Central Asia
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Post-Socialist Forms of Islam
Caucasian Wahhabis

The vision of Islam as it is practised in the post-socialist context is very confused at the moment. It is associated either with 'the revival of local pre-modern traditions' and thus with the localization of post-socialist Muslim space, or with 'the spread of Islamism absolutely alien to local Muslim traditions', introduced to countries of the former socialist bloc from abroad and fraught with their Islamist globalization. Post-socialist forms of Islam are often thought of as an 'Islamic threat' opposing all non-Muslim cultures.

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Portrait of the former Chechen *mufti* A. Kadyrov.

The so-called 'Wahhabi' movement in the North Caucasus offers particular insight into what Islam has come to mean in this post-socialist era. Its relevance becomes even more clear when discussing the main problems of post-socialist Muslim societies, including the impact of the socialist and pre-socialist legacies on modern forms of Islam, new divisions of the contemporary Muslim space, and the politicization and radicalization of the Islamist movement.The Wahhabis are dissident Muslim congregations that emerged in the Northern Caucasus in the late socialist period. Their *imams* appeal to the 'purification of Islam' from 'non-permitted innovations' (*bidaʿ*), including *dhikr*, pilgrimages to saint shrines (*ziyarat*), *mawlid* celebrations, recitations of the Qur'an in cemeteries (*talqin*), and the use of protective charms (*sabab*). They regard the Qur'an and the Sunna as the only sources of faith (*din*). Sufi *shaykhs* are particularly targeted by the Wahhabis' assaults. Criticizing them for their cooperation with post-socialist authorities, the Wahhabis accuse these 'tariqatists' of selling their religion to the 'infidel' (*kuffar*) government.

The Wahhabis have even challenged the other North Caucasian Muslims by their dress. Their men have beards without moustaches and wear short trousers. Some Wahhabi women are veiled by a *khimar* or a *hijab* and sometimes by a *niqab*. The followers of the movement call themselves 'Muslims' or 'brothers' (*ikhwan*) and consider their congregations as the only communities of the faithful (*jamaʿat*). They are also known as *salafs*, making reference to the first followers of Prophet Mohammed whose way of life they claim to imitate. The movement was named 'Wahhabi' by its opponents amongst the followers of local Sufi *shaykhs*. This term was invented after the name of Mohammed b. ʿAbd al-Wahhab, a reformer of Islam in the 18th century. In the Northern Caucasus, it has a derogatory and negative connotation.

Soviet roots of the Wahhabis

The foundation of Wahhabi congregations in the Northern Caucasus is usually associated with the fall of the socialist regime in 1991. In reality, they date back to the mid-1970s, when proselytizing Muslim groups arose in dozens of Dagestani and Chechen villages situated in the Terek-Sulak lowlands. Their members secretly gathered in houses of local Muslim scholars (*ʿulama'*) while attending their Arabic and Qur'anic classes. Such unlicensed schools also carried out missionary work (*daʿwa*) among the village youth. Fearing the spread of Islamism from Iran and Afghanistan, the Soviet authorities closed down all unauthorized Islamic schools by the beginning of the 1980s. However, in the 1990s some of the teachers, such as Bagauddin Kebedov (b. in 1945), from the village of Pervomayskoe, and Ahmad-qadi Akhtaev (1942-1998), from the village of Kudali, became renowned Wahhabi *amirs*. Initially, they sided with Naqshbandi *shaykhs* who had instructed them in Arabic and *usul al-din*.

It should also be mentioned that the North Caucasian Wahhabis emerged in a context of, though in reaction to, anti-Islamic socialist reforms. Their movement arose in lowland districts of Dagestan and Chechnya where collectivization, resettlement and 'cultural revolution' campaigns were successfully carried out from the 1930s-1970s. About two-thirds of highlanders had resettled there. For instance, Bagauddin Kebedov's parents had moved from their native Dagestani village of Sasitli to Vedeno in Chechnya following the deportation of the Chechens in 1944, and in 1957 resettled in the village of Pervomayskoe in Dagestan. Closed Muslim communities had been formed within collective and state farms in the lowlands and these became the cradle of the 'Islamic revival' movement that arose in the latter years of perestroika.

Under socialist rule, many pre-revolutionary *ʿulama'* were persecuted and most of the Sufi intellectual practices faded away. Both Wahhabis and followers of Dagestani and Chechen Sufi *shaykhs* shared a secular socialist mentality. The impact of the Soviet ideology can be observed down to the very title of the Wahhabi programme, passed in January 1998, called the 'Manifesto of Jamaʿat of Dagestan' after the famous Communist Manifesto.

Redividing Muslim space

The wave of Islamic enthusiasm, which seized Dagestan and other Muslim republics of the Northern Caucasus at the end of the 1980s, divided the region's Muslim society into 'Wahhabis' and 'Traditionalists'. This schism replaced a traditional cleavage of Muslim space into Shiʿites (Azerbaijan and Southern Dagestan) and Sunnites (Northern Caucasus). Under socialist rule, confrontations which had taken place between Caucasian Shiʿites and Sunnites from the Safawid expansion of the 16th-18th centuries to the early 20th century died out. At present, the former Shiʿite places of worship, such as Friday *juma*-mosques in the Dagestani towns of Derbent and Kizlyar, are attended by Shiʿites and Sunnites alike. At the same time, another pre-modern division of the Sunnite Muslims into followers of the Shafiʿite legal school, which had traditionally dominated in Dagestan and Checheno-Ingushetia, and the Hanifite *madhhab* prevailing in the North-Western Caucasus, disappeared.

