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Rhetoric Clouds 'War on Terrorism'

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The diversity of views held by Russia's Muslims on the 11 September attack and the subsequent US-led anti-terrorist operation defy convenient classification. First, there have been contradictory responses from Muslim leaders of differing political and religious leanings. The dividing line runs mainly between the official muftis and the unofficial leaders. Second, the views expressed by Russia's Muslims may well change substantially in response to new developments in Afghanistan or other potential theaters of the anti-terrorist operation. Finally, in Russia the US effort is viewed through the prism of the Chechen war. The anti-terrorist language, in the Russian context, is deeply reminiscent of the rhetoric at the start of the Chechen war. In this way the response to the US effort partially reflects preexisting views of the war in Chechnya. Hence, it is not possible to speak of a dominant attitude among Russia's Muslims and, at this juncture, any appraisal must bear a somewhat preliminary and fragmentary character.

The reaction to the strikes against the Taliban among the Russian population, including the Muslims, is contradictory. On the one hand, the habits of suspicion garnered over 50 years of Cold War confrontation die hard and many Russians are inclined to view the US as a foe threatening Russia's vital interests. On the other hand, it seems that these attitudes are changing in response to the events of 11 September, a genuine watershed which proved the global nature of the terrorist threat.

President Vladimir Putin was the first to react, and he did so firmly, saying that terrorists have thrown down a challenge to the world. One has the feeling that he immediately sensed that the opportunity to effect a serious reassessment by the US and the West of
his own "antiterrorist" operation in Chechnya. His remarks also set the tone for many who spoke after him.

On 12 September, the mufti of Dagestan, Akhmad-Khadzhi Abdulaev, publicly expressed his condolences: "Of course one more statement, coming from anyone, can't bring back the victims or lessen the tragedy and grief that cover the globe. However, let my words and with them the words of all Dagestanis be not flowery but deep and sincere sympathies, which represent the tears and pain of thousands of my countrymen."(2)

The Dagestani mufti pointed out that terrorism contradicts Muslim religious values. "I think there is no need to yet again assure everyone that terrorism cannot be combined with Islam. On the contrary, he who committed this can not be regarded as 'human.'... The footage from Palestine that has been broadcast throughout the world should not be taken as incriminating all Muslim believers.... Just as the handful of Nazis celebrating in front of the US embassy [in Moscow] should not be taken as representative [of the Russian people]."

The mufti reminded the audience that in August-September 1999 Dagestan itself had been attacked by North Caucasian fundamentalists, known as Wahhabis: (3) "We certainly know about terrorism first hand. Only a few days ago we marked the anniversaries of the incursion of the terrorist grouping into our republic and of the explosions of Buinaksk,(4) and the terrorist attack that carried away the life of Dagestan's mufti S. Abubakarov."(5)

The other leading Muslims, Ravil' Gainudin, the chairman of the Coordinating Council of the Muftis of Russia, and Talgat Tadzhuddin, the head of the Central Directorate of Russia's Muslims, also condemned the 11 September attacks and approved of the US military response (albeit with some minor caveats).(6)
Among the important muftis, the only one to condemn the anti-terrorist actions was sheik Nafigulla Ashirov, the chairman of the Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of the Asian part of Russia (DUMAR). At a 5 November press conference, "Will Russia's Muslims fight in Afghanistan?" he accused the US and other Western nations of unraveling a war against the Muslim world. According to Ashirov, "In Afghanistan the [powers] including Russia are carrying out a crusade against Islam." Ashirov called on the audience to take a "differentiated" attitude to Osama bin Laden's statements. The mufti characterized the Taliban as "humane" and approved of their demolition of the statues of the Bimiyan Buddahs. Moreover, he said, "every Muslim has the right to fight on behalf of the defenders of the Afghan state," meaning the Taliban.

Among the political activists, Abdul-Vakhid Niyazov, perhaps the most visible Muslim political leader, came forth with biting criticism of the US anti-terrorist actions. Niyazov is a member of the Duma and the chairman of the political council of the Eurasia party, which relies heavily on Muslim members. In an interview with the weekly, Versia, Niyazov said, "We protest against the barbaric operation of the USA, which hits first at the Afghans, not at the terrorists. It's clear that the US is pursuing goals far flung from the struggle against terrorism. The Afghan war affects Russia much more than is being said. I can see how inter-ethnic relations became substantially worse as in the case of the Tsaritsin pogrom. Our press, unfortunately, only adds fuel to the fire and fuels xenophobic attitudes. But the US brushes off this wave of aggression towards people from a different civilization."

Similarly it is significant that a moderate (at least until recently) Muslim political leader, Abdurashid Saidov, the founder of the Islamic Democratic Party of Dagestan who now directs the Committee for Human Rights of the Moscow-based International Islamic Representative Organization, gave a very negative assessment. For Muslims who obey the Koran and the Sunna, "who fear God and aren't simply Muslims only in their passports or last names, the current situation constitutes a reason to declare jihad." He seems sincerely convinced that "the main task of the official Muslim clerics in all of Russia's regions is to present everything that the Russian government and president..."
does as furthering Islam and Muslims."(13) Hence they find religious justification for everything that comes from the government.

"And until there comes a single effort of all Muslims- if not of the whole world, then at least of Russia-the West together with Russia will keep talking to the Muslims in the language of rockets and artillery," Saidow said. He draws a parallel between the second Chechen war and the war against the Taliban. The contrast between Saidov and Abdulaev is readily apparent in their opposite invocations of the Chechen war.

"And all of this," Saidov continues, "will be done 'in the interests of Muslims,' and will be accompanied by the commentary, 'we're not fighting against Muslims, we're on the same side as the Muslims!' as Putin, Bush and others say already."

Another influential commentator, Maxim Shevchenko, the editor of Nezavisimaya gazeta's "Religion" supplement, although not a Muslim himself, sympathizes with what might be termed the "neformaly" among Russia's Muslims, who challenge the religious-political establishment. He writes: "The US government is readying a war against Islamic Afghanistan. Mankind is asked to choose between the 'civilized' and the 'uncivilized.' Immediately we find that Palestinians and the Arab world in general are among the 'uncivilized.' Faced with a real threat from the US, Muslim religious and political leaders overwhelmingly supported the US. But those we may call ordinary Muslims, who don't rely on US credits or oil exports, have readied themselves for war."(14)

Shevchenko goes on to argue that "after the collapse of socialism, political Islam is the biggest and most powerful obstacle to those who would aspire to world domination. One should not confuse this movement with Islam 'in general' which is integrated into global structures at the level of muftis, kings, presidents and etc."

By "political Islam," scholars usually mean fundamentalism. In Russia, as elsewhere, the Sunni Muslims, who constitute the vast majority of Muslims, can be divided into two
movements. The traditionalists believe that since the time of the prophet the religion developed in an unbroken path, and hence accept the consequences of this growth together with its spiritual riches. The fundamentalists, who think that the faith has accumulated many mistakes, prefer to return to the original texts: the Koran and the Sunna. Today, radical Islamic fundamentalism replaces Marxism as a revolutionary force. As one of the main ideologists and the founder of the Islamic Party of Russia's Rebirth, Geidar Dzhamaľ', says, "In the current conditions, when 1% of the population of the planet exploits the rest of the world, Islam presents itself not as a religion in the traditional or secularist sense, but as an all-encompassing ideology, which protects the weak and the oppressed."(15)

Since the Taliban's "emirate" became a kind of model of political Islam, it is hardly surprising that the radicals in Russia sympathize with the Taliban. Even though the number of such persons seems fairly small, they do form a very vocal minority. The majority of Russia's Muslims either approve of or are fairly indifferent to the US actions in Afghanistan.

It should also be clear that a person's response to the war in Afghanistan is colored heavily by perceptions of the war in Chechnya. In reality, if one looks carefully, there are very substantial differences between the "anti-terrorist operation" in Chechnya and the "anti-terrorist operation" in Afghanistan. However, many cannot see these differences because Russian government propaganda has succeeded in making the two seem indistinguishable to the domestic and international media.

On the eve of 11 September, Afghanistan was in the throes of civil war between the traditionalist Muslims of the North and the totalitarian regime of the south. It's hardly a coincidence that the legendary leader of the Northern Alliance, Akhmed Shah Mas'ud, was assassinated, apparently by Al Qaeda, only a few days earlier. At this writing, it looks like the Northern Alliance, thanks to air support from US and the UK, is successfully squeezing the Taliban out of the country. The Taliban regime is melting before our eyes, since it has lost all support of the population.
In contrast, Chechnya suffers a deep ethnic conflict: A large proportion of the population seeks to establish sovereignty in the context of an independent state. This conflict is properly understood as a national movement for independence. Radical fundamentalism has a presence in this conflict, but its role is rather limited.

Critics of the war in Afghanistan among Russia's Muslims worry that the US may subject the population of Afghanistan to the sort of bombardment that the Russian military used in Chechnya. Such sentiments seem natural in a media environment which stressed the common goals and mutual endorsement of Bush and Putin. However, all such judgments are preliminary and can change rapidly as the results of the US-led campaign become more apparent.

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4. The September explosions in Buinaksk may have been the Wahhabis' revenge for the military operations against the Wahhabi villages (the so-called Kadar zone) also located in the Buinaksk region. See "Dagestan and War Next Door."

5. Dagestani Mufti Said-Mukhammad Abubakarov, his brother, and their driver were killed on 21 August 1998 when a mine exploded in the courtyard of the main mosque of Makhachkala. As their Volga entered the courtyard, a car was exploded by a remote-controlled mine. To date the guilty parties have not been found.

7. The Spiritual Directorates or religious boards have been established throughout Russia to regulate Muslim religious life. They govern religious education, distribute funds and play an important role in deciding which mosques can be officially registered. In Dagestan especially the Spiritual Directorate has become a quasi-political institution, in effect a state-sponsored faith.

8. The Koran says "We persuaded you [Mohhamed] to accept the faith of Abraham, who was pious and was not among the idol-worshippers." (Sura 16 ayat 124 translated from the Russian) However, for centuries on end the "idolatrous" statues of the Buddahs did not get in the way of the Muslim Afghans. Moreover, since presently there are no Buddhists in those areas, the statues were not the object of worship but of historical memory.


10. The pogrom carried out by skinhead youths initially targeted Caucasians near the Tsaritsino metro station. After trashing the market and killing several persons, the "patriotic" youth continued the killings and beatings at the hotel Sevostopolskaya, which held an Afghan-controlled market.


12 The word "sunna" means the path or the example. The Sunna records the actions and sayings of the Prophet Mohammed.


