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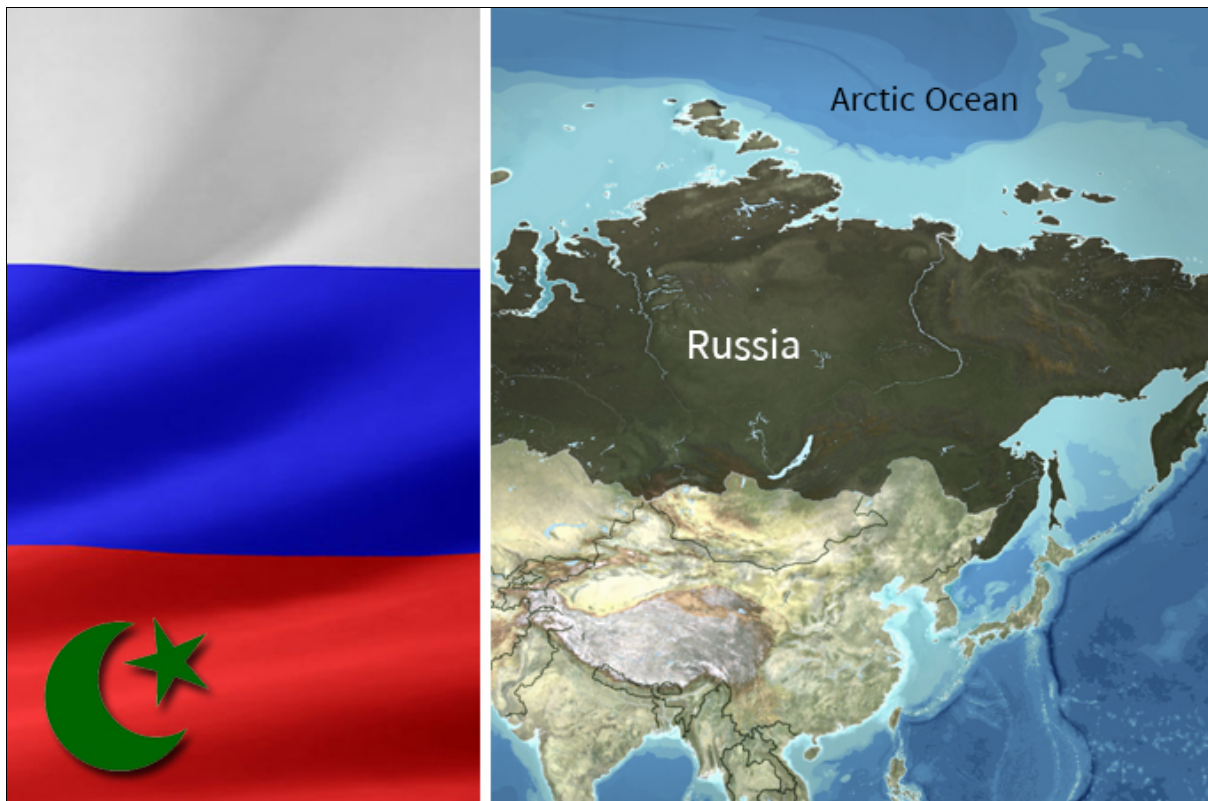
Report

Interpreting Russian foreign Policy and Islam

*Karina Fayzullina**

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Abstract

The perceived growth of political Islam and Islamist extremism throughout the world has recently led to a rethinking of foreign policy in many Western countries. Intensifying upheaval caused by terrorism from Nigeria to Yemen, and from Afghanistan to Iraq, has placed Muslims, Islam and political Islam in the political spotlight. This is a rising trend everywhere; Russia is no exception. Like elsewhere else in the world, Islam is at the forefront of thinking prevalent in Russian foreign policy-making. There is one difference, however. Negative stereotypes of Islam found in Europe and the US are less visible in both politics and the media. As argued here, Islam is integrated as part of national identity in Russian politics. How does the practice of foreign policy reflect this standard?

