

CULTURES OF ISLAM

VERNACULAR TRADITIONS AND REVISIONIST INTERPRETATIONS ACROSS RUSSIA



Editors

MARLENE LARUELLE & JESKO SCHMOLLER



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CULTURES OF ISLAM: Vernacular Traditions and Revisionist Interpretations across Russia

Marlene Laruelle, Jesko Schmoller, editors



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Introduction

Marlene Laruelle and Jesko Schmoller

This edited volume is the product of an online workshop that took place virtually at the George Washington University in October 2020. The workshop was part of a three-year project, “Islam in Russia, Russia in the Islamic World,” itself part of the Central Eurasia-Religion in International Affairs (CERIA) initiative. Launched in summer 2014 by GW’s Institute for European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies (IERES) and its Central Asia Program (CAP), CERIA inscribes itself in a broader effort at the Elliott School of International Affairs to bring greater academic and policy attention to the place of religion in international affairs. Generously funded by the Henry Luce Foundation, CERIA has since amplified synergies with existing programs at the Elliott School, in particular the Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS) and the MA in Islamic Studies, and deepened interdisciplinary discussions within the faculty, as well as with several university partners in the DC area.

Islam remains a gaping hole in many discussions of today’s Russia. The Russian authorities’ incessant promotion of the Russian Orthodox Church, Orthodox symbols, and supposed “Orthodox cultural values” tends to hide the presence of significant Muslim minorities. Of the country’s more than 146 million inhabitants (including two million in Crimea), about 15 million people are nominally Muslim, in the sense that they belong to an ethnic group whose cultural background refers primarily to Islam. To these nominally Muslim citizens should be added between 3 and 5 million labor migrants from the formerly Soviet and culturally Muslim countries (Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Azerbaijan); they work in Russia and stay there for different periods of time, but many of them plan to integrate into Russian society. Russia already has the largest Muslim minority in Europe, and Moscow, with at least 2 million Muslim inhabitants, now hosts the largest Muslim population of any European city.

Thus, Islam is a growing identity marker for many Russian citizens, yet it is still usually excluded from Western perspectives on Russia.

The Russian Constitution’s preamble acknowledges Orthodox Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Judaism as inseparable parts of the country’s historical heritage, while emphasizing the “special contribution” of Orthodoxy to the country’s history and to the development of its spirituality and

culture. Vladimir Putin regularly receives high-level Islamic dignitaries, particularly the leaders of the two main institutions that represent Islam in Russia—Talgat Tadzhuddin of the Ufa-based Central Spiritual Board of Muslims of Russia and Ravil Gaynutdin of the Russian Council of Muftis, headquartered in Moscow—and has created an Interreligious Council of Traditional Religions. In 2009, then-President Dmitry Medvedev noted, “Muslim foundations are making an important contribution to promoting peace in society, providing spiritual and moral education for many people, as well as fighting extremism and xenophobia.”

In parallel with this recognition, the Russian authorities have crafted a narrative on radical Islam in which all non-conformist versions of Islam are subsumed under the label “Salafi” (previously preference was given to the term “Wahhabism.”) At the start of the second war in Chechnya in 1999, the Russian regime began denouncing “Wahhabi” violence as a way of delegitimizing Chechen combatants. Ever since, the regime has utilized the post-9/11 slogan of “War on Terror” to extend the list of religious currents deemed Wahhabi/Salafi and therefore banned from operating on Russian territory. Several anti-extremist pieces of legislation have attempted to codify this policy, including the one that bans the Hizb ut-Tahrir and Tablighi Jamaat movements, both of which are often decried in the Russian media as Wahhabi despite sharing no theological basis with this Saudi current.

In line with this interpretation, non-conformist—or non-traditional—Islam is necessarily deemed “foreign” and not recognized by the Spiritual Boards. The Russian authorities have therefore been cultivating the image of a regime that shows no pity toward “non-traditional” Muslims that it considers “radical.” They tend to amalgamate three different phenomena: people promoting a literal reading of the Quran (Salafis), those calling for Islam to become a political ideology, and those inclined toward terrorist violence for religious or other reasons.

On the domestic scene, public debates around Islam are multiple and contradictory. Many famous politicians, such as Vladimir Zhirinovskiy or current deputy prime minister and former leader of the Rodina (Homeland) party Dmitry Rogozin, have been in the spotlight for their Islamophobic remarks. It is common for Russian media outlets—and even institutions such as the Federal Migration Service and law enforcement agencies—to draw connections between labor migrants and the spread of Islamic radicalism. Yet at the regional and local level, relationships to Islam vary considerably. In traditionally Muslim regions, references to Islam are an integral part of public life, and all local leaders attempt to position themselves as supporters of traditional Islam. However, in certain regions where Islam is only visible through the activities of migrants, tensions are noticeable and rising, such that Muslim communities’ requests to build new mosques are often not well received by local populations.

Russia's Islam is itself shaped by a number of competing societal and ideological trends that can be schematically divided into several categories. The majority of Russian Muslim citizens feel well integrated into Russian society and display the same level of patriotism as do nominally Christian Orthodox citizens. They either rally behind the notion of depoliticized "traditional Islam" inspired by Sufism or prefer a more engaged Islam that claims to provide critical support for the Putin regime, such as Chechen head of state Ramzan Kadyrov's "Islamic Putinism." A minority of Russian Muslims feel increasingly uncomfortable in Russia in the face of growing Russian nationalism and the progressive officialization of the Russian Orthodox Church. These individuals ask for Islam to be recognized as equal in public spaces, a request that encompasses the rights to wear Islamic clothing, build new mosques in historically non-Muslim regions, teach Islam in schools, etc. Within this minority, a tiny but increasingly influential segment rallies behind the cause of Salafi groups, calling for the Islamization of Russia as a whole and its transformation into a caliphate.

In the present publication, we take a closer look at the relationship between Islam and various aspects of culture. Many Muslims in Russia perceive an overlap between their religious and ethnic/national identities. They are born into families with Muslim heritage, where some religious practices are associated with ethnic belonging and "national traditions," or where people feel a spiritual connection to the land of their ancestors. For them, Islam and culture are closely entangled. A growing number of Muslim believers, however, disagree with this perspective and instead advocate for strict separation of the two spheres. In their opinion, the message of Islam is universal; ethnic tradition and national sentiments should be kept out of it. When faced with the question of learning a new language, for instance, adherents of what they themselves consider to be pure Islam would typically opt for Arabic instead of one of the ethnic minority languages of Russia. Given their embrace of a global outlook, identity politics at the regional or local level rarely mean much to them. When the authors who contribute to "Cultures of Islam" write about questions of identity, education, activism, or the Islam of migrant groups, we may recognize both positions among Muslims in Russia: Islam and culture thought of as separate or in combination with one another.

Scholars published in this volume reflect upon case studies from regions across Russia: Siberia, the Volga region, Crimea (with its ambiguous status), and the more central parts of the country. In an open discussion, the participants attended to the diversity of Muslim belief and practice in a range of Russian locations. In these pages, we wish to interrogate when and why some aspects of culture (national, ethnic, regional, local) gain influence. Whose interests are being served and what kind of power struggles can be determined? Do global and other interpretations of Islam clash or do

they co-exist? Our authors are therefore confronted with the uneasy convergence of one Islamic revelation, on the one hand, and a multitude of Muslim traditions, on the other.

Part I

Navigating Islam: Traditional and Foreign, Old and New, Halal and Haram

The Sociology of Competition between “Traditional” and “Globalized” Islam among Tatars in Russia: Actors and Their Interests

Liliya Sagitova

The theme that brought us together for the workshop that produced this book emphasizes the link between culture and religion, but both of these categories have a multitude of connotations. In our case, since we are dealing with social groups classified by ethnicity (Tatars of Russia), culture will be determined by ethnicity and associated with ethnic identification. Primordialist, instrumentalist, and constructivist interpretations of ethnic identity, notwithstanding their views of the genealogy of ethnicity, have as their subject an individual or a group that solidarizes on the basis of historical origin, common territory, language, economy, worldview, and sometimes religion.¹ It is important to point out that ethnic and religious identifications do not correlate strictly, but may overlap. The rigidity or plasticity of identity is associated with the influence of many factors. Following Rogers

¹ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures. Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973); Anthony D. Smith, *Nationalist Movements* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1976); C. Young, *Dialektika kul'turnogo pluralizma: kontseptsii i real'nost'. Etnichnost' i vlast' v politichnykh gosudarstvakh* (Moscow: Nauka, 1994), 111-135; Fredrik Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1982); V.A. Tishkov, “Identichnost' i kul'turnye granitsy,” in *Identichnost' i konflikt v postsovetskikh gosudarstvakh*, ed. M.B. Olcott, V. Tishkov, and I. Malashenko (Moscow: Carnegie Center, 1997), 7-43; L.M. Drobizheva, “Etnicheskaya identichnost'” in *Identichnost': Lichnost', Obshchestvo, Politika. Entsiklopedicheskoe izdanie*, ed. I.S. Semenenko (Moscow: Ves' mir, 2017), 417-418.

Brubaker and Frederick Cooper,² I emphasize the influence of codifying agents on the self-identification and self-presentation of a person or group; group connectivity and density of social networks are also significant factors that can connect culture and religion.

When speaking of “Russian Islam,” it is worth noting that the term refers to a multitude of ethno-cultural communities of Muslims living in Russia. The settlement of Muslim peoples in different regions spread across the vast territory of the Russian Federation has resulted in Islam being practiced differently in different local contexts, not least because the prohibition of religion during the atheist Soviet period heavily limited communication between Muslims in different parts of the USSR. The national and cultural policies of the Soviet state undoubtedly influenced the development of cultures and religion in the “national apartments” of the Soviet Union: the Bolsheviks’ policy of giving each people “their own” republic or autonomous national district led to the institutionalization of ethnic cultures,³ in the shadow of which religion also survived.

As such, “Russian Islam” per se has very limited purchase as an analytical concept. Let us therefore turn to the key categories within it.

The first of these is the concept of “traditional” Islam, which has been widely used in Russia since the 1990s and has a variety of connotations. The basic foundations of “traditional Islam” in Russia are the Shafi’i and Hanafi madhhabs⁴ adapted to Russian conditions, namely historical coexistence with Orthodoxy.⁵ These are combined in each locality with historical and ethnocultural specifics, making “traditional” Islam a syncretic phenomenon that includes both religious and ethnocultural components. In the republics of the North-East Caucasus, this has taken the form of Sufism, while in the North-West Caucasus, Islam has blended with elements of folk culture and paganism.⁶ Islam in Crimea is inextricably linked with the ethnic culture of the Crimean Tatars, as it forms the basis of their traditions, identity, and group solidarity.⁷

² Rogers Brubaker, *Ethnicity without Groups* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004); Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper, “Beyond ‘Identity,’” *Ab Imperio* 3 (2002): 61-115.

³ Yuri Slezkine, “SSSR kak kommunal’naia kvartira,” in *Amerikanskaia rusistika: Vekhi istoriografii poslednikh let. Sovetskii period: Antologiya* (Samara: Samara University Press, 2001), <https://stanislav-spb.livejournal.com/6400.html#cutid1>.

⁴ V. Akaev, “Konflikty mezhdru traditsionnym i netraditsionnym napravleniiami v Islame: prichiny, dinamika i puty preodoleniia (na materialakh Severnogo Kavkaza),” *Tsentral’naia Aziia i Kavkaz* 2 (56) (2008): 126-134, 126.

⁵ Z.G. Sultanakhmedova, “Traditsionnyi islam na Severnom Kavkaze,” *Filosofskie nauki* 1 (26) (March 2018): 131-135, 132.

⁶ Akaev, “Konflikty mezhdru traditsionnym i netraditsionnym napravleniiami v Islame,” 127.

⁷ E.S. Muratova, “Politicheskii islam v Krymu: lokal’nye variatsii global’nykh proektov. Aktual’nye voprosy istorii i sovremennogo razvitiia islama v Krymu,” in *Rider sbornik tekstov dlia chteniia k modul’u povysheniia kvalifikatsii po istorii i kul’ture islama*, ed. E.S. Muratova (Kazan: KFU, 2012), 142.

Those who have researched Islam in the Volga region have identified a wealth of meanings of “traditional Islam.” The first—historical and theological—relates to the pre-revolutionary tradition of Tatar theologians.⁸ The second—ethnological and sociological—examines the practice of Islam at the level of the family or the Muslim community, allowing us to conclude that the confessional identity of modern Tatars, despite ongoing “religious revival,” is connected more with Tatar history and culture than with the Islamic faith as a worldview or belief system.⁹ This is linked to Soviet-era atheism, which forced religion into the private domain and led to the spread of “popular Islam.” However, it should be noted that this concept is not unambiguous. Some researchers use it to refer to the everyday culture of the Tatars, which they understand as a synthesis of Islamic and ethnocultural rituals.¹⁰ Others, meanwhile, use it to describe a synthesis of Islamic and pagan rituals that includes both rituals¹¹ and pilgrimage to holy places.¹²

Accordingly, in this chapter, I use two intersecting interpretations of “traditional” Islam: the historical and cultural tradition (Tatar) and the “folk” tradition (popular). The former implies the historically established theological and ritual tradition of the Russian Tatars. The latter is the nominal identification of the Tatars with Islam, in which ethnic and religious identities are equated. There is also a politicized interpretation of “traditional Islam” where its main feature is loyalty to the secular state¹³ and opposition to the politicized trends in Islam, namely Wahhabism and Salafism.¹⁴

⁸ R.M. Mukhametshin, *Tatary i Islam v XX veke* (Kazan: Fen, 2003); R.M. Mukhametshin, “Islam v obshestvenno-politicheskoi zhizni postsovetetskogo Tatarstana,” in *Tatary i Islam v regionakh Rossiiskoi Federatsii: religioznoe vozrozhdenie i etnichnost'* (Kazan: Artifakt, 2014).

⁹ R. Musina, *Islam i problem identichnosti tatar v postsovetiskii period. Konfessional'nyi faktor v razvitiitatar* (Kazan: Institute of History named for Sh. Mardzhani AN RT, 2009), 86-100.

¹⁰ Ibid.; R.K. Urazmanova, “Islam v semeino-bytovoii obriadnosti tatar: traditsii i sovremennost',” in *Islam i etnicheskaia mobilizatsiia: natsional'nye dvizheniia v turkskom mire* (Moscow, 1998), 360-366; R.K. Urazmanova, “Musul'manskii obriady' v bytu tatar,” *Etnograficheskoe obozrenie* 1 (2009): 13-26.

¹¹ According to Davletshina, several variants of the rainmaking ritual existed among the Kazan Tatars; these incorporated religious and pagan components in varying degrees. For the most part, they are syncretic, although there are separately practiced rituals. See L. Kh. Davletshina, “Moleniia o dozhde v traditsii kazanskikh tatar,” *Filologicheskie nauki. Voprosy teorii i praktiki* (Tambov: Gramota 12 (78), 2017): 16-18, www.gramota.net/materials/2/2017/12-1/3.html.

¹² Researchers attribute pilgrimage to sacred places to prayer rituals. Among the Tatars-Mishars, it is common to visit ancient cemeteries and ancient graves, which they call the graves of saints (*izgelar*). See R.G. Mukhamedova, *Tatary-mishari: istoriko-etnograficheskoe issledovanie* (Kazan: Magarif, 2008), 236; G.F. Gabdrakhmanova and R.K. Urazmanova, “Musul'manskii kul't sviatykh u tatar Volgo-Uralskogo regiona: osobennosti formirovaniia i transformatsii,” *Etnograficheskoe obozrenie* 2 (2018): 58-75.

¹³ R.R. Suleimanov, “Sufizm v Tatarstane v postsovetiskii period: raznoobrazie grupp, rasprostranenie, vliianie na ummu regiona,” *Religiovedcheskie issledovaniia* 2 (14) (2016): 87-124, 117.

¹⁴ Akaev, “Konflikty mezhdru traditsionnym i netraditsionnym napravleniiami v Islame,” 132; Suleimanov, “Sufizm v Tatarstane v postsovetiskii period”; R. Batyr, “Smyslovaia chekharda vokrug traditsionnogo Islama porozhdaet putanitsu,” *BiznesOnline*, October 26, 2013, <https://www.business-gazeta.ru/blog/200812>.

In my opinion, an important circumstance that accentuates the geographical differentiation of Islam in modern Russia is the role and significance of Sufism in regional contexts. In the North Caucasus, Sufism is perceived as a historical tradition of local Muslims. It is consistently interpreted by political and religious actors as a legitimate “traditional Islam” and functions through *tariqats* and *viridy*.¹⁵ For the Muslims of the Volga region, meanwhile, this interpretation is controversial. The political elite appeals to the theological tradition of the Tatars, which existed in pre-revolutionary Russia and was represented by the directions of Kadimism and Jadidism. At the same time, however, priority in official discourse is given to Jadidism.¹⁶ There are discrepancies among the Muslim clergy: one part follows the discourse of the political elite, while the other understands Sufism as “traditional Islam.” With regard to the bulk of the Muslims of the Volga region, our research is consistent with the view of Rais Suleimanov, who argues that for the overwhelming majority of Tatars, Islam is not associated with Sufism and its specific rituals. Instead, Islam is understood as the practice of their grandparents, who, in Soviet times, were able to preserve and practice Islam at the level of simple prayer and life-cycle rituals.¹⁷

The second key category is “globalized Islam,” which, like “traditional Islam,” has many connotations. The first meaning is basic: opposition to the historically established local Islamic tradition influenced by local ethnic culture in favor of Islam coming from the countries of the Middle East. This concept may include non-judgmental categories: Arabic Islam, Turkish Islam, etc.

However, the politicization of Islam in Western and Russian political discourse imbues “globalized Islam” with a negative connotation, identifying it with such concepts as “political Islam,” “Islamism,” “Islamic fundamentalism,” and “Islamic sectarianism”—which includes Wahhabism, Salafism, and their respective purported political actors (Hizb ut-Tahrir, the Muslim Brotherhood, etc.).¹⁸ In field research, these concepts can be meaningfully differentiated through analysis of informants’ ideas about Islam and their religious self-identification.

The concept of religious “tradition” is by definition associated with inertia since the tradition took shape in a certain historical period. In Imperial Russia, due to underdeveloped communications and the low mobility of the population, the regional features of Islam retained their local specificity under the canopy of this global confession. The situation changed dramatically during the atheist Soviet period: different administrative regimes and sanctions were imposed depending on the

¹⁵ Akaev, “Konflikty mezhdu traditsionnym i netraditsionnym napravleniiami v Islame,” 127.

¹⁶ R.S. Khakimov, *Kto ty, tatarin?* (Kazan: Master-Lain, 2002), 21.

¹⁷ Suleimanov, “Sufizm v Tatarstane v postsovetskii period,” 122.

¹⁸ Muratova, “Politicheskii islam v Krymu”; A.V. Malashenko, *Musul'manskii mir SNG* (Moscow, 1996).

policies of the central and local authorities, the degree of a region's remoteness from Moscow, local features of Islam, and the ethnic composition of the population. This adjustment was reflected in specific conditions for the existence of Islam, especially in rural Muslim communities, as convincingly shown by the participants in the collective research project "From Kolkhoz to Jamaat."¹⁹

Analyzing the present-day situation, it is important to understand how the inertia of the Soviet period coexists with the challenges of globalization. When we talk about the sociology of "traditional" and "globalized" Islam, we mean first and foremost the identification processes associated with religious values and the behavior of believers rather than the theological aspects thereof. This study is particularly interesting because it looks at an ethnic group that combines the features of two eras: Soviet (atheist) and post-Soviet (where religion is actively practiced).

This combination generates many research perspectives, of which the following are relevant to our case: the role of culture and religion in the process of identification; the role of internal and external codifying agents; influence of socio-political conditions on the specifics of ethnic and religious identification; influence of social history of an ethnic group on the correlation between ethnicity and religion; and the impact of globalization on the relationship between culture and religion. The study employed a qualitative sociological method of data collection: family interviews in the format of focus groups. Thirty such interviews were conducted among urban and rural Tatars in each of the following regions: Tatarstan, Bashkortostan (Volga Tatars), the Tyumen region (Siberian Tatars), and the Republic of Crimea (Crimean Tatars).

Ethnic and Religious Identification among Russian Tatars

The competition of ethnic and religious identities arose in the Tatar community with the development of a sense of national identity. The ethnonym "Tatars" received its cultural connotation in the modern era, when the nationalist paradigm pushed other forms of identity, religion, and class to the periphery. The Muslim identity of the Tatars of Imperial Russia, which used to be a predominantly rural population,²⁰ gradually slipped into the background in the course of Soviet modernization, overshadowed by the dominant factor of national identity. At the same time, its cultural connotation—enshrined by the Soviet government in a set of institutions (the establishment of national republics and territories, the fifth [nationality] line in the passport, etc.)—eventually

¹⁹ Christian Noack and Stephane A. Dudoignon, *Allah's Kolkhozes. Migration, De-Stalinisation, Privatisation and the New Muslim Congregations in the Soviet Realm (1950s-2000s)* (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz, 2014).

²⁰ Historical data indicate that in 1897, 91.5% of Tatars were villagers. By 1926, only 5.2% of Tatars lived in the cities of the republic. See *Sotsial'noe i natsional'noe* (Moscow: Nauka, 1973), 15.

acquired stable features seen as primordial. Industrialization and urbanization intensified the migration of Tatars from villages to cities, where the dominance of secular institutions, along with strong administrative control, pushed religious practices and faith into the private sphere. However, the institutionalization of ethnicity allowed it to become a protective umbrella for religious rituals and Muslim family practices, which the Soviet government could not eradicate due to their importance to those who practiced them.

Scholars researching Tatar religiosity confirm the close intertwining of ethnic culture and Islam. Raufa Urazmanova, who conducted expeditions in Tatarstan during the Soviet period, found that holidays such as Uraza bayram and Kurban bayram were identified as folk holidays, while religious life-cycle rites were considered important for all ethnic Tatars and were widely practiced. This kind of tradition became known as “folk Islam.”²¹ Post-Soviet studies by Rozalinda Musina have shown that Islam is perceived by today’s Tatars as part of their national and cultural heritage and occupies an essential place in the structure of ethnic identity. In a 2002 survey, 55% of respondents in the Republic of Tatarstan described Islam as an obligatory component of Tatar ethnicity.²²

What Did the Fieldwork Show?

Common Features

Analysis of ethnic and religious identification among the Tatars of Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, the Tyumen region, and Crimea made it possible to identify features common to all regional groups of Tatars. These include: family transmission of religious values and practices (Islam is perceived both as a family tradition and as an integral part of ethnic identity); the involvement of the extended family in the preservation and transmission of religious beliefs and practices; the influence of communal rural life on the reproduction of religious values and practices; and the preservation of religious ideas and practices in a form truncated during the Soviet period.

Family transmission of religious values was almost universal among Tatars in the regions under study. Its characteristic features, in their view, are genealogical and cultural-historical foundations; one’s self-identification as a Muslim is derived from kinship roots and the family ritual tradition: “We were born as Muslims” (No. 16, male, 39, Tyumen). This is especially typical of rural

²¹ Urazmanova, “Islam v semeino-bytovoi obriadnosti tatar,” 360-366; Urazmanova, “Musul’manskie obriady’ v bytu tatar,” 13-26.

²² Musina, *Islam i problem identichnosti tatar v postsovetskii period*, 93-99.

Tatars, who follow traditions and mechanistically reproduce religious practices as established by family and community norms:

Interviewer: Are you a believer?

Respondent: Well, yes, since we live in such a family.

Interviewer: How is your faith expressed?

Respondent: I don't know. Well, anyway, we observe all these ceremonies and holidays (No. 13, female, 32, a village in the Tyumen region).

In the family transmission of religious practices, the grandparents play a central role. Those who underwent religious socialization in pre-Soviet Russia managed, under the tough conditions of the atheist Soviet Union, to maintain religious values and transmit them to their children and grandchildren. The latter handed them down to the younger generations, thereby forming a family tradition that, as the older generation passed away, became part of family custom. Among rural Tatars, along with the inertia tradition, a deeper transmission of values and norms also manifested itself:

When we had free time, our father told us about religion, about the prophets, about how grandfather studied, what sermons he read... this is what he talked to us about in the evenings. Therefore, when we entered the madrasah to study, we were already prepared a little. At the age of 22, I began my studies in Ufa, at the Central Spiritual Directorate (No. 8, male, 45, a village in Bashkortostan).

For Tatar city dwellers, religious identification varies depending on such factors as level of education and length of time spent in the urban environment. The extended family—represented by parents living in rural areas, as well as cousins and second cousins—plays a significant role for first- and second-generation urban residents. As a rule, meetings with them are held in conjunction either with celebrations of religious holidays or with important life-cycle events accompanied by religious rites (weddings, funerals, childbirth, etc.). Visiting ancestral places and maintaining family ties is perceived by many of them as a return to the origins of one's genus and as a way to restore and maintain fortitude. It carries a strong ethnic connotation.

We also observed a rather widespread dynamic of religious transmission in which grandmothers and grandfathers preserved the pre-Soviet local tradition of Islam while their children and grandchildren adopted a limited version of "folk Islam." It is quite logical that in the context of the post-Soviet re-Islamization and return to the canonical religious cycle of rituals, this sequence is perceived by some of the older generation as a manifestation of "radical Islam." A rural family in the

Republic of Bashkortostan is illustrative: members of the older generation were active believers, while members of the middle generation and their children expressed belief in a higher power, but did not define themselves as “true Muslims”:

I say some words, but I don’t read *namaz*, I don’t know anything—but *nanayka* [the local term for “grandmother”—L.S.], she read, she had Arabic books (No. 1, female, 57, a village in Bashkortostan).

The traditional concept that you yourself believe and read *namaz*...well, we do not have such a thing, I mean, we don’t have anything as radical as that. We consider ourselves Muslims, we believe in this, but we do not do everything as it is ... There is spiritual belonging, but we don’t have such a thing as wearing a headscarf or something else like that; we invite grandmothers to visit, give *haer* (alms—L.S.) if it is a feast day (No. 1, female, 29, a village in Bashkortostan)

We don’t go to the mosque at all (No. 1, male, 30, a village in Bashkortostan).

Sometimes, townspeople of the second and third generations have more individualized religious identification. For this category of informants, strengthening secular values and attitudes lead them either to a nominal adherence to the family religious tradition (in tribute to the family) or to a deep search for their place within several other confessions. It may sometimes lead to agnosticism or atheism.

Turning to the theme of competition between “globalized” Islam and its “local” counterpart, none of my respondents claimed to be adherents of Hizb ut-Tahrir or the Muslim Brotherhood. Most focus group participants called themselves believers in “their own,” “traditional” Islam and expressly rejected the new trend, which they identified with “radical” Islam. That being said, the arguments they used for this rejection were limited to ethno-cultural aspects: “Our grandmothers did not wear the hijab,” “Tatars did not dress like that,” etc.²³

Differences

Despite these numerous similarities, the focus group results from the various regions also show significant regional differences. For Crimean Tatar families, the political factor played a key role in strengthening the connection between religion and ethnicity. The experience of forced

²³ Such statements were made by men and women of different age groups in all focus groups conducted in Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, Tyumen Oblast, and the Crimean Republic.

displacement under Stalin and survival in Siberia and in the republics of Central Asia undoubtedly strengthened intrafamily and intracommunal ties and elevated faith in the Almighty to an absolute, the only force on which one can rely in conditions of severe discrimination. This can largely be understood as a reaction to social exclusion that sets them apart from other groups of Tatars.

For the Crimean Tatars, the post-Soviet period was marked by the conjunction of religious renaissance and a return to their homeland, which, under the conditions of deportation, acquired a sacred meaning for them. The revival of Islam—the religion of their ancestors—and the regaining of the ancestral homeland have strengthened the connection between the people, its territory, and faith, and enhanced intra-family ties on a religious basis.

An important distinguishing feature of the religiosity of the Crimean Tatars, in comparison with the Tatars of other regions, is the priority of faith over other values, such as family, health, and work:

You cannot do without help from the Almighty, first of all, one relies on his help, on his mercy. Well, then, probably, on oneself too” (No. 2, female, 44, a city in the Republic of Crimea).

For me, the main thing is faith in Allah ... everything else is not important (No. 5, female, 35, a village in the Republic of Crimea).

In general, like all Muslim women, my authority is our Prophet (No. 7, female, 37, a city in the Republic of Crimea).

In respondents’ understanding, ethnicity and Islam are inseparable concepts: “Of course, we consider ourselves to be an ethnos that belongs, as they say, to Islam. Yes, we are Crimean Tatars, we are Muslims” (No. 16, male, 61, a city in the Republic of Crimea).

The need to settle down and survive in difficult circumstances boosted the activity component of the lives of Crimean Tatars. Only the Crimean Tatars articulated the role of the Almighty as their main source of inspiration and strength. Their intention to create, build, and achieve something in life rests on the Islamic postulate about the importance of labor, about activity as a fundamental quality of a believer, and on faith in Allah as a source of strength for doing things:

Faith in the Almighty, in the Holy ... he gives you some kind of strength ... As the Almighty said, you must do something so that I will help you achieve some of your goals, therefore, faith is the basis (No. 2, male, 71, a village in the Republic of Crimea).

For me, faith is an awareness of belonging to something big and great that gives me strength at certain moments (No. 1, male, 37, a city in the Republic of Crimea).

During trying times in life, the postulate of the fear of God becomes more important. The theme of the importance of the fear of God was quite often voiced in respondents' narratives:

If she is a Muslim, the main thing for her is to be God-fearing, so that, for example, she does not violate the laws of God (No. 7, male, 39, a city in the Republic of Crimea).

Someone said to me: let's get a drink there [drink alcohol—L.S.], let's eat a pig. I say no, I won't. Who will see it? I say: But the Almighty sees (No. 2, male, 71, a village in the Republic of Crimea).

Even the relationship between family members... there was some discord in the family, there were disputes... this is a great sin, because we will be punished for this (No. 5, female, 42, a city the Republic of Crimea).

Evidently, the Crimean Tatars typically turn to faith as their primary means of regulating everyday life and relations within the family and between people, as well as assessing a situation, moral and ethical norms, and the righteousness of life and achievement. This aligns with the canons of Sharia:

The Quran has a great many things, well, probably, one's whole life is mapped out there, from birth to death—how to behave in specific situations. This helps us a lot. We know how to behave in what situation, where to go. We mainly look to faith (No. 8, male, 63, a village in the Republic of Crimea).

The cornerstone of practicing Muslims from among the Crimean Tatars is the maxim of responsibility for their actions, self-control, and conscious adherence to the norms of Islam. Moreover, the social component of Islam has developed among the Crimean Tatars to a greater extent than among other Tatars, both in the value-normative aspect and in the behavioral one.

The intragroup solidarity of the Crimean Tatars, based on ethnicity and their deportation experience, counters the influence of Islamic globalization and, among some informants, leads to the rejection of the Arab version of Islam:

Among our youth, there has been a tendency to deviate from traditions, traditional Islam ... they tend to go more into a kind of Arabism, sometimes into

radicalism. I stick more to our traditional Crimean Tatar version ... I call it Crimean Tatar Islam, because the kind of Islam that used to be is rather more correct for us. It is more adapted to our culture. And when teenagers who are two, three, four, five years younger than me say: Our grandmothers did not understand what they were doing, they did not know, they were illiterate. But I analyze: Wait, then where are our Muslim scholars whose manuscripts are kept in the libraries of Cairo, Mecca, and Medina? Who were the theologians known throughout the Islamic world? What about the elementary veneration of saints, what about our saint Hoser Ilyas?²⁴ They say: this is a pagan saint! But this is an inalienable part of our culture! If you renounce it, you renounce the culture of the Crimean Tatars! (No. 8, male, 26, a city in the Republic of Crimea).

Of course, in each of the studied groups of Tatars, there are adherents of “globalized” Islam, and a deeper study of the motivations for turning to it helps to examine in detail the place of ethnicity and culture in the value system of neophytes. If, for the Tatars of Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, and the Tyumen region, rejection of “globalized” Islam is based on the force of inertia, the habit of established norms and practices of its own—albeit “traditional”—Islam, the Crimean Tatars see a special value in ethnicity closely integrated with the Ummah as part of a genus identity and a basis for group solidarity, which was an invaluable resource under conditions of deportation.