A new fundamental division of the North Caucasian Muslims has an important political dimension associated with the disintegration of the central power as it occurred in post-socialist Russia. Following the fall of the socialist regime, the Spiritual Board of the Muslims of the Northern Caucasus, dating back to 1943, broke up into several independent republican branches. In turn, some of them split into small ethnic branches. Though legalized by the North Caucasian republican authorities and incorporated into the post-socialist political system, these *muftiyats* have failed to gain the support of all the restored Muslim congregations. The number of unauthorized Friday mosques grew rapidly, as did the new congregations independent from the officially recognized Muslim clergy: only 212 of 1585 restored Dagestani mosques sided with the republican *muftiyat* by May 2000.

Dagestan and Chechnya witnessed the appearance of the Islamist counterparts of the official Muslim clergy – the Wahhabis. From the lowlands, their influence first spread to the highland villages of both republics. By the mid-1990s, their congregations, although small in size, emerged in Ingushetia, Karachaevo-Cherkessia, Kabardino-Balkaria, Stavropol'e and even in the Dagestani migrant community in Astrahan. Before the beginning of the first Russian-Chechen war (1994-1996), the Wahhabis concentrated on their missionary work (*daʿwa*) by imparting Qur'anic education and literature on basic Islamic practices such as Bagauddin's book, *Namaz* (Prayer). This work had been reprinted in hundreds of thousands of copies in 1993, 1994 and 1999. Until 1998, the centre of the movement was located in the Dagestani town of Kizilyurt, where the largest Wahhabi *madrasa*, al-Hikma, comprising more than 700 pupils, had been set up by Bagauddin Kebedov in December 1991. By the mid-1990s, some Wahhabi congregations established close contacts with the missionary centres and foundations from abroad including Tayba, al-Haramain, and al-Igasa al-Islamiyya, which began to sponsor their educational and publishing activities.

Radicalization of Islam

From 1994-1998, a number of armed conflicts occurred between Wahhabi and Sufi factions in the towns and villages of Dagestan and Chechnya. Since the mid-1990s, the Wahhabis have been subjected to systematic repression by the local official Muslim clergy. Gradually, outbreaks of fighting within village and town communities were reproduced at the level of the republic and subsequently expanded to the regional level. Thus from 1997-1999 the Wahhabi *jamaʿat* of Karamakhi, Chabanmakhi, Kadar and Durangi villages expelled representatives of the Dagestani authorities and proclaimed 'a separate Islamic territory governed by the Shariʿa' (or the so-called Kadar zone). By 1998, the initiative in this struggle was captured by 'Traditionalists'. The official Muslim clergy lobbied for a new federal religion bill and a Dagestani version was passed in Moscow and Makhachkala in September-December 1997. Wahhabi congregations and other 'non-traditional confessions' were to be officially registered.

In December 1997, Bagauddin Kebedov had to leave Kizilyurt for Urus-Martan in Chechnya. This exile and the ensuing death of Ahmad-qadi Akhtaev in March 1998, resulted in a rapid politicization and radicalization of the movement. There had always been a political dimension, but its form and programmes now changed. While Khasbulat Khasbulatov's 'Jamaʿat al-Muslimin', Kebedov and Akhtaev's Islamic Revival Party and Akhtaev's 'al-Islamiyya' movement had been founded in the period from 1989-1996 to represent the North Caucasian Muslims to the Russian state authorities and to spread Islamic knowledge among the North Caucasian highlanders, 'Islamic Jamaʿat', established by Bagauddin Kebedov in 1998, announced a holy war (*al-jihad al-asgar*). This war was to be waged against the 'unbelieving secular government' of Dagestan and for the establishment of an 'Islamic caliphate in the Caucasus'. Supported by Chechen field commanders, the Wahhabi leaders organized 'Islamic peace-making troops'. Some famous terrorists such as ʿAbd al-Rahman ibn al-Hattab, originating from the Chechen diaspora in Jordan, and Shamil Basaev entered the movement. The former Chechen *mufti* Kadyrov, siding with the 'Traditionalists', formed a 'tariqatist' regiment that actively fought with the Wahhabis.

From 1999-2001, the Wahhabis based in Chechnya and Dagestan were involved in the second Russian-Chechen war, which started with a raid by military Wahhabi groups in northern Dagestan. Federal forces rapidly defeated their troops and destroyed villages of the Kadar zone, but failed to abolish the movement whose leaders escaped to Chechnyan territory. They are still active in the underground, functioning simultaneously 'everywhere and nowhere' (cf. M. Gilsenan). Paradoxically, the militant Islamist ideas and practices are shared by both Wahhabis and their religious and secular adversaries. Such enigmatic and destructive tendencies in modern North Caucasian forms of Islam deserve greater attention in research on the process of re-Islamization in the post-socialist context. ◆

This article is dedicated to the memory of Tatiana Shafarevich who tragically died in January 2001.

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