Introduction

The image of Russia in the world is rarely associated with Islam and Islamic identity, in general. While Orthodox Christianity is the country's predominant confession, not many know that Russia is home to as many as 14 million Muslims of various ethnic backgrounds. However, there is no recent census to verify this figure.

Historically, Islam has not been instituted in Russia in a deliberate fashion as a conceptual part of national identity until the breakup of the USSR more than two decades ago. Stark secularism of the former Soviets prevented any religion from evolving either within or without the official political framework. Thus the role of traditional creeds of the diverse ethnicities and peoples included in the former Soviet Union remained understated for decades. It is only recently that Islam in Russia has

found itself less 'chained' by the restrictions that had previously shackled it for centuries, before and during the founding of the former Soviet Union.

This government policy trend has turned out to be really encouraging. Russian leaders and politicians repeatedly stress the significance of Islam as integral to the political fabric of statehood, historically and in the contemporary era.

For instance, President Putin generally does not shy away from expression of religious sentiment and support, in general, and is forthright in his respect for Islam. He states the following:

'...Islam is rightly claimed an inalienable part of today's religious, social and cultural life of Russia. Its traditions are based on eternal values of goodness, mercy and justice...'(1)

The policy of the 2000s along with the government policy to improve Russia's image in the Muslim world, seems to have yielded encouraging results in terms of Russia's overall standing. In terms of mass consciousness, Russia is seeking to present itself in the image of a friendly country to Islam and Muslims. That is, it is cultivating the image of an alternative to the belligerence of the US Neoconservative voices ('Neocons'), who constantly set themselves against the Muslim world with persistent yet fruitless attempts to spread Western political values such as through democracy promotion. Russia does not have a similar policy, and does not follow in the footsteps of the former Soviet Union in terms of seeking to spread communism.

The Syrian war partly spoiled the improved image of Moscow. However, the slow progress with the destruction of Syria's chemical weapons and the lack of positive results from the Geneva II peace conference all seem to indicate that the level of distrust in Russian leadership in the world is still rather high.

Yet, it is too early to say that domestic and foreign Islamic affairs of Russia are fully crystallised. Rather, they are at the very beginning of this process. This can be expected as today, Russia's new national identity is still evolving, following the dissolution of the former Soviet Union. The issue of ideology in the country's political identity is perhaps the most burning at this historical juncture. The country's overall political economy complicates this process. Surging oil prices over the last two decades has allowed the recovery of the state from the arduous post-Soviet political and economic crisis. Nonetheless, today the transition to a fully-fledged democracy is still awaited. When it comes to the question of political participation and civic responsibility required for thorough state and nation-building, Russian civil society remains largely apathetic. Whether civil society can become a cohesive and conscious force with a say in issues related to state and nation-building will depend on the ability of the liberal elites and

voices to work towards empowerment. This is necessary for wide and deep inclusiveness of the people in the public sphere.

Should this trend gain momentum, the role of Islam can be expected to grow. Shall Russian Muslims – elites and the population – be a legitimate and solid stakeholder in the governmental affairs and be integrated within existing political forces, both foreign and domestic politics in Russia would become more disposed towards constructive engagement with the Muslim world. The benefits of such a scenario in today's unstable world would be a certain win-win for all. Russia has a foundation on which to design policies that allow for strong relations with its Muslim population as well as with Muslim countries. Russia is the permanent member of the United Nations Security Council UNSC with the highest ratio of Muslims, residing within its borders.

Historical Shaping of Muslim identity

Muslims of the Eurasian proto-states have had extensive relations with the rest of the world since the adoption of Islam in the early Middle Ages by the peoples of these vast territories. In the tenth century, Ahmad Ibn Fadlan, a traveller and a writer who served at the court of Abbasid Caliph Al Muqtadir, described the life of Muslims in the state of Bulgaria in the Volga region.