Conclusion

What did the conducted field research reveal about the links between culture/ethnicity and religious identity? The comparative analysis of various groups of Tatars living in the regions of Russia revealed that the political factor had significant influence. In comparing the Soviet and post-Soviet periods, we see the consequences of political engineering in the sphere of culture and religion. The institutionalization of ethnicity by the Soviet state under the influence of the global trend of nationalism helped Islam to survive, even though it was transformed in the process. For the Tatars of Russia, the Soviet institutionalization of ethnicity gave culture a biological, down-to-earth character and linked ethnicity with ancestors and territory.

²⁴ Khizir Ilyas is a mythological character, a prophet who, according to legend, drank “living water” from the source of life and gained eternal life. Khizir Ilyas appears in the form of a beggar, shepherd or traveler, gives good advice, gives wealth, or indicates the location of treasures. See L. Kh. Davletshina, “‘Khyzyr Ilyas’ v traditsionnoi kul’ture tatar,” *Vestnik Bashkirskogo universiteta* 16, no. 3 (2011): 779-781.

The influence of the social history of the Crimean Tatars on the relationship between ethnicity and Islam was also stimulated by the actions of the state. The history of deportation, which has acquired sacred status in every family, has influenced the crystallization of ethnicity as a basis for repression. The experience of deprivation stimulated intragroup cohesion, solidarity, and mutual assistance. In this context, Islam served as a source of spiritual support and future salvation, which was seen exclusively in terms of the Crimean Tatars' return to their homeland, the territory of their ancestors—essentially the regaining of a lost paradise.

Due to the specificity of Islam as a religion with a high degree of regulation of spiritual norms and everyday life, religious practices ensured the intergenerational transmission and, to varying degrees, preservation of religious values. The Soviet period brought about generational transmission of Islam, in which the family and the extended family circle were the main identifying agent. Religious beliefs and practices have survived in a curtailed form, more in rural areas than in the cities. Under the conditions of Soviet atheism and the secularization of society, the gradual drift of the pre-revolutionary local religious tradition to “folk” Islam led to the formation of a “moderate” Muslim who typically recognizes the existence of a “higher power,” respects ceremonies and rituals supported by older relatives in the family, occasionally visits the mosque, and gives to charity. The religious identification of those who consider themselves to be “moderate” can also be determined by the external attributes of believers. These include observance within the family of traditional family holidays (Kurban bayram and Uraza bayram) and rituals related to life cycles (birth, wedding, funeral). Since the festive and ritual culture of Islam accompanies the life of the family at all its significant stages, this involves a wide family circle, which in turn forms strong and intense kinship ties, thereby linking the family, ethnicity, and religiosity.

Mobile Actors in the Islamic Education of Post-Soviet Tatarstan

Leila Almazova

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Islamic education in the Russian Federation had to evolve practically from scratch. The first madrasas opened in 1989. During the 1990s, an increasing number of Islamic educational institutions of different levels were registered in the Russian regions, ranging from mosque schools—designed to educate children and the elderly on the basics of Islam—to Islamic institutions of higher education. Even before the Islamic education system had time to mature, it became a battleground for various forces, chief among them federal and local officials.²⁵

Writing in 1996, Arjun Appadurai explored global dynamics: “State plays an increasingly delicate role: too much openness to global flows, and the nation-state is threatened by revolt ..., too little, and the state exits the international stage, as Burma, Albania, and North Korea in various ways have done.”²⁶ In the early 1990s, Russia declared itself an open society and allowed foreign missionaries to establish new churches and spread new religious ideas among the population. Along with multiple Protestant denominations, numerous Islamic movements and groups were allowed to preach, especially in the country’s Muslim regions.

This open-door policy on the presence of foreign groups in Russia was revised with the First Chechen War (1994-1996), the radicalization of Islam in the North Caucasus, and then the Second Chechen War (1999-2009). As Appadurai aptly put it, “There is always a fear of cultural absorption by polities of larger scale, especially those that are nearby. One man's imagined community is another man's political prison.”²⁷ The Russian authorities were concerned about possible transformation of the Muslim regions into Islamist enclaves, prompting the state to quickly cut off all direct financial contacts between domestic religious organizations or educational institutions and foreign organizations. Many madrasas were either closed down or found themselves struggling to survive. In

²⁵ For example, in Tatarstan since 1998 the position of Mufti has had to be agreed upon with the Office of the President of Tatarstan as well as with the rectors of Islamic higher educational institutions, in spite of the fact that according to Article 14 of the Russian Constitution, religious organizations are separated from the state and Mufti is a position elected by local Muslim clergy.

²⁶ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 42.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 32.

Adygea in the early 2000s, for example, all Turkish schools founded by the Sulaymaniye Sufi movement were closed. In 2005, schools run by the followers of Fethullah Gülen were suppressed throughout the North Caucasus²⁸ and in other regions of Russia.

The tragic events in the North Caucasus affected the work of the madrasas even in areas far removed from the conflict zone, such as the Republic of Tatarstan. In 2000, by order of the Mufti, Gusman Iskhakov, the Yulduz, Ikhlas, Nuruddin, Tanzilya, and Iman madrasas²⁹ in the city of Naberezhnye Chelny were closed and a new institution—the Ak Mechet madrasa—established to replace them.³⁰ The reorganization was occasioned by the fact that illegal armed groups in Chechnya had included students at the Yuldyz madrasa and potentially the others, at a time when the city was at the forefront of the movement for Tatarstan's independence from Moscow.

The state has taken a number of political steps to outline the course of domestic Islamic education. On June 19, 2002, President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin, against the backdrop of the continuing deterioration of the situation in the North Caucasus, issued order 1089-PR, which stated in part:

Continuing manifestations of religious extremism in the country require the adoption of additional measures to increase the level of cooperation between the State and religious associations. As a matter of priority, I request the development of a set of measures to provide organizational, material, and methodical assistance in the development of religious education, especially Muslim education.³¹

On November 15, 2005, the Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation approved the Comprehensive Program of Assistance to the Development of Religious Education, Chiefly Muslim Education, for 2005-2015. This document included an analysis of the main problems in the field of Islamic education:

Despite the fact that there are more than 70 registered Islamic educational

²⁸ A. Yarlykapov, "Osnovnye problemy vzaimootnoshenii islama i vlasti na Tsentral'nom i Severo-Zapadnom Kavkaze," in *Islam i gosudarstvo*, ed. A. Malashenko and A. Yunusova (Moscow and Ufa: Informreklama, 2007), 158-176, 173.

²⁹ In the 1990s there were about 20 madrasas in Tatarstan. Some closed due to financial problems and others for political reasons, with the result that there were 10 madrasas remaining in 2008. By 2021, the number of madrasas stood at 8.

³⁰ Rafik Mukhametshin, "Sistema musul'manskogo obrazovaniia v postsovetском Tatarstane," in *Sistema musul'manskogo religioznogo obrazovaniia u tatar: istoriia, problemy, perspektivy* (Kazan: Institut istorii AN RT, 2005), 78-89, 79.

³¹ This quote can be found in many publications, including the Comprehensive Program of Assistance to the Development of Religious Education, Chiefly Muslim Education, for 2005-2015.

institutions in Russia (along with hundreds of unregistered madrasas and schools), there is, generally speaking, no system for training highly qualified religious leaders in the country... Madrasas usually use foreign textbooks to teach Russian Muslim students; foreign teachers are invited to work in madrasas. Except in rare cases, Russian Muftis and Imams have no higher (secular or religious) education. At the same time, *dozens and hundreds of graduates of foreign Islamic educational institutions are returning to the country, having received a systematized and ideologically strong Islamic education that does not take Russian realities into consideration. It is obvious that they are educated much better than local imams and ;uftis, and taking into account the very difficult socio-economic situation in Russia and their abilities to receive financial aid from abroad, their position is only getting stronger* (emphasis added).³²

In the period between 2005 and 2020, the Russian state invested more than 4 billion rubles in the development of domestic Islamic education.³³ However, an analysis of Islamic education in Tatarstan and other Muslim regions of the Russian Federation reveals a very interesting phenomenon that practically undercuts officials' stated goal of getting rid of foreign influence: over time, Russian graduates of foreign Islamic educational centers have gained increasing influence in the national Islamic education system. Today, in some educational institutions—for instance at the Bolgar Islamic Academy—up to 90 percent of the lecturers who teach religious courses and Arabic language are graduates of foreign programs. It is obvious that these so-called “mobile actors” enjoy international social ties and greater religious knowledge than their domestically educated counterparts, both of which they skillfully use when they return home to Russia. That being said, how justifiable is it for the Russian authorities to fear that teachers with foreign education—so-called “mobile actors”—will bring with them foreign values, ideologies, and norms? It should be remembered that in a new (Russian) context, ideas acquired abroad are transposed, adapted, and begin to serve local realities in a very different way than in the place of their origin. In that sense, it would be interesting to answer the following questions:

1) Which foreign educational institutions determine the strategy for the development of modern Islamic education in the Republic of Tatarstan? 2) What is the relationship between the rating and popularity of an educational institution and the number of its teachers who received a foreign

³² Comprehensive Program of Assistance to the Development of Religious Education, Chiefly Muslim Education, for 2005-2015, author's archive.

³³ For more details, see Leila Almazova, “Evolution of the Russian Islamic Education in the Era of Post-Secularity (1990-2020),” *Vestnik rossiiskoi natsii* 6 (2020): 5-34.

education? 3) What are the considerations of those who supervise appointments in the system of Islamic education, determining which “mobile actors” can be entrusted with teaching and which should be kept away from Muslim youth? Before answering the above questions, a brief historical overview is appropriate.

Mobile Actors in Islamic Education in the Volga-Urals in Historical Perspective

Since the eighteenth century, the most famous madrasas among the Tatars of the Volga-Urals gained their fame thanks to teachers (*mudarris*) who had studied far from their homeland. To take one example, Ishniyaz b. Shirniyaz al-Khwarezmi (died 1791) was one of the most famous teachers in the Kargaly madrasa.³⁴ He returned to his motherland after a long period of study in Urgench. No less popular was Waliaddin Hassan al-Baghdadi (1755-1831), a teacher at the same madrasa who studied in Baghdad and also visited India, Khorasan, and Bukhara.³⁵ A teacher in the other well-known madrasa in Machkara village³⁶ was mullah Muhammadrahim al-Ashiti (d. 1818), who studied in Dagestan.

If we look at the most prominent individuals who contributed both to education and theology, we see the same pattern. Prolific author and Sufi poet Gabdrahim Utyz-Imani (1754-1834/5) was educated first at the famous Kargaly madrasa and then at the Sufi lodge of Shaikh Fayzhan al-Kabuli (d. 1802) in Bukhara. Tajuddin Yalchigul (1767-1838), a teacher and the author of the commentary *Risala-i Gaziza* (Letter to Daughter Gaziza) on Sufi Allahyar's (1644-1721) poetic treatise *Subat al-'Ajizin* (Help for Those Who Weakened), studied first in Dagestan, then in Diyarbakir (Ottoman Empire) in the circle of Sufi Shaikh Abd al-Shukur Afandi (died 1784?), and then in Istanbul. Abu Nasr Kursavi (1776-1812), an imam and mudarris, studied at home in the Machkara madrasa and then in Bukhara, where he became a disciple (*murid*) of Shaikh Niyaz-Kuli al-Turkmani (died 1821). After returning to the homeland, he taught in different villages until he was accused of unbelief (*kufir*)

³⁴ Kargaly sloboda was established in 1745 eighteen kilometers from the city of Orenburg. On behalf of Empress Elizabeth (1741-1762), the senate issued a special edict allowing Tatars to found new sloboda and practice Islam there. In more traditional regions of Tatar residence, building mosques was prohibited before Empress Catherine the Great (1762-1796). At the time, Kargaly served as a center of trade between Russia and Muslim regions of Central Asia, where Tatars played a leading role. Immediately after the first mosque in Kargaly was built in 1749, it began to serve as a place for studying Islam. Students from the Volga-Urals came there to study Islam because it was prohibited to build mosques—and thus teach religion—in other places.

³⁵ A. Khabutdinov, “Okrug Orenburgskogo magometanskogo dukhovnogo sobraniia: rol' medrese kak obshchenatsional'nogo instituta” (2011), <http://idmedina.ru/books/materials/?3365>.

³⁶ Machkara village is located in Kukmor district of the Republic of Tatarstan. The mosque where the madrasa operated was built in 1791 in the baroque style. The building, which is still not restored, was filmed recently for the series “Zuleykha Opens Her Eyes” (2020) about collectivization and the Stalinist repressions.

because of his views on the issue of God's attributes.³⁷ He tried to avoid threats from his contemporaries by going on pilgrimage to Mecca but died *en route* near Istanbul. Shihabuddin Marjani (1818-1889)—the head of the madrasa near the Yunus Mosque (Kazan) and the author of numerous treatises on *fiqh*, theology, and history—first studied in his native village of Tashkichu,³⁸ then in Bukhara with Shaikh Salih al-Khujandi (d.?), and then in Samarkand with Shaikh Abu Said al-Samarkandi (died 1849). Zyaetdin Kamali (1873-1942), the director of the Galiya madrasa in Ufa, the first Muslim higher educational institution in the Russian Empire, studied first at the Uthmaniya madrasa in Ufa and then at the technical college in Istanbul, completing his education at the theological faculty of al-Azhar University under the tutelage of Muhammad 'Abduh (1849-1905).

The list goes on. Galimjan Barudi (1857-1921), director of the Muhammadiya madrasa in Kazan, studied in Bukhara. Zakir Kadyri (1878-1954), a leading lecturer at the Husayniya madrasa in Orenburg and the Galiya madrasa in Ufa, studied in Bukhara, Istanbul, and Cairo. Sungatullah Bekbulatov (1886-1954), a teacher at the Husainiya madrasa in Orenburg and the author of a number of textbooks on the history of Islam and of the Orient, studied at al-Azhar in Cairo.

Analysis of the biographies of 242 Tatar-Bashkir scholars, lecturers, and public figures listed in Rizaetdin Fakhretdin's (1859-1936) biobibliographical work *Asar* (Spiritual Memory) in 1843-1862 testifies that 72 persons, or 30 percent, had international experience and/or were trained outside their historical homeland.³⁹ Bukhara was one of the most prominent centers for the education of Tatars and Bashkirs: 53 scholars (or 78 percent of those trained abroad) received their education there. Mecca and Medina ranked second, with at least eight students, some of whom also attended madrasas in Bukhara. Two apiece studied in Turkey, Egypt, Dagestan, and India, and one in each of Samarkand, Urganj, and in Afghanistan.

According to Aydar Khabutdinov, "It was the graduates of Bukhara who created practically all the famous madrasas of the Volga-Urals. The Central Asian education system was the main example and model to be followed."⁴⁰ Farhshatov found that in 1800-1860, 21.5 percent of teachers on the territory of contemporary Bashkortostan had studied abroad, a figure that fell to 13.4 percent in 1860-1890.⁴¹

³⁷ He was opposed to the idea that God has 7 (as in the Ashari school) or 8 (as in the Maturidi school) attributes of His essence. See more in G. Idiyatullina, *Abu-Nasr Kursavi* (Kazan: Fan, 2005).

³⁸ Tashkichu is a village in the Arsk District of the Republic of Tatarstan, 90 kilometers from Kazan.

³⁹ This is my own analysis, conducted on the basis of R. Fakhretdin, *Asar* (Kazan: Tatar kitap nashriyaty, 2010).

⁴⁰ Khabutdinov, "Okrug Orenburgskogo magometanskogo dukhovnogo sobraniia."

⁴¹ M.N. Farkhshatov, *Narodnoe obrazovanie v Bashkirii v poreformennyi period* (Moscow: Nauka, 1994), 61-62.

Thus, long before today's globalization, the Islamic world had its own globalization, consisting not so much of free trade across much of the globe as in freedom of choice as to where to acquire knowledge. Prior to its clash with Western economic and military supremacy, the Islamic world was satisfied with the classical Islamic educational system of the *maktab* (primary school) and *madrasa* (providing a professional religious education), which existed in every Muslim region.

By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Tatar knowledge-seekers began looking to new places. Along with the traditional Bukhara, an increasing number of students began traveling to Turkey, where the Tanzimat reform phase (1839-1876) included the development of a secular education system, and Egypt (al-Nahda)—that is, to the first two countries in the Muslim world to undergo modernization. Tatar knowledge-seekers were attracted by the success of reforms in those societies, especially in the educational sphere. Muslims of the Russian Empire started their own modernizing educational project, Jadidism, which—unlike in Egypt or Turkey—was not supported by the state but rather represented a grassroots social movement led predominantly by those educated abroad.

The experience gained at the end of the nineteenth century by Tatar students (*shakird*) in Turkish, Egyptian, and Russian educational institutions, as well as in Europe, led at the beginning of the twentieth century to the Tatar system of religious education becoming the most progressive one that existed among the Muslim peoples of the Russian Empire. Students from the Kazakh steppes and Kyrgyz *auls* came to study in Kazan, Ufa, Orenburg, and Troitsk. Tatar teachers and Jadid textbooks gained popularity in Central Asian and Dagestani schools.

Yet the success of the Jadid movement came to an abrupt end in 1917. The October Revolution was a turning point in many spheres of Russian life, and Islamic education was no exception. Famous madrasas were closed in 1918 following the issuance of the state decree “On the Separation of Church and State.” Soviet educational institutions were created on their material-technical base: the Teachers’ Institute replaced the Husayniya madrasa in Orenburg; a pedagogical college replaced the Rasuliya madrasa in Troitsk; and a Tatar gymnasium replaced the Galiya madrasa in Ufa, among others. The repressions of the 1930s led to total annihilation of the Muslim clergy. Only much later, in 1946, was the madrasa Mir-i Arab reopened in Bukhara; in 1971, the Islamic Institute in Tashkent was established. According to Muminov, Gafurov, and Shigabdinov, “New Islamic universities were established to train new Muslim specialists without high qualifications, but with the utmost loyalty to

the Soviet state.”⁴² In the 1960-1980s, about 20 students from the Volga-Urals graduated from these two institutions. Later, in the 1990s, they were the ones who laid the foundations for the revival of Islam and Islamic education in the post-Soviet era.

Islamic Education in the Republic of Tatarstan in the Context of Foreign Influence

During the last three decades, the Republic of Tatarstan has fully developed a system of Islamic education consisting of more than 700 mosque schools, eight vocational colleges (*madrasas*), an Islamic Institute, an Islamic University, and the Bolgar Islamic Academy. In what follows I analyze the teaching staff within the system of vocational Islamic education, leaving the system of mosque schools out of focus because of the small number of graduates of foreign institutions employed there.

“Mobile Actors” in Tatarstani Madrasas

In 2017, the Spiritual Board of Muslims of the Republic of Tatarstan published a Tatar-language book entitled *Tatarstan Madrasas and their Teachers (ostazlary)*⁴³ that presented brief biographical information about the 135 employees and teachers of madrasas. If we exclude those who do not teach (19 are auxiliary staff—accountants, cooks, etc.) and those who only teach secular courses (16), there were 100 teachers of Islamic sciences and Arabic language across 9 Tatarstan madrasas⁴⁴ as of 2017. Three of the 100 were foreigners—Muhammad Mahmud from Egypt, Husam Husayn from Jordan, and Adel Muhsen from Syria—and all three taught Arabic in the Muhammadiya Madrasa. Of the remaining 97 teachers, 23 were young people from Tatarstan and the neighboring regions who in the 1990s and 2000s studied abroad. Among them, there were: nine graduates of al-Azhar University (Egypt), five who studied in Turkey (most often in Quran-Hafiz courses at Ismailaga Madrasa or Orzanli Madrasa, both in Istanbul), four who studied in Saudi Arabia (Medina Islamic University, Umm al-Kurra, and Dar al-Hadis in Mecca), three who studied in Tunisia (two at Habib Bourguiba University of Living Languages and one at the famous al-Zaytoun University), two who studied at the Mir-i Arab Madrasa in Bukhara (Nail Jarullin of the Muhammadiya Madrasa graduated in 1991 and Mansur Jalaletdinov of Kazan Islamic College graduated in 1990), one who studied at

⁴² Ashirbek Muminov, Uygun Gafurov, and Rinat Shigabdinov, “Islamic Education in Soviet and Post-Soviet Uzbekistan,” in *Islamic Education in the Soviet Union and Its Successor States*, ed. Michael Kemper, Raoul Motika, and Stefan Reichmuth (London: Routledge, 2009), 252.

⁴³ N.Ə. Gyjzzätullina and A.Ə. Karibullin, eds., *Tatarstan mədərəsələre həm ostazlary* (Kazan: Kazan University Press, 2017).

⁴⁴ As of 2021, there are 8 madrasas in Tatarstan. “Kazan Islamic College” ceased to exist in 2020.

Jarash University in Jordan (Kamil Valiullin of Muhammadiya Madrasa), and one female teacher who is a graduate of the International Islamic University in Malaysia (I. Khaybutdinova of Muhammadiya Madrasa).

It is possible to rank the madrasas according to the proportion of foreign graduates working there (see Table 1).

Table 1. Madrasas ranked by the proportion of their teachers who studied abroad

Madrasa	Total number of teachers (Islam and Arab language)	Number of mobile actors	%
Kazan Islamic College	4	2 (1 – Egypt, 1 – Turkey and Uzbekistan)	50
Muhammadiya Madrasa	19	5+3=8 (1 – Egypt, 1 – Turkey, 1 – Uzbekistan, 1 – Jordan, 1 – Malaysia, 3 foreigners)	42
Ak Mechet Madrasa	13	4 (2 – Saudi Arabia, 1 – Turkey, 1 –Egypt)	30
Madrasa named after the Millennial of Islam	18	5 (3 – Tunis, 2 – Saudi Arabia)	27
Buinsk Madrasa	11	3 (2 – Egypt, 1 – Turkey)	27
Mamadysh Madrasa	4	1 (Egypt)	25
Almetyevsk Madrasa ⁴⁵	11	2 ⁴⁶ (1 – Turkey, 1 – Egypt)	18
Fanis Madrasa in Urussu	19	1 (Egypt)	5
Kukmor Madrasa	12	0	0
Total	100	26	100

⁴⁵ There are only 4 biographies of Almetyevsk Madrasa presented in the book *Tatarstan Madrasas and Their Teachers (ostazlary)*. The official site of the madrasa (<http://almet-medrese.magarifrt.ru/sveden/employees/>), accessed in 2020, contains information about 11 teachers.

⁴⁶ Almetyevsk Madrasa also has 4 lecturers who graduated from the Madrasa named after Muhammad Arif in Mahachkala. Muhammad Arif (1901-1976) was a famous Sufi Shaikh from Dagestan.

Table 2. Madrasa directors and their education

Director	Madrasa	Education
Mansur Jalaletdin	Kazan Islamic College (Kazan)	Mir-i Arab, Bukhara
Naul Jarullin (1997 to 2017) Kamil Samigullin (since 2017)	Muhammadiya Madrasa (Kazan)	Mir-i Arab, Bukhara Madrasa Ismailaga, Istanbul, Turkey
Ilyas Jihanshin	Madrasa named after the Millennial of Islam (Kazan)	Madrasa named after the Millennial of Islam (Kazan)
Rustam Shayhivaliev	Ak Mechet Madrasa	Yuldyz Madrasa (Naberezhnye Chelny) – Arab teachers
Fahim Ahmetzyanov	Almetyevsk Madrasa	Quran Hafiz courses, Istanbul, Turkey
Ilmir Hasanov	Buinsk Madrasa	Al-Azhar, Cairo, Egypt (1 year course)
Albert Khabibullin	Mamadysh Madrasa	Al-Azhar, Cairo, Egypt (Shariah Department)
Rashid Kuramshin	Kukmor Madrasa	Muhammadiya Madrasa

An interesting picture emerges from the analysis of madrasa staff. All three Kazan madrasas (Muhammadiya Madrasa, Madrasa named after the Millennial of Islam, and Kazan Islamic College) were headed by representatives of the Bukharan School of Islamic knowledge. These individuals were the best prepared to conduct educational activities in the post-Soviet space because the Bukhara system of Mir-i Arab, created during the Soviet era, was confined to the ideology of secular society and did not insist on the leading role of religion in public life, even if the situation is now changing in favor of foreign graduates.

In other districts of Tatarstan, the situation is slightly different: in the large cities of Naberezhnye Chelny (population near 520,000) and Almetyevsk (population near 126,000), we see strong foreign influence, which the state authorities increasingly began to monitor in the 2010s. For example, in Almetyevsk, the director was until 2013 Rafik Minneahmetov, a graduate of the Faculty of Sharia of Medina University. Saudi Arabian educational institutions are often the object of suspicion in the Russian Federation because of the Saudi official Wahhabi ideology. In 2013, Minneahmetov was replaced by Fagim Ahmetzyanov, who had Turkish training. Not coincidentally, this appointment coincided with the election in 2013 of Mufti Kamil Samigullin, also a graduate of the Turkish Sufi

Madrasa Ismailaga. In 2017, the author of this chapter visited the Almet'yevsk Madrasa and found that half of the teachers had been replaced and all personnel were extremely cautious in their conversations. The madrasa has an excellent library, which was donated by foreign sponsors during the administration of Rafik Minneahmetov.

In Naberezhnye Chelny, for its part, memories of the closure of the Yuldyz madrasa, whose students were found in hot spots in Chechnya as well as among the perpetrators of the gas pipeline bombing in November 2013, are still alive. A graduate of this madrasa, Rustam Shayhivaliev, is currently leading the only remaining madrasa in Naberezhnye Chelny, Ak Mechet. The disgraced director of the Almet'yevsk Madrasa, Rafik Minneahmetov, switched to this madrasa in 2013. It was in this madrasa that two Saudi graduates settled as teachers.

The madrasa in Kukmor and the Fanis Madrasa in Urussu are headed by directors who have received only domestic Islamic education. In addition, they are well integrated into the secular context of Tatarstani society. The director of the Kukmor madrasa, Rishat Kuramshin, is a graduate of Kazan Music College (bayan class), as well as of Muhammadiya Madrasa. The director of the Fanis Madrasa in Urussu, Marat Mardanshin, graduated from the Pedagogical University in Ufa. In 2009, he defended his PhD thesis, "Sungatullah Bekbulatov: Teacher and Historian."⁴⁷ From 2013 to 2017, the Buinsk Madrasa was headed by Rashid Malikov, a graduate of that madrasa. In 2012, he received a PhD for his dissertation on "Social Status of the Muslim Clergy of the Kazan Governorate in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries." Since 2017, Buinsk Madrasa has been headed by Ilmir Hasanov, a graduate of a one-year course at al-Azhar.

Thus, analysis of the transnational experience of madrasa directors reveals several trends:

1) Those who have received local or Bukharan education (Nail Jarullin—Muhammadiya Madrasa; Mansur Jalaletdinov—Kazan Islamic College; Rashid Malikov—Buinsk Madrasa) have gradually been relegated to secondary roles;

2) Step by step, power is being transferred to the younger generation, graduates of al-Azhar (Egypt) or Turkish centers of Quran-Hafiz: Kamil Samigullin (Muhammadiya Madrasa), Albert Habibullin (Mamadysh Madrasa), Ilmir Hasanov (Buinsk Madrasa), Fagim Ahmetzyanov (Almet'yevsk Madrasa).

⁴⁷ The fact that Marat Mardanshin chose this topic for his PhD dissertation speaks for itself: interest for regional Islamic figures corresponds to both the intent of Russian state officials to support domestic Islam as a counterbalance to foreign influences and Tatars' aspirations for revival of Tatar national history and identity. The latter is treated with suspicion by state officials, but seems to be more welcome than foreign radical ideologies.

With regard to the staffing of madrasas, there are also a number of trends interesting to note:

1) Different madrasas have different numbers of foreign graduates, ranging from 0 to 50 percent with an average of 26 percent.

2) The greater the number of mobile actors, the higher the rating of that madrasa. According to information gathered during fieldwork in 7 districts of Tatarstan,⁴⁸ in 2017 the majority of imams in these districts had graduated either from Muhammadiya Madrasa or the Madrasa named after the Millennium of Islam. Moreover, graduates of these two institutions are usually the winners in competitions in Arabic language and Islamic disciplines.⁴⁹ Ak Mechet Madrasa ranks third. Other madrasas primarily serve their own neighborhoods and do not attract students from other districts.

Russian Islamic Institute/Kazan Islamic University⁵⁰

The trends that were visible in the analysis of madrasas' mobile actors are even more pronounced at the higher levels of Islamic education.

At the establishment of the Russian Islamic University, when the rector was the former Mufti Gusman Iskhakov⁵¹ (1998-2006), the teachers were foreign citizens. Salih Seihan (Republic of Turkey) and Muhammad Sadik Awad (Egypt), both graduates of al-Azhar University, worked as tutors for training courses in 1998.⁵² In 2006, after a short period (8 months) where the secular professor

⁴⁸ Kazan Federal University conducted research in 7 districts of the Republic of Tatarstan in the framework of the project "Work and Activities of Local Islamic Religious Organizations," 2017.

⁴⁹ In 2020, first place was taken by a student of the Madrasa named after the Millennium of Islam and second place by a student of Muhammadiya Madrasa.

⁵⁰ Russian Islamic University was founded in 1998. In 2008, it split into two institutions: the Russian Islamic Institute and Kazan Islamic University. Now, higher vocational Islamic education in the Russian Federation is offered in two forms:

1) State standard on specialties with in-depth study of Islam—"Theology," "Linguistics," "Journalism," etc. (BA and MA degrees). These standards are subject to state accreditation for compliance with the Federal State educational standard. Each of the standards takes into account the specific courses due to study according to the chosen specialty. In addition, there is a large block of secular humanities courses. The Russian Islamic Institute corresponds to this type of education in the Republic of Tatarstan.

2) Religious standard provides a diploma of higher education in "Training of Clergy and Religious Staff of Religious Organizations." This diploma is not recognized by the state. Kazan Islamic University corresponds to this form of education.

It should be noted that this division took place only in 2008. Between 1998 and 2008, there was only one institution, the Russian Islamic University. Now, the two institutions occupy the same building and are headed by the same rector, Rafik Mukhametshin.

⁵¹ Gusman Iskhakov (1957) was Mufti of the Muslim Religious Assembly of Tatarstan in 1998-2011. He graduated from Mir-i Arab madrasa in Bukhara (1978-1982) and then studied one year (1984-1985) at the Islamic University in Tripoli, Lebanon.

⁵² *Rossiiskii islamskii institut v litsakh, sobytiakh, faktakh* (Kazan: Kazan University Press, 2018), 12.

and historian Ildus Zagidullin held the position of rector, a new rector, Rafik Mukhametshin, was appointed on the decision of the board of the university. At that time, Mukhametshin was likewise a secular scholar: the subject of his doctoral thesis was “Islam in the Social and Political Life of the Republic of Tatarstan at the End of the 20th Century.”⁵³ Having no religious education and not knowing the Arabic language, he has very limited recruitment capacity in the Islamic sciences and has to rely on the opinion of those in his circle with greater Islamic knowledge; al-Azhar graduates Rustam Nurgalyev and Ramil Gizzatullin have become decision-makers in religious matters. Given Mukhametshin’s familiarity with the humanities, meanwhile, the Russian Islamic University has become a venue for applying his ideas about how secular courses should be taught in a religious university. As a result, the Russian Islamic University (now Russian Islamic Institute) has a very strong faculty in history, philology, pedagogy, and psychology, with more than 15 PhD holders.

In general, of the 48 teachers of religious disciplines at the Russian Islamic Institute, 22 (45 percent) have foreign training experience. As with the madrasas, al-Azhar University holds the leading position—6 teachers are its alumni. Three were trained in Saudi Arabia (Islamic University of Medina and Umm al-Kurra in Mecca), three in Syria, two apiece in Yemen, Indonesia, and Tunisia (in the latter case, both at Habib Bourguiba Living Language University) and one in each of Malaysia, Turkey, Sudan, and Jordan.

The situation at Kazan Islamic University among teachers in the Faculty of Islamic Sciences is as follows: of 17 lecturers who teach courses on Islam and Arabic,⁵⁴ 12 are graduates of foreign institutions and five are alumni of local educational institutions.⁵⁵ Of the 12, four graduated from al-Azhar University, Egypt; two are graduates of the Islamic University of Karaouine in Morocco; and one graduated from each of Ismailaga Madrasa (Istanbul, Turkey), the Lebanese University (Beirut, Lebanon), the International Institute of Islamic and Arab Sciences (Damascus, Syria), and Islamic State University named after Maulana Malik Ibrahim (Malang, Indonesia). Accordingly, 70 percent of teachers at Kazan Islamic University are graduates of foreign universities.

⁵³ According to Dissercat: <https://www.dissercat.com/content/islam-v-obshchestvenno-politicheskoi-zhizni-tatar-vozrozhdenie-i-funktsionirovanie-religiozn>, accessed July 19, 2021.

