsia and they try to interpret the dogma of Islam in modern ways, based on the scientific, technological and social progress, and 3 - fundamentalists or Wahhabists - who try to return to the Mohamed's day. The third type of group mainly represents illiterate, poor, unemployed - people from the from lower layers of society. [1]

Since the mentioned period Dagestan and the whole North Caucasus became Russia's "Tinderbox", as the region faces the continuous turmoil and political instability.

Of course all this affects Russia's home and foreign policy.

The outcome of the re-Islamization was that the region lost stability and security, as the region suffered from two Chechen wars (1994-1996 and 1999-2000). In 1996 the Chechen Republic Ichkeria was declared as an Islamic republic and there were introduced the Islamic laws. In 1994-1996 there were 26 Sharia's courts, many Islamic political Parties, charity funds and organizations and last but not least the Wahhabi's structures [2].

Wahhabism gained its peak of popularity in the North Caucasus region in 90s of last century, when they created political parties, organizational structures, establish contacts with the overseas Islamic radical parties and organizations and started "verbovka" - youngsters' recruitment. All this were done with the help of foreign mercenaries, especially in Dagestan and Chechen Republics [3].

It is well known that the youngsters were illiterate, from the poor families and did not have any chance for social success. This is the reason that encourages the flourish of international terrorism and religious radicalism. There were countless military camps, where the mercenaries were taught the Qur'an. This impressed and influenced their ideology. Of course they and their families were provided with money. Thus a young man becomes a member of Wahhabi team. They were under such a strong ideological affluence that immediately fulfill all orders.

The outbreak of hostilities in 1994 led to the radicalization of the Chechen society. In situations of armed conflict, many political forces appealed to Islam, often with extreme positions. Besides the traditional Sufi during the first military campaign (1994 -1996) in Chechnya, appeared a considerable number of adherents of revivalist movements in Islam, calling for a literal implementation of the provisions of the Quran.

Recent events have shown that for the last 15 years, the revival of religious Islam was a revival of political organizations and activities. Where religion is connected to the politics and criminal activities.

A small North Caucasian republic, where the population before well-known wars was about a million, immediately turned out at the center of Russia's recent history. The first war in Chechen Republic, was an outcome of the Yeltsin's weak government. At the same time, however, this war was a good and profitable plan for his political team's business interests, as through Chechen Republic, where Russian laws did not act any more, could easily pass weapons to Iraq, the Balkans and Yemen.

The situation changed dramatically, when a significant number of Islamic mercenaries came to the Republic. It is necessary to mention that this was organized by the help of

Islamic organizations as the mercenaries were well-armed and trained team of the above mentioned organizations. All the all, military operations were carried out under the guise of “Jihad” and coincided with the general radicalization of the Chechen society. However, it should be noted that the ideology of radical Islam was part of the popular so-called leadership of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria.

The starting point in the policy creation in Chechnya “Islamic state” can be considered 12 September 1996, when the President Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev signed the law and introduced to the country a new legislation based on Sharia. Soviet and Russian laws did not act any more and what’s more secular courts were abolished.

The second Chechen war (1999-2000), Russia called the operation against terrorist groups - “Counter-Terrorist Operation”. The main leader of the Chechen militants was field commander Shamil Basayev and political figure, Emir Ibn al – Khattab, more commonly known as Emir Khattab Arab, whose exact origin is still unclear, who acted as the main connecting link between the Chechen “militants” and international terrorist organizations.[4]

The whole of the North Caucasus region, where in recent years became a tangle of political, national, religious, economic, and other not less important problem, which should be solved politically and not by violent means. All this happened due to 4 reasons: I – the region suffered from the lack of the qualified government - there was no strong and fair leader in the region; II – there were too many weapons; III - the population was uneducated and poor; and last but not least - the spiritual rehabilitation of oppressed people - Chechens, Ingush Karachi.

Relations with Russia and the North Caucasus – is a very significant event in the world history. Over the centuries was being created a joint Russian - Caucasian political, economic and cultural space. To the end of the XX century, the region ran into constant political tensions, economic instability and turned into an armed conflict region, which threatens Russian unity and territorial integrity. As was already mentioned, Dagestan in the point of socio - economic problems which are related to national security and the wealth of natural resources is a very important republic for Russian. In the modern era of globalization, Dagestan may become a certain kind of transit of Russia - Western Europe - Middle East Middle East - North. [5]

In the first place, the Chechen conflict began amid a general ‘Islamic renaissance’ on the territory of the former USSR, including Russia. In the North Caucasus this process was particularly vigorous in Dagestan and Chechnya.

The Islamic rebirth facilitated the regeneration of the Chechens’ historical memory in which Jihad – Holy War (gazavat) figured prominently. It revived in people’s minds a sense of dignity, pride and belief in their ability to oppose any external enemy. It would be fair to say that the early 1990s were a brief period of emotional religious euphoria which was capitalized on by the then Chechen politicians, and above all by General Dzhokhar Dudayev, the first president of the self-proclaimed Chechen Republic, who

at first had no intention of appealing to Islam for political purposes.

In the second place, if Moscow had not set out to suppress the Chechen separatists by military methods (whether this was justified or not) the Chechen Islamic rebirth would not have taken such radical, even extremist forms. It was only when the conflict between Moscow and Grozny became a military confrontation that the Islamic rebirth in Chechnya assumed the form of Jihad. ‘Russia forced us to enter on the path of Islam, although we were not prepared well enough to accept the Islamic values’, Dudayev said in 1996. The transformation of religious renaissance into a holy war made Islam one of the key factors in the Chechen conflict, as well as in the overall situation in the North Caucasus. Only after that did outside influence from radical Islamic organizations as well as certain Muslim states begin to be felt. (Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Syria and Turkey are the countries most often named in this connection. This overlooks the fact that initially this outside influence was generated by Chechen rather than Islamic solidarity, since there is a united and influential Chechen Diaspora in those countries.)

Historically, Chechnya’s goal was not to secede from Russia, but to be considered a federal republic by Moscow, a prestigious upgrade from that of “autonomous region.” “Moscow’s lack of response to (then-Chechen President) Dudayev’s demands had a radicalizing impact on the Chechen nationalist agenda”. Most importantly, this impact includes the shift of political agenda from ethnicity/nationalist based to religious-based.

Dudayev increasingly incorporated Islam into his politics, whereas previously he had stressed the national character of the Chechen movement for independence. “Dudayev’s appeal to Islam had an important propaganda function: it sought to attract international Islamic support for the Chechen cause.”

Thus, as Islam was co-opted for political gains, it is important to note that “Islamic radicalism in the Northern Caucasus is of a pseudo- religious character and is a manifestation of nationalist and strategic aspirations by specific political groups – as a rule, remote from Islam.” Few Chechen leaders “turned to Wahhabism in the mid-1990s when they realized that support for their secessionist goals was not forthcoming from western states and international institutions such as the U.N”. Although effectively bringing much needed finances to Chechnya to conduct the conflict, Wahhabism did not prove to be the decisive factor the Chechens had hoped. The turn to Wahhabism gave an opportunity for extremist Islamic leaders with ties to groups in Yemen, Afghanistan and other centers of radical Islam to hijack the Chechen conflict. “Wahhabism primarily has attracted nonreligious young men, many of whom were unemployed after the end of the first war. They embraced its ideology of armed jihad rather than its Islamic doctrines.” [6]

The Wahhabis’ vision of a fundamentalist Islamic society was quite extraneous to most Chechens, who tend to

be quite secular and typically follow no more than a few basic religious norms. Although Islam is a vital block of Chechen identity, “the eruption of armed Wahhabi gangs attempting to force women to wear the veil or erecting roadblocks to search for alcohol in cars provided a serious shock.” As Miller put it, “although Wahhabi intervention became a principal reason why the Chechens gained support from neighboring regions and countries, their infiltration into Chechnya led to considerable internal chaos and confusion. Toward the conclusion of the first war in Chechnya, however, relations between the Wahhabis and Chechen Sufis abruptly deteriorated, as the Arab mujahideen continued their jihad against Russia and nonbelievers.” Several obstacles stand in the way of any long-term solution to the Russian –Chechen stand-off in the North Caucasus. The main obstacle is Russia’s fear that Chechen secession would be the final drop to unravel the Caucasus, and then the Russian state. “From Russia’s standpoint maintaining political control over the territory was very important to prevent the new Russian Federation from falling apart.” Russia is home to “at least ethnic minorities with some kind of pretension to autonomy,” and thus successful Chechen secession could “trigger additional declarations of independence and plunge into the chaos of civil war a vast area stretching from the Arctic Ocean to the Black Sea and from Kaliningrad to the North Pacific.” [7] Wahhabi movement has demonstrated the role of radical Islam, not only as a mobilizing ideology, but also a major political force.

Radicalisation of the political elite was a result of internal power struggles and lack of resources. Shamil Basayev, as a military strategist, was one of the first to realize the organizational benefits of Islamist structures, their mobilization appeal and capacity to generate funds from Islamist donors. In 1996, he helped the foreign jihadis Ibn alKhat-tab and Abu Fatqh found a training camp near the village of Serzhen-Yurt that offered courses in jihadi ideology and guerrilla warfare until almost the beginning of the second war. Several thousand from around the North Caucasus reportedly took part, later returning home to become Islamist or militant leaders. A Dagestan fundamentalist, Bahhaudin Magomedov (aka Kebedov), reportedly was prominent in the Chechen leadership’s radicalization after forming a fundamentalist enclave in the Chechen town Urus-Martan in 1997. By February 1999, Maskhadov was trying to appropriate his opponents’ slogans, proclaiming the introduction of “full Sharia rule”.

Among the Chechen insurgents, a more moderate group committed to retaining the national-liberation agenda and aiming at military but not civilian targets in and outside Chechnya continued to function. However, a radical wing has committed major acts of terror, including over 40 in the rest of Russia, since 1999, many attributed to groups commanded by Basayev. An ethnic Chechen pro-federal side led by Akhmad Kadyrov, who as a Sufi leader was strongly against the republic’s slide toward radical Islamism (Salafism), and later his son, Ramzan Kadyrov, also rose to prominence, breaking with Basayev and welcom-

ing Moscow’s military backing. However, the “Wahhabi” gangs movement continues to be the backbone operating in the Chechen illegal armed groups.

Literature

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რეზიუმე

ემილია ალავერდოვი,
სტუ-ს დოქტორანტი, მე-3 კურსი

ისლამური რენესანსი თუ ჩრდილოკავკასიური რადიკალიზაცია?

სტატია ეხება ჩრდილოეთ კავკასიის რეგიონის ბოლო 20წლისმოვლენებს, კერძოდ, რუსეთისფედერაციისშიისლამისალორძინებას, რომელიც მიმდინარეობს ისლამიზმის ფორმით, სადაც რელიგიისალორძინება იხრება და მიდრეკილია პოლიტიკური ორგანიზაციებისალორძინებისაკენ დაგააქტიურებისაკენ. როგორც ირკვევა, ჩრდილოეთ კავკასიის რეგიონში რელიგია გადაჯაჭვულია პოლიტიკასა და კრიმინალურ საქმიანობაზე. სტატიაში აგრეთვე ავტორის მიერ განხილულია ჩეჩნეთის ომები, უცხოური ბანდფორმირებების საველე მეთაურების ჩრდილოეთ კავკასიის მოვლენებში ჩართულობა-საქმიანობა და ჩეჩნეთის ლიდერების ისლამით აპელირება.