The Volga River was for centuries a vital artery for trade connecting European and Asian markets. People inhabiting this region were involved in booming international trade between the East and the West. Affairs with Arabic and Persian societies were mutually advantageous, therefore stable and regular. According to eyewitness accounts found in Ibn Fadlan's Risala, a large missionary delegation of Baghdad's Caliph in 922 to Bulghar included merchants, craftsmen, clergy and soldiers. The mission, which also crossed the territories of Central Asia and Eastern Europe, was dispatched by the request of the Bulghar king to buttress the incipient Islamic tradition in the Volga-Kama area.⁽²⁾

Until the sixteenth century statehood in the Khanate of Kazan, the Khanate of Astrakhan, the Khanate of Siberia and Crimean Khanate were predominantly formed under Islamic influence. The Arabic script and Arabic language were widely used in science, literature and in spiritual affairs.⁽³⁾ With the centralisation of lands around Moscow, the ascendancy of Islam was challenged by the traditions of the captors, who substantially demoted indigenous political, social and cultural agency and norms.⁽⁴⁾ The emergence practice allowing Pale of settlement in Russia prohibited local populations to settle along the banks of large rivers and trade routes.

Failed attempts of Christianisation and assimilation of national minorities convinced consecutive Russian rulers to make certain concessions, thus tolerating religious

diversity. Mending relations with Muslims and using their religious ties with the external world in diplomacy and economic relations resulted in many benefits for the Empire. The ban on mosque construction was lifted in the eighteenth century.⁽⁵⁾ However, the most innovative and far-reaching policy was the 1773 Toleration of All Faiths' by Catherine's II and the creation in 1788 of the Orenburg Muslim Spiritual Assembly.⁽⁶⁾ The Assembly was founded to undertake the coordination of political affairs between the metropolis and Central Asia. Moreover, Catherine's new policy encouraged the recruitment of Muslim elites into government agencies, giving them the opportunity to serve the Empire and its interests. During the era of European colonialism, Russia did not wage expansionist wars in the Muslim world. Russian scholarly Orientalism historically has developed differently from traditional Western Orientalism, which generally represented Muslim communities as less civilised than Europeans.

Until the 1920's, when the Bolsheviks took over the reins of government, intra-Islamic relations facilitated diversification of links and nature of involvement with the central authorities. To be more accurate, insofar as intra-Islamic affairs permitted acknowledgment of the Soviets and close ties with the Arabic-Persian world, the Bolsheviks tolerated Islam in certain forms. Here, the role of the Soviet Muslims was pivotal. For instance, in the early 1920s the young Soviet state and Britain were engaged in diplomatic competition for dominance in Southwest Asia. Thanks to the skill of a Russian diplomat of Muslim background, named Karim Hakimov, the USSR was among the first states to recognise Abdul-Aziz Ibn Saud as a king of Saudi Arabia in 1926. Relations between the USSR and Hejaz had been established earlier in 1924. The Soviets believed that approaching the house of Saud would bring them closer to the Muslim world, while at the same time frustrating British ambitions in the Khaleej (Gulf) region.⁽⁷⁾ In 1932, Ibn Saud's visit to the USSR was organised. However, after Hakimov had become a victim of Stalin's repression, Ibn Saud refused to accept another representative, and the relations were severed, only to be resumed in the 1990s'.

Nevertheless, for decades the Soviets maintained close strategic relations with the Arab world. This was true of ties with ruling regimes in the key socialist states with predominantly secular politics such as Algeria, Nasser's Egypt, Syria, Iraq and the former Southern Yemen. As strategic allies sharing a socialist and secular ideology, they commonly ignored disparity in the religious affairs within their states. But despite domestic religious persecution during the time of Stalin, the recruiting of Muslim public servants and state cadres – as well as favoured solid relations with Muslim states such as in the Middle East.

Russia and Russian Muslims

For a host of reasons, Russian Muslims nowadays neither can be described as a tight-knit lobby group at home, nor as a meaningful force with a say in foreign policy-making. Russia finds itself at a historic crossroads. The old Soviet ideology is outworn and disestablished; the crisis of statehood that followed in the 1990s is in the past. Right now both the people and the government are seeking ways of how to define consciously what kind of society they want to live in. Russians are faced with the urgent task of defining who they are and more importantly, whom they want to be. Also, determining what shall be the bedrock of the governmental philosophy of Russia is an additional challenge at this point of time for Russia and Russians.

The tragic history of the twentieth century has partly created the problem of identity or, better to say, the lack of identity. The brutal Soviet 'disestablishment' of the Muslim community, by seeking in different phases such as during the Stalinist era to erase cultural roots, embedded in either Christianity or Islam, entailed the loss of the best part or most important source of national pride and sense of belonging to society.⁽⁸⁾

On the one hand, the Kremlin was frantically trying to implement the idea of Eurasian integration, that would open up an economic and cultural space for Eastern Europe, Russia and Central Asia. To be beneficial and equitable for all, the principles of such integration had to be essentially distinct from those, which banded together the space of the former USSR. An element of loose control, freedom and decentralisation had to be present. This is the gist of Russia's multiculturalism. On the other hand, it has turned out that the ideas of multiculturalism are not popular across Russia. The sentiments of ultra-nationalistic calls to 'save' the 'white capital' from the 'strangers' seem to be reverberating in the country's media. Those calls concern not only the gastarbeiters (guest workers) from Tajikistan or Kyrgyzstan, but fellow citizens from the North Caucasus. To maintain the image of populist leaders, the elites often support the sentiments of the crowd. Thus, Putin, while promoting integration, has suggested introducing a visa system for migrant workers from the Central Asian republics. How those two ideas – integration and neo-nationalism – are to get along is the hardest riddle for all.

The apparent rise of Islamophobia, as a fear of the other, is in Russia motivated by the same factors as those found in Western Europe. The political debate over Muslim migration from Central Asia has shifted to ultra-nationalistic concerns over the issues of national unity/disunity and interaction with the country's Muslim neighbours. Today, the resulting dilemma of the identity question in Russia is posing serious concerns for moral and accommodating voices amongst liberal forces within the country.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that the Russian government does nothing to maintain and consolidate historical ties with neighbouring Muslim countries, specifically, and the world's Muslim community, more generally. Quite the opposite, despite the inconsistency in the approaches towards migration and integration, the Kremlin displays evident ambition to develop partnership with the Muslim world on the basis of equality and mutuality. The crucial steps in shaping such relations were boosted by Russia's gaining of observer status in the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in 2003. Putin's design to draw Russia closer to the OIC impressed not only his close allies, but also the Russian Muslims themselves. Putin states that:

For centuries Russia as a Eurasian country has been intertwined with the Islamic world by traditional and natural ties. Millions of Muslims have historically lived in our country, and they consider Russia their homeland.

I am convinced - the participation of Russia will not only extend the Organisation's horizon; it will also add to its work new capabilities, and will bring the weight and voice of Russia's large Muslim community. A community that no longer separates itself from the world community of Muslims; and is ready to participate fruitfully in its spiritual, cultural and political life.⁽⁹⁾

It is frequently observed by many leaders that Russia has historically evolved as a multicultural and multi-religious state. Joining OIC as an observer has implicitly and explicitly given the country's Muslim establishment the green light to seek and deepen relations with their brothers in faith at state level. Currently, there are a number of intergovernmental events, seeking to strengthen the economic ties between Russia and the Muslim world. A case in point is the annual Economic Summit held since 2009 between Russia and Organisation of Islamic conference. One item on the agenda of these annual meetings is to develop alternative financial systems and solidify poorly diversified economic ties between Russia and the Muslim world – mainly the Middle East and South East Asia. This is hoped to create a global Islamic finance system, able to compete with the traditional economy.

There are several other initiatives that explicitly show that Russia has all the potential to design a foreign policy partly informed by the Islamic identity too. They include the forums and conferences concerned with topical troubles of Muslims around the world: radicalisation, extremism, and misunderstanding of the Islamic values in mass consciousness. In 2012, Moscow hosted the International Theological Conference 'Islamic doctrine against radicalism'. It was jointly organised by the Kuwaiti International Centre Al-Wasatiyyah, its Russian affiliate and the International Union for Muslim Scholars. Following the two-day event, the participants – including the leading learned scholars of Islam or 'ulema from all over the world and the spiritual leaders of Russian Muslims – adopted the 'Declaration of Muslim scholars on jihad, the application of Shari'a (Islamic Law) and the Caliphate'. Among the participants were the Secretary General of

the International Union of Muslim scholars, the deputy Chairman of the International Union of Muslim scholars, chief muftis of several states; Tunisia's Religious Affairs Minister, Kuwait's Undersecretary of the Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs. Never before had Russia presented itself as an equal member of the world's ummah (global Muslim community), able to bring together Muslim minds and leaders in the bid to reinforce existing endeavours by the Muslim ummah and international community to develop a vision of how to face the challenges of extremism and radicalisation. Though political issues were not directly touched upon, the conference was perceived in the rest of world as a step in the right direction initiated by Moscow. Despite differences of opinion towards the Syrian war, leading Muslim scholars and theologians agreed to accept Russians to their club in order to cement the intra-Islamic relations.⁽¹⁰⁾

At the regional level, there are a number of international forums that seek to offer a meeting place for continuous discussion to a wide range of representatives of Muslim and non-Muslim organisations, government officials from Russia, and CIS members. For instance, the subject of the 8th Muslim Forum organised in Moscow was consolidation of Muslims from CIS countries, their common future and achievements. It was particularly timely when viewed against the background of Eurasian integration. Muslim leaders believe that they are able to facilitate smooth integration between their peoples, while the governments provide the legal platform and infrastructure for such projects as Eurasian Union. Strengthening Muslim communities within the CIS has aims to bridge the ideological gap, which divides the region's societies over the question of national identity.

There are other dynamic events that accentuate Islam's role in Russia. Among them is the annual 'Moscow Halal Expo Exhibition', held for the fourth time in July 2013. The fourth Moscow Halal-Congress, Islamic Finance and Investment Forum, and the Forum of Muslim Youth were organised concurrently with the 2013 Expo.

Russian Muslims manifest themselves in the cultural sphere of intra-Islamic affairs dynamically. In September 2013, Moscow hosted the 14th International Quran recitation competition. It annually gathers the global community of hafiz (Quran memorisers) from the Middle East, Europe, Asia and America. There are a number of performers of nasheeds (religious hymns) in Russia, known by their art locally and abroad, such as the daughter of Chechen president Ramzan Kadyrov, Khutmat. She has several video clips, including those recorded with the well-known munshid and the imam of the Kuwaiti Great Mosque sheikh Mishary bin Rashid Alafasy.⁽¹¹⁾

Overall, there is plenty of evidence, including economic, social and cultural activities, which attests to Russia's endeavour to value and give expression to its Muslim identity. There is a long way to go to catch up with the core Muslim centres. Up to now, the crux

of it all is to empower Muslim Russians to make them believe in the importance of dual self-identification as Russians and Muslims.

Conclusion

Historically, unlike their western counterparts, Russian Orientalists have never tended to lessen the significance of Islam or to represent it as a form of 'barbarian culture', not even in the heyday of Soviet atheism.

Today Russia is a secular state with highly centralised political management by the Kremlin. Religion continues to be disestablished, and its role in foreign policy has until recently been limited. However, the lines between religion and politics are increasingly being blurred. Today, in the quest for a multicultural national identity, they seem to be closely interrelated. For instance, when the chairman of the Council of Russian Muftis, Sheikh Ravil Gaynetdin, meets Yemeni president Abd Rabboh Mansur Hadi, or the president of PNA Mahmoud Abbas, he does not face any objections from the Kremlin. What is certain is that Russia is showing skills and know-how in its endeavour to re-shape its national identity in favour of more Muslim inclusiveness. As for foreign policy, disposition towards the Muslim world is being informed by this trend.

Over the last ten years, Russia has been making rather courageous attempts to reach to the Muslim world. However, Russian politics is excessively bureaucratised. Civil society is generally passive and the top-down type of relations between state and society is predominant. For Russian Islam to anchor itself in culture as a constituent element of the national 'psyche', Muslims must first evolve as a weighty civic and political force. Putin's Russia has opened up opportunities that bode well for Islam and Muslims, locally and globally.

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***Karina Fayzullina** is a Russian researcher specialising in international relations.

Endnotes

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