⁵⁴ According to the winter examination term schedule (2020), <http://kazankiu.ru/KIU/Raspisaniye/PSiRPRO%20m%20in%20zs%2020-21.pdf>, accessed July 19, 2021.

⁵⁵ Among the local educational institutions where teachers of the Kazan Islamic University studied are Russian Islamic Institute, Kazan Islamic University, and Muhammadiya Madrasa.

Bolgar Islamic Academy (BIA)⁵⁶

One of the main purposes of the establishment of the BIA was to increase opportunities for students in the Russian Federation to receive quality Islamic education at home. Bringing in foreign teachers to provide Arabic-language instruction has been the primary way in which the BIA has attempted to achieve this goal. Indeed, even though all three of its rectors have been Russian citizens and none of them have had religious training, foreign lecturers comprise the bulk of the teaching staff. The first two professors invited were Abdurazzaq al-Saadi, a former religious adviser of Saddam Hussein,⁵⁷ and Ismail Bol-Bol, former dean of the Gaza branch of al-Azhar University.⁵⁸

Abdurazzaq al-Saadi received his doctorate in Arabic philology from Umm al-Kurra University in Mecca. At BIA, he offers courses in Arabic morphology and grammar. According to his curriculum vitae, Ismail Bol-Bol graduated from al-Azhar University. Much of his work has been related to the development of the al-Azhar University campus in Gaza (Palestine). At BIA, he teaches Interpretation of the Qur'an (*Tafsir*) and Hadith.

The other three foreign professors are Muhammad Zahravi, a former professor of Damascus University (Syria) who teaches the methodology of Islamic law from a Hanafi perspective; Junayd Aldeirshavi from Turkey, who also teaches the methodology of Islamic law, but according to the Shafi'i madhab; and Sayf al-Asri from Abu Dhabi, who teaches a variety of courses in *Fiqh* (comparative Islamic law, modern Islamic family law, Shafi'i law, etc.).

There are three local professors teaching at the BIA. Two of the three have international experience: Said Shagaviyev (PhD in History) is a graduate of the International Islamic University in Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia) whose field of study is Arabic literature, while Robert Shangaraev, a student of linguistics, is a graduate of the International African University (Sudan). The third, Ramil Adygamov (PhD in History), is a graduate of the local Muhammadiya Madrasa. Thus, almost 90 percent of the teachers of Islam and Arabic at BIA are either foreign (five lecturers) or Russian graduates of foreign universities (two lecturers).

⁵⁶ Bolgar Islamic Academy was founded in 2017. The first rector (2017-2019) was Rafik Mukhametshin, who simultaneously headed Russian Islamic Institute and Kazan Islamic University. The second rector was Daniyar Abdrakhmanov (2019-2021), who as a scholar worked on combatting drug abuse and later became interested in counter-terrorism. Neither has a religious education or speaks Arabic, which is essential for Islamic Studies. The third rector, since 2021, is Aynur Timerkhanov (PhD in Arabic Philology).

⁵⁷ Some biographical information can be found on the TNV site: "Sovetnik Saddama Khuseina v Tatarstane: 'On u menia sprashival tol'ko o religii' (VIDEO)," *TNV*, February 18, 2020, <https://tnv.ru/news/kazan/83270-sovetnik-saddama-khuseyna-v-tatarstane-on-u-menya-sprashival-tolko-o-religii-video/>.

⁵⁸ Biographical reference, author's archive.

Conclusions

For centuries, the Muslims of the Volga-Urals have been an integral part of transnational Islamic educational networks: Baghdad, Istanbul, Cairo, the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, Dagestani centers of knowledge, and of course glorious Bukhara. With the advent of the Soviet era, these educational routes were almost completely closed off to the region's Muslims for 70 years. The exception was Mir-i Arab Madrasa in Bukhara, which was revived by the Soviet authorities in 1946. Although it was built in accordance with Soviet ideological requirements, its alumni were able to give quite a powerful impulse to the first stage of religious revival in the early 1990s. Since the late 2010s, a new generation of young alumni of foreign Islamic universities has gradually been replacing the Soviet-era religious elites.⁵⁹

Graduates of al-Azhar University currently occupy dominant positions in the system of Islamic religious education in the Republic of Tatarstan and largely determine its main directions of development. For example, Ramil Gizzatullin (al-Azhar) is the Head of the Department of Education of the Muslim Religious Board of the Republic of Tatarstan and Dean of the Faculty of Islamic Sciences at Kazan Islamic University. Rustam Nurgaleyev (al-Azhar) is the vice-rector of Kazan Islamic University⁶⁰ and was the main creator of the educational program in use at Bolgar Islamic Academy.⁶¹ Obviously, Nurgaleyev is quite a special case, but his experience does illustrate that the education received at al-Azhar allows graduates to fit into the Russian legal context and ideologically accommodate the needs of the Russian authorities.

⁵⁹ In 2017, the director of the Muhammadiya Madrasa, Nail Yarullin, resigned from his position and in 2020 the Kazan Islamic College, headed by Mansur Jalaletdinov, was closed. Both studied at Mir-i Arab Madrasa in the late 1980s.

⁶⁰ During one of the events held within the framework of the Muslim Leader Winter School "Mahalla," Nurgaleyev volunteered to defend the position of "Traditional Islam" in Tatarstan—see Leila Almazova and Azat Akhunov, "In Search of 'Traditional Islam' in Tatarstan: [SEP] Between National Project and Universalist Theories," in *The Concept of Traditional Islam in Modern Islamic Discourse in Russia* ed. Renat Bekkin (Sarajevo: CNC, 2020), 45-47. This is a very interesting sign of the changing post-Soviet religious paradigm: if previously "Traditional Islam" correlated mostly with the older generation of Tatar imams, who spoke Tatar language and represented a linear tradition of local Muslim authorities stretching from pre-revolutionary madrasa graduates through the Soviet period self-educated imams or Mir-i Arab Madrasa graduates, it has now begun to be represented by a new generation of Muslim clergy who usually have little in common with those self-educated imams or local old Muslims, who are typically represented as an old man wearing a *tubeteyka* or as an old women wearing a white headscarf hanging down the back with two broad ends and tied under the chin. In another speech from December 25, 2020, at the round table "Textbooks for Madrasas and Islamic Universities of Russia," Nurgaleyev commented on the position of the medieval lawyer Burhan al-Din al-Marginani (1135-1197) in his work *al-Hidayah* (Guidance) about the concept of *Jihad* (Holy War), giving this notion an interpretation that corresponded to Russian legal realities: "*Jihad* is nothing more than the need to serve in the Russian army to defend the homeland."

⁶¹ All programs at the initial stage of formation are kept in the author's personal archive.

Second place is shared by the graduates of Turkish Quran-Hafiz courses and graduates of the Mecca and Medina universities. However, the Russian authorities have serious concerns about the latter, which is why these graduates are generally not appointed to senior positions and are sometimes restricted from teaching Islamic theology. To give a few examples, in 2013 Rafik Minneahmetov was removed from the leadership of the Almetyevsk Madrasa (although he went on to take up the position of deputy director of the Ak Mechet Madrasa in Naberezhnye Chelny), while Sheikh al-Saadi at the Bolgar Islamic Academy has been allowed to teach only courses related to the Arabic language, even though he is the author of Russian-language textbooks on Ethics (*Ahlaq*)⁶² and Islamic Law (*Fiqh*)⁶³ published in 2017. It is difficult to say to what extent the authorities' concerns about the danger to Russian students of foreign interpretations of religious provisions taught by Hejaz Islamic graduates are justified. However, certain Salafi views are broadcast by alumni of Mecca and Medina Universities, at least in personal interviews.⁶⁴

As for alumni of Turkish Quran-Hafiz courses, it should be mentioned that their tradition of recitation of the Qur'an is perhaps the most conservative of any Islamic discipline. In addition, a number of Tatarstan madrasa lecturers and Mufti Kamil Samigullin graduated from Madrasa Ismailaga Quran-Hafiz Center, which is "one of the most conservative Muslim Sufi communities of Turkey."⁶⁵ The orientation toward the formation of "orthodoxy" in Talal Asad's sense (Orthodoxy is not a mere body of opinion but a distinctive relationship of power),⁶⁶ understood here as an orthodoxy that pleases first of all the Russian authorities, is to a certain extent a continuation of Soviet control over the system of religious education, where the authorities monitor its development and direct it in a way they suppose will benefit their aspirations. The Egyptian and Turkish experiences, where religion has long been a part of the state system and is relegated to the areas of family law and rituals, also seem to be acceptable in Russia. The Saudi Arabian model, viewed in Russia with suspicion because of Saudi Arabia's alleged political ambitions, plays a more limited but still

⁶² This book is available through the "Lan" electronic library, <https://e.lanbook.com/book/113126>, accessed July 19, 2021.

⁶³ This book is available through the "Lan" electronic library, <https://e.lanbook.com/book/113125>, accessed July 19, 2021.

⁶⁴ Leila Almazova, "Sovremennye religioznye diskussii v Volgo-Ural'skom regione: o chem ne mogut dogovorit'sia mezhdub soboi musul'mane?" in *Pervyi Kazanskii mezhdunarodnyi nauchnyi forum "Islam v mul'tikul'turnom mire, 1-3ogo noiabria 2011*, ed. Azat Akhunov and Renat Bekkin (Moscow: Kazan University Press, 2012), 331-340.

⁶⁵ I.G. Saetov, "Vyzov modernu iz tsentra Stambula: Dzhamaat 'Ismail Aga' v obshchestvennoi zhizni Turtsii," *Uchenye zapiski Kazanskogo universiteta* 155, book 3, part 2 (2013), 90-97, 90.

⁶⁶ Talal Asad, *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam* (Washington D.C.: Centre for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University, 1986), 15.

prominent role in Tatarstan's religious educational institutions. All three trends represent a sort of conservatism that corresponds to the general security line of the Russian state.

Halal Headaches: Post-Cultural Islam in Tatarstan

Matteo (Teo) Benussi

The post-Soviet “boom” in halal goods, services, and discourses in Russia’s multi-confessional Tatarstan republic suggests a picture tense with contradictions. On the one hand, *a*) a critical number of Volga Tatars today—we shall call them pious Muslims—want to ensure that the goods they consume, the activities they perform, and so on conform to Islamic ethical injunctions. On the other hand, *b*) the fact that the question of halalness arises is in itself indicative of a widespread concern about *whether or not* such conformity can be taken for granted. Indeed, *c*) this concern is justified: most goods and activities in post-Soviet Tatarstan *do not*, by default, conform to Islamic ethics, which poses some challenges to pietists. This is because *d*) not all Tatars share the same priorities and orientations as pious Muslims, and certainly not with the same intensity: although growing in number, pietists are still a minority. The social, cultural, and moral world around them is not based on the truth upon which they organize their lives. What does this picture tell us about “Islam” and “culture” among the Tatars? This contribution attempts to briefly address this question.

As I have discussed in detail elsewhere,⁶⁷ the fast and remarkable spread of a physical *and discursive* halal infrastructure in post-Soviet Tatarstan is a historical novelty. According to many respondents, for example, halal meat was not widely called “halal meat” (Rus. *khalial’noe miaso*) until the post-Soviet period. Earlier, it was referred to by means of Tatar-language circumlocutions such as “meat [from animals] slaughtered uttering *bismillah*” (*bismilla aytep chalğan ite*). Or consider the body of new halal-related additions to Tatarstan’s Islamic discursive regime: latter-day Russo-Arabo-English jargon expressions such as *khalial’nyi biznes* (halal business), *khalial’-shopping* (shopping), *khalial’-fitnes* (fitness), *khalial’ brend* (brand), or *khalial’naia moda* (fashion) only acquired their current discursive pre-eminence with the post-perestroika dual expansion of Islamic piety and capitalism-fueled “globalized” lifestyles.

This is not to say that the concept of halal was ignored in the past. To my knowledge, a systematic history of halal in the pre-revolutionary Volga region has yet to be produced, but it is

⁶⁷ Matteo Benussi, “Living Halal in the Volga Region: Lifestyle and Civil Society Opportunities,” in *Rethinking Halal: Genealogy, Current Trends, and New Interpretations*, ed. Louis-Léon Christians and Ayang Utriza Yakin (Leiden: Brill, 2021).

certain that religious scholars and learned men wrote on the subject of the permissible and the forbidden. However, the halal concept seemingly enjoyed limited currency. Its use appears to have been largely confined to the specialized realm of theological/juridical debate, and its regular and competent use was a prerogative of the religiously literate elite, which issued top-down guidance to rank-and-file Muslims (the reception of which remains to be investigated). This stands in stark contrast to the post-Soviet picture, in which halal is discursively omnipresent and the **حلال** logo can be found at many corners of Tatarstan's big cities. This contemporary framing of halal is premised on an unprecedented degree of mass theological literacy, with thousands of pious Tatar Muslims making juridically competent, autonomous judgements and deliberations in a range of quotidian micro-contexts—bodily care, shopping, business, etc.—on a daily basis without delegating this to the customary moral authorities. Indeed, such authorities no longer exist: the village mullahs, wandering Sufis, and Qadimist literati of yore have all but disappeared, along with the relatively coherent, Islam-infused cultural ecosystem that buffered the faithful existences of pre-revolutionary Volga Muslims.

The Soviet experience ushered millions of Tatars into so-called “secular modernity,” meaning that individuals are now left to fend for themselves in terms of spiritual and moral choices, and find themselves endowed with an unparalleled amount of individual freedom in a world confusingly saturated with material abundance. The sudden popularity of halal can thus be linked to a contradictory development: an increase in available theological knowledge and doctrinally informed behaviors, on the one hand, and the appearance of a host of new ethical anxieties (or “headaches”), on the other.

Fragments of a “Muslim Domain”

Let me delve a bit deeper into the processes of social and moral change that led to the current setup. The notion of “Muslim domain”⁶⁸ proposed by Mustafa Tuna may be cautiously used to describe the Muslim social landscape of the Imperial-age Volga region, provided that we envision it as a landscape criss-crossed with disagreements, debates, and different views about/approaches to Muslimness,⁶⁹ rather than as a harmonious, homeostatic, insulated world of uniform observance. As my friend Alfrid Bustanov reminded me during the workshop that spawned this publication, it would

⁶⁸ Mustafa Tuna, *Imperial Russia's Muslims: Islam, Empire and European Modernity, 1788–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

⁶⁹ Agnes Kefeli, *Becoming Muslim in Imperial Russia: Conversion, Apostasy, and Literacy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014); Danielle Ross, *Tatar Empire: Kazan's Muslims and the Making of Imperial Russia* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2020).

be problematic to claim that pre-revolutionary and Soviet-era Volga Muslims were untouched by the complex moral dilemmas involved in seeking to be good believers. That is certainly true. Yet discontinuities must be taken into account as well: after all, moral dilemmas take different forms in different eras and under different conditions. As Wael Hallaq has argued, “non-modern” paradigms of Muslim subject formation, pedagogy, and community self-governance cannot be immediately conflated with contemporary ethical landscapes, which are much less morally integrated.⁷⁰ In this sense, the concept of a “Muslim domain” may be interpreted not as a sociological abstraction but as shorthand for a rich and complex moral ecosystem underpinned by a cohesive, capillary moral-pedagogical infrastructure that, to an extent, sheltered Volga Muslims from alien moral discourses.

What was the place of halal in this picture? Pre-revolutionary sources suggest that the question of halalness arose among specialists when Volga Muslims were confronted with novelties from beyond the boundaries of custom: Russian recipes, European fashion, and even tea imported from East Asia.⁷¹ This is intriguing because it appears to indicate that the halalness question, in earlier historical periods, was connected to the management of items perceived as culturally innovative and potentially disruptive to the community’s folkways. Put otherwise, novel types of objects (chairs, newspapers, suits for men, etc.), foreign goods (tea), and new ideas (party politics, the academic study of geography, etc.), presented pre-revolutionary Volga Muslims with an existential dilemma: can things that *this particular community* (which saw itself as Muslim as opposed to, say, Christian Russians) has never done before be permissible or are they *eo ipso* un-Islamic?

Today, the question of halal is normally posed rather differently: are things that Muslims *can* do, including those that enjoy the blessing of custom, *actually* permissible by universal Islamic standards? Do they stand the test of theology and *fiqh*? Within this framework, cultural novelties can be perfectly permissible—witness the popularity of sushi among Tatarstani Muslims—while time-honored customary traditions such as pilgrimage to local shrines or the consumption of horsemeat become topics of contention (some pietists reject local pilgrimages as “paganism” and “harmful innovation,” while horsemeat, though still very popular, has been flagged by some as “unrecommended”—*makruh*—under Hanafi *fiqh*).

⁷⁰ Wael Hallaq, *The Impossible State: Islam, Modernity, and Modernity’s Moral Predicament* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

⁷¹ Tea being a substance that many Volga Muslims today would associate with quintessentially “Islamic” dietary habits and drinking cultures: Turkey’s slender *çay* glasses, Morocco’s mint *atay*, Uzbekistan’s *choy* ritual, and indeed the very Tatar *sütle*—milky—*çäy*. See Ross, *Tatar Empire*, 74.

This picture is simultaneously simpler and more complex than the pre-revolutionary situation. Simpler because halalness parameters are more directly anchored to a singular, universal, doctrinal matrix. More complex because the community's lifeworld has unfastened itself from a stable, customary moral framework: the contemporary ethical ecosystem, forged through decades of Soviet-led social engineering that dismantled autonomous Islamic moral and administrative institutions, has joined the global whirlwind of capitalist-powered late modernity.

To adopt a neo-Weberian approach,⁷² we might frame this social and moral transformation in terms of a progressive differentiation of "*spheres of value and experience*." To Weber, social systems could be divided into an economic sphere, an aesthetic sphere, an erotic sphere, an intellectual sphere, and a political sphere: under modernizing conditions, these spheres would, so to speak, pull apart from each other and *away from religion*, which in turn becomes more of an autonomous sphere. Although Weber's evolutionary framework is far from unproblematic, the idea of "sphere separation" has echoes in, and is vindicated by, later reflections on secularization, such as Charles Taylor's concept of "post-Durkheimian societies," in which temporal government and spiritual/religious authority are disjoined,⁷³ and Wael Hallaq's contention that modernization has opened a chasm between morality, on the one hand, and governance and politics, on the other, in Muslim societies.⁷⁴

Needless to say, Islam's exalted status as a universal truth has never been disavowed from "inside" the tradition, but the Volga region has seen the emergence of a broader social order resting upon a relativization of religion within an increasingly privatized and nonbinding, if traditionally venerable, sphere.⁷⁵ Therefore, contemporary Tatars—pietists and nonpietists alike, halal-minded or not—are faced with a "post-Durkheimian," fragmented moral landscape, devoid of an overarching, singular, hegemonic religious matrix or source of authority. Post-Soviet Tatars are raised without

⁷² Max Weber, "Religious Rejections of the World and their Directions," in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. Hans Heinrich Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), 323-362; c.f. Joel Robbins, "Between Reproduction and Freedom: Morality, Value, and Radical Cultural Change," *Ethnos* 72, no. 3 (2007): 293-314.

⁷³ Charles Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today: William James Revisited* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

⁷⁴ It must be emphasized that "sphere separation" here does *not* mean a smooth "separation of church and state": in fact, the authors cited here can be seen as part of a scholarly trend that opposed such a simplistic view by framing modern secularism as an arrangement—not devoid of paradoxes and awkwardness—under which religion becomes as a site of intervention at the hands of non-religious state authorities. In this paper, however, owing to space constraints, I do not delve into the question of post-Soviet secularism and the relative power dynamics. See also Hallaq, *The Impossible State*.

⁷⁵ This manifests in the vast numbers of individuals, aggregates, and institutions that are variously irreligious, non-practicing, little-practicing, uninterested in religion, or *instrumentally* (for instance, the Russian state) interested in religion.

pervasively Islam-infused cultural and pedagogical institutes⁷⁶ and move within the deeply secular social landscape of urban Russia, which, for all its publicly trumpeted illiberalism/conservatism, leaves Muslim-background individuals with unprecedentedly ample leeway for personal choice on matters such as (to return to Weber's spheres) consumption and professional life, taste, eros, knowledge, and even private political convictions. Of course, nonpietists and pietists respond to this situation in very different, even contrasting ways: the former by implicitly accepting this state of things and embracing a "cultural" understanding of Muslimness, the latter by trying, against the grain and of their own volition, to reintegrate their lives under a singular Islamic matrix.

After (Muslim) Culture

And so, to post-Soviet Tatars (*including* pietists, although their actions perpetually try to undo this state of affairs), religion may seem to be a "sphere" apart, privatized and substantially independent from politics, economy, kinship, etc. Arguably, this was never quite the case in earlier historical eras, especially for rank-and-file Volga Muslims: had individuals forsaken Islam—and chances are, such a prospect would have been near-unthinkable to most—that would have undermined a key pillar of their social identity and moral personhood. It is telling that in religious matters, important choices such as conversion and/or adherence to a revival were usually made at the collective (household/village) level or were predicated on profession and social position⁷⁷ rather than being a matter of purely individual private judgement.

Today, there is much greater leeway: during my fieldwork, I have met nonpietists who would accept the label of *ethnic* Muslims (i.e., Muslims by ancestry) while knowingly and gleefully flouting norms of Islamic conduct or, indeed, entirely disregarding Islam as a meaningful source of moral guidance. For example, there are ethnic-Muslim Tatars who are atheist, Catholic, Hare Krishna, or neopagan. And while the decision to distance oneself from Islam may be frowned upon in certain quarters, there is no steep social price to pay for choices concerning what most people now regard as one's personal inner life and "conscience."

Things have also changed from the pietist viewpoint, with a newfound awareness and connectedness with a transnational, cosmopolitan community of believers. Of course, Islam is an inherently universalist religion, as the Prophetic notion of an *ummah* composed of different nations

⁷⁶ Pietists' children being only a partial exception: devout parents devote much attention to Islamic child-rearing, but this does not occur organically or seamlessly.

⁷⁷ Kefeli, *Becoming Muslim in Imperial Russia*.

attests. Yet while early academic observers would marvel at the deep cultural dissimilarities within this nominal community, subdivided into autonomous customary worlds,⁷⁸ the late-twentieth-century rise of transnational reform movements in an increasingly globalized ecumene have brought the universal singularity of the *ummah* into sharper relief. The global Muslim community remains diverse, but it is fair to say that its fundamental unity has never been as experientially intense as it is now and its traditional internal cultural boundaries never so porous.

Where does this leave us with respect to the topic of this collection, namely the idea of “Muslim cultures” in Russia? It is evident that the concept of culture cannot be used innocently as a self-explaining category in the case of the Volga Tatars, whether pietists or nonpietists. The classic anthropological definition of culture as a “complex whole” of values, habits, etc., “acquired as members of society”⁷⁹ is hardly tenable in the context of late modernity—“complex” should be replaced with “complicated,” and there is hardly any “whole” to speak of amid these loose assemblages of disparate elements and registers.

The Tatars’ collective experience *as Tatars*—pietists and nonpietists—mirrors a specific socio-historical-ethnic positionality, expressed in national pride, a social identity (which includes “ancestral” Muslimness), a more-or-less shared mythology, the narratives produced by the Tatar intelligentsia, and the looming issue of language preservation. But it is doubtful that this positionality amounts to a “culture” in the classic anthropological sense. Indeed, contemporary Tatars firmly partake in Russia’s “cultural” landscape, sharing historical memories and myths (WWII, socialism, the “wild” 1990s), public discourse references (Soviet and post-Soviet film, music, TV), mannerisms of speech and comportment, political aspirations and related cynicism, aesthetic sensitivities, geopolitical anxieties, and overall habitus with their Russian (*rossiiskie*) neighbors. On an even broader scale, Tatars belong to what is awkwardly called “global culture,” i.e., the ubiquitous aggregate of a neoliberal frame of mind (self-help, consumerism, middle-classness), familiarity with global pop culture (music, film, TV from Hollywood to Korea), a technological lifeworld (gadgets, platforms), and an overall way of living shared by millions of late-modern urbanites worldwide.

All these elements infuse and animate the various disjoined spheres of value and experience within which the Tatars (pietists and nonpietists) move, combining in immensely variable ways across individual and social niches. The concept of culture may perhaps be stretched and adapted to

⁷⁸ Clifford Geertz, *Islam Observed: Religious Developments in Morocco and Indonesia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971).

⁷⁹ E.B. Tylor, “Religion in Primitive Culture,” in *A Reader in the Anthropology of Religion*, ed. Michael Lambek (Malden, MA, and Oxford: Blackwell, 2008 [1871]), 23-33.

this landscape, but questions would arise as to the analytical efficacy of such a catch-all framework. I therefore suggest that we reposition Islam, moving it from the framework of *culture* to that of *ethics*, from a matter of ethnic custom to one of existential quandary.

Of course, Muslimness as a social identity remains an important element—but the post-Soviet halal boom is an index of the growing appeal of active, subjective engagement with *Islam as a living ethical framework* rather than as a national identity or passively acquired custom. The surge of halal awareness in the Volga region has been spearheaded by people who are not content with an ancestral or “cultural” connection with Islam, but want to put Islam into practice in their everyday lives as a source of actionable guidance in myriad quotidian circumstances. However, as we have seen, the Tatars embarking on such an ambitious project are far from a majority: in the absence of an organically religion-infused “Muslim domain,” only a sub-section of the Tatar population chooses to embrace a life of piety.

Uphill Halal: Reuniting the “Spheres”

Latter-day discursive and material halal infrastructures can thus be interpreted as an effort by pious Tatars to bring disparate “spheres” within a single overarching framework: that of Islam, here understood here as an *ethical paradigm* rather than as a “culture” or social identity. Let us return to expressions such as *khalial'-biznes*, *khalial'-fitnes*, *khalial'-brend*, and the like: here, halalness is an attribute attachable to a plurality of concepts corresponding to disparate areas of experience: money-making, the care of the self, consumption, leisure, fashion, etc. In this new, eminently late-modern halal terminology, we can almost literally see the effort involved in bringing Islam to bear on areas of life that are not inherently “Islamic” and that are indeed *extraneous* to the Muslim/Islamic domains of the past.

The main point I am trying to make is that halal both provides *and* manifests a matrix capable of re-Islamizing areas of life (finance, leisure, but also education, family life, etc.) no longer pertaining to an organically Muslim “culture.” The Volga region’s halal boom thus has a paradoxical quality in the sense that it manifests at once the vitality of Islam and Islam’s decline as a civilizational whole. If a post-Soviet Islamic “renaissance” can be declared, then this renaissance is “post-Durkheimian,” in the sense that it does not resolve the public disconnect between religion and other domains of life, and “post-cultural,” in the sense that it blossoms in a void left by Islamicate civilization and its moral institutes.

Furthermore, and crucially, “halal living” (*zhit’ po-khalial’nomu*) cannot be done spontaneously and effortlessly, as a result of passive acquisition and conformity to custom: rather, it requires reflexive choice and individual effort, often against the grain: halal-minded pietists make deliberations, ponder options, knowingly choose to spend more for halal-certified items and services, check labels and paperwork, distrust institutions, invest energy to familiarize themselves with theological and *fiqhi* themes, use tools such as apps and websites for Muslims, invent/import/invest in new halal products and services, renounce objects of desire that fail to meet the necessary standards of permissibility, and so forth. In a word, keeping halal requires a lot of work. It is important to highlight that the halalization of life in post-Soviet Tatarstan is not a matter of world-denial but, quite differently, an intense, purposeful *re-engagement* with the various spheres of value and experience that compose reality. The proliferation of “halal solutions,” including goods, services, and practices in different domains, illustrates that halal-minded pietists are robustly world-oriented, albeit keen to engage with the world on their own terms. Renunciation (of all things haram) is part of pietist ethics but far from the end of the story. This ethical “conquest” and ordering of spheres of value and experience is a central dimension of halal living in post-Soviet Tatarstan and, arguably, across the Muslim world.

But it is not a simple task. For those who embark on this mission, bringing together disjoined spheres of value and experience under the unitary matrix of Islam presents considerable challenges. Efforts to “halalify” life do not and cannot restore a coherent public moral order: we might imagine the various “value spheres” as resisting, on account of their inherent tendency toward autonomy, any attempt to impose a unitary framework. This resistance brings an element of stubborn difficulty to halal living. In the sphere of business, for example, many of my entrepreneur interlocutors reported the need to compromise on halalness in order to keep the enterprise functional. In leisure, people are often forced to lower the halalness bar to avoid missing out on global pop-culture products, music, TV series, or travel. Even in the sphere of Tatar “ethnic” art/aesthetic, keeping things 100% halal is almost impossible: Tatar theatre performances normally include gender mixing, Tatar visual art include portraits, and so on.

In other words, halal living implies the balancing of contrasting moral forces: on the one hand, the centrifugal separation of value spheres, and on the other, their centripetal reorganization under the single moral matrix of religious scripture and *fiqh*. As a result, dilemmas, compromise, and headaches are not just incidental glitches in the mechanism, but unavoidable characteristics of Muslim ethical life in the present. These headaches are here to stay: the expansion of halal

infrastructure, while covering certain issues, will likely generate more complexity and thus open new fronts of ethical uncertainty.

Michael Lambek perceptively observed that ethics/religion is about “anxieties,”⁸⁰ that is, concerns about one’s actions—in our case: is this food really halal? Is insurance always contrary to Islamic economic norms? Can I go to a classical music concert? To the swimming pool? Can I trust the state-backed halal certification board? Despite the level of coherence and control over the everyday that pietists manage to achieve, the aspiration to *entirely* re-organize spheres of value/experience under a single matrix is ever-unfulfilled, an uphill road with no summit in sight—at least not in this world.

Conclusion

To recapitulate: a discursive as well as physical infrastructure to disambiguate halal and haram would not have been necessary had the Volga Tatars’ cultural world been extensively organized around Islam-derived principles, as tended to be the case in earlier historical periods. If everything around you is infused with Islam, halalness becomes an unmarked feature of your environment that hardly needs to be pointed out in everyday situations. In post-Soviet Tatarstan, however, a marked halal infrastructure is indeed needed to orient pietists in a pluralist and fragmented moral landscape rife with ambiguous novelties (consumption, business, fashion, etc.). Therefore, the emergence of halal as an infrastructure is an index of *both* the ethical thriving of Islam in post-Soviet Tatarstan (such infrastructure is in demand) *and* its civilizational “decline” (such an infrastructure is needed in the first place).

The picture, therefore, is two-pronged: Tatarstan’s Muslim pietists operate in a post-Durkheimian world, pursue a post-cultural Islam, and face the Sisyphean ethical challenge of halalizing life amid opposing forces. However, this predicament does not mean that pietists are alienated from the faith. The opposite is true—first, today’s halal-seekers have a first-hand, direct relationships with Islamic jurisprudence and theology not filtered through devotionism, traditional authorities, or the demands of custom; on aggregate, the degree of religious literacy and ethical sophistication today is probably far greater than it ever was in the pre-revolutionary “Muslim domain.” Second, and most importantly, it is precisely through the never-ending labor that goes into halalizing a life that constantly resists this effort, and thus constantly presents new challenges, that

⁸⁰ Michael Lambek, “Living as If It Mattered,” in *Four Lectures on Ethics: Anthropological Perspectives*, ed. Michael Lambek, Veena Das, Didier Fassin, and Webb Keane (Chicago: Hau Books, 2015), 5-52, 23.

observant Muslims prove to themselves, and to God, their determination to spare no effort on the path to salvation.

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Re-Appropriating Traditional Tatar Educational Culture or Building Their Own: Homeschooling Practices among Observant Muslims in Tatarstan

Liliya Karimova

This project explores if and to what extent homeschooling, which is becoming increasingly popular among practicing Tatar Muslims, provides these families with an opportunity to connect with, strengthen, and root themselves in the ethnic aspect of their identity, such as the Tatar culture and language. This is in the context of Russia's federal policies aimed at re-centralization and Tatarstan's declining ability to incorporate cultural elements into its public education in an extensive or meaningful way. In this study, I explore whether and to what extent homeschooling can serve as a vehicle for incorporating Tatar cultural elements into a curriculum and thereby contribute to concerted efforts on the part of homeschooling Tatar Muslim families to cultivate traditional Tatar Islam that is rooted in Tatar language and culture.

The Educational Space as a Contested Site

In present-day Russia, the educational space (*obrazovatel'noe prostranstvo*) is a contested site in which various players stake a claim and compete for resources. This is particularly the case when it comes to primary and secondary education,⁸¹ which are heavily regulated by the Russian state, which sees primary and secondary education as exclusively its prerogative. The Russian state provides free public primary and secondary education,⁸² but requires that public education institutions be entirely secular.⁸³ This severely constrains the ability of representatives of religious communities to realize religious goals within state-operated public schools.⁸⁴

⁸¹ Referred to as "K-12" in the U.S.

⁸² Article 43 of the Constitution of the Russian Federation guarantees the right to the free basic education.

⁸³ Paragraph 6, Article 3 of Federal Law #273-Φ3 "On Education in the Russian Federation" of December 29, 2012.

⁸⁴ Kamil Nasibullov, "Mezhdu Dagvatom i Khidzhroi': Musul'mane v poiske optimal'noi modeli obrazovaniia dlia svoikh detei," in *Islam i religiozniy aktivizm v Respublike Tatarstan*, ed. R. F. Pateev et al. (Kazan: Izdatel'stvo AN RT, 2021), 387-420.

In this context, homeschooling represents an alternative form of education that is preferred by families who would like to incorporate religious education and practices into their children's daily lives.⁸⁵ That being said, although homeschooling has slowly but surely been making inroads in Russia for the past decade, the state continues to consider it a controversial—and potentially dangerous—trend. In 2019, for example, Tatarstan's Minister of Internal Affairs, Artyom Khokhorin, claimed that a second generation of Salafis was being raised by families that had chosen homeschooling. If the claim is true, it is alarming for the Russian state, which has been cracking down on any non-traditional religious ideology, including Salafi Islam, for the past twenty years. Tatarstan's prosecutor, Ildus Nafikov, expressed similar concerns.⁸⁶

According to *Vecherniaia Kazan'*, a Kazan-based newspaper, in the fall of 2019, the local police made the rounds of homeschooling families in one suburb of the city, asking them to sign a document acknowledging that they had been warned about the dangers of homeschooling. The text claimed that homeschooled students were vulnerable minors who were particularly prone to various forms of deviant behavior. In signing the document, students' parents pledged to take full responsibility for ensuring that their children's education complied with the requirements of the Federal Law "On Education in the Russian Federation" or else be held liable under the law for non-compliance.⁸⁷ Significantly, the document made no mention of parents' right to choose how their children are educated, even though this right is enshrined in that very law.

The document quickly made the rounds on social media, sparking heated discussions and drawing the attention of higher-level officials. The controversial police initiative was quickly brushed off by the republican Ministry of Internal Affairs as strictly "a local initiative," and thus something the Ministry had nothing to do with—a common practice in Russia. Nonetheless, these examples illustrate the state's apprehension when it comes to families choosing to homeschool their children. This concern seems to be disproportionate to the phenomenon: although the number of homeschooled students is growing in Tatarstan (and in Russia as a whole), it remains relatively low, at an estimated

⁸⁵ For a helpful discussion of the logistics of religious education in Russia, see Nasibullov, "Mezhdu Dagvatom i Khidzhroi."

⁸⁶ Dar'ia Turtseva, "V Tatarstane stanovitsia populiarnym semeinoe obrazovanie: MVD, prokuratura i Minobrnauki obespokoeny," *Real'noe Vremya*, January 31, 2019, <https://realnoevremya.ru/articles/127490-v-tatarstane-uzhestochat-kontrol-za-semeynym-obrazovaniem>.

⁸⁷ Article 44 of Federal Law # 273-Φ3 "On Education in the Russian Federation" of December 29, 2012.

1,400 students, or 0.35 percent of students in Tatarstan, as of spring 2019⁸⁸ and 12,500 students, or 0.08 percent of students in Russia, as of spring 2020.⁸⁹

Research Questions and Data Sample

As the discussion above highlights, homeschooling is a relatively new educational phenomenon in Russia. Whereas it has been welcomed by religious communities, it is seen as controversial by the state due to the state's limited ability to control this educational space, within which not only secular, but also religious, schooling may occur. In this context, my inquiry into homeschooling among practicing Muslims in Tatarstan is driven by curiosity about whether these families try to incorporate ethnic elements into their children's education as a means of cultivating traditional Islam rooted in the Tatar language and culture.⁹⁰

As someone who had been exploring homeschooling in the US for my own two children, I was somewhat familiar with the American practice. However, I was surprised to discover during fieldwork in Tatarstan in 2018 that several families in my own circle of friends and acquaintances were actively exploring or practicing homeschooling in Russia. That prompted me to explore the practice of homeschooling in Tatarstan in preparation for fieldwork that was planned for the summer of 2020. Due to the coronavirus pandemic, however, the fieldtrip was suspended, as was my ability to conduct

⁸⁸ Based on a report by Tatarstan's Ministry of Education, according to *Vecherniaia Kazan'*: Natal'ia Vasil'eva, "Otkroite, politsiia! V Tatarstane siloviki pugaiut roditelei, kotorye vybrali semeinoe obuchenie," *Vecherniaia Kazan'*, December 5, 2019, <https://www.evening-kazan.ru/articles/otkroyte-policiya-v-tatarstane-siloviki-pugayut-roditeley-kotorye-vybrali-semeynoe-obuchenie.html>.

⁸⁹ Lyubov Dukhanina, deputy chairman of the State Duma Education and Science Committee. Cited in Anna Vladimirova, "Zadanie na dom," *Rossiiskaia gazeta*, March 2, 2020, <https://rg.ru/2020/03/02/bole-12-tysiach-shkolnikov-vybrali-semejnoe-obuchenie.html>. According to Bondarenko et al., there were 16,137,300 students in Russian schools as of spring 2020: N.V. Bondarenko et al., *Indikatory obrazovaniia: 2020: staticheskii sbornik* (Moscow: National Research University—Higher School of Economics, 2020), 158. See also a *RIA Novosti* news article according to which there were 15.5 million pupils in Russian schools in 2017: "Chislo shkol'nikov v Rossii v novom uchebnom godu vyrastet na million chelovek," *RIA Novosti*, August 28, 2017, <https://sn.ria.ru/20170828/1501219932.html>. According to a 2019 article in *Rossiiskaia gazeta*, there were about 16.5 million pupils in Russian schools: Tat'iana Dmitrakova, Kseniia Kolesnikova, Natal'ia Savankova, and Ol'ga Shtein, "V Rossii za party siadut bolee 16 millionov shkol'nikov," *Rossiiskaia gazeta*, September 1, 2019, <https://rg.ru/2019/09/01/reg-cfo/za-party-siadut-165-milliona-shkolnikov.html>.

⁹⁰ "Traditional Islam" is a highly contested term that is routinely used in Russia by politicians, Muslim officials, and the general public to refer to a form of Islam that is either highly secularized in light of the Soviet official policy of atheism or believed to have been embraced by Russia's Muslims before the revolution and therefore to be grounded in local religious, cultural, and linguistic heritage. I use the term not as an analytical category, but for operational purposes, to index the myriad of meanings assigned to it by local actors. A critical analysis of the term is beyond the scope of this paper. For an insightful analysis of the term, see, for example, Lili Di Puppo, "The Paradoxes of a Localised Islamic Orthodoxy: Rethinking Tatar Traditional Islam in Russia," *Ethnicities* 19, no. 2 (April 2019): 311–34, or Lili Di Puppo and Jesko Schmoller, "Here or Elsewhere: Sufism and Traditional Islam in Russia's Volga-Ural Region," *Contemporary Islam* 14 (2000): 135–156.

research in the field. Consequently, the data sample for this study is very limited and findings are exploratory and preliminary. The data sample consists of in-depth semi-structured interviews (conducted remotely via WhatsApp) with five practicing Muslim Tatar women who are homeschooling parents and one practicing Orthodox Christian homeschooling mother of Tatar and Russian ethnicity.⁹¹ I also interviewed two Tatarstan-based scholars—Guzel Guzelbaeva and Kamil Nasibullov⁹²—who have conducted extensive fieldwork and published work on homeschooling among practicing Muslims in Tatarstan. I further joined two Kazan-based WhatsApp groups about homeschooling⁹³ and have been monitoring Russian-language and Tatar-language media on the topic.

For comparative purposes, and given that I was already somewhat familiar with the practice of homeschooling among observant Muslims in the US, I conducted two in-depth interviews with American Muslim parents who homeschool their children. I also joined a Facebook group for homeschooling Muslim families and attended three seminars on homeschooling organized by a Muslim community in Northern Virginia.⁹⁴

The following research questions were central to my inquiry:

- 1) What drove practicing Muslim Tatars to choose homeschooling?
- 2) What role, if any, did religion—specifically Islam—play in families’ decision to choose homeschooling for their children?
- 3) Do these families see homeschooling as an opportunity to return to a “pre-Soviet” Tatar educational and religious tradition where Islamic education was primary and secular education was tightly intertwined with Islamic? If so, to what extent?
- 4) To what extent is the growing homeschooling trend driven by Tatar Muslim families’ desire to preserve local Tatar traditions, language, and values—and, therefore, Islam informed by these Tatar values—and to what extent is it more of a global trend?

⁹¹ The interview questions that I used as a guide are reproduced in the appendix.

⁹² I thank both scholars for their time and insights.

⁹³ The two groups are “SO [semeinoe obuchenie]: podrostki” (Homeschooling Teenagers) and “SO [semeinoe obuchenie] nachalka. Schastlivy doma” (Homeschooling Elementary Schoolers. Happy at Home). The elementary-age group later moved to Telegram, which is considered a safer and more secure platform.

⁹⁴ The seminars were organized and/or hosted by the McLean Islamic Center, located in McLean, Virginia (<https://mcleanmuslims.org>).

Discussion and Preliminary Findings

Based on my analysis of the data, I suggest that for practicing Tatar Muslims, homeschooling does not serve as an opportunity to strengthen their connection to local—Tatar—cultural, linguistic, and ethnic heritage, and by extension to local, traditional Tatar Islam. In fact, based on my interviews with homeschooling mothers, I argue that practicing Tatar Muslims are moving away from local/traditional Islam—understood as Islam rooted in local cultural and linguistic norms—toward the kind of Islam that does not have a strong connection to a local cultural tradition. This trend, which began a few decades ago, is manifested in a number of ways when examined through the prism of homeschooling.

Reasons for Choosing Homeschooling

One of the first questions that I asked practicing Muslim Tatar women was what made them decide to homeschool their children. After all, homeschooling requires extra effort, typically on the mother's part, and extra resources. Perhaps most importantly in the Russian context, homeschooling parents have to find a school that will register their child and allow test-taking within its walls or else accept test results from another qualified school—that is, a school that will monitor and document the child's progress. According to my respondents, this creates extra work for public schools without bringing them any benefits, with the result that public schools are typically not welcoming of homeschooling families. As Nuria, a homeschooling mother I interviewed, put it, “[Kazan public schools’ attitude] is very rude. These schools don’t care about us. We are extra work for them.” She went on to explain that these schools often do not provide any guidance when it comes to the curriculum or testing, effectively leaving homeschooling families to figure it out on their own. While private schools are an option, they typically charge a hefty fee for their services. In light of these administrative hurdles and the lack of support from public schools and state-run educational agencies, why do families choose to homeschool their children?

None of the Tatar Muslim women I interviewed mentioned a desire to preserve the Tatar language and culture as a primary reason for homeschooling her children. This is in a context where, due to re-centralization and the curtailing of federal subjects’ political and cultural independence over the past two decades, Tatarstan’s efforts to expand or even maintain the presence of Tatar language and culture in the public sphere and public schools have been unsuccessful.⁹⁵ At the same time, social

⁹⁵ See, for example, Sergey Sergeev, “The Republic of Tatarstan: Reduced to a Common Denominator?” *Russian Politics & Law* 56, no. 3–6 (2018): 222–35; Teresa Wigglesworth-Baker, “Language Policy and Power Politics in

science subjects mandated by the federal educational standards to be taught in all Russian public schools have become increasingly focused on ethnic Russians and Orthodox Christianity, as part of broader nation-building efforts.⁹⁶ As a consequence, over the past twenty years, and particularly since 2017, Tatarstan has experienced a decline in people's way of life being dictated by Islam.

Among their primary reasons for choosing homeschooling, the Tatar Muslim women I interviewed listed convenience and the poor quality of education in the public schools to which they were assigned.⁹⁷ For example, one family lived in the suburbs of Kazan and considered the public education provided by a local public school sub-par. The family's choices were to drive the children to a distant private school or to homeschool them, which was a simpler solution. Another reason for choosing homeschooling was a child's low level of emotional comfort in the public classroom due to the child's personality. None of the families I interviewed cited religion—and the need to adjust their children's lifestyle (in terms of dress code or dietary requirements, for example) to a public-school setting—as a primary reason for homeschooling their children. This could be due to the fact that all of the families I interviewed had children of elementary-school age, with the result that some of the Muslim lifestyle imperatives that would be important for older children (dress code, diet, relationships between genders, etc.) were not an issue for these families and their children just yet.⁹⁸

Post-Soviet Tatarstan," in *Language Planning in the Post-Communist Era: The Struggles for Language Control in the New Order in Eastern Europe, Eurasia and China*, ed. Ernest Andrews (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 119-44.

⁹⁶ Nasibullov, "Mezhdu Dagvatom i Khidzhroi."

⁹⁷ In her article on Muslim socialization among Muslim homeschooling families, Guzelbaeva also notes that for most homeschooling parents in Russia, the primary driver for choosing homeschooling is the poor quality of education in public schools; for practicing Muslim families, the importance of religious socialization at home is an added factor. Guzel Ia. Guzelbaeva, "Islamskoe vospitanie i sotsializatsiia detei v sem'iakh sobliudaiushchikh musul'man Tatarstana v kontekste semeinogo obrazovaniia," *Islam v sovremennom mire* 16, no. 4 (2020): 163-182.

⁹⁸ According to Nasibullov, practicing Tatar Muslims in Kazan prefer to send their children to schools with a Tatar component (56%), followed by a regular public school (20%) and homeschooling (15%). The preference for schools with a Tatar component is driven by a belief that the schools' climate and conditions are more favorable for children from observant Muslim families. However, outside of Tatarstan, Muslim parents' leading factors for choosing a certain educational format for their children, including homeschooling, was school location/commute convenience and quality of instruction. At the same time, the study found that a fairly sizable number of practicing Muslim families would seriously consider homeschooling their children (37% in Kazan and 59% in Tatarstan outside Kazan). Nasibullov concludes that, overall, Muslims parents have multiple and varied concerns when it comes to primary and secondary education for their children, due in large part to the fact that public schools in Russia, by and large, are not equipped to meet the practical or moral needs and expectations of these families. Nasibullov, "Mezhdu Dagvatom i Khidzhroi."

The Homeschooling Curriculum

In line with another trend that began a couple of decades ago,⁹⁹ many practicing Tatar Muslims who are now in their twenties and thirties and whose children are of school age no longer conflate the ethnic and religious aspects of their identity, although this was common at the height of the Tatar sovereignty movement in the 1990s. These families do not seek to reinforce Tatar language or culture as an inextricable part of their Muslim identity.¹⁰⁰ This is evidenced by their lack of interest in incorporating—and lack of effort to incorporate—Tatar language or culture into their children’s homeschooling curricula. For example, when I asked Rimma,¹⁰¹ a practicing Tatar Muslim woman, if her child’s homeschooling curriculum included any lessons on Tatar language, literature, or culture, she responded in the negative. She explained that she and her husband spoke Tatar at home and did not consider it necessary to incorporate the Tatar language into their child’s curriculum.

Interestingly, Asma, a practicing Muslim and homeschooling mom living in the US, expressed a similar attitude toward the Arabic language. Both Asma, whose parents were from Egypt, and her husband, of Iraqi origin, were heritage speakers of Arabic, but they made no efforts to incorporate Arabic into their children’s homeschooling curriculum. Instead, Asma shared, they tried to “infuse” the language and culture into their daily lives by speaking Arabic at home, cooking ethnic dishes, and wearing ethnic clothing on special occasions. This trend among practicing American Muslims not to reinforce ethnic aspects of their identity for their children via schooling was particularly evident in a virtual homeschooling seminar that I attended. A special guest of the seminar was a young imam of Middle Eastern origin who is fairly well-known in the US. He urged Muslim parents not to impress the ethnic and cultural aspects of their identity on their children, exhorting them to focus instead on cultivating religious (Muslim) identity. His rationale was that trying to cultivate both would overwhelm children, so to make it easier for children to navigate their multiple identities, parents were encouraged to focus on Islam, which was presented as a top priority, and let go of ethnicity and culture.

⁹⁹ See Liliya Karimova, “Muslim Revival in Tatarstan: Tatar Women’s Narratives as Indicators of Competing Islamic Traditions,” *Nova Religio* 17, no. 1 (August 2013): 38–58.

¹⁰⁰ Guzel Guzelbaeva notes that many Muslim homeschooling families prioritize Arabic over Tatar. Those parents who value and try to incorporate the Tatar language see it as a tool to use against secularism rather than as an attempt to root their children’s religious identity in the local language and culture (personal communication, October 2020). Kamil Nasibullov makes a similar observation about Tatar-language schools: practicing Muslims may prefer these schools not because they are interested in bolstering their children’s ethnic identity or rooting their religious identity in Tatar language and culture, but because they see these school as a better choice than regular public schools, which are secular and less compatible with Muslim values (personal communication, August 2020).

¹⁰¹ All names are pseudonyms.

This parallel between practicing Tatar and American Muslims' attitudes toward the ethnic and religious aspects of their own and their children's identities and the role (or, rather, lack thereof) of homeschooling in reinforcing the former was striking. Although the data sample is too limited to draw any definitive conclusions about the dominance of "global Islam"—the kind of Islam that is detached from cultural and ethnic elements—the trend for practicing Muslim parents not to reinforce the ethnic and cultural aspect of their children's identity via homeschooling, even though this could fairly easily be done due to the flexibility of homeschooling, cannot be overlooked. In the case of Rimma's family, the parents made no special effort to take advantage of homeschooling to incorporate the Tatar language, literature, or culture into their child's curriculum. This was also the case with the other Tatar homeschooling families I interviewed.

Homeschooling Educational Materials

The quality of or approach to education in public schools are often among the main reasons why parents choose homeschooling.¹⁰² The freedom to choose their own textbooks and educational materials is an important factor that draws families to homeschooling.

When it comes to textbooks and other educational materials, homeschooling parents often opt out of the standard set of books approved for use by the Ministry of Education of the Russian Federation¹⁰³ and slated for use by public schools. Homeschooling parents disapprove of the textbooks used in public schools for a number of reasons, from poor instruction and sequencing of lessons to morally problematic content. A leading alternative among Russian homeschooling families when it comes to textbooks and other educational materials is the materials produced by the Russian Classical School [Russkaia Klassicheskaia Shkola, RKSh], a private organization founded by the wife of practicing Orthodox Christian oligarch Igor Altushkin.¹⁰⁴ At the beginning of the school year or semester, the WhatsApp homeschooling groups were flooded with messages from parents wanting to order RKSh textbooks or taking orders (ordering as a group is cheaper). The school openly focuses on content appropriate to ethnic Russian Orthodox families. For example, a multi-volume Russian

¹⁰² Guzelbaeva, "Islamskoe vospitanie i sotsializatsiia detei."

¹⁰³ The official website of the Ministry of Education of the Russian Federation (also called the Ministry of Enlightenment of the Russian Federation, after its original in Russian) has a database of its Decrees, among which is the recent (May 20, 2020) Decree #254, which contains an updated list of textbooks approved for use by state-licensed educational institutions: <https://docs.edu.gov.ru/document/d6b617ec2750a10a922b3734371db82a/>.

¹⁰⁴ On its website (<https://russianclassicalschool.ru/>), the school refers to itself as an "educational system of the future, rooted in the past."

history reader compiled by M. G. Balakayev and published in 2018 is a “compilation of stories taken from various sources.” Its carefully constructed narrative lacks scientific or factual rigor and is based on bits and pieces that fit a Russian- and Orthodox-centric worldview.¹⁰⁵ In the second volume of the textbook, the Mongol invasion of the Kievan Rus is referred to as “the Tatar invasion” by “Tatars” who “came from Asia” led by Chinggis Khan.¹⁰⁶ The textbook makes no attempt to explain or unpack the terminology or the word choice. The narrative of the textbook is openly sympathetic to Orthodox Russians, who are often portrayed as martyrs at the hands of the invaders. The textbook is also full of Russian Orthodox imagery. In the foreword to the textbook, Balakayev writes:

In present-day textbooks, Russian history, as a rule, is laid out in schemes developed on the basis of foreign, non-Russian historical experience. They are dominated by a liberal linear-progressive interpretation of history...In the *Russian History Readers*, Russian history emerges, on the one hand, as our ancestors’ great care for the Russian soil...and, on the other hand, as a series of missteps due to their attempts to achieve a good life for themselves at the expense of God’s truth.¹⁰⁷

Despite their Russian-and Orthodox-centric perspective, Tatar Muslim homeschooling parents use RKSh textbooks due to their lesson sequencing and the teaching methodology recommendations that accompany the textbooks, even though neither the school nor its educational materials are licensed by Russia’s Ministry of Education.

When I asked Nuria, a practicing Tatar Muslim woman who homeschools her children and uses RKSh textbooks, how she felt teaching history from Russian- and Orthodox-centric textbooks, she said she carefully picked lessons that would not undermine her children’s ethnic and religious identity, skipped over lessons that might, and in some cases provided her own interpretation and explanation of historical events. While Nuria saw the use of RKSh materials as problematic or

¹⁰⁵ M.G. Balakaev, *Kniga dlia chteniia po Russkoi istorii. Kniga 1. Ot drevneishikh vremen do tsarstvovaniia Ivana III: v 2 ch. —Ch. 1* (Ekaterinburg: Artefakt, 2018), 5.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 29.

¹⁰⁷ The Russian-language original is as follows: ““В современных учебниках русская история, как правило, излагается по схемам, выработанным на основе чужого, нерусского исторического опыта. В них превалирует либеральная линейно-прогрессивная интерпретация истории (от гнета традиции (коллектива) к полной свободе индивидуального потребительского выбора). В Книгах для чтения история России предстает, с одной стороны, как радение наших предков о русской земле, об общем благе с верой в конечное торжество добра, а с другой стороны, оттеняющей первую, как череда отступлений, измен и блужданий, происходящих от лукавой мечты хорошо устроить свою жизнь вопреки Божьей правде. (Именно таково понимание русской истории у лучших наших писателей).” Balakaev, *Kniga dlia chteniia po Russkoi istorii. Kniga 1, Ch. 2*, 6.

undesirable because they could potentially undermine her children’s ethnic or religious identity, she took a pragmatic approach to using the materials and developed a teaching strategy that mitigated problematic content. According to her, she and other Muslim families would often color over any Orthodox crosses present in RKSh textbooks. In fact, she praised the founder of RKSh for being ahead of the curve and for creating educational materials that reinforced the identities and values of the school’s main target audience—ethnic Russian, often observant Orthodox families. She was critical of both practicing Muslims and Tatars for not inventing something similar for their communities:

She [RKSh’s founder] teaches family values. It’s a pity that nothing like this exists within the Tatar culture. Yes, they are chauvinists, but they have earned the right; they’ve created something. But where are the Muslims? Where is a Muslim mother of six¹⁰⁸ who could dig out old Soviet textbooks, fit them into her values, create this project, and make good money off it, and carry out her mission? Where are Muslims? They are sitting on their butts as usual. So what are the options, then? We have to take [RKSh materials] and adapt them.

Figure 1. On the left is the official symbol of the school, an outline of a Russian Orthodox church topped by a cross. On the right is the cover of an RKSh textbook on Russian history compiled by M. G. Balakaev, which features the interior of an Orthodox church and displays a tsar hat topped by a cross at the bottom of the cover.



Source: Photo taken by the author

¹⁰⁸ RKSh’s founder, Tatiana Altushkina, who is referenced here, and her husband have six children.

Nuria, who spoke fluent Tatar but whose children did not speak Tatar, was not aware of educational materials in Tatar that would satisfy the educational needs of her homeschooled children while providing a Tatar- or Muslim-centric perspective. Rather, her approach was to take the best resources that were out there and adapt them to her children's educational needs. Other Tatar Muslim homeschooling families expressed a similar position. None were concerned about using RKSh materials, even though they promote a Russian- and Orthodox-centric perspective.

Many U.S.-based Muslim homeschooling families take a similar view. During a virtual homeschooling seminar for Muslims in the US entitled "Homeschooling the Muslim Child," which I attended in August 2020, parents talked about adapting a variety of educational resources, ranging from those developed by secular organizations to those developed by Christian homeschoolers, who are the pioneers and leaders of homeschooling in the US. Only one mother expressed concern about using materials developed from a Christian perspective.

Considering that homeschooling is a recent practice in Russia, it is perhaps unsurprising that there are no educational materials that cater to homeschooling families *and* contain an ethnic (Tatar) or religious (Muslim) component. Perhaps more surprising is the fact that the Tatar Muslim homeschooling families I interviewed are neither concerned about using RKSh educational materials nor attempt to seek out and incorporate Tatar-language or Muslim-centric educational resources. This suggests that preserving their children's ethnic identity via Tatar language and culture is not a priority for Tatar Muslim homeschooling parents. Rather, they take a pragmatic approach, adopting and adapting educational materials that will enable their children to succeed and compete academically in the homeschooling context.

Finally, the founders of the RKSh refer on their website to their project as an attempt "to revive classical traditions in education. With much gratitude to the great teachers of the past who left the invaluable heritage to us." The RKSh curriculum includes educational materials on Old Slavonic that were developed in tandem with the Russian Orthodox Church and draw on old (pre-Soviet) educational materials. Other, non-religious materials refer to the works of K.D. Ushinskii, who is considered the founder of pedagogical science in tsarist Russia. In other words, in its approach to education, RKSh sees the past and pre-Soviet education as, if not as an exemplar, then at least a rich resource on which to draw. None of the Tatar Muslim homeschooling families with whom I spoke drew any connection between present-day homeschooling—its format, reasons for choosing it, or its educational potential—and pre-Soviet Tatar educational tradition; they never suggested that this was

something to which they were returning or which they even explored.¹⁰⁹ Rather, these families perceived homeschooling as a wholly modern phenomenon that emerged in response to the challenges presented by public education.¹¹⁰

Conclusion

As a relatively new but growing practice in Russia, homeschooling is a social phenomenon that can shed light on recent social changes. At the beginning of this project, I set out to explore whether, and to what extent, practicing Muslim Tatars use homeschooling as an opportunity to maintain or strengthen the ethnic aspect of their identity in the context of recent federal policies aimed at de-prioritizing the ethnic component in Russia's republics, including Tatarstan. If that were the case, to what extent would homeschooling enable Tatar Muslim families to ground their religious knowledge and practices in Tatar linguistic and cultural heritage and thereby cultivate some form of traditional Tatar Islam?

As the discussion above illustrates, my Tatar Muslim respondents expressed little concern about preserving and reconnecting with their Tatar cultural and linguistic heritage. Additionally, Islam is rarely the main factor in choosing homeschooling for their children. Rather, homeschooling appears to be driven by similar concerns, aspirations, and even practices as elsewhere in the world (and specifically in the US). If anything, for Tatar Muslims, homeschooling is a culture of their own that may have local dimensions but is more globally oriented than locally focused.

It must be noted that researchers (including myself), as well as state and public officials, sometimes make assumptions about a social group based on what is perceived as the salient element of their identity. My research suggests that at least when it comes to Tatar Muslim families, religion plays a limited role in homeschooling. If there is a trend toward globalism—and thus a move away

¹⁰⁹ Like “traditional Islam,” the “Tatar educational tradition” is a contested concept. By “the Tatar educational tradition,” I mean the dominant form of education among Tatars before the twentieth century, when education was primarily religious, with girls educated at home and boys at a medrese. Private secular tutors, the teaching profession, and secular schools were a fairly recent phenomenon. See L.R. Gabdrāfikova, “Mugallima: novaia sotsial’no-professional’naia rol’ tatarskoi zhenshchiny nachala XX v.,” *Vestnik Rossiiskogo universiteta družby narodov. Seriya: Istoriiia Rossii* 18, no. 2 (2019): 302-319; L.R. Gabdrāfikova, “Elka i zhurnaly s kartinkami. Noveye podkhody k vospitaniuu detei v tatarskom obshchestve nachala XX veka,” *Rodina* 12 (2014): 150-152; L.R. Gabdrāfikova, “Novye liudi’ v tatarskom obshchestve v nachale XX veka: sotsial’no-ekonomicheskoe polozhenie uchitelei,” *Obrazovanie i samorazvitiie* 6 (34) (2012): 210-215.

¹¹⁰ Antufeva makes a similar observation, arguing that although homeschooling was a primary form of education in pre-revolutionary Russia, present-day homeschooling is seen as an exclusively modern phenomenon. M.P. Antuf’eva, “Poniatie ‘semeinoe obrazovanie’ v Rossii i SShA: sopostavitel’nyi analiz,” *MNKO* 5 (78) (2019).

from their local cultural or religious roots—this is dictated by the practical needs of homeschooling families, not by a conscious decision to choose or practice a certain type of Islam.

Given the limited sample data, the discussion provided above should be treated as a conversation-starter about homeschooling as a possible factor in cultivating a certain kind of Islam. In terms of future research, a longitudinal study of homeschooling among practicing Muslims in Tatarstan may help us understand whether we can conceptualize homeschooling as a culture and what kind of relationship, if any, it has with Islam and other social phenomena, both local and global.

Appendix 1. Interview Questions for Homeschooling Parents

I drew on the questions below while conducting semi-structured interviews with practicing Tatar Muslim homeschooling mothers in Kazan, Tatarstan. The interviews were conducted in Russian. I drew on a similar set of questions while interviewing two practicing American Muslim women who homeschool their children.

1. Где и как вы узнали о семейном обучении и почему решили выбрать именно эту форму обучения для своего ребёнка/своих детей?
2. Где вы находите материалы и другие обучающие ресурсы/единомышленников? Как Вы проходите аттестацию?
3. Исходя из вашего опыта с семейным обучением на сегодняшний день, каковы плюсы и минусы семейного обучения?
4. С какими сложностями вы столкнулись переводя детей на семейное обучение?
5. Считаете ли вы, что семейное обучение должно популяризироваться и поддерживаться государством?
6. Включили ли вы Татарский или татарскую культуру/литературу в образовательную программу и почему?
7. Есть ли в Вашем обучении религиозный компонент?
8. Что хотите добавить от себя, о чем я не спросила?

Part II

Identity, Community, Ethnicity and Islam

Muslim Communities of Kazan: Youth, Religion, and the Search for a Life Strategy

Guzel Y. Guzelbaeva

Since the mid-1990s, the Republic of Tatarstan has seen the growth of religion in the public space and the spread of individual religious practices. Old churches have been restored and new ones built, spiritual educational institutions have appeared, and religious literature has begun to be published. This sociological study indicates that the younger generation of Tatars has been actively involved in this religious revival. If in the pre-secular period it was mostly rural residents, women, and older people who showed an interest in religious issues, the 1990s and 2000s have witnessed the Islamization of educated young people in cities and the growth of their social activity.¹¹¹ The paper focuses on the activities of Muslim youth initiative groups in Kazan from 2005 to 2012 and the reasons for their rise and decline.

¹¹¹ Grigoriy Kosach, "Tatarstan: religiia i natsional'nost' v massovom soznanii," in *Novye tserkvi, starye veruiuschie—starye tserkvi, novye veruiuschie: religiia v postsovetsskoi Rossii*, ed. Kimmo Kaariinen and Dmitriy Furman (Moscow and St. Petersburg: Letniy sad, 2007), 341-95; Rinat A. Nabiev, *Vlast' i religioznoe vozrozhdenie* (Kazan: Kazan University Publishing House, 2014); Guzel Ia. Guzelbaeva, "Postsekulyarnye tendentsii u Tatar v nachale XXI veka," *Uchenye Zapiski Kazanskogo Universiteta. Seriiia Gumanitarnye Nauki* 156: 6 (2014): 212-221.

The young Muslims of Tatarstan disprove the claim of secularization theory that religion plays only a marginal and privatized role in social and individual life. At the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, the Muslim students of Kazan did not want to limit themselves to indoor, secluded communication and ritual practice. Rather, they wanted to reclaim the public urban space. At the peak of the religious revival, Muslim students crossed the boundary into the public sphere. They created several civil society groups that brought together prominent Muslims with progressive views. The most famous of these groups were the Muslim youth associations *Soznanie* (Consciousness) and *Altyn Urta*. This period can be considered the heyday of civil activism in the Muslim youth environment, in line with which goals and life strategies were formulated.

Research Methods

This analysis of the activities of Islamic youth communities is based on qualitative sociological studies conducted in 2012-2013 and 2018-2019. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and observation. Twelve in-depth interviews were conducted with leaders and participants of the organizations *Soznanie* and *Altyn Urta*, as well as with members of the informal student groups *Ikhlas* and *SAMI* who attended various universities in Kazan,¹¹² and with young Muslims who took part in events for Islamic students at Kazan universities in 2007-2012. *Soznanie* and *Altyn Urta* were chosen because they were the most significant and noticeable in terms of their number of supporters, coverage of various activities, and awareness of their strategy.

Some of the interviews from 2018-2019 were conducted after the main events described in the article. The duration of each interview ranged from one-and-a-half to two-and-a-half hours. The interviews were accompanied by contextual observations with a field diary. These observations took place in mosques and public squares in Kazan, as well as in those settlements where supporters of the studied organizations lived: Naberezhnye Chelny, Nizhnekamsk, Bugulma, and the villages of the Aznakaevskiy, Almetyevskiy. and Mamadyshskiy districts of Tatarstan. A total of 12 hours of observations were conducted.

¹¹² *Ikhlas* and *SAMI* were other groups that tried to bring together young Muslims who had a common interest in Islam and sought group activities inspired by Islamic ideas. They were small, less popular and expressive, and only active for about one year. They did not set such clearly defined goals as *Soznanie* and *Altyn Urta*. The name *SAMI* derives from Union (or Soyuz) of Active Muslims. Another letter was added, as the term “sami” in Russian language suggests acting independently of others.

Muslim Youth Activism in Kazan: From Student Organizations to Broad Social Horizons

Soznanie was the first informal community that called on young Muslims to unite. The leaders of Soznanie built on the growing interest of students in Islam and their willingness to follow religious guidelines. The group was most active in 2005-2007. Soznanie was engaged in educational work in the field of Islam, charity events, organizing Islamic holidays in universities, and solving urgent problems such as providing places for prayer readings in universities and making halal dishes available in student cafeterias. Community members held regular meetings in universities, where they discussed issues related primarily to Islamic doctrine and behavioral rules. A conference was held at Kazan State University in which students and clergy tried to understand the issues that young Muslims were facing at that time from a theological perspective. They collaborated with influential imams from the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Tatarstan, Kazan city hall, and the Public Chamber. They published the newspaper *Format Mysli* (Format of Thought), which was published regularly and distributed among the Muslim students of Kazan. Its main position was the unacceptability of radical views as well as the idea of moral improvement of society.

Despite their young age, its activists were distinguished by a strong interest in Islamic theology and a meaningful approach to setting goals. Throughout the entire existence of their community, they could be described as an intellectual group on the basis of the issues they raised, the ways they solved problems, the topics discussed, and the people whom they invited to their events and with whom they collaborated.

By 2010, the leaders and activists of Soznanie were mostly immersed in constructing their own private lives. They left university, created families, found employment, and began to run businesses. They passed the torch to another group, Altyn Urta, which represented a younger generation of students. It was created in 2010 by six students at different universities in Kazan on their own initiative. Altyn Urta literally translates from Tatar as “The Golden Mean.” The name also parallels the Tatar appellation for the Golden Horde.

The activities of Altyn Urta built upon the religious and civil activism initiated by Soznanie. Yet Altyn Urta’s activities aimed at a broader segment of society, including people beyond the university; they often gathered in mosques and at sites outside of Kazan. The Internet helped them to attract followers in the towns and rural areas of Tatarstan and nearby regions. They cooperated with the Spiritual Administration of Muslims and conducted joint actions. Over time, however, this cooperation was reduced to a minimum due to a lack of consensus on goals and actions, as well as the latter’s attempts to claim leadership and control young people.

The group activities of Kazan's Muslim students provide a clear illustration of the interplay between civic activity and religious intentions as one of the expressions of the new social significance of religion. At the same time, they represent a special case of the famous postulate of Jose Casanova: the global trend of the religious sphere in the modern world is to deprivatize it; religion and its agents refuse to accept the marginal and private role that they have been assigned in the secular narrative of modernity.¹¹³ Young Muslims came out into the public space and loudly declared themselves.

The example of these organizations shows the great potential of civic initiatives to realize youth ambitions by setting goals inspired by religious values. The following features of their activity became the basis for their life strategies. First, they transformed religious identification into a mainstream movement that had a positive image and was associated with the growing trend of belonging to the Islamic community, including to the Islamic world more globally. Second, they set the goal of moving beyond the narrow group framework and responding swiftly to challenges as they emerged. They did this by transcending the boundaries of their student groups and spreading to wider social strata not only within Tatarstan, but also beyond it.

The activities of Soznanie and Altyn Urta captured non-university Muslim youth from small towns and rural areas, young people who were engaged in various occupations and had different economic standards. The two key traits of modernity in their activities were: (1) the focus on interactivity and the use of social media as conduits for ideas and activities and to gain popularity in a wider social and geographical area; and (2) the rejection of hierarchical-paternalistic strategies and a preference for horizontal forms of interaction and cooperation. Muslim youth set and solved their tasks independently, but this did not rule out appeals to the university administration or the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of the Republic of Tatarstan when it was necessary to attract institutional resources.

Analyzing in-depth interviews with leaders and members of Soznanie and Altyn Urta, we can see that their main advantages were a great desire for action, a conscious strategy, and mobility. Their disadvantages included a lack of life experience and a focus on solving problems rapidly. These groups appeared on the initiative of ordinary Muslims without the participation of state bodies or the Spiritual Board. Thus, their religious activity was concentrated at the level of civil society, but not the level of politics or state institutions.

¹¹³ Jose Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Jose Casanova, "Public Religions Revisited," in *Religion: Beyond the Concept*, ed. Hent de Vries (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2008), 101-119.

Notably, the last two decades have seen a competition between so-called “traditional” and “new” Islam in several regions of Russia, a competition that has erected boundaries within religious and ethno-cultural groups. Accordingly, the activities of Soznanie and Altyn Urta took place against a background of diversification of Muslim practices in the republic. Some Muslims preferred to remain within the local Hanafi tradition, which had been influenced by Tatar culture over the course of several centuries, while others favored variants of Islam that had been exported from Arab countries and which reflected global trends. It can be argued that Soznanie belonged to global Islam; although its members did not claim this openly, they were hardly followers of the Hanafi madhhab. Altyn Urta, by contrast, insisted on its adherence to “Tatar Islam” linked to local traditions.

Decline in the Civic Activism of Muslim Youth Organizations

The popularity of Muslim youth organizations was limited. After several intense years of energetic initiatives, they could not gain any more followers. The years following 2012 saw a visible decline in activity associated with religious issues. According to my research, there are several reasons for this.

The first was a decline in interest in religion compared to the first decade of the twenty-first century. Religious life took on more formal characteristics. Young people felt that both Orthodox Christianity and Islam were more concerned with the approval of government institutions than with the needs and priorities of society.¹¹⁴ Sociological studies further demonstrate the predominance of secular values over religious ones among today’s young people. Although there continues to be general interest in questions of faith, it can be argued that few young people now choose religion as the guiding light of their lives.¹¹⁵

The second was a decline in enthusiasm for social activities after students graduated from university. Arguably, such forms of civic activism of young people cannot endure because they are not rooted in culture, including political culture.

The third was the lack of a permanent direct connection between Muslim students and the older generation of Tatarstan’s Islamic community. Although Soznanie and Altyn Urta both interacted

¹¹⁴ Marina M. Mchedlova, ed., *Religiia v sovremennoi Rossii: konteksty i diskussii* (Moscow: RUDN University, 2019).

¹¹⁵ Guzel Ia. Guzelbaeva, “Agenty religioznoi sotsializatsii v postsekulyarnyi period: rol’ v transformatsii tsennostno-normativnoi sistemy,” *Kazan Socio-Humanitarian Bulletin* 6, no. 4 (2015): 21-26; Marina L. Ivleva, Sergey N. Kurilov, and Vadim J. Rossman, “Religioznye tsennosti glazami molodezhi: opyt sotsiologicheskogo issledovaniia,” *RUDN Journal of Sociology* 18, no. 3 (2018): 481-93.

with prominent Islamic figures, they focused primarily on their own capacities and valued independence. The official Islamic organizations, for their part, sought to transform the youth initiatives into a community that they could control. However, these attempts to gather young people under their leadership were not a viable alternative to the charismatic activity of Muslim students in Kazan.

The tragic murder of the former deputy mufti of Tatarstan, Valiulla Yakubov, in Kazan in July 2012 became a turning point for many Muslims in the region. The state's policy of curtailing uncontrolled initiatives related to Islam led to Muslim youth ceasing to organize public events; such events were later resumed in a more closed format. This is another reason for the discontinuation of the activities of young Muslims, and one which they themselves perceive as central. The changed priorities of the state's domestic and foreign policy made young Muslims fearful of acting openly. The orientation of Russian state policy toward countering extremism and terrorism and the requirements of national security naturally prompted law enforcement agencies to pay attention to communal activity, particularly within the Muslim community.

However, we cannot say that the potential for uniting Muslims through private initiatives has been exhausted. Informal Muslim practices persist; they have simply shifted to an intra-community format that is not visible to outsiders. Today's young Muslims are creating new practices related to Islam and their understanding of religious precepts. The activity of student Islamic groups continues online (with Muslim bloggers) and through non-public practices (such as bringing up children in an Islamic way). A few dozen Muslim bloggers from Tatarstan have begun to influence public opinion within the Islamic community, competing with the media and the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Tatarstan. Their popularity is growing day by day, and some bloggers have more than 100,000 followers on Instagram. Meanwhile, to socialize their children with Islam, parents organize Muslim kindergartens and children's summer camps and develop family-based secondary education.

Muslims seek to carry out these activities without attracting widespread attention. This indicates self-organization at the level of arranging private life and efforts to distance themselves from the state.

Conclusion

The Islamic youth communities of Kazan in 2005-2012 recognized the changing needs of young Muslims and Tatars, as well as the transformation of public demands and expectations.

Accordingly, these communities formulated a meaningful strategy for their activities and their lives that reflected their civic responsibility.

The main advantages of these organizations were a sincere desire to unite young Muslims, a well-thought-out action strategy, and the ability to respond quickly to changing conditions and new challenges, as well as the use of online networks to expand their sphere of activity and get new participants involved. This civic activism, combined with the progressive views of young Muslims, contributed to the growth of interest in Islam among a segment of young people. These organizations therefore demonstrate that there is significant scope to realize youth ambitions by setting goals inspired by religious values and carrying them out through civic initiatives.

The religious views and activities of these Islamic youth organizations reflected the religious mainstream of their time. When the trend of global Islam emerged, Soznanie expressed the relevant ideas. This group operated until 2010, at which point adherents of global Islam were not yet experiencing pushback from official state structures and the Spiritual Board of Muslims. When the traditionalists became more active, young people from Altyn Urta caught the urgency of criticism of “pure” Islam and supported the development of local “Tatar” Islam.

The emergence of these communities constitutes a vivid example of grassroots initiatives by ordinary Muslims, which was exactly what made it impossible to integrate these communities into the religious institutions of the Republic of Tatarstan. The non-formal practices of those Muslims who were involved with these communities—as well as of today’s young Muslims—continue, but they have shifted to an almost invisible intra-community level.

Conflict Factors in the Contemporary Muslim Community of the Republic of Tatarstan

Bulat G. Akhmetkarimov

The Muslim community of the Republic of Tatarstan has been the object of close attention by specialists from various academic fields since the “revival” of religious life in post-Soviet Russia. Yet despite extant scholarship on the issue, many questions remain to be explored, especially from the standpoint of the field of conflictology (or conflict resolution). How and why is Islam often manifested as a tool for greater political self-determination of the Tatar nation? Why do local Muslims refer to Islam when they demand freedom and justice? How does Islam relate to the construction of group identities in contemporary Tatarstan?

The scholarly literature on religious conflicts often refers to identity markers, local strategies for inclusion and exclusion, economic policies, and migration flows that may affect inter- and intra-faith harmony.¹¹⁶ Despite the multiple political and socioeconomic challenges that the Republic of Tatarstan is currently facing, a significant majority of practicing Muslims believe that there is no major threat to local religious peace. Relying on analysis of 22 in-depth interviews conducted in the fall of 2020 with mosque attendees in Kazan and several administrative districts across the Republic,¹¹⁷ this study suggests that generally speaking, Muslims continue to have confidence in secular state institutions.¹¹⁸ For some of them, however, the situation in Tatarstan is increasingly alarming, for several reasons. As indicated by interviews and the analysis of discussion groups from social media sites popular among practicing Muslims, the nationalities policy of the Russian state, the

¹¹⁶ Jonathan Fox, “Towards a Dynamic Theory of Ethno-Religious Conflict,” *Nations and Nationalism* 5, no. 4 (1999): 431-463; Peter S. Henne and Jason Klocek, “Taming the Gods: How Religious Conflict Shapes State Repression,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 63, no. 1 (2019): 112-138; V.A. Kozlov and N.V. Shakhmatova, “Factors of National and Religious Conflictogenicity in the Saratov Region,” V International Scientific and Practical Conference “Dylnov Readings,” 2018, pp. 118-122, https://www.sgu.ru/sites/default/files/conf/files/2018-05/dylnovskie_chteniya_2018_.pdf.

¹¹⁷ Kazan, Bugulma, Verkhniy Uslon, and Zelenodolsk.

¹¹⁸ For a detailed discussion of whether mosque attendees can be considered representative of the Muslim population, see Torkel Brekke, Lene Kühle, Göran Larsson, and Tuomas Martikainen, “Mosques, Muslims, Methods: The Role of Mosques in Research about Muslims in Europe,” *Journal of Muslims in Europe* 8, no. 2 (2019): 216-233.

problem of religious pluralism, and the challenges presented by modern communication technologies are seen as posing a threat to peace and security in the region.

Nationalities Policy and the Status of Tatar Language

A content analysis of several key discussion groups on social media sites popular among practicing Muslims, publications on the personal pages of several opinion leaders (individuals with great influence on public opinion among Muslims across the region),¹¹⁹ and the results of a survey conducted in mosques with ordinary Muslim believers confirm the premise that culture and religion are seen as closely intertwined.¹²⁰ In their publications on digital platforms and answers to the questionnaire, authors and respondents noted the narrowing of the space for Tatar national self-determination. They identify two main reasons for this: 1) the expiration of the Treaty on Delimitation of Jurisdictional Subjects and Powers between Bodies of Public Authority of the Russian Federation and Bodies of Public Authority of the Republic of Tatarstan in 2017; and 2) the fact that the study of the Tatar language in public schools has become voluntary and the number of hours allotted for Tatar language instruction has been reduced.¹²¹

Officially, the end of the treaty process between the Russian Federation and its constituent units is interpreted as the elimination of asymmetries in the federation inherited from the chaotic 1990s.¹²² The ethnic republics, however, see it as undermining the basic principles of federalism. Over the course of the 2000s, the legislation of republics was harmonized with federal legislation. With some exceptions, the provisions of republican constitutions that addressed the sovereignty of republics were brought into conformity with the federal Constitution. The laws and bylaws of

¹¹⁹ On Telegram: 1. Mulla iz-za-ugla (Rasul Tavdiriyakov); 2. Islamist'; 3. "Isnad"—online medrese; 4. Alif-tv; 5. Ar-rad; 6. Religiiia segodnia/Islam; 7. Shariatskie voprosy; 8. Telegram kanal Kamilia Khazrata Samigullina (kamilhazrat); 9. Al-Futuwwa. On Instagram: 1. Shariatskie voprosy (#шариатскиевопросы); 2. Instaroman—Moia sestra salafitka (#моясестрасалафитка); 3. Golos Islama (#голосислама); 4. Min tatarcha soileshem (#минтатарчасойлэшэм); 5. Informationsno-novostnoi portal—Golos-islama.ru (Dmitrii Khamza Chernomorchenko).

¹²⁰ Matteo Benussi, "Ethnic Muslims and the 'Halal Movement' in Tatarstan," *Anthropological Journal of European Cultures* 27, no. 1 (2018): 88-93; Marlies Bilz-Leonhardt, "Islam as a Secular Discourse: The Case of Tatarstan," *Religion, State & Society* 35, no. 3 (2007): 231-244; Marlene Laruelle, "Religious Revival, Nationalism and the 'Invention of Tradition': Political Tengrism in Central Asia and Tatarstan," *Central Asian Survey* 26, no. 2 (2007): 203-216.

¹²¹ "Istoriia dogovornykh otnoshenii Kremliia i Tatarstana," *Kommersant*, July 11, 2017, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3351733>; "Kak ne rodnoi. Izuchenie tatarskogo iazyka okonchatel'no stanet dobrovol'nym?" *Ezhenedelnik "Argumenty i fakty"* 17, April 25, 2018, https://kazan.aif.ru/society/details/kak_ne_rodnoy_tatarskiy_yazyk_okonchatelno_stanet_dobrovolnym.

¹²² Gulnara R. Shaikhutdinova, "Federalism with a Unitary Face (2004–2019)," in *Contemporary Russian Federalism: Delimitation of Jurisdictional Subjects and Powers* (The Hague: T.M.C. Asser Press, 2020), 4.

constituent units were amended in accordance with federal legislation or repealed. According to Shaikhutdinova, all of these changes demonstrate steady movement from federalism to unitarism.¹²³

Survey respondents refer to the above developments as they express significant concern regarding the future of national heritage, language, and culture. A male believer in his mid-60s from Verkhonii Usloň suggests, for instance, that he, like many of his neighbors in the area, cannot be sure that his grandchildren will speak fluent Tatar. “In our daily lives here, we mainly rely on Russian language. I totally understand why we do so and we all appreciate the peace that we have,” he says. “There is history, there may be politics, yet I don’t want my children to bury me in a ‘non-Muslim’ way” (*ne po-musul’manski*). Thus, we try to stay close to the mosque, which is the only venue besides our homes where we communicate in Tatar,” he adds. “And if it comes to defending a mosque, that’s a matter of protecting our land,” he concludes.

With the change in the status of ethnic minority languages in 2017, the constitutional right to study the languages of titular nationalities became only a “voluntary right,” not an obligatory one.¹²⁴ This sets Tatar, for instance, apart from Russian, which was given official status in the July 2020 constitutional amendments and now has to be taught to all school-age children.¹²⁵ While Tatar political elites are limited in their capacity to respond and have to act within the framework of federal legislation, civil society representatives, the community of Muslim believers, and the Spiritual Board of Muslims of the Republic of Tatarstan (DUM RT) have come up with a number of counter-initiatives. First, the clergy took the initiative to conduct Friday sermons in Tatar. Second, the spiritual administration proposed that Tatar language courses be organized and conducted at mosques.¹²⁶

These initiatives on behalf of the DUM RT have far-reaching consequences. On the one hand, the move has been positively perceived, especially among Tatar nationalists, and strengthened the spiritual administration’s authority as a key actor in the Muslim community of the republic. The head of the World Congress of the Tatars executive committee, Rinat Zakirov, told *Kommersant*: “Mosques are an important part of our national life. It would be sad if the Tatar language left this sphere.” He noted that the preaching of sermons exclusively in the Tatar language is “the desire of the imams

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ “Vladimir Putin: ‘Russkii iazyk dlia nas—iazzyk gosudarstvennyi, ego nichem zametit’ nel’zia!’” *BiznesGazeta.ru*, July 21, 2017, <https://www.business-gazeta.ru/article/352146>.

¹²⁵ Paul Goble, “Putin: Non-Russians Must Learn Russian But Russians Mustn’t Be Forced to Learn Republic Languages,” *Window on Eurasia (blog)*, July 21, 2017, <http://windowoneurasia2.blogspot.com/2017/07/putin-non-russians-must-learn-russian.html>.

¹²⁶ “V BF ‘Zakiat DUM RT startovali uroki tatarskogo iazyka dlia podolechnykh,” Executive Committee of the World Congress of Tatars, October 9, 2020, <https://tatar-congress.org/ru/blog/topnews/v-bf-zakyat-dum-rt-startovali-uroki-tatarskogo-yazyka-dlya-podopechnyh/>.

themselves,” but the executive committee of the Congress “considers it correct.”¹²⁷ Yet the initiative sparked a wave of criticism from both secular and religious groups. Some argued that over 60% of mosque attendees will no longer be able to understand the imam. For others, the initiatives of the official clergy were another attempt to strengthen a narrow interpretation of “traditional Islam.”¹²⁸ Thus, the question about the status of Tatar language may elicit unpredictable consequences within the religious community.

The Question of Religious Pluralism

The dominant status of the official clergy causes some concern among various groups of believers. On the one hand, the clergy has made great strides toward Sufi brotherhoods. With Kamil Hazrat Samigullin having assumed the office of mufti, much has been done to include Sufi movements (Qadiriya, Shaziliyya, Naqshbandiyya-Khalidiyya, Haqqaniyya, Topbashiyya, Husainiyya, Muhammadiyya) in the category of “traditional Islam.”¹²⁹ The Tatar murids of Dagestani Sheikh Said Chirkeysky, the followers of Ismail aga, and the Sufi brotherhood of Tatar sheikh Rishat Musin have gained particular strength and legitimacy. They are widely regarded as loyal to the secular state and are also perceived as an alternative to radical—read: Salafi—Islam.

Nevertheless, despite attempts to expand the legitimate presence of these groups in the religious space, DUM RT continues to encounter opposition from marginal religious entities. Followers of groups banned in Russia (Hizb ut-Tahrir, Tablighi Jamaat, At-Takfir va Khizhra, Faizrakhmanists) continue to participate in the struggle for the loyalty of fellow believers. Their claims range from relatively modest calls for self-conscious Muslims to abide strictly by the dictates of the faith to challenging the legitimacy of state institutions. In order to ensure public safety, law enforcement agencies often apply brutal force against affiliates of these groups. In many cases, this response meets with widespread approval. Yet sometimes such measures are perceived as inadequate and as making these Islamic groups look like martyrs, generating another wave of controversy.

¹²⁷ “Bozhii tatar,” *Kommersant*, August 12, 2016, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3060955>.

¹²⁸ For further discussion of the concept of “traditional Islam,” see Lili Di Puppò, “The Paradoxes of a Localised Islamic Orthodoxy: Rethinking Tatar Traditional Islam in Russia,” *Ethnicities* 19, no. 2 (2019): 311-334; Kaarina Aitamurto, “Discussions about Indigenous, National and Transnational Islam in Russia,” *Religion, State & Society* 47, no. 2 (2019): 198-213; Lili Di Puppò and Jesko Schmoller, “Introduction: Studying Islam from Below and Interrogating Divisions in Contemporary Russia,” *Contemporary Islam* (2020): 1-12.

¹²⁹ P.P. Zaiintlinova, “Prichiny i posledstviia ukrepleniia pozitsii sufiiskogo islama v polikonfessional’nykh regionakh Rossii v nachale XXI veka,” First International Forum “Theological Heritage of Muslims of Russia,” Bolgar, October 13-19.

The Challenge of Modern Technology

The use of modern communication technologies, the importance of which became especially clear during the COVID-19 pandemic, has also revealed a number of contradictions in the local Muslim community. Under conditions of limited/restricted in-person contact with religious authorities at the mosque, digital sources of information and Internet imams came to the forefront. Today, Internet pages with religious content and Islamic pages on popular social networks are actively spreading. Researchers identified over 400 active Muslim sites as of 2019,¹³⁰ a growth that was accentuated by pandemic conditions. Internet imams' interpretation of Islam may not only differ from the Hanafi madhhab and aqidah of the Maturidis, but may also lead believers in unique directions. A recent study by a group of scholars identifies some of the most popular Islamic preachers among the Tatars today and examines their influence on followers via social media.¹³¹ Thus, for example, Rasul Tavdiryakov's social media accounts—with 34,000+ active followers on Instagram, 48,000+ on YouTube, and 3,000+ on Telegram—seem to reflect on some of the most pressing questions currently facing the Muslim community, and his views do not always line up with those of the official clergy.

Conclusion

Diversity of religious practice remains a characteristic feature of the Tatar Muslim community. Maintaining religious peace in the Republic is therefore increasingly dependent on several factors. The first of these is Tatars' status as a titular nation in the Republic. The fewer opportunities a national-religious group has to express its national identity through existing secular institutions, the higher the likelihood of sectarian tensions. Second, the attitude of the official clergy toward the issue of religious pluralism will be key to securing peace. The dominant status of the Spiritual Board can be maintained only insofar as it reflects the views and interests of the majority of believers. In order to prevent conflict situations, it needs to provide the broadest possible coverage of diverging interpretations of religious dogma. Third, the influence of the Internet may cause some Muslim believers to encounter new narratives that conflict with the official position of the uftiate. One should therefore not rule out the possibility of growing religious tensions within the Tatar Muslim community in the short- to medium-term.

¹³⁰ Rezeda Safiullina-Ibragimova and Inessa Beloglazova, "What Do Sheikh-Google and Facebook-Mufti Preach? (Theological Issues in the Muslim Blogosphere and Mobile Apps)," *International Journal of Criminology and Sociology* (2020): 1761-1766.

¹³¹ V.T. Sakaev, ed., "Risks of Radicalization of Muslim Communities in Polyconfessional Regions of Russia," RFBR project № 20-011-31642.

The “Heroes” of Unofficial Islam in Contemporary Russia: Fayzrakhman Sattarov and His Fight against the “Official Line”

Azat Akhunov

The history of post-Soviet Islam in Tatarstan is quite well studied.¹³² Nevertheless, there has been only limited study of Islamic communities that appeared in the public arena in the late 1980s and early 1990s. During the “Islamic revival,” when the religious literacy of the population was still low, these groups were able to gather a decent number of followers and did as much to set the religious agenda as the official clergy. Among such groups, the most prominent was the Fayzrakhmanists, a sect¹³³ founded by Fayzrakhman Sattarov (1929-2015) during the Soviet era. Its ideology is of great interest to researchers as a unique phenomenon in the history of post-Soviet Islam in Tatarstan and the Volga-Ural region as a whole. A number of works¹³⁴ have been devoted to the Fayzrakhmanists, but it is too early to say that this topic has been comprehensively studied. This paper considers their ideology and lifestyle, paying attention to various aspects of their activities.

In June 2017, together with the Islamologist Renat Bekkin, I conducted field research in the city of Naberezhnye Chelny (Republic of Tatarstan), where several Fayzrakhmanists had settled in a

¹³² See, for example, Gasym Kerimov, “Islam and Muslims in Russia since the Collapse of the Soviet Union,” *Religion, State & Society* 24, no. 2-3 (1996): 183-192; Renat Nabyev, *Islam i gosudarstvo: Kul'turno-istoricheskaya evoliutsiya musul'manskoi religii na Evropeiskom Vostoke* (Kazan: Kazan State University, 2002); Rafik Mukhametshin, *Tatary i islam v XX veke (Islam v obshchestvennoi i politicheskoi zhizni tatar i Tatarstana)* (Kazan: Fen, 2003); Valiulla Yakupov, *Islam v Tatarstane v 1990-e gg.* (Kazan: Iman, 2005); Ruslan Ibragimov, *Vlast' i religiia v Tatarstane v 1940-1980-e gg.* (Kazan: Kazan State University, 2005); Kimitaka Matsuzato, “The Regional Context of Islam in Russia: Diversities along the Volga,” *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 47, no. 4 (2006): 449-461; Roland Dannreuther and Luke March, eds., *Russia and Islam: State, Society and Radicalism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010); Renat Bekkin, ed., *The Concept of Traditional Islam in Modern Islamic Discourse in Russia* (Sarajevo: Center for Advanced Studies, 2020).

¹³³ We define this group as a “sect,” a point that will be elaborated upon below.

¹³⁴ Rais Suleimanov, “Fayzrakhmanisty: sekta islamskogo proiskhozhdeniia v Tatarstane v nachale XXI veka,” in *Evrasiiskoe prostranstvo: Tsivilizatsionnye krizisy i poisk putei grazhdanskogo soglasiia: materialy 1ogo Kazanskogo evraziiskogo nauchnogo foruma (30 iunია-2 iulia 2008 g.)*, Vol. I (Kazan: Intelpess+, 2013), 6-12; Azat Akhunov, “Fayzrakhmanisty,” in *Islam v Tatarstane: entsiklopedicheskii slovar'* (Moscow: Medina, 2017), 226-227; Renat Bekkin, “‘Ukorotit' khvost nezakonnykh religioznykh deiatelei.' Ob ideinoi evoliutsii v zgliadov Fayzrakhmana Sattarova na rol' ‘ofitsial'nogo dukhovenstva' v religioznoi zhizni musul'man Rossii,” *Gosudarstvo, religiia, tserkov' v Rossii i za rubezhom* 4 (2018): 277-323; Renat Bekkin, “The Fayzrakhmanists of the Volga Region as a Religious Community Opposing “Traditional Islam,”” in *The Concept of Traditional Islam in Modern Islamic Discourse in Russia*, ed. Renat Bekkin (Sarajevo: Center for Advanced Studies, 2020), 135-155.

single apartment. We conducted an in-depth interview with sect leader (*Amir*) Gumar Ganiev.¹³⁵ These and other materials form the basis of the present research.

Perestroika. Glasnost. Uskorenie, Soviet Collapse: A Brief History of the Movement of Fayzrakhman Sattarov

The Fayzrakhmanists are named after the founder of the sect, Fayzrakhman Sattarov (*Nasrallah-Babai*), and describe themselves as “true Muslims.” Sattarov received religious education in Bukhara before serving as an imam in many official mosques, including Leningrad, Rostov-on-Don, Ufa, and Oktyabrsk. In the 1970s he served as deputy mufti of the Central Spiritual Board of Muslims in Ufa. In 1980, he put forward his candidacy for the post of mufti but was not elected. Offended by this, he decided to create his own Islamic movement. While working as a janitor, he gradually formed his “teaching,” attracting a group of adepts-supporters.¹³⁶

From 1998 to 2014, his sect was based in Kazan at 41 Torfianaia Street (in a rural part of the Sovetsky district) on a closed piece of land that featured a mosque, madrasa, residential buildings, and outbuildings. During that period, there were an average of between 20 and 70 followers living there, not counting children; most of them were Tatars, but some were Russian Muslims.

The community is built on implicit obedience to its leader, and the key positions in the sect are occupied by Sattarov’s closest relatives. The popularity of the Fayzrakhmanists rose in the early 1990s, when a general wave of interest in religion prompted a number of people to join. At that time, the Fayzrakhmanists achieved state registration by the Kazan administration as a legal entity under the name “*Qur’aniyun va hadithiyun*” (Followers of the Qur’an and Hadith) and received a plot of land for the construction of a mosque (this was later lost). Members of the community preached in Bashkortostan, Naberezhnye Chelny, Almetevsk, and Nizhnekamsk before settling at 41 Torfianaia Street in 1998.

Until recently, younger members of the community worked as market traders, providing the main source of financial support for the sect. Sattarov categorically forbade them to pay for retail space and utilities, as a result of which they repeatedly ran afoul of the authorities and were often arrested. On principle, the Fayzrakhmanists do not pay taxes on income, land, or property, nor even for gas.

¹³⁵ Author’s interview with Gumar Ganiev, June 7, 2017.

¹³⁶ The Soviet period of Sattarov’s life and work is discussed in detail in Bekkin, “The Fayzrakhmanists.” This chapter will focus on the events of the post-Soviet period.

In 2007, the Fayzrakhmanists preached at mosques, churches, and synagogues in Kazan, informing those present of the arrival of the “new prophet” Fayzrakhman Sattarov. The Mufti of the Republic of Tatarstan, Gusman Iskhakov, was consequently compelled to make an official statement about what he saw as a case of apostasy. Between 2008 and 2012, the Fayzrakhmanists avoided their usual media activity. In August 2012, after the July assassination attempt on mufti of Tatarstan Ildus Fayzov, security forces conducted a preventive operation in the community, as a result of which a Tatar-language manuscript with “signs of extremism” was confiscated.

In February 2013, the Sovetsky District Court of Kazan recognized the activities of the Fayzrakhmanists as extremist and banned them.¹³⁷ According to the prosecutor’s office, the court also recognized as extremist a collection of handwritten books by Fayzrakhman Sattarov. The forensic examination showed that the materials in the collection, which provide the sect’s ideological foundation, are aimed “at forming a negative perception of representatives of other religious groups and an aggressive model of behavior towards them.” In addition, “a number of interpretations do not correspond to the classical concepts of Islam.”¹³⁸

In November 2013, the same court supported the prosecutor’s office’s claim that members of the Fayzrakhmanist group no longer had the right to use the residential premises on Torfianaia Street and should be evicted without being provided with other residential premises and removed from the official register of place of residence. In August 2014, the remaining 12 members of the community were evicted by bailiffs from their premises on Torfianaia Street and the house was sealed.

Roman Silant’ev, a well-known religious scholar who is the author of a number of works on the recent history of Islam in Russia, concluded in 2017 that the Fayzrakhmanists did not pose a threat to society.¹³⁹ Nevertheless, the final blow to the Fayzrakhmanists was dealt in June 2019. The leader of the community, *Amir* Gumar Ganiev, and a number of activists were found guilty by the court of committing various crimes and were sentenced to terms of between 5.5 and 7 years in prison.¹⁴⁰ Thus, it can be stated that since 2019, the Fayzrakhmanists have ceased to exist as a sect.

¹³⁷ “V Tatarstane po rezul’tatam prokurorskoï proverki sud priznal ekstremistskoï i zapretil deiatel’nost’ religioznoi gruppy t.n. “fayzrakhmanistov,” General Prosecutor’s Office of the Russian Federation, February 25, 2013, accessed January 15, 2021, <https://genproc.gov.ru/special/smi/news/news-81260/>.

¹³⁸ “V Kazani priznan ekstremistskim sbornik rukopisnykh knig lidera religioznoi gruppy ‘Fayzrakhmanisty,’” *TatarInform.ru*, August 22, 2013, <https://www.tatar-inform.ru/news/society/22-08-2013/v-kazani-priznan-ekstremistskim-sbornik-rukopisnyh-knig-lidera-religioznoy-gruppy-fayzrahmanisty-5673538>.

¹³⁹ Roman Silant’ev, “K probleme klassifikatsii organizatsii, zapreshchennykh v Rossii,” *Vestnik Moskovskogo gosudarstvennogo lingvisticheskogo universiteta. Gumanitarnye nauki* 9/781 (2017): 185.

¹⁴⁰ “Mestnye zhiteli priznany vinovnymi v osushchestvlenii ekstremistskoï deiatel’nosti,” Investigative Committee of the Russian Federation in the Republic of Tatarstan, June 19, 2019, accessed January 15, 2021, <https://tatarstan.sledcom.ru/news/item/1365891/>.

The details of this case were not covered in the media. The Investigative Committee, meanwhile, only published enough information to reveal under which articles of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation the Fayzrakhmanists were convicted. Fifty-two-year-old Gumar Ganiev, 41-year-old Rustam Galiev, 61-year-old Mudaris Ibragimov, 58-year-old Talgat Gizatullin, and 58-year-old Glimyan Khazetdinov were convicted under different articles of the Criminal Code. All of them were found guilty under parts 1 and 2 of Article 282.2 of the Criminal Code (“organization of the activities of a religious association, in respect of which the court has adopted a legally binding decision to ban activities in connection with the implementation of extremist activities”), part 1.1 of Article 282.2 of the Criminal Code (“inducement, recruitment, and other involvement of a person in the activities of an extremist organization”), and part 1.1 of Article 282 of the Criminal Code (“inducement, recruitment, and other involvement of a person in the activities of an extremist organization”).

Since the Fayzrakhmanists were recognized as extremist in 2013 and the sect’s activities banned, and since the members of this group did not deny their affiliation with it, all decisions were taken within the framework of the current legislation.¹⁴¹

The Ideological and Religious Views of Fayzrakhman Sattarov and His Supporters

Fayzrakhman Sattarov generated both secular and religious ideas on his own. Having appointed himself *Rasullah*, the Messenger of Allah, only he could pass the “true knowledge” to his flock. According to the basic tenets of Islam, only those who have the status of *rasul* can bring new law and Scriptures to the Ummah. Officially, there are five such individuals: Nuh, Ibrahim, Musa, ‘Isa, and Muhammad. By including himself in this list, Sattarov conferred on himself a prophetic status. If the Prophet Muhammad received instructions from Allah in the form of *wahi* (revelations), the leader of the Fayzrakhmanists had a connection with the Lord through his dreams. Thus, all his instructions had to be obeyed without question, since the words he spoke were not his, but “the words of Allah”; he was only an intermediary between the Almighty and his flock.

The image of Sattarov as a madman or even a freak that formed as a result of media coverage did not correspond to reality. In 1964, he successfully completed a nine-year course at the Mir-i-Arab madrasa in Bukhara, receiving the highest grade of “excellent” in almost all religious and secular subjects (including Constitution of the USSR). The only subject in which the examiners rated him

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

merely “good” was Uzbek literature.¹⁴² And in 2008, the head of the Department for Religious Affairs under the Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Tatarstan, Renat Valiullin,¹⁴³ assessed Sattarov as “a [spiritually] strong, sufficiently literate person who is aware of all the novelties of public life.”¹⁴⁴

First, let us consider Sattarov’s secular views to better understand how he was able to gather a fairly large number of supporters. Between 2012 and 2013, the independent Kazan newspaper *Zvezda Povolzh’ia* published a number of articles written by the leader of the Fayzrakhmanists under the general title “Let’s Revive the USSR” and signed “F. Sattarov, the Messenger of Allah.”¹⁴⁵ This was the time when persecution of his community was at its peak, and perhaps Sattarov was trying to gain the indulgence of the authorities through messages showing that he was not so different from them. These publications absolutely did not correspond to the image of Sattarov as a “religious fanatic” and “extremist” that had developed in previous years. But for those who were familiar with his biography, there was nothing new in these publications.

Fayzrakhman Sattarov was born in 1929. Almost his entire adult life was spent in the USSR, and his personal views on the domestic and foreign policy of the Soviet state always coincided with the official position. Sattarov was never a dissident nor the object of persecution. In general, his career was quite successful: throughout his life, he held high-ranking positions in the official Islamic hierarchy. Previous research has described the Soviet period of his life in detail using archival documents.¹⁴⁶

Not only did Sattarov not go beyond the bounds set by the authorities, but he also spoke in the style and language of the Soviet party elites —anticipating the expectations of the officials who controlled the religious sphere. One example of this is an extract from his Friday sermon dedicated to the 50th anniversary of the October Revolution:

¹⁴² His certificate of completion of the nine-year course at the “Mir-i Arab” madrasa is reproduced in Bekkin, “Ukorotit’ khvost nezakonnykh religioznykh deiatelei,” 281.

¹⁴³ Listed as “commissioner for religious cults” in the Soviet table of ranks.

¹⁴⁴ Rashid Minhaj, “Bez dini turkemner dibez hokukyj kyrda sekta digen tushenche juk,” *Vatanyrm Tatarstan* 127-128/25816-25817 (2008): 17.

¹⁴⁵ Fayzrakhman Sattarov, “Vozrodim SSSR,” *Zvezda Povolzh’ia*, October 26, 2012, <https://zvezdapovolzhya.ru/obshchestvo/vozrodim-sssr-236-18-2324-26-10-2012/>; Fayzrakhman Sattarov, “Vozrodim SSSR,” *Zvezda Povolzh’ia*, November 15, 2012, <https://zvezdapovolzhya.ru/obshchestvo/vozrodim-sssr-15-11-2012.html>; Fayzrakhman Sattarov, “Vozrodim SSSR,” *Zvezda Povolzh’ia*, December 20, 2012, <https://zvezdapovolzhya.ru/obshchestvo/vozrodim-sssr-20-12-2012.html>; Fayzrakhman Sattarov, “Vozrodim SSSR,” *Zvezda Povolzh’ia*, April 28, 2013, <https://zvezdapovolzhya.ru/obshchestvo/vozrodim-sssr-28-04-2013.html>.

¹⁴⁶ Bekkin, “Ukorotit’ khvost nezakonnykh religioznykh deiatelei,” 281–323.

Like our beloved prophet, when the Holy Qur'an was revealed to him, preached the most beautiful idea of Sharia for 23 years [...] and made everyone [...] who believed him into brothers. Thus, he ended the enmity between the nations in the villages and cities. In the same way, our beloved Soviet state for 50 years has transformed the multinational people into one friendly, united family, like brothers from the same mother and father.¹⁴⁷

Another example, from a sermon he gave in Rostov-on-Don in 1970:

The upcoming month [November 1970—A.A.] is important for two reasons. This is the month of fasting. This is the month in which the Soviet government was born. In this month, all Muslims should pray to Allah... We Muslims should pray for our beloved leader and liberator V. I. Lenin, and we are sure that such a person who has brought freedom and happiness to the peoples will receive God's reward, and his place will be in paradise.¹⁴⁸

In June 2017, during field research in Naberezhnye Chelny, I was able to become acquainted with a number of documents stored in the house of the leader of the Fayzrakhmanists, Gumar Ganiev.¹⁴⁹ Among them was a draft of Sattarov's speech prepared for the conference dedicated to the 1,200th anniversary of the birth of Imam al-Bukhari according to the Islamic calendar.¹⁵⁰ The forum, which brought together the world's leading Islamic theologians, was held in Samarkand on November 13-14, 1974, and was intended to symbolize the humanism and tolerance of the Soviet government toward Islam.¹⁵¹ In geopolitical terms, this and similar forums were intended to strengthen relations

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 293.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 293.

¹⁴⁹ Documents of Gumar Ganiev (FMA-DGG), June 7, 2017. Until now, there was no published biographical information about Ganiev. During the preparation of this article for publication, the Islamic scholar Renat Bekkin provided me with an electronic copy of the notebook in which Ganiev outlined in Tatar his biography and the history of the Fayzrakhmanist community. Chronologically, it covers the period 1966-2011. From this text, it appears that Gumar Ganiev was born on September 25, 1966, in the village of Sarsaz in the Sharansky district of the Bashkir ASSR. Between 1981 and 1984, he studied at SPTU-4 (Secondary Vocational School) in Oktyabrsky, Bashkir ASSR. At that time, Fayzrakhman Sattarov worked as an imam in this city. Ganiev became acquainted with his views through an elderly woman who rented him a room and who was a follower of Sattarov's teachings. He met Fayzrakhmanist activists in February 1995 and gave his *baigat* (oath) in that same month. In August 1996, he and other activists moved to Kazan to "build madrassas" and preach Sattarov's teachings. In 1998, they built a mosque in the village of Torfyanny in the Sovetsky district of Kazan, which would be followed by residential buildings. In that same year, the majority of the community moved to Kazan.

¹⁵⁰ Manuscript of the report of Fayzrakhman Sattarov (FMA-DGG), June 7, 2017. Draft. 36 sheets (in Tatar language, in Cyrillic and in Arabic script).

¹⁵¹ A. Usmankhodzhayev, *Zhizn' muftiiev Babakhanovykh: sluzhenie vozrozhdeniiu Islama v Sovetskom Soiuze* (Moscow and Nizhny Novgorod: Medina, 2008), 3, http://www.idmedina.ru/books/history_culture/?1191#pg3.

between the USSR and the Muslim countries of the Third World. In addition, judging by a resolution taken at the conference, its participants unanimously condemned the militaristic policies of Israel and other imperialist states (i.e., the recent Yom Kippur War).¹⁵²

Sattarov, in his speech, focused on the success of the Soviet government in the fields of science, culture, and education. He tried to connect all this with the basic positions of Islam and specifically of Imam al-Bukhari, who, according to him, sought to “develop knowledge and advocate for social justice.” In Sattarov’s understanding, all these ideas were successfully implemented by the Soviet Union. He argued that the October Revolution of 1917 had led to the triumph of social justice in the Soviet Union. Progress in the field of knowledge, he added, was also visible to the naked eye: the USSR was now the most advanced state in terms of technological progress.¹⁵³ All this, he argued, was possible only “by the will of Allah.”¹⁵⁴

Like his contemporaries, Sattarov studied the speeches of the leaders of the Communist Party of the USSR. A number of documents—including synopses of General Secretary of the CPSU Leonid Brezhnev’s speeches, belong to this time.¹⁵⁵ Sattarov wrote down some quotations in Russian that apparently served to justify and consolidate his theory.

In fact, the 2012-13 series of publications entitled “Let’s Revive the USSR” echoes Sattarov’s ideas from almost forty years before. In these texts, he did not say anything new, but simply expanded on his earlier ideas. “In order to unite the people as a single community in the state of Russia, and then in the USSR, first of all, we need the mercy of Allah Almighty,” Sattarov wrote.¹⁵⁶ At the same time, he analyzed the concept of “the mercy of Allah” as a separate theological problem in a very detailed and professional way, based on the Quran and Hadith. We can therefore summarize Sattarov’s argument as follows: In the 1970s, the mercy (or will) of Allah was fulfilled, and a just state was built in the USSR.¹⁵⁷ The Soviets managed to unite the most diverse groups of people—in terms of social status, nationality, and religious views—into a single Soviet nation. This could become the

¹⁵² Materials of the conference dedicated to the 1,200th anniversary of the birth of Imam al-Bukhari (FMA-DGG), June 7, 2017. Sheets printed on a typewriter (in Arabic).

¹⁵³ Manuscript of the report of Fayzrakhman Sattarov (FMA-DGG), June 7, 2017, 3, 20.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 5.

¹⁵⁵ Synopsis of Leonid I. Brezhnev’s speech at an official meeting dedicated to the 20th anniversary of the Virgin Lands Campaign (PMA-DGG). Quoted in *Pravda* No. 108 of April 18, 1974.

¹⁵⁶ Sattarov, “Vozrodim SSSR,” November 15, 2012.

¹⁵⁷ This was the time of so-called “developed socialism” (“развитый социализм”) - the last stage before the onset of communism, the arrival of which was expected in 1980. Therefore, in the 1970s, Sattarov claimed that the USSR as a just and almost “Islamic” state had already been built.

basis for a just (probably Islamic) state in the future. At this historical moment, to return to the original position (that is, the initial Caliphate), the mercy of Allah is necessary.

This is reminiscent of the *Uchronie* of nineteenth-century French philosopher Charles Renouvier—a utopian reconstruction of history not as it really was, but as it could have been.

The Soviet and anti-imperialist views contained in Sattarov's works were fully adopted by his disciples and followers. Indeed, they were even repeated by Sattarov's deputy, *Amir* Gumar Ganiev, during our interview with him in June 2017. In his opinion ("Allah Almighty told me so," he said), "America is our enemy," as are the Baltic States. Ukraine and Uzbekistan, meanwhile, used to live at the expense of Russia and now cannot do without it: "For some reason they call Russia a robber, an occupier. But all of them work in Russia." Like Sattarov, Ganiev argued in favor of the revival of the USSR:

To live together with other nations as friends. Now a Muslim and a Christian (a *mushrik*), they are the same—why do they fight? Or different madhhabs are at war with each other, but they are the same before Allah. They are on the same level—let them not fight among themselves.¹⁵⁸

Now let us turn to Sattarov's religious views. Are the Fayzrakhmanists a sect or a religious community? Since 1994, the field of Russian religious studies has used various terms for such religious groups: *heretics*, *sect*, *totalitarian sect*, *destructive cult*, and *cult*. Sometimes these are treated as different concepts and sometimes they are used interchangeably.¹⁵⁹ In the Russian religious and philosophical tradition, the term "sect" was originally almost identical in its meaning to the concept of "heresy." With the onset of active missionary activity by various new religious movements (NSM) in the post-Soviet period and their subsequent prohibition, the connotation of "sect" changed from neutral to very negative. Today, therefore, this term is closer in meaning to the English "cult" and refers to a social group that is defined by its unusual religious, spiritual, or philosophical beliefs or by a common interest in a particular person, object, or goal.

In his study, Bekkin proposed characterizing the Fayzrakhmanists as a community. In his view, since there is no orthodoxy in Islam, it is inappropriate to talk about the existence of sects. The Islamic term *firqa*, he argues, is used in relation to religious individuals; an Islamic group cannot be termed a "sect" in Russian because this term has a well-defined meaning that is linked to Christianity

¹⁵⁸ Interview with Gumar Ganiev (FMA), June 7, 2017.

¹⁵⁹ Roman Kon', *Vvedenie v sektovedenie* (Nizhny Novgorod: Nizhny Novgorod Theological Seminary, 2008), 17.

and inapplicable to Islam.¹⁶⁰ Religious scholar Rais Suleymanov, on the contrary, argues that “the Fayzrakhmanism that emerged on Tatar soil, although not widespread, is a vivid example of a totalitarian sect of Islamic origin.”¹⁶¹

In this study, I will use the term “sect” in the classical sense defined by sociologist Max Weber in the early twentieth century: it is a newly formed religious group that forms elements of its parent (“true”) religion as a sign of protest. Valiulla Yakupov, a researcher of Islam in Tatarstan and former deputy Chairman of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Tatarstan (1963-2012), noted in his monograph that “he [Sattarov—A.A.] is certainly a charismatic leader, so the group he created bears the imprint of his personality.”¹⁶²

Looking at his secular views, we could see that the personal, pro-Soviet views of the leader of the Fayzrakhmanists were almost unchanged in the post-Soviet period and fully accepted by his supporters. The same was true of his religious teachings.

Sattarov declared himself to be a prophet and formed a community built on a syncretic doctrine that incorporates elements of different Islamic schools, including Shi’ism; features of Judaism; and the organization of economic and everyday life characteristic of the Amish community. An important source of income was forced donations. Members of the community were obliged to “work for Allah” and give one-fifth of their income (*khums*, a practice borrowed from Shiism) to the mosque. The obligation to pay the *khums* is incumbent on all members, including pensioners, orphans, and the poor (“we calculate the *khums* that is given away from all profits; other Muslims calculate it only from the spoils of war”).¹⁶³

Saturday is a holiday for Fayzrakhmanists. On this day, they cannot work or do worldly things, but only pray, read the Quran, or fast. This seems to be a direct borrowing from Judaism, although the leader of the sect, Gumar Ganiev, claims that this tradition is originally Islamic and that the authentic hadiths that could prove this were deliberately destroyed.¹⁶⁴

In terms of content, Fayzrakhmanist teachings are a creative mixture of various schools and trends in Islam. The structure of the group, meanwhile, is analogous to a Sufi order. Sattarov himself claimed that he belonged to a certain *silsila* and that he was the 34th generation in the line of descent from the Prophet Muhammad, or Messenger No. 239. The Fayzrakhmanists believe that all religions,

¹⁶⁰ Bekkin, “Ukorotit’ khvost nezakonnykh religioznykh deiatelei,” 278.

¹⁶¹ Suleimanov, “Fayzrakhmanisty,” 12.

¹⁶² Yakupov, “Islam,” 125.

¹⁶³ Interview with Gumar Ganiev (FMA), June 7, 2017.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

including official Islam, are deceptions and that the truth is known only to their leader, who communicates directly with Allah in his dreams, which only he is allowed to interpret. Together with the Qur'an and the Sunnah, dreams constitute the third source of their teaching. Recently, the leader of the sect was allowed to dream of Allah and other members of the group. For example, one of the leaders of the community had a dream in which colossal birds moved the Islamic relic of the Black Stone of the Kaaba directly to the community house on Torfianaia Street in Kazan. According to the Fayzrakhmanists, the Kaaba is still there, and therefore they all perform the Hajj every day. Thus, each of their prayers is equal to a thousand ordinary prayers, as if they were said in Mecca.¹⁶⁵

Sattarov recognized the hadiths, but contrary to tradition, he put the collection of Abu Dawud al-Sijistani (817-888) above that of Imam al-Bukhari (841-870). He also "checked" their validity or strength through his dreams. He further developed a "doctrine of Iman." "Imans" are numbered (#1, # 2, etc.) and the religious training of sectarians goes according to this numbering. The Fayzrakhmanists' doctrine has also inherent apocalyptic motifs. According to them, catastrophes and natural disasters (earthquakes, floods, and hurricanes) will soon occur on Earth. The harbinger of this will be the sun, which will rise from the opposite side. Those who have not converted to the true faith will die; only those gathered under the roof of the Fayzrakhman Sattarov mosque will remain.

A distinctive sign of the community is a black, green, and white flag placed over the mosque. Black is the false faith with which people come to them, green is the process of re-education of these people, and white is the "true faith." All Fayzrakhmanists have a religious "passport"—a small rectangle of paper that contains, in addition to their name and address, the following words: "I ask you to bury me in the land of Allah and divide my property according to the Qur'an." This passport, as well as a believer's will, are to be carried at all times.¹⁶⁶

Conclusion

Using the example of Fayzrakhman Sattarov, we can see that the Muslim Ummah in the USSR was not homogeneous: there were "heroes" who opposed the "general line" determined by the state through the system of Soviet muftiates. As the Abyz movement and the Vaisov movement previously, Fayzrakhmanists advocated maximum isolation from the official authorities and their guides, namely muftis. In 1788, after the creation of the Orenburg Mohammedan Spiritual Assembly, the Abyzes did not accept the position of the official clergy, which they perceived as direct administrative

¹⁶⁵ Akhunov, "Fayzrakhmanisty," 226-227.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 227.

interference in Muslim religious affairs. Vaisov's followers also opposed official Islamic institutions. The leader of this movement, Bagautdin Vaisov (1810-1893), was actually the forerunner of Fayzrakhman Sattarov. According to Vaisov, the Islamic faith is distorted and must be "cleansed" of excess layers, a view akin to the ideas of Salafia.

Vaisov began to gather followers and teach them "the true faith." He united a group of his supporters in the Firqa-i-najiya (Salvation Party). This name goes back to the hadith of the Prophet Muhammad that states that after his death, the Ummah will be divided into 73 communities; only one, containing the most righteous "saved" (*najiya*), will be preserved, while members of all the rest will go to hell. According to the Vaisovites, Vaisov belonged to the group of those who will be saved because he was a member of the family of the Prophet Muhammad—another parallel between this movement and the Fayzrakhmanists.

Despite the similarity of its ideas to those of the Abyzes and the Vaisovites, Sattarov's group also had its differences. Sattarov did not deny the role of the state, but believed that it should be both secular and religious ("if you live only according to the Quran, how can you feed the population?"). Moreover, he allowed for the possibility that members of his group might participate in political activities or campaign through the media. Thus, while he did not abandon the *da'wat* (the call), the ultimate goal of which is to create an ideal society of Muslims living exclusively according to the Quran and the Sunnah of the Prophet, he understood that this is an incredibly difficult path and an almost impossible task.¹⁶⁷ Nevertheless, the Fayzrakhmanists were convinced that they should continue to preach, like the Prophet Nuh (Noah), who spent 950 years on this mission.¹⁶⁸

Like the Abyz and Vaisov movements, the Fayzrakhmanists emerged at times of heavy state pressure on Islam. Representatives of the Abyz movement advocated the preservation of Islamic traditions and Muslim education in the conditions of isolated rural communities. Vaisov's followers opposed both Russification and the institutional Islam. Sattarov began to develop his ideas during the period of so-called "developed socialism," when the management of religious institutions passed into the hands of the state. All three movements were to some extent of a protest nature and were directed against official structures, but they were united by a common belief in a "fair tsar" (Alexander III, Leonid Brezhnev, etc.). They all idealized the past: the Abyz and Vaisov movements referred to the

¹⁶⁷ Audio recording of interview with Fayzrakhman Sattarov on April 22, 1999 (Torfyanoy village, Tatarstan, Russia) by Galina Yemelyanova, researcher of Islam in Eurasia at the Centre of Contemporary Central Asia and the Caucasus, SOAS University of London. I thank Galina Yemelyanova for allowing me to use the materials of this interview in the present article.

¹⁶⁸ Interview with Gumar Ganiev (FMA), June 7, 2017.

ancient Bulgar (pre-Mongol Tatar) civilization, while Sattarov and his supporters looked back to the period of the early Caliphate, the image of which they interpolated to the Soviet Union.

Sattarov and his supporters were categorically opposed to the division of Muslims into any parties, movements, or *madhhabs* and considered both Sunnis and Shiites to be lost. Like Vaisov, Sattarov believed that only he and his followers would be saved and that all others would go to hell. Notably, the Fayzrakhmanists' adherence to "pure Islam" has nothing to do with the ideology of the Salafis, who, having separated into a different group, they believe will also end up in hellfire. The Hanafis, too, are considered outside the law: although Sattarov believed that Abu Hanifa (699-767), the founder of the Hanafi school of jurisprudence, lived righteously according to the Quran, he claimed that his students wrongfully "distorted his words."¹⁶⁹

In his research, Bekkin cites the opinion of Damir Shagaviev, a specialist in modern Islamic movements and trends, that the Fayzrakhmanist community in the form in which it existed until the end of the 2000s can be designated as a Takfiri jama'at and the leader of the community understood as a figure similar to the Salafi theologian al-Albani (1914-1999).¹⁷⁰ Nevertheless, based on the above analysis of the Fayzrakhmanists—both their religious doctrine and their lifestyle—we can reasonably say that the ideology of this group is unique and has no direct equivalent in the local history of Islam.

¹⁶⁹ Audio recording of interview with Fayzrakhman Sattarov, April 22, 1999.

¹⁷⁰ Bekkin, "Ukorotit' khvost nezakonnykh religioznykh deiatelei," 280.

To Be a Muslim in a Crimean Tatar Way:

Ethnic Culture and Global Trends

Elmira Muratova

Since the mid-1990s, Crimea has enjoyed increased attention from representatives of various global Islamic groups. By that time, most of the Muslims who had been deported from its territory in 1944 had returned to the peninsula. The history of Islam in Crimea is mainly a history of the Crimean Tatars, a people formed on the territory of the peninsula in the 13th – 16th centuries. Crimea was once one of the centers of Islamic culture in Eastern Europe, producing texts on philosophy, mathematics, and law known throughout the Muslim world, as well as scholars who achieved significant career growth in the key Islamic cities: Cairo, Mecca, Damascus, and Istanbul.¹⁷¹

However, little evidence of this rich Islamic heritage remains in post-Soviet Crimea. Upon returning to their homeland, the Crimean Tatars discovered that the Soviet government had attempted to ideologically transform the Crimean cultural space:¹⁷² cities and streets had been renamed, mosques and madrassas had been used for different purposes, and cemeteries and libraries had been destroyed. The religious revival of the 1990s began almost from scratch and carried considerable material costs. It was under these conditions that representatives of various Islamic groups and movements began to enter Crimea.¹⁷³ Their help in building mosques and teaching Crimean Muslims the basics of religion was perceived as a manifestation of Muslim solidarity. Only later, at the end of the 1990s, did Crimean Muslims begin to perceive that they were losing their ethnic identity. This feeling was reinforced by the need to accept their new status as an ethnic minority in a territory where the Crimean Tatars had once been the state-forming people.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷¹ See Mykhayl Yakubovych, *Filosofska dumka Krymskoho khanstva* (Kyiv: Komora, 2016).

¹⁷² Olena Soboleva, "Crimean Tatar Religiosity: Between Privacy and Politics," *Euxeinos. Culture and Governance in the Black Sea Region* 24 (2017): 52.

¹⁷³ See Elmira Muratova, "'He Who Pays the Piper Calls the Tune': Muslim Sponsors of Islamic Revival in Crimea," *Religion, State and Society* 37, no. 3 (2009): 263-276.

¹⁷⁴ According to the Ukrainian census of 2001, Crimean Tatars numbered about 243,000 people, or 12 percent of the Crimean population. See O.G. Osaulenko, ed., *Natsional'nyi sklad naseleniia Ukrainy ta yogo movni oznaki za danyimi Vseukrains'kogo perepisu naseleniia 2001 r.* (Kiev: State Committee of Statistics of Ukraine, 2003).

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the influence of global Islamic projects on the culture of the Crimean Tatars, the formation of the discourse of “our” vs. “alien” Islam, and the notion of “Islam in the Crimean Tatar way.” The paper is based on the author's field research, conducted in Crimea over the past 15 years: focus groups, interviews, and analyses of documents and Crimean media. The paper first discusses the interaction between cultural and religious belonging during the deportation period. It then explores the transformation of the role of Islam after the Crimean Tatars’ repatriation to their homeland. In conclusion, it outlines two “models” of Islam in post-Soviet Crimea.

Crimean Tatar Culture and Islam During the Deportation Period

Ethnic identity occupies a central place in the identity of the Crimean Tatars; it is far more significant than civic or regional identities. This is evident from many studies conducted in post-Soviet Crimea.¹⁷⁵ This state of affairs is largely due to twentieth-century history, specifically the 1944 deportation and the repatriation to their homeland fifty years later. In exile, the Crimean Tatars were well aware that they had been deported on ethnic/national grounds—that is, that they had been exiled as a collective entity united by a common “guilt.”¹⁷⁶ Life in exile in places of special settlement and the discriminatory policy of the Soviet authorities toward them on the basis of ethnic criteria consolidated the Crimean Tatars and strengthened their ethnic identity. There was a strong understanding that survival in such unfavorable conditions, when the Crimean Tatars were forbidden from even being listed on the register of peoples of the USSR, was only possible through unity and mutual support.

In such conditions, Islam played an important role in maintaining ethnic identity. During the Soviet period and especially after the deportation, Crimean Tatar religiosity shifted to the family domain under the pressure of forced secularization. Islam existed mainly in the form of rites and rituals that accompanied the life cycle: birth, marriage and family, and funeral. The peculiarities of the religious rituals of the Crimean Tatars—for example, holding *dua* (collective recitations of the Quran

¹⁷⁵ Svetlana Chervonnaya, “Vozvrashchenie krymskotatarskogo naroda: problemy etnokul’turnogo vozrozhdeniia,” in *Krymskotatarskoe natsional’noe dvizhenie* 4 (1994-1997), ed. Mikhail Guboklo (Moscow, 1997); Olga Dukhnich, “Psikhologicheskie osobennosti sokhrannosti i retransliatsii identichnosti krymskikh tatar v AR Krym,” *Nauka i osvita* 4 (2013): 18-24; V. Mukomel and S. Khaikin, “Krimskie Tatary posle ‘Krimskoi Vesni’: transformatsiia identichnostei,” *Monitoring obshestvennogo mneniia: Ekonomicheskie i sotsial’nye peremeny* 3 (2016): 51-68.

¹⁷⁶ In May 1944, the entire Crimean Tatar people was deported from Crimea on charges of collaboration with the Nazis during their occupation of Crimea in 1941-1944 and resettled in Uzbekistan, the Urals, and other republics and regions of the USSR.

and *zikr*) on happy and sad occasions¹⁷⁷—contributed to building institutions of spiritual authority and leadership around people who knew Islam and could read the Quran. These rituals also served to transmit religious knowledge across the generations and provided a place for maintaining family/communal relations and exchanging socially significant information.

Situation after the Repatriation to Crimea

Islam continued to play these roles in the first years after the Crimean Tatars' repatriation in the early 1990s. With time, however, Islam became not just an important component of the ethnic culture of the Crimean Tatars, but a key factor of their ethno-political mobilization for the fulfillment of their collective rights.¹⁷⁸ These rights were achieved with great difficulty, over the opposition of the regional (Crimean) and central (Kyivan) authorities, and notwithstanding Tatarophobic sentiments.¹⁷⁹

Islam played several roles in the ethno-political mobilization of the Crimean Tatars. First, it served to delineate the ethnic boundaries of the Crimean Tatars and slow down assimilation into the Slavic entity. Islam made it possible to build an “us-versus-them” dichotomy on the basis not only of language and culture, but also of religion. Moreover, Islam imparted religious legitimacy to the protest actions of the Crimean Tatars. Islamic slogans (for example, “*Allahu Akbar!*”) became a part of political actions, as did collective *dua* during rallies, land grabs, etc.

The use of Islam for ethno-political mobilization stemmed from the alliance of secular and religious organizations that existed at that time. The *Mejlis* of the Crimean Tatar people¹⁸⁰ served as a representative of the collective rights of the people. This was a secular institution whose ideology was Crimean Tatar nationalism and whose goal was to achieve national-territorial autonomy within Ukraine. Religious issues fell under the jurisdiction of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of

¹⁷⁷ Soboleva, “Crimean Tatar Religiosity,” 53.

¹⁷⁸ Vladimir Grigoryants, *O nekotorykh osobennostiakh protsessy vozrozhdeniia islama v Krymu* (Simferopol, 2002); Elmira Muratova, *Islam v sovremennom Krymu: indikatory i problemy protsessy vozrozhdeniia* (Simferopol: Elinio, 2008).

¹⁷⁹ See more: Greta Lynn Uehling, “Genocide’s Aftermath: Neostalinism in Contemporary Crimea,” *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal* 9, no. 1 (2015): 3-17.

¹⁸⁰ The *Mejlis* was formed in 1991 during the Second Qurultay of the Crimean Tatar people. It consists of 33 people elected by delegates of the national congress. For a long time (1991–2013), the *Mejlis* was chaired by Soviet dissident Mustafa Dzhemilev. In 2013, he was replaced by Refat Chubarov. In 2016, after the arrival of Russia in Crimea, the *Mejlis* was included on the list of extremist organizations and prohibited in the Russian Federation.

Crimea (DUMK),¹⁸¹ which was under the full control of the *Mejlis* and actively participated in all its initiatives. Thus, until 2014—when, as a result of a self-proclaimed referendum, Crimea fell under the de facto jurisdiction of the Russian Federation—Islam was an integral part of ethno-political processes in Crimea.

Global Islamic Groups

Along with the ethnically oriented forms of Islam professed by the majority of Crimean Tatars, other forms of Islam have emerged in Crimea since about the mid-1990s under the influence of global Islamic projects. These had divergent sources and ideologies but shared the objective of “re-Islamizing” Crimean Tatars and merging their ethnic identity into a broader Islamic one. For them, secular nationalism is a product of the West and therefore alien to the spirit and history of Islamic civilization.

Among the most widespread global Islamic projects in Crimea were the Islamic party *Hizb ut-Tahrir*,¹⁸² the Salafis,¹⁸³ and the Muslim Brotherhood.¹⁸⁴ By the early 2000s, all had developed groups of followers, established well-coordinated organizational structures, founded media outlets, gained control over some Muslim communities and mosques, and created a network of Islamic courses to teach Islam and spread their ideology.

Supporters of these groups showed indifference to, and sometimes even disregard for, the culture of the Crimean Tatars. In their value system, ethnicity should fade into the background and everyday traditions and rituals should be revised for compliance with Islamic norms. Everything that, from the point of view of the supporters of such views, contradicted or did not find support in the Quran and *Sunnah* was declared an innovation (*bidah*) and was therefore to be banned. Not only

¹⁸¹ The Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Crimea (DUMK), or the Crimean Muftiate, is a centralized Islamic organization created in 1992 to coordinate processes in the religious life of Crimean Tatars. The Muftiate is headed by the mufti, who is elected by the delegates of the Qurultay of the Muslims of Crimea. There have been three muftis: Seitdzhelil Ibragimov (1992-1995), Nuri Mustafaeu (1995-1999), and Emirali Ablaev (since 1999).

¹⁸² Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami (the Islamic Party of Liberation) is an international pan-Islamic political party founded in 1953 in Jerusalem by a judge of the local Sharia appeal court, Taqi al-Din al-Nabhani. Its declared goal is the re-establishment of a fair and just Islamic way of life and the Islamic state (Caliphate), as well as the implementation of the Islamic system therein.

¹⁸³ The Arabic word “salafiya” means a return to the origins of the Islamic tradition and the example of the first Muslims—the pious predecessors (*as-salaf as-salih*). Crimean Tatars call Salafis Wahhabis (after the 18th-century Arabian Islamic reformer Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab).

¹⁸⁴ The Muslim Brotherhood is a transnational Sunni Islamist organization founded in Egypt by Islamic scholar and schoolteacher Hassan al-Banna in 1928. The movement’s self-declared aim is the establishment of a state ruled by Sharia law. Its most famous slogan worldwide is “Islam is the solution.”

secular traditions and customs—such as the etiquette, clothing, songs, dances, and wedding rituals of the Crimean Tatars—but also purely religious events were subjected to such revision. In particular, the *dua*, which had been the most important tool of Islamic knowledge transmission during the deportation period, came under criticism, accused of not having existed in the time of the Prophet Muhammad. *Dua* was criticized for having lost its religious spirit and become a formality—ordinary feasts where people came to discuss the news.

Such behavior gave rise to broad discussions within the Crimean Tatar community about “our” (local, Crimean) and “alien” (foreign, Arab, Turkish) Islam,¹⁸⁵ as well as the need to preserve religious traditions and prevent the dissolution of the Crimean Tatars’ identity into a broader Islamic identity.

Two “Models” of Islam

Several forms or “models” of Islam have formed in post-Soviet Crimea. The first model is an ethnically colored Islam, a kind of “Islam in the Crimean Tatar way.” It focuses on the preservation of ethnically expressed religious traditions and practices, emphasizes the importance of maintaining ethnic identity, and prioritizes the fulfillment of the collective rights of the people. Supporters of this model, who are still in the majority, note the importance of following the Hanafi *madhhab* and the Maturidi school, which are traditional for Crimea. They advocate the preservation of the practice of *dua* and the use of the Crimean Tatar language in *khutbah* during Friday prayers and other religious rituals at mosques. For many years, the *Mejlis* and the DUMK promoted this model of Islam in Crimean Tatar society.

The second model is a more universalistic and globalized Islam devoid of ethnic criteria. It lacks a national agenda and is distanced from initiatives to defend the collective rights of Crimean Tatars. It is ideologically heterogeneous and represents several competing models of Islam, yet all of these see the future of the Crimean Tatar people in joining the Ummah.

The most active Islamic project in Crimea throughout the post-Soviet period has been the party *Hizb ut-Tahrir*, which has generated many public events (rallies, conferences, round tables, etc.), active media outlets, and educational events. Before 2014 it was fiercely criticized by the *Mejlis* and DUMK. With the arrival of Russia in Crimea in spring 2014, *Hizb ut-Tahrir* was outlawed and became

¹⁸⁵ See more: Elmira Muratova, “Traditional Islam in Crimean Tatar Discourse and Politics,” in *The Concept of Traditional Islam in Modern Islamic Discourse in Russia*, ed. Renat Bekkin (Sarajevo: Center for Advanced Studies, 2020), 255-276.

the object of prosecution by Russian law enforcement agencies. By the end of 2020, about 70 members of the party had been imprisoned on charges of involvement in terrorist activity.¹⁸⁶ Meanwhile, the leaders of the *Mejlis*, banned in 2016, were forced to leave for Kyiv. From there, they criticize Russian policy toward Crimean Tatars and defend the arrested members of *Hizb ut-Tahrir* as “political prisoners of the Kremlin.”¹⁸⁷ The *Mejlis* also provides *Hizb ut-Tahrir* members with access to its media outlets (for example, the TV channel ATR, which moved from Crimea to Kyiv in 2015) and international human rights platforms. All this has led to the glorification of *Hizb ut-Tahrir* members among the Crimean Tatars, fostering a sympathetic attitude towards them and bringing new supporters to the party.

Conclusion

Under the influence of political processes in contemporary Crimea, the boundaries between supporters of the two models of Islam have become permeable. Political and ideological views of the situation in Crimea have become more important than religious differences. Adherents of the ethnic model of Islam, including the *Mejlis*, now see the members of *Hizb ut-Tahrir* as their allies against Russia’s presence in Crimea. They portray the arrested members of the Islamic party as compatriots targeted by Russian law enforcement agencies and the main victims of Russia’s annexation of Crimea. The emphasis on these victims helps the *Mejlis* to form a picture of the sufferings of the Crimean Tatars at the hands of the Russian authorities.

This, in turn, gives the leaders of the *Mejlis* the opportunity to push Western countries and international organizations to adopt tough anti-Russia statements and resolutions. Members of *Hizb ut-Tahrir*, faced with unprecedented repression and in need of the support of the Crimean Tatars, have also changed their rhetoric and strategy. They no longer criticize the way of life and traditions of the Crimean Tatars nor talk about the need for Crimean Tatars to return to the caliphate. In addition, they have begun to emphasize that Russia is not persecuting members of their party specifically, but Crimean Tatars globally.

Thus, the presence of a common enemy and the interest in each other of adherents of the two models of Islam in post-2014 Crimea have become the basis for convergence. Experts believe that this is a short-term rapprochement that meets the conditions of the current moment, but its consequences

¹⁸⁶ “Monitoringovy obzor s pravami cheloveka v Krymu. Noiabr’ 2020,” https://crimeahrg.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/crimean-human-rights-group_nov_2020_ru.pdf, 4.

¹⁸⁷ The DUMK remained in Crimea and established good relations with the new Russian authorities. It continues to criticize *Hizb ut-Tahrir* and counteract it, but its legitimacy among Crimean Tatars has fallen markedly.

might have serious implications for the identity and future of the Crimean Tatar people in the medium and long terms.

Part III

Meaning-making and Practicing Islam in Migration

Migrants' Islamic Practices in Russian Cities: Coping in "Cities of Exception"

Irina Kuznetsova and John Round

Russia is the most common destination, for both work and family reasons, for migrants from Central Asian countries. The majority of migrants from Central Asia are representatives of ethnic groups that traditionally profess Islam, with the result that destination cities develop large religious minorities. For example, in Moscow there are approximately 1.5 million migrant workers with a Muslim background.¹⁸⁸ How this is experienced in daily life, from both the migrant and recipient city perspectives, is little understood. As Olimova and Olimov note in their research on the role of Islam among migrants from rural Tajikistan, former villagers have to create "their own ways of adapting and integrating into Russian urban societies. However, the influence of Islam and its local forms in the process of adaptation and integration into Russian urban societies 'has been very poorly studied.'"¹⁸⁹

It is known, however, that feelings of insecurity in the host city prompt an increase in religiosity among some Central Asian migrants.¹⁹⁰ Some migrants only start to practice Islam in

¹⁸⁸ Marlene Laruelle, "How Islam Will Change Russia," The Jamestown Foundation, September 13, 2016, accessed October 1, 2020, <https://jamestown.org/program/marlene-laruelle-how-islam-will-change-russia/>.

¹⁸⁹ Saodat Olimova and Muzaffar Olimov, "Religious Institutions and Tajik Migrant Integration in Russia," DOC Research Institute, February 21, 2018, accessed October 2, 2020, <https://doc-research.org/2018/02/religious-institutions-tajik-migrant-integration-russia/>.

¹⁹⁰ Sherzod Eraliev, "Growing Religiosity among Central Asian Migrants in Russia," *Journal of International and Advanced Japanese Studies* 10 (2018): 137-150,

Russia;¹⁹¹ for many others, Muslim practices were already part of daily life and provide a connection with their country of origin.¹⁹² The need for spaces for religious practice—which may lead to attempts to construct mosques in cities that do not have an “indigenous” Muslim population—is the main battlefield for Polar Islam¹⁹³ and often becomes central to anti-migrant discourses.¹⁹⁴ Though the Muslim landscape in Russia is diffuse—it is not confined either to “Islamic islands” or to real-life locations, as it can also rely on online Muslim infrastructure¹⁹⁵—the lack of places for prayer, together with other constraints on migrants in urban spaces, including document checks, registration issues, and a whole spectrum of insecurities related to informality, has a major impact on the daily lives of migrants.¹⁹⁶ This, it is argued here, creates “spaces of exception” where migrants can be abused outside the confines of legal frameworks. To explore this further, this paper first looks at Islamophobia and “cultural imagination of disgust” toward migrants, as well as attempts at the “domestication” of Islam in Russia. It then turns to examine the compromised mobilities of Central Asian migrants in Moscow and the role of Muslim practices in the daily lives of migrants. It is argued that migrants’ religious practices are intertwined with their everyday experiences, including exploitation, trouble receiving regular status, and compromised mobility. The paper is based on numerous studies conducted by the authors since 2012, including 300 in-depth interviews with migrants from Central Asia, interviews with experts, and discourse analysis. The interviews focused on the everyday experiences of migrants, which helped to avoid methodological nationalism and overstressing the role of ethnicity and religious belonging. Often, the responses did not even mention the role of Islam, as respondents considered it to be a part of their private life.

http://japan.tsukuba.ac.jp/research/JIAJS10_ONLINE01_Eraliev.pdf; Dmitriy Oparin, “Possession and Exorcism in the Muslim Migrant Context,” *Ethnicities* 20, no. 4 (2020): 731-751.

¹⁹¹ Sophie Roche, “The Role of Islam in the Lives of Central Asian Migrants in Moscow,” *CERIA Brief* 2 (2014), <https://app.box.com/s/ufwnkqu0lk17z5pg6k4t>.

¹⁹² Therefore, for example, the suicide bombing in the St. Petersburg metro in 2017 where a man originally from Osh, Kyrgyzstan, was accused of conducting a terrorist attack demonstrates, as Abashin argues, that radicalization is a deviation from common practices. See Sergei Abashin, “Vzryv v metro i migranty iz Tsentral’noi Azii: korni radikalizatsii,” *BBC*, April 10, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/russian/blogs-39554912>.

¹⁹³ Marlene Laruelle and Sophie Hohmann, “Polar Islam: Muslim Communities in Russia’s Arctic Cities,” *Problems of Post-Communism* 67, no. 4-5 (2020): 327-337.

¹⁹⁴ Kaarina Aitamurto, “Protected and Controlled: Islam and ‘Desecularisation from Above’ in Russia,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 68, no. 1 (2016): 182-202.

¹⁹⁵ Dmitriy Oparin, “Spiritual Authority and Religious Introspection among Muslim Migrants in Western Siberia,” *Problems of Post-Communism* 67, no. 4-5 (2020): 362-374.

¹⁹⁶ John Round and Irina Kuznetsova, “States of Exception in a Super-Diverse City: The Compromised Mobility of Moscow’s Labor Migrants,” in *Eurasia on the Move: Interdisciplinary Approaches to a Dynamic Migration Region*, ed. Marlene Laruelle and Caress Schenk (Washington, DC: The George Washington University, Central Asia Program, 2018), 107-118, <https://centralasiaprogram.org/archives/15955>.

Islamophobia and “Othering” Migrants in Russia

In Russia, anti-migrant xenophobia has increased in parallel with control of migration policy. The myth of a “dangerous migrant” has been created by politicians’ and the mass media’s construction of migrants’ image as connected with crime, disease, and illegal work.¹⁹⁷ Often, the anti-migrant rhetoric of Russian media “parroted far right views espoused in the EU in order to justify a thesis about the ‘incapacity of Muslim migrants to integrate.’”¹⁹⁸ As Tolz showed:

Islam suddenly began to be singled out as the core identity of a wide variety of people both in Russia and in Western Europe. These included labour migrants to Russia from the former Soviet states of Central Asia, Russia's own citizens from the North Caucasus who happened to live outside their ethnic republics and were therefore labelled “internal migrants,” and residents in Western Europe of Middle Eastern and North African origin. In the process, a negative image of Islam was constructed.¹⁹⁹

Recently, the director of the Federal Security Service of Russia, Alexander Bortnikov, argued that it is necessary “to increase the effectiveness of work in the prevention of terrorism among labor migrants.”²⁰⁰ The link between migration and terrorism was further articulated in 2017 after the St. Petersburg metro bombing, when media initially reported that the bomber was an ethnic Uzbek born in Kyrgyzstan. That framing provoked “a wave of indiscriminate and unjustified detentions, threats, the use of violence and extortion against labor migrants from Central Asian states that had nothing to do with the explosion in St. Petersburg,” according to a petition signed by civil rights activists and academics in Russia that aimed to bring a halt to “stirring up migrant-phobia and to placing the blame collectively on migrants.”²⁰¹

¹⁹⁷ John Round and Irina Kuznetsova, “Necropolitics and the Migrant as a Political Subject of Disgust: The Precarious Everyday of Russia’s Labour Migrants,” *Critical Sociology* 42, no. 7-8 (2016): 1017-1034; Irina Kuznetsova and John Round, “Postcolonial Migrations in Russia: The Racism, Informality and Discrimination Nexus,” *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* 39, no. 1-2 (2019): 52-67.

¹⁹⁸ Vladimir Mukomel, “Rossiiskie diskursy o migratsii: ‘nulevye gody,’” in *Rossiiia reformiruiushchaia: Ezhegodnik-2011* (Vol 10), ed. Mikhail Gorshkov (Moscow and St. Petersburg: Institute of Sociology of Russian Academy of Sciences, 2011), 86-108, 98.

¹⁹⁹ Vera Tolz, “From a Threatening ‘Muslim Migrant’ Back to the Conspiring ‘West:’ Race, Religion, and Nationhood on Russian Television during Putin’s Third Presidency,” *Nationalities Papers* 45, no. 5 (2017): 742-757, 746.

²⁰⁰ Ivan Egorov, “‘Ne pustili terroristov’: Aleksandr Bortnikov rasskazal ob opasnoi migratsii,” *Rossiiskaia gazeta*, August 11, 2020, <https://rg.ru/2020/08/11/glava-fsb-prizval-k-effektivnoj-profilaktike-terrorizma-sredi-migrantov.html>.

²⁰¹ “Ostanovte razzhiganie migrantofobii i vozlozhenie kollektivnoi otvetstvennosti za terakty,” Change.org, accessed June 25, 2021, <http://chnng.it/9F6YR2Px Ct>.

Even several years prior to this, migrants experienced clear Islamophobia. One interviewee—a Russian citizen originally from Tajikistan—explained:

And recently I have noticed that Muslims are being pressed. [...] They show some kind of cleaners, they are dirty, you turn on the TV—that they are doing bad things. We are not all like that. Why are they mostly showing that we are bad? Recently, it has been shown that you are a third-class citizen. And now everyone thinks, it feels like everyone thinks that we are the last, dirty people. To be honest, it has been felt lately. (male, 36 years old, 2014, Moscow)

He went on to mention that this has negatively affected his sense of belonging as a Russian citizen. Many other migrants who were in the process of receiving residence permits and aimed to apply for citizenship expressed similar feelings: they were concerned not only about their documented status, but also about the attitudes of media, government, and society. In this respect, belonging and mobility in relation to Muslim practices are intertwined with the current atmosphere around Islam and migrants in Russia.

The Compromised Mobilities of Central Asian Migrants in Moscow

It is argued here that the anti-migrant mass-media and political discourses create symbolic borders within urban areas for migrants that combine with neoliberal desires such as the exploitation of their labor to comprise migrants' mobility. Drawing upon Agamben's theory of *Homo Sacer*, we argue that bordering and compromised mobility are both a result of the neoliberal wish to keep "undesirables" out of spaces of consumption and to place migrants in spaces where they can be "attacked" with impunity.²⁰² This is exacerbated by the postcolonial imaginaries of the center and periphery in relation to labor migrants from the post-Soviet Central Asian states.²⁰³ To take one example, as a result of the constant document checks for people of so-called "non-Slavic" appearance in Moscow, migrants try to remain out of view whenever possible to avoid confrontation, theft, being accused of/arrested for crimes, and possible expulsion from the country. Many migrants avoid traveling by metro to prevent such confrontations, even if the alternative forms of transport take far longer.

²⁰² Round and Kuznetsova, "States of Exception in a Super-Diverse City."

²⁰³ Kuznetsova and Round, "Postcolonial Migrations in Russia."

Such everyday bordering and compromised mobility affect religious practices as well. There are only four mosques in Moscow, with the result that migrants may be unable to go and pray if they do not consider a journey safe or do not have time to make the journey because they need to work long hours. Often, employers do not allow migrants to have a day off to visit a mosque: the boss of one Uzbek migrant working in Moscow oblast bars him from going to the mosque by saying that “We are in Russia, let’s live by Russian law” (male, 35 years old, 2014). Moreover, Moscow’s mosques cannot accommodate everyone, and attempts to build more have been stopped by the authorities.²⁰⁴ The discourse around mosques is highly anti-migrant. As Aitamurto shows, “framing new mosques as part of the migration issue further advances the image of Islam as the ‘other’ in contrast to ‘us’, the Russian tradition.”²⁰⁵ Furthermore, interviews revealed tensions between ethnic Russian Muslims and migrants: the former fear that if the latter attend mosques then it will cause tension, as the police will be more likely to pay unwelcome attention to the space, as they will assume that “criminal” migrants will be there. Another factor of compromised mobility is Islamic dress, which is common in the Volga region and other traditionally Islamic regions but perceived negatively in Moscow and other cities.²⁰⁶ Some of our female informants in Moscow shared that they were more likely to be stopped by police if they were wearing traditional Tajik dress with a scarf rather than casual European clothes. This aligns with Laruelle and Yudina’s findings that “veiled women seem to be targeted more often than men and the debate tends to crystallize around women’s symbolic status.”²⁰⁷

Everyday Experiences and Islam among Migrants in Kazan

In Kazan, which has over 75 mosques²⁰⁸ for a population of 1.3 million people (at least half of whom are not Muslims), there are fewer issues with finding places for pray both on Friday and during Islamic holidays. Research on Muslim welfare provision in Kazan found that although it is not common to ask for support from formal Muslim organizations and mosques, the spaces around the mosque and family networks play an important role in social welfare and social work provision.²⁰⁹ Migrants may also take advantage of ethnic support networks that may or may not be linked to

²⁰⁴ See also Roche, “The Role of Islam.”

²⁰⁵ Aitamurto, “Protected and Controlled,” 199.

²⁰⁶ Marlene Laruelle and Natalia Yudina, “Islamophobia in Russia: Trends and Societal Context,” in *Religion and Violence in Russia: Context, Manifestations, and Policy*, ed. Olga Oliker (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018).

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 62.

²⁰⁸ “Kolichestvo mecheti v Kazani priblizilos’ k vos’midesiati,” *Novye izvestiia*, July 5, 2019, <https://newizv.ru/news/society/05-07-2019/kolichestvo-mechetey-v-kazani-priblizilos-k-vosmidesiati>.

²⁰⁹ Irina Kuznetsova and John Round, “Communities and Social Work in Russia: The Role of Religious Charity amongst Tatarstan’s Muslims,” *International Social Work* 5 (2014): 486-496.

mosques, as halal cafes and shops also serve as “enabling environments” for this communication and support. Many of the halal cafes in Kazan employ staff from Uzbekistan. As Turaeva has demonstrated in the case of Moscow, the places around mosques often contribute to a sense of “imagined community,” even for migrants who do not necessarily follow Muslim practices.²¹⁰

At the same time, overwork means that many migrants struggle to be active community members. Many migrants mentioned that they do not have a particular mosque but attend different ones depending on where there is space for them (some mosques in Kazan only allow 50 worshipers at a time, for instance) or where they are working on a given day. Only rarely do employers in Kazan prevent migrants from praying: a migrant from Uzbekistan related that “How many people I know in a construction site, they let them pray no problem” (male, 30 years old, Kazan 2013). Nevertheless, it is difficult to take a day off for Muslim holidays: since migrants often work informally, they must work even on days that are official holidays in Tatarstan—such as Eid al-Adha—if they want to be paid for that day. Migrants’ religious practices are often limited to prayer (though depending on their work arrangements and level of religiosity, migrants may pray only once or twice per day instead of five times) and fasting. Digital practices are increasingly popular; they also serve to connect migrants to their home countries and local networks of mutual help, information, and religious practices.

Conclusion

One of the main problems facing migrants in Russia is racism and xenophobia, which is exacerbated by state policy/rhetoric and amplified by the mass media. The centralization and “domestication” of Russian Islam and the generally negative attitude toward migrants’ Islam, especially in Moscow, does not allow for discussion about the role of Islam as an institution for migrants. However, Muslim practices of prayer, fasting, and consumption of halal food are common, allowing migrants both to follow “tradition” and cope with the extreme difficulties of their daily lives in Moscow. The fact that migrants’ mobility is compromised adds extra layers of difficulty to accessing health care without the fear of police interference, traveling without document checks, and enjoying their rare free time. Networks and knowledge-sharing have become of vital importance in navigating these challenges, and it is clear that religion plays a significant role in creating and sustaining such groups.

²¹⁰ Rano Turaeva, “Imagined Mosque Communities in Russia: Central Asian Migrants in Moscow,” *Asian Ethnicity* 20, no. 2 (2019): 131-147.

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Practices and Views of the Central Asian Mullahs in Eastern Siberia

Dmitriy A. Oparin

In this chapter, I shall be looking at the five Central Asian mullahs with whom I enjoyed the closest contact during my fieldwork in Irkutsk, South-Eastern Siberia. Two of these men are Kyrgyz, three are Tajiks. Each has a complex and multi-vector migration biography, his own relationship with the imam and the rest of the Muslim environment, and his own personal spiritual trajectory. These five mullahs—the main heroes of this study—are far from being the only Central Asian religious experts in the Irkutsk area, much less the only Islamic authorities. However, they proved to be the most visible and involved in the everyday religious life of the agglomeration. The biographies of these mullahs, their practices and ideas, and their positions in the Muslim environment are similar in some respects and different in others. These differences best illustrate the diversity of forms of Muslim authority that have developed and continue to be constructed in the migration environment.

The key question of this study is the nature of the relationship between the “unofficial” Central Asian mullahs and the “official” imam of the mosque and regional mufti (Farit). In this work, I have attempted to reconceptualize the schematic demarcation of the border between the *official* and the *unofficial*—and demonstrate its fluidity—using the configuration of the Muslim environment in Irkutsk as an example.

Despite the large volume of anthropological and sociological works on “Islam in migration” or “Islam in the West” that have been published over the past twenty years, there are not many studies devoted to the practices and views of “ritual experts,” “unofficial mullahs,” “folk mullahs,” or “local Muslim authorities” in the context of migration. One of the few studies that has explored Muslim authority in a migration context focuses on religious experts involved in funeral practices in a small Dutch town.²¹¹ The authors of the paper investigate the motivation and nature of the authority of Muslim migrants who read the *Salat al-Janazah* (and who also cleanse the bodies of the deceased) on three levels: personal, interpersonal, and transpersonal. That is, they are interested in a whole range

²¹¹ Claudia Venhorst, Thomas Quartier, Peter Nissen, and Eric Venbrux, “Islamic Ritual Experts in a Migration Context: Motivation and Authority in the Ritual Cleansing of the Deceased,” *Morality* 18, no. 3 (2013): 235-250.

of issues: sociality, a person's religious and migration background, the construction of authority and its forms, and the understanding of one's duty to God and the rewards that derive from fulfilling this.

Religious authority among contemporary Muslims is an extremely diverse and dynamic institution and, as Western Islam researcher Sunier writes, is currently more unstable than ever.²¹² It is a truly dynamic field, filled with multiple actors and devoid of any strict hierarchy, making it difficult to classify. Indeed, the field, according to the authors of the Dutch case study, is in a state of formation.²¹³ In my view, the roles and practices of "unofficial" Muslim ritual experts cannot become stable in the context of migration. First of all, stability and strict hierarchy cannot be inherent in an environment constructed by "non-institutionalized" leaders. Second, the migration environment is essentially mobile—not only geographically, but also in terms of status and the religious, ethnic, state, and social identities of individuals.

Researchers have written about the growing popularity of various preachers and the crisis of authority experienced by "official" imams.²¹⁴ Many imams' loss of religious authority, coupled with their closeness to the local state authorities and their lack of any migration experience similar to that of most of their congregation, influences the diversification of the religious space and the emergence of new authorities.

Recent years have witnessed the publication of various studies on the practices and perceptions of Central Asian mullahs in migration in Russia.²¹⁵ These anthropologists seek to understand who these Muslim authorities are and to see their practices and views within the broader contexts of migration, power, the religious, and the social. These studies have focused on how unofficial Muslim leaders have adapted their religious practices to new environments. However, as my fieldwork in Moscow, Tomsk (South-Western Siberia), Irkutsk, and the Yamal Peninsula (Western Siberia) has shown, most Central Asian mullahs only became mullahs during migration, making their

²¹² J.T. Sunier, "Moral Failure, Everyday Religion, and Islamic Authorization," in *Straying from the Straight Paths: How Senses of Failure Invigorate Lived Religion*, ed. Daan Beekers and David Kloos (New York: Berghahn, 2018), 107-123, 117.

²¹³ Venhorst et al., "Islamic Ritual Experts in a Migration Context," 247.

²¹⁴ Sunier, "Moral Failure," 118; Frank Peter, "Individualization and Religious Authority in Western European Islam," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 17, no. 1 (2006): 105-118, 111.

²¹⁵ Anna Cieslewska and Zuzanna Blajet, "The Spiritual Industry of Central Asian Migrants in Moscow," *Laboratorium: Russian Review of Social Research* 12, no. 1 (2020): 106-126; Rano Turaeva, "Imagined Mosque Communities in Russia: Central Asian Migrants in Moscow," *Asian Ethnicity* 20, no. 2 (2019): 131-147; Rano Turaeva, "Muslim Orders in Russia: Trade Networks and Hijama Healing," *Nationalities Papers* 48, no. 4 (2020): 661-674; Dmitriy A. Oparin, "Sovremennoe musul'manskoe prostranstvo Moskvyy: severokavkazskiy zikr i sredneaziatskiye religioznye praktiki," *Etnograficheskoe obozrenie* 4 (2017): 115-130; Dmitriy Oparin, "Possession and Exorcism in the Muslim Migrant Context," *Ethnicities* 20, no. 4 (2020): 731-751.

authority itself a product of migration²¹⁶—something that has mostly been realized and received recognition in a given Russian city, rather than in the locations from which they migrated.

In the local Muslim community, a flexible system of ranking by specialization is formed among the representatives of religious authority. Reputation is of great importance, and it is often the community that endows an expert with certain skills. A mullah is assigned a set of religious characteristics based on both his skill and knowledge and on the fame his religious practices have won him.

The local religious authorities with a Central Asian migrant background in Irkutsk include *qori* (Arabic *qāri'*—hafizes who know the Quran by heart), exorcists specializing in the expulsion of *djinns*, volunteer teachers who teach mostly children to read the Quran and the basics of Islam, specialists in *ruqya* (healing people by reading the Quran), people who are simply respected and pious who can be consulted for religious advice, mullahs who lead *namaz* prayers in the absence of Imam Farit, and even Central Asian muezzins. This ranking by specialization is very flexible—one individual can combine several different skills and knowledge areas—and converts the individual sacral capital of each religious authority into social capital.

Mullah 1.²¹⁷ A Tajik mullah who specializes in expelling *djinns*. This is not the only public religious practice in which he engages, but he is known among coreligionists as an exorcist. He is 41 years old, came to Irkutsk at the age of 22, and now has Russian citizenship. Back in Tajikistan, he had an *ustadh* (a teacher or spiritual mentor) and graduated from a madrasah in Dushanbe. Once he arrived in Irkutsk, the mullah began selling shoes; he is now a construction site supervisor, occasionally doing the work himself. He often employs his relatives and fellow countrymen. This is a key characteristic of migration from Central Asia to Russia: migrants who have already settled in a place begin aiding newcomers and others who have not yet managed to build up a professional reputation or social capital. The mullah lives with his family in a rented apartment, but recently bought a plot outside the city where he is building a new house.

Mullah 2. The brother of the first mullah, he also lives in Irkutsk. He leads Friday prayers in a prayer hall opened by the Baikal Muftiate in 2009 at a vegetable warehouse in the Zhilkino neighborhood, Leninsky District, Irkutsk. The prayer hall is open only on Friday afternoons, on Muslim holidays, and in the evening during Ramadan. On Fridays, around 300 people gather here for

²¹⁶ Oparin, "Possession and Exorcism," 749.

²¹⁷ To protect the anonymity of my informants, I do not give their names here, but nor do I consider it necessary to use pseudonyms.

namaz. This mullah came to Irkutsk in 2003, starting out as a market trader selling clothes and footwear. In 2008 he obtained Russian citizenship, and in 2013 he bought a plot on the outskirts of the city where he grows potatoes for sale at local markets. At this point, the mullah was able to bring his family to Russia. In addition to selling potatoes, this mullah also drives a taxi. On top of this income, he receives part of the *sadaqah* (in his case, the alms collected before and after the *jumah-namaz*). The imam of this prayer hall says that he “reads the Quran well and knows everything about *namaz*,” but on all other issues he defers either to the imam of the central mosque or to his brother, who specializes in *ruqya* and exorcism.

Mullah 3. While the first two mullahs, the two brothers, have some trouble giving clear explanations in Russian, the third hero of this study speaks the language freely and without difficulty. He is currently a muezzin in the city mosque, and occasionally conducts rituals or reads the Quran to his fellow believers. His migration history is typical of many Tajiks. In 1988, he did military service in Irkutsk, during which time he not only learned the building trade, but also established important local contacts. Upon leaving the army, he returned to Dushanbe. In 1991, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, he came back to Irkutsk to engage in trade. Since the early 1990s, this mullah has been working in the construction industry. Predictably, with 30 years of experience in Irkutsk, connections in the region, and having held Russian citizenship since 2007, he provides his relatives and fellow countrymen with work. Mullah 3 prefers not to take orders from construction companies—primarily because many firms “throw” (double-cross) migrants—and works mainly for private homeowners.

Mullah 4. This mullah is the assistant for religious affairs of the chairman of the Kyrgyz diaspora in Irkutsk, a member of the Muslim council at the mosque, and a local Kyrgyz imam. He was born in 1971 and has been living in Irkutsk since 2000. During the Soviet era, he lived briefly in Saratov, European Russia, where he wanted to enter the university, but was then drafted into the army and did his service in the Greater Moscow region. He got married in Kyrgyzstan, and in 1999 the young family left to live and work in Novosibirsk. After failing to establish a business in that city, they moved to Irkutsk to live with relatives. Today, the mullah and his wife sell clothes on the city’s central market.

Mullah 5. This mullah is the youngest of all the mullahs with whom I communicated in Irkutsk. He was born in a suburb of Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, in 1988. In 2013, he became a migrant for the first time. He first went to Moscow, though he did not manage to gain a foothold there and ended up returning to Kyrgyzstan. In 2018, now with his wife, he moved to Irkutsk, where he currently works either on a construction site or driving a taxi. Sometimes he leads *namaz* in the central mosque

in the absence of the imam, and he is often asked to read the Quran for healing purposes or to teach *tajwid* (the rules for reading the Quran).

Four of the five mullahs have been living in Irkutsk for an extended period of time. They are embedded in the social, professional, migration, and religious contexts of the region; have amassed significant social capital; and are well known not only among those who regularly attend the mosque, but also among migrants from Central Asia and the broader Muslim community of Irkutsk. Their religious authority is intertwined with their migratory and professional authority. They are not just respected *hafizes* or exorcists, but key figures in the migrant space of the agglomeration. To one degree or another, each of the mullahs not only defines the everyday religious life of their fellow countrymen—remonstrating with them, instructing them, and helping them get through crisis situations—but also determines the local processes of migration. Respect in the Muslim community and religious expertise are complemented by their professional gravitas and significant social capital. New migrants often rely on these mullahs, asking them about employment and business opportunities. It is important to note that each of the informants I briefly described above associates their own personal fate with Irkutsk. They have all moved their families to the city, and some have even bought property there.

None of my informants has a regular work schedule. Each is now self-employed and spends a lot of time in the mosque. There is a definite connection between temporality and religiosity: an active public religious life requires a degree of independence when it comes to organizing one's daily affairs. The mullahs do not simply come to *namaz*. Some of them actually lead prayers on the request of the imam during his occasional absences. The imam can ask them to carry out any *namaz* without prior notice. They often arrive early and leave late. After *namaz*, their co-religionists approach them with requests, sometimes striking up a conversation with them in the courtyard of the mosque.

Each mullah has an *ustadh* or even several *ustadhes*. They usually made the acquaintance of their *ustadh* back in Central Asia. Some of the mullahs maintain relations with their *ustadh*, calling them when they have doubts and consulting with them on religious issues. Many of the mullahs received a religious education in Central Asia. Mullah 5, for example, studied with the village imam as a schoolboy before going on to study at the Bishkek madrasah and then graduating from the local Islamic university as a *hafiz*. Mullah 3 states that he is “not a full *qori*,” i.e., he does not know the entire Quran by heart. However, in the final years of the Soviet Union and following its collapse, he did attend classes in the Dushanbe madrasah.

For each of the mullahs, their family history and continuity within the family of religious practices and knowledge are of particular importance. Mullah 1, who specializes in exorcism, believes that his strength and fearlessness in the face of *djinns* is due to his family history and can be attributed to the dynastic continuity of the practice of expulsion in his family line:

And we read, and Allah helps us to heal people and the djinns are afraid of us. They cannot harm us. Even my grandfathers and great-grandfathers were favorites of Allah, they were auliya [Muslims of impeccable conduct, the righteous – author’s note], close to Allah. They even talked to the most senior djinns. Our grandfather talked to one djinn and told him: you will not touch my own to the seventh generation, and tell all your relatives not to touch my own down to the seventh generation.

Mullah 4 did not study at any institution and traces his knowledge to family heritage:

I haven’t studied anywhere. For us this comes from the clan. I had mullah great-grandfathers, then my grandfather, then my father, and then me. My father was an imam in our village in the USSR for 60 years. And we accepted all his teachings.

Those mullahs who came of age in the 1980s were observant Muslims in Soviet times. The aforementioned Mullah 4, for example, recalls how he became a “garrison imam” while serving in the Greater Moscow region in the last year of the Union.

Central Asian Mullahs’ Loyalty to the Imam

A Muslim city council has been formed at the Irkutsk mosque that includes representatives of all the major Muslim ethnic communities in the city. Counting Imam Farit, the council numbers ten people, among them representatives of the Kyrgyz, Tajiks, Uzbeks, Chechens, Ingush, Azerbaijanis, and Dagestanis. The council meets once every two to three months.

The history of the Muslim community of Irkutsk differs little in its essentials from that of many other urban communities in Russia. Notably, however, the mosque was not closed during the Soviet era. According to the recollections of Imam Farit, it was mostly Tatars who went to the mosque in the 1990s, many of whom were by then elderly, and there were more women in the congregation than men. Now Tatars are barely in evidence at the mosque; immigrants from Central Asia make up the bulk of the parishioners.

Each of the major Muslim ethnic communities in the city has its own place in the ritual life of the mosque. A small one-story brick house on the grounds of the mosque is occupied by Vainakh

dhikrists, or *dhikr* practitioners. Since 2004, Chechens and Ingush have regularly held the *Qadiri tariqah dhikr* there.²¹⁸ The basement of the mosque is occasionally used for gatherings by Shias, represented locally by the Azerbaijani community. The Azerbaijanis do not have their own imam and invited a Shia imam from central Russia to celebrate Ashura in 2019. There are no regular classes at the mosque for either children or adults. The rules for reading the Quran are taught by knowledgeable Tajik *hafizes* in the main hall of the mosque.

A Dagestani imam sent to Irkutsk by the Muftiate of Dagestan gives short lectures on the Quran and hadith for adult parishioners before the *adhan* is called for *jumah-namaz*. Sometimes he gathers young Dagestanis interested in religion in an outbuilding on the mosque grounds. Such meetings are likewise not regular.

Namaz, including *jumah-namaz*, is often carried out by the so-called *pomoshchniki*, or “assistants,” of Imam Farit. These are mainly Tajik mullahs, many of whom are noted for their beautiful voices and correct *tajwid*. Imam Farit usually reads his sermon in Arabic, Tatar, and Russian (*jumah-namaz* is also held in this way in Moscow mosques). If the imam is absent, one of the Tajik or Kyrgyz mullahs may read a sermon in Arabic, followed by one of the imam’s Tatar assistants reading it in Russian. On these occasions, nobody reads in Tatar. According to the regulars at the mosque, Farit only began reading in Arabic in the last five years: before that, he used to ask one of the Tajik *hafizes* to do so. In the prayer hall at Zhilkino, opened in 2009, Mullah 2 preached sermons in two languages during the first year of operation: Arabic and Tajik. At that time, he was not yet proficient enough in Russian to preach in the language; most members of the congregation were also Tajiks. Today, however, he gives sermons in Arabic and Russian. In his recollection, worshipers asked him to read in Russian rather than Tajik.

According to the Irkutsk Tajiks, their mullahs helped Imam Farit in the early days, teaching him how to perform *namaz* and read the Quran correctly. One of the mullahs even calls himself the imam’s *ustadh*. One reason the imam often asks a Tajik *hafiz* to perform *namaz* in his place is due to the peculiarities of Farit’s voice:

He [the imam – author’s note] reads the Quran very correctly. [But] it’s just the voice he has, you see. If you have to listen to it for some time, it’s very hard—you

²¹⁸ *Dhikr* is the ritual remembrance of Allah. The word *tariqat*, derived from the Arabic word for “path,” initially referred to a method of training Sufi students under the guidance of a mentor and later spread to the brotherhoods themselves or their divisions, based on personal connections between students and teachers (Kimitaka Matsuzato and M.R. Ibragimov, “Tarikat, etnichnost’ i politika v Dagestane,” *Etnograficheskoe obozrenie* 2 (2006): 10–23, 10. *Qadiriyya* is one of the most widespread *tariqas* in the North Caucasus.

stand behind and suffer when the hazrat is reading. He's got something wrong with his throat. If there's someone behind him who can read well, a qori, then he hands it over to them so that it can be read more beautifully. [Mullah 4]

At the end of 2008, a rather high-profile scandal took place in the Irkutsk mosque, even making it into the local newspaper.²¹⁹ A regular worshiper at the mosque, an ethnic Ingush, publicly expressed dissatisfaction with Imam Farit's religious training. Yet although part of the congregation wanted to remove the imam, most of the active members of the Irkutsk Muslim community supported Farit, including immigrants from Central Asia who had some weight in the Muslim community of the city. Farit therefore remained in his position and in the following year set up a mosque council consisting of ethnic community representatives loyal to him. I did not discuss this incident with the imam, but some of the worshipers with whom I spoke recalled what had happened in 2008.

Memories of the events of 2008 were updated after a more recent scandal at the mosque. In 2019, a Dagestani who was, in the words of eyewitnesses, possessed by *djinn*, kicked the imam out of the mosque and into the street during *jumah-namaz*. Notably, the *djinn* possessing the Dagestani was ultimately expelled by the local Tajik mullah-exorcist.

Undoubtedly, the imam appointed as representatives of the various ethnic communities of the city loyal men who were dependent on him to one degree or other. These include a number of Central Asian mullahs, among them the heroes of this study. Farit appointed Mullah 2 as imam of the prayer hall in Zhilkino, he allows Mullah 1 to carry out expulsions of *djinns* in the basement of the mosque or in the back room, and he has given permission for the Vainakh *dhikrists* to assemble in a separate building on the grounds of the mosque. During the month of Ramadan, Tajik and Kyrgyz *hafizes* regularly hold *hatim* (reading of the Quran in its entirety). In 2019, the *hatim* was read by two *hafizes*: one Tajik, the other Kyrgyz (namely, Mullah 5).

Farit does not interfere with the practices of the Kyrgyz and Tajik mullahs. These mullahs, in turn, serve as intermediaries between the mosque administration and their co-ethnics, who make up the city's two largest Muslim communities. The imam has managed to establish a fairly stable relationship with these mullahs based on mutual loyalty. This relationship contrasts with what I have observed, for example, in Moscow's mosques, where the majority of Tatar imams and the Tatar mosque administration are suspicious of "unofficial" Central Asian mullahs.

²¹⁹ "Islam delo tonkoe. V musul'manskoi obshine Irkutska zreet konflikt," *Vostochno-sibirskaya pravda*, January 21, 2009, <https://www.vsp.ru/2009/01/21/islam-delo-tonkoe/>.

Conclusion

In order to draw lines between the key religious actors in a local Muslim space, informants and researchers²²⁰ sometimes use such qualifiers as *official* and *unofficial*. This dichotomy does not reflect the Soviet distinction between “genuine” Islam (*official*) and “popular” or “hybrid” Islam (*unofficial*).²²¹ Rather, the synonyms of *official/unofficial* in this case are the concepts of *institutionalized* and *non-institutionalized*. *Official* (*institutionalized*) actors include mosque imams appointed or elected by the council of imams, while *unofficial* (*non-institutionalized*) actors include the mullahs, who conduct rituals and advise believers despite having no formal position in the local religious hierarchy.

On the one hand, the division into *official* and *unofficial* mullahs is convenient when describing the picture of the Muslim space of a city. On the other hand, it is too formal, failing to take into account the complexity of the religious configuration in a given city or village. For example, the Tajik mullah who leads *namaz* in a prayer hall at a vegetable warehouse is universally referred to as an imam and is incorporated into the “official” system. However, his independence is limited (he is an appointee of Imam Farit) and he does not receive a fixed salary. The Kyrgyz mullah is also called an imam because he is registered as an assistant for religious affairs to the chairman of the Irkutsk Kyrgyz diaspora and sits on the council at the mosque.

In this study, I tried to rethink this schematic demarcation and demonstrate the fluidity of the boundary between the *official* and the *unofficial* using the configuration of the Muslim environment of Irkutsk as an example. The well-known Central Asian mullahs of Irkutsk have a mutually respectful relationship with Imam Farit. Some of them are members of the Muslim council at the mosque and cooperate with the imam in the resolution of pressing issues. The imam allows them to perform rituals in the mosque (expelling *djinns*, performing *nikah* and *ruqya*), teach children *tajwid*, and lead *namaz* prayers. The mullahs, in turn, show loyalty to the imam, speak respectfully of him, and are prepared to support him when conflicts arise.

Mutual loyalty and respect form the basis for a certain degree of independence on the part of the Central Asian mullahs. Formal support from the mosque imam gives them freedom of action and legitimizes their practices in the eyes of the community. The mullahs are religious authorities for their

²²⁰ Akhmet Yarlykapov, “Divisions and Unity of the Novy Urengoy Muslim Community,” *Problems of Post-Communism* 67, no. 4-5 (2020): 338-347; Sergei N. Abashin, “Prakticheskaya logika islama,” in *Antropologiya sotsial'nykh peremen*, ed. E. Guchinova and G. Komarova (Moscow: Rossiiskaia politicheskaya entsyklopediia (ROSSPEN), 2011), 256-281, 264.

²²¹ Devin DeWeese, “Islam and the Legacy of Sovietology: A Review Essay on Yaacov Ro'i's Islam in the Soviet Union,” *Journal of Islamic Studies* 13, no. 3 (2002): 298-330.

countrymen; they are the first port of call for many Irkutsk Tajiks and Kyrgyz in the event of doubt or crisis. They independently build relationships with fellow believers, contributing to the shaping of their everyday religious life and influencing their religious development. At the same time, subordination remains a feature of the local Muslim environment, creating a hierarchy that is flexible and loose, but situationally updated and supported by the various actors of the Muslim space based on mutual respect.

There is a law. The Prophet said: if there is an amir among you [in the sense of a leader – author’s note], do you know? A head. If you appoint a black slave as head, obey him. And if your leader is a black slave, you must listen to him. Whoever obeys him obeys the Prophet. He who obeys the Prophet obeys Allah. In Irkutsk we set up a hazrat. He was appointed. And everyone should obey him. [Mullah 4]

In this hierarchical system, more intuitive than formal in nature, there are imams; mullahs close to the imam who are not built into the system of mullahs, but are just well-versed Muslims; and religious authorities with their own particular specialization. All of them occupy a niche in the local Muslim space. For example, the young Kyrgyz mullah acknowledges the special position in the local Muslim hierarchy not only of Imam Farit, but also of the older Kyrgyz imam, who has more social capital and has lived longer in the region; of the Tajik *hafiz* who teaches children *tajwid*; and of the Tajik exorcist mullah, who stands out among religious experts and authorities for his knowledge, skills, and unique personal qualities.

The largest town of the agglomeration after the provincial capital is Angarsk, located 40 kilometers from Irkutsk. A mosque has just been built there, and Rinat, the nephew of the Irkutsk imam, Farit, has been appointed its imam. However, Tajik mullahs play a key role both in ritual everyday life, including during *jumah-namaz*, and in the local urban Muslim community. As one Angarsk Muslim put it, “Rinat is according to the documents, but another person does the reading—one of ours, a Tajik.” “Ordinary” Muslims can permit themselves such judgments, but the mullahs display respect for the mosque imams. Farit and Rinat are, to a certain extent, guarantors of the stability of the Central Asian mullahs’ religious authority, ensuring the stability of the heterogeneous system that has formed amid large-scale migration, a system whose distinguishing characteristics are mutual loyalty, persistent subordination, and a certain interdependence.

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Praying in Migrant Moscow:

The Religious Experience of Female Migrants from Central Asia

Anna Cieřlewska

This paper explores the influence of migration on the religious life and beliefs of female migrants from Central Asia.²²² It focuses on the performance of religious and spiritual practices in the mosque and at home in a narrow circle of family and friends led by women who possess relevant religious knowledge, or female religious leaders (*otun/otin-oy/otyncha*, among other terms²²³). Despite growing interest in religion in the context of migration from Central Asia, most studies focus on the relationship between religion and diaspora/migrant networks within male-dominated spaces or the impact of religious networks on female migrants' adaptation rather than on understanding female migrants' religious spaces and practices.²²⁴

However, migration to Russia is a new religious experience for many female migrants, as in Central Asia they do not attend mosques, which are considered male spaces. For centuries, there have

²²² I conducted this research together with Zuzanna Blajet (MA, Jagiellonian University). This chapter was written as part of the project "Changes in the Religious Traditions of Migrants from Tajikistan in the Russian Federation" no. 2016/21/DHS1/03403, financed by The National Science Centre in Poland within the program "Sonata 11."

²²³ There are a variety of terms that are used to describe the same social institution, including *bibi otun/otin, bi-otin/otun, bu-otin, bibi khalifa/halfa/holpa, oy (u) bibi mullo, otyncha, otin-bucha*, and *otin-hofiz*. See Anna Cieřlewska, *Islam with a Female Face: How Women are Changing the Religious Landscape in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan* (Krakow: Księgarnia Akademicka, 2017); Svetlana Peshkova, *Women, Islam, and Identity: Public Life in Private Spaces in Uzbekistan* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2014); Razia Sultanova, *From Shamanism to Sufism: Women, Islam and Culture in Central Asia* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011); A. Kramer, "Otin," in *Islam na territorii byvshei Rossiiskoi Imperii (Entsiklopedicheskii Slovar I)*, ed. S.M. Prozorov (Moscow: Vostochnaia Literatura, 2006), 321-323.

²²⁴ See Emil Nasritdinov, "Vulnerability of Labor Migrants from Kyrgyzstan to Engagement with Violent Extremist Groups in Russian Federation" (UNDP, unpublished report, 2017); Dmitry Oparin, "Migration and Contemporary Muslim Space in Moscow: Contextualizing North Caucasian Loud Dhikr and the Religious Practices of Central Asian Folk Mullas," *Contemporary Islam* 11 (2017): 61-80; Dimitri Oparin, "Spiritual Authority and Religious Introspection among Muslim Migrants in Western Siberia," *Problems of Post-Communism* 67, no. 4-5 (2020): 362-374.; Sophie Roche, "The Role of Islam in the Lives of Central Asian Migrants in Moscow," *CERIA Brief* 2 (2014): 1-5, <https://centralasiaprogram.org/archives/7416>; Rano Turaeva, "Imagined Mosque Communities in Russia: Central Asian Migrants in Moscow," *Asian Ethnicity* 20, no. 2 (2019): 1-17; Rano Turaeva, "Muslim Orders in Russia: Trade Networks and Hijama Healing," *Nationalities Papers* 48, no. 4 (2020): 661-674; Rustamjon Urinboyev, "Muslim Prisoners in Russia during the COVID-19 Pandemic," *University of Helsinki (blog)*, June 17, 2020, <https://blogs.helsinki.fi/gulagechoes/2020/06/17/muslim-prisoners-in-russia-during-the-covid-19-pandemic/>.

been active female figures among Tajiks and Uzbeks who have conducted rituals and taught Islam to women and children. At present, there are both “traditional” spiritual leaders and Islamic reformists. Female religious leaders have never been present among the Kyrgyz, Kazakh, and other nomadic groups, where *bakhshy*, *kuuchu* (shamans), *bubu* (wise woman), and other spiritual figures (both men and women) have provided spiritual services. At present, some mosques in major cities of Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan provide spaces for women, but this is a relatively new practice, and not all mosques accept female visitors.²²⁵ By contrast, in Russia, most mosques are open to everyone without restrictions; women have their own chapels where they can pray and have the opportunity to attend religion classes and various other activities.²²⁶ Nevertheless, some female migrants perform practices brought from their countries of origin within social clusters based on family/ethnic/regional ties and/or new alliances formed at work, the mosque, or other places. For others, migration is an opportunity for new religious explorations. A third group of women negotiate between what they consider to be their long-standing traditional rituals and the new religious experience.

It is against this backdrop of religious patterns that I wish to explore the role of migration in shaping women’s religious practices and activities. Does migration transform women’s religiosity or/and approaches to religion? How do they use new opportunities such as mosque or work networks to expand their religious interests? In what ways can migration become a *catalyst* for religious change in women? What are new ways in which they interpret religion in the context of migration?²²⁷ Another aspect that I would like to explore is how they channel/transfer rituals and practices that involve ritual food, religious/spiritual performances, and healing services.

Material and Methods

The material presented in this article is ethnographic and was collected on the basis of participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and informal conversations during field research in Moscow in 2017-2019 (lasting between one and three months per visit). This includes material gathered during various rituals organized in mosques and private spaces in which I participated. To maintain the anonymity of my interlocutors, their real names and the exact locations of research sites are not disclosed except where required by the context.

²²⁵ Cieřlewska, *Islam with a Female Face*, 17; N.A. Manichkin, *Shamanizm i dukhovno-magicheskie praktiki kyrgyzov* (Moscow: RAN/Smart Ivent, 2020).

²²⁶ Turaeva, “Muslim Orders in Russia.”

²²⁷ Bernardo E. Brown and Brenda S.A. Yeoh, “Introduction,” in *Asian Migrants and Religious Experience: From Missionary Journeys to Labor Mobility*, ed. Bernardo E. Brown and Brenda S.A. Yeoh (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018).

In 2013-2016, I conducted a research project on the social role of female religious leaders from Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. It was at this time that I became interested in religious transfer as part of the migration experience. Subsequently, I observed in Moscow how female migrants from Central Asia negotiate between what they consider their spiritual tradition and the new religious patterns of the host country.

Taking the cases of four women from Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan, and two female rituals they organized, I present different perspectives and approaches of female migrants regarding spiritual practices/religious experiences. I met each of the women by chance; they themselves were acquainted via the mosque in Moscow or through friends, having not known each other prior to migration. I had regular contact with each woman during the field research. Zuzanna Błajet and I met regularly with three of them, going to halal restaurants and other places together. We also visited them at home or hosted them at our flat in Moscow. The fourth woman, Bibi-Solikhha (the Moscow *otun*), I got to know mainly through the rituals that she conducted for women from Central Asia. I stay connected to two of the women via social media and WhatsApp.

Religion, Rituals, and Migrants in Urban Space

Most studies that address the issues of religion and migration tend to focus on how religion and spiritual practices connect migrants with their national/ethnic group or home country. They may look at whether—and to what extent—performing religious rituals, consuming ritual food, or listening to spiritual music reinforce migrants' feeling of belonging to a certain place and community. They may also explore the role of religious networks in facilitating migrants' social and economic adaptation.²²⁸

However, Brown and Yeoh found that even though migrant communities usually associate their religious identity with the practices and traditions of their home countries, their religious experience in migration reflects a much more complex reality.²²⁹ Religious rituals and practices are a key instrument for reinforcing the cultural boundaries of communities, but they can also serve to link migrants to their host society or to other groups of migrants. Religious and spiritual ties can be fluid; adherence to a tradition practiced in the home country does not mean that this tradition is confined to a certain cluster of migrants and not transferred to others, nor that it remains static in the face of

²²⁸ Jacqueline Maria Hagan, "Religion on the Move: The Place of Religion in Different Stages of the Migration Experience," in *International Handbook of Migration Studies*, 2nd edition, ed. Steven J. Gold and Stephanie J. Nawyn (New York: Routledge, 2019), 260-268; Brown and Yeoh, "Introduction."

²²⁹ Brown and Yeoh, "Introduction."

new circumstances. Various spiritual/healing practices brought to Russia by migrants demonstrate that certain forms of spirituality can be accepted by a host society.²³⁰

Hagan points out that in new circumstances, migrants adapt multiple religious traditions and organizations to create a fabric of personal contacts that can provide a support network.²³¹ Migrants attempt to find elements that connect them with the traditions of their homeland. Thus, they collect money to erect sacred buildings, organize holidays and events, or participate in rituals via the Internet. But, as Hagan argues, cultivating religious tradition means something different to everyone: attitudes toward religion—and how it is interpreted—can vary depending on circumstances. The religious practices of migrants are not related to specific religious settings. They encompass other spheres, including workplaces, associations, and private spaces. “Referred to as ‘everyday religion’ or ‘lived religion,’ this perspective places emphasis on religion as practice.”²³² In the case of Islam in Central Asia, Sartori explains that “religiosity” is “an expansive and all-encompassing understanding of religion, one which includes the spiritual as well as the social component of being Muslim.”²³³

There are five mosques in Moscow, as well as prayer halls, cultural centers, informal religious spaces, and markets and shops selling halal goods and Islamic accessories. As one of the layers of a multicultural urban agglomeration such as Moscow, the spiritual infrastructure created by Muslims—including migrants—develops and expands in parallel with the needs and expectations of its clients.²³⁴ Despite ethnic and national divisions and various clusters/networks, common prayers and practices produce a strong sense of Islamic solidarity. For some, interactions at the mosque are the only opportunity to step out of their narrow migrant circle, have different experiences, and form new friendships.

Kim Knott observes that religion is expressed through space.²³⁵ Religion transforms and creates social spaces. Transnational religious groups locate themselves in national contexts and

²³⁰ See Anna Cieřlewska, “Spiritual Mobility: Alternative Practices of Healing among Migrants from Central Asia in Moscow,” in *Labour, Mobilities and Informal Practices: Power, Institutions and Mobile Actors in Transnational Space*, ed. Rano Turaeva and Rustamjon Urinboyev (London: Routledge, 2021), 133-148; Anna Cieřlewska and Zuzanna Błajet, “The Spiritual Industry of Central Asian Migrants in Moscow,” *Laboratorium: Russian Review of Social Research* 12, no. 1 (2020): 106-126; Oparin, “Migration and Contemporary Muslim Space in Moscow”; Gertrud Hűwelmeier and Kristine Krause, “Introduction,” in *Traveling Spirits: Migrants, Markets and Mobilities*, ed. Gertrud Hűwelmeier and Kristine Krause (New York: Routledge, 2010), 1-16.

²³¹ Hagan, “Religion on the Move.”

²³² *Ibid.*, 264.

²³³ Paolo Sartori, “Of Saints, Shrines, and Tractors: Untangling the Meaning of Islam in Soviet Central Asia,” *Journal of Islamic Studies* 30, no. 3 (2019): 1-40, 3.

²³⁴ Cieřlewska and Błajet, “The Spiritual Industry of Central Asian Migrants in Moscow”; Turaeva, “Muslim Orders in Russia.”

²³⁵ Kim Knott, “Spatial Theory and Method for the Study of Religion,” *Temenos* 41, no. 2 (2005): 153-184.

simultaneously in a variety of places. In this regard, rituals and practices performed by female migrants in Moscow function in various locations, which can be understood as temporary, spontaneous religious place-making. In this context, religious place-making is a space emerging from a process of transferring and introducing religious ideas, practices, and sacred objects from one place to another, while at the same time ideas regarding belief, ritual, locality, and sacred dimensions are transformed. Hence, in a sense, the practices performed by female migrants connect the Fergana Valley, Dushanbe, Andijan, and other places in Central Asia with Moscow. International migrants form a qualitatively new social group within new social “fields.” These fields are created by combining elements of the new and old regions, leading to the emergence of a specific space between the places of residence.²³⁶

Levitt and Schiller point out that “Migrant institutions are also sites where globally diffused models of social organization and individuals’ local responses converge and produce new mixes of religious beliefs and practices.”²³⁷ The authors emphasize that migrants’ integration into a host country does not mean that they do not have transnational ties. As for female migrants, Moscow serves as a hub where various religious/spiritual traditions interpenetrate each other. Migrants both transfer their spirituality and absorb other religious ideas, reinterpreting them according to their needs and experiences.

Getting Started

We met Asiya and Guzal in a halal restaurant located not far from a conciliar mosque colloquially known among Muslims as “mechet Prospekt Mira” (the Prospekt Mira mosque)²³⁸ in Moscow after Friday prayers one week early in our research.

In 2017 Asiya was about 58 years old. She is a Tatar from Andijan in the Ferghana Valley and the mother of four children. She previously worked as a music teacher in a school. At the time of our research, she was living in Moscow with one of her twin sons, both of whom had graduated from Al-Azhar University in Cairo.

²³⁶Gertrud Hüwelmeier, “Praying in Berlin’s Asia town: Religious Place-Making in a Multi-Ethnic Bazaar,” in *Spiritualizing the City: Agency and Resilience of the Urban and Urbanesque Habitat*, ed. Victoria Hegner and Peter Jan Margry (New York: Routledge, 2018), 65-80; Kayzer and Brednikova 2004, cited in E. Kapustina and E. Borisova, “Vvedenie. Obzor teoreticheskoi diskussii o kontseptsii transnatsionalizma,” in *Zhit v dvukh mirakh: pereosmysliaia transnatsionalizm i translokal’nost’*, ed. O. Brednikova and S. Abashin (Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie: Biblioteka zhurnala “Neprikosnovennyi zapas,” 2021), 14.

²³⁷Peggy Levitt and Nina Glick Schiller, “Conceptualizing Simultaneity: A Transnational Social Field Perspective on Society,” *International Migration Review* 38, no. 3 (2004): 1002-1039, 1027.

²³⁸The conciliar mosque in Moscow is located next to the Prospekt Mira metro station.

In Islam Karimov's Uzbekistan, her sons were vulnerable to accusations of radical inclinations due to their foreign Islamic education and religious views. In her words, the Uzbek secret services attempted to recruit them, but they refused. Since that time, the family had lived between Russia and Uzbekistan. In 2016 Shavkat Mirziyoyev took over as the new president, but they preferred to stay in Moscow and observe the course of events in Uzbekistan. Asiya is deeply religious: she wears a Muslim outfit, reads the Quran, and regularly studies the principles of Islam acquiring knowledge from her sons and other sources.

Guzal, aged 55, is from Dushanbe and also has four children. She is an engineer by profession. She and her husband worked in Afghanistan during the Afghan-Soviet war (1979-89). In her words, she is a Tajik with Uzbek roots; her extended family (*avlod*) originated from Urgench and Bukhara, in present-day Uzbekistan. She comes from a family of *sayyids*: her great-grandfather, Mirzo Sayyid Bek, was an interpreter of five languages and a bodyguard of Sayyid Mir Muhammad Alim Khan, the last emir of the Emirate of Bukhara. Mirzo Sayyid and some members of their family fled to Afghanistan during the October Revolution. Others remained in the Tajik SSR until the Tajik Civil War (1992-97), when many of them emigrated abroad. It was then that Guzal and her husband escaped to Russia. Today, their extended family lives around the world, including in the US, the UK, Canada, and Sweden. At present, Guzal's husband works in Seoul. Guzal has Russian citizenship and brought up her children in Moscow, but she maintains a house in Dushanbe, where part of her family still lives.

During our first meeting, I told both women about my research on female rituals in the Fergana Valley and we had a long conversation about various ritual performances. After a few days of acquaintance, we were invited to Guzal's home for the ritual of Mushkil-kusho. It is difficult to determine to what extent our discussion inspired Guzal to organize the ritual and to what degree it resulted from her longing for Tajik spiritual practices (she later sent me a video of the Mushkil-kusho ritual being performed at their home in Dushanbe at her mother's instigation in 2017), but she was very excited to organize the ritual at home, inviting us—her Polish guests—and her Tatar friend.

Mushkil-kusho and Politics, 2017

The Bibi Mushkil-kusho ritual (Tajik: Bibi Mushkil-kushod/kusho; Persian: Bibi Moshkel-goshā, also other local versions of this term; English: Lady of Solution, the Lady who opens a path, sometimes Bibi Chorshanbe—the Lady of Wednesday) is an old ritual popular among some Tajik or Uzbek women to ensure the fulfilment of someone's wishes, to find a solution to their problems, or just "to clean the path"—to make life happier. It is organized exclusively for women, mostly on

Wednesdays, and is conducted by female religious leaders. The ritual is based on the old legend about Bibi Mushkil-kushod, who helped a poor woodcutter to become wealthy, and involves reading the Quran, prayers, and other rituals.²³⁹

The ritual is traditionally organized at home in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan within the family/friend circle (Tajik: *gap/gashtaq*) and less frequently at *mazar/ziyosat gahs* (sacred pilgrimage sites) where random visitors can meet. The celebration, led by an *otun*, is an old practice that is popular mostly among the older and middle generations of women. In August 2017, we were invited to Guzal's apartment, located in a peripheral district of Moscow. At the beginning, we were told that she had organized the ritual herself, without an *otun*. She knew only one female religious figure in Moscow, and she was not available that day. We were promised that we would meet Bibi Solikha on another occasion.

The ritual was short, with the traditional dishes on the table, such as *halvatar*,²⁴⁰ *shir-birinch* (milky rice porridge), *boorsog* (pieces of fried dough), dry tea, salt, sugar, *non* (bread), and *kishmish* (raisins). The ritual was dedicated to Bibi Mushkil-kusho and Bibi-Seