

The Revival of Islam and Islamic Publishing

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Russia, to use Lenin's useful axiom, was not just a prison for nations, but also for religions of all kinds. When the Bolsheviks came to power in 1917, they turned that prison of religions into a prison of strict regime. Let me give you some statistics for the Russian Federation alone. There are about seven million Tatars and Bashkirs in the Russian Federation today, as well as about four million Islamic nationals living in the northern Caucasus. In Tatarstan and Bashkiria, in 1913, there were 6,000 mosques and 7,000 madrasas (religious schools). In Dagestan alone there were 2,060 mosques and about 1,000 madrasas. The situation was similar in the Crimea, Chechenia and Ingushetia, and Cherkassia. By 1941, there was not a single mosque or madras left in Dagestan. In 1944, because of the Stalin deportations, there were no longer any Crimean Tatars in the Crimea, nor mosques or madrasas there. Similar things were taking place in Chechenia and Ingushetia. When I socialize with other Muslims, we often talk about Mikhail Gorbachev. The Muslims often say, "even if he has done nothing else but given us the freedom to cherish our religion, Gorbachev deserves a lot of respect."

A rebirth of Islam is taking place today. And, of course, this rebirth includes both positive and negative sides. When in the 1980s I was studying in graduate school in Leningrad, demographers were discussing, with a lot of concern, the threat that could come from the growth of the Muslim population. This problem was considered so important it was even discussed in the Ministry of Defense. Remember, every third soldier in the former Red Army was Turkic-speaking, or Muslim by birth.

Today Russia is an independent state. There are about 12 million Muslims living in Russia. Under the Communists, Islamic life was organized in the following way: one government department in charge of religious affairs was targeted to control all the Muslims in the European part of Russia and Siberia. Another department covered all the Muslims in the northern Caucasus. Those religious departments were conceived as early as Catherine the Great to keep the Muslims under the thumb of the Russian Empire. And the Bolsheviks borrowed this structure and decided to use it for their own purposes.

At the top, these departments were infiltrated and controlled by the corresponding secret services. Because of perestroika, they have fallen apart into smaller units. In 1988 there were large-scale Muslim riots in Makhach-

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kala. There were large rallies demanding the resignation of the mufti, the Muslim religious leader. He was a Kabardinian by origin and was accused of stealing property and of having direct contacts with the KGB. Most insulting for a Muslim, the mufti was not even circumcised.

Today, there are 14 religious departments in the northern Caucasus and 10 in Tatarstan and Bashkiria. And all those departments are organized in accordance with ethnic principles. And there are plenty of debates focusing on the extent to which Islam can be integrated into what we call "the democratic society." In general, it can be argued that all Muslim countries (excluding Iran and probably Afghanistan) do have what we call "democratic" institutions. They do have their own legislation separate from religion, and, in general, the church is separate from the state. After a history of living together with the Russians for 150 or 200 years, to come out with some sort of separatist or nationalist demands is premature. The Islamic nations of Russia should be looked at not only as Islamic. We have to ask this question: Who are the Muslims of Russia?

We have developed the same sort of social and political institutions as the ethnic Russians did. We have the same kind of education. We have set up our own institutes of national culture, and have mastered pretty well the culture of the Russian nation. I could give you here hundreds of examples of north Caucasians or people of ethnic groups who live along the Volga Basin who work in the most different branches of science and education in Russia; in technology, electronics, astronautics, architecture and many other professions.

The rebirth of Islam is the revival of a tradition which existed among the Muslims of Russia before the 1917 Revolution, and it seeks to elevate Islam to the level which existed before the Communists came to power. I believe that to achieve that level will take 10 or 20 or even 30 years. This is so because the Muslim culture had been developing in the Arabic language (in the northern Caucasus, for example, Arabic was the language of inter-ethnic communication and also the language of education). In which direction was Islam developing? It was developing as enlightened Islam. The fact that today most of the religious literature is being published at a very high level and that today thousands of young north Caucasians and people who live in the Volga Basin are going to religious schools, tells us that Islam will likely continue to develop along this enlightened path.

Today there exist elementary problems: learning the "ABCs" of the Islamic religion. Clerics are poorly educated and everything that is related to the propagation of Islam, or is being published about Islam, is done by young, enthusiastically minded intellectuals, who very often are just emotionally related to the Islamic religion. For example, they are publishing "How to pray" manuals. In Tatarstan, they published a book which is called *The Hidden History of the Tatars*.

In a number of publications more than half the space is occupied by Islamic themes. The main magazine that we publish in Dagestan is called *Nash Dagestan* (Our Dagestan). Added to this, in Dagestan there exists a long-standing tradition of manuscripts. According to some estimates,

Dagestan possessed 30,000 manuscripts before the Revolution but only 10,000 survive today. The rest were burned by the Bolsheviks. And right now, there are about 400 different publications which are produced in the indigenous languages of the ethnic groups of Dagestan. This represents as much as was published throughout all the years of Soviet power in the languages of those ethnic groups. It is not just religious literature, but also fiction and poetry. The process of cultural familiarization is taking place for many people.

Attempts to create a common newspaper or magazine for the Muslims are being undertaken by the Islamic Cultural Center in Moscow. This Center has been in existence for two years. The people at the Center are experiencing severe financial problems. They are particularly preoccupied with the organization of conferences, setting up the madrases, educating people how to speak their native lan-

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guages, and so on. Among Islamic customs, the system of dissemination of information, of communications, is a little bit different from what a Westerner might expect. Often it is accomplished through the prayers of this or that spiritual leader as read by him in the mosque on Fridays. Appeals by spiritual leaders through television have also been quite effective. I do not know how it is in Tatarstan, but in Dagestan, the worshippers check the political orientation of their spiritual leaders very closely. During the recent elections, the mufti, the spiritual leader of Dagestan, spoke openly in support of pro-mafiosi figures and organized crime, and he was quietly told “You’d better quit on your own, or otherwise you’ll be eliminated in a different way.” Now another mufti has taken his place. In 1989, there was a big rally in Dagestan which lasted for a long while, because the authorities were not allowing the Muslims to undertake their pilgrimage to Mecca. The leader of this group called for all Communists to be hanged. In his native village, he appealed to all not to shake hands with Communists, to denounce them, to boycott them. Such was the level of confrontation between Islam and Communism in the final days of Soviet power.

A lot has been said about Islamic fundamentalism and I come to the full conclusion that the Islamic nations of Russia are really quite well integrated into the fabric of Russian society. They constitute just about six percent of the population of the Russian Federation. That is why Islam is not a threat for Russians. The real threat for Russia is nationalism. To promote nationalism it is not necessary to be a Christian, or a Muslim, or a Jew. You do not even have to read newspapers or books. You just have to understand one thing which nationalists preach: “We are better, and all the rest of you are inferior to us.”

I could give you lots of concrete examples of real fascism and nationalism. But I will limit myself to saying one thing of a slightly different but related nature: it is really hard to find a job in Dagestan. The population numbers about 2 million. In the former Soviet Union, every year between

March and December, up to 400,000 Dagestani would go to Central Asia and to Russia to earn their living. Mayor Luzhkov of Moscow is trying hard now to clear Moscow of Caucasian nationals.

It is really humiliating and insulting when you go to Moscow and you are stopped by armed people, your documents are checked, and you are asked, "Where were you born and what are you doing here?" Last year alone, over 50 corpses of young people were brought back in coffins from different parts of Russia to two different districts of 50,000 people in Dagestan. I do not believe that all of my fellow Dagestani are criminals. But that is the way we are being looked upon and are being treated in Russia. During the two days I was in Moscow before I came here, I listened to the radio. All the reports about crime in the city were centered around people of Caucasian nationalities, as they call them in Moscow.

In Russia today there is no regional policy and there is no national policy. And the Council of the Federation, which was meant to replace the so-called Soviet of Nationalities, was just a move to marginalize the ethnic republics and make them just like the other regions in Russia. The representation of Dagestan in this Council of the Federation is limited to only two of the 32 ethnic groups which inhabit Dagestan. And this system of elections is provoking inter-ethnic conflicts inside our republic and promoting backlash nationalism.

We are used to the thought that Moscow is always cheating us. Still, I believe that the new Islamic Dagestan will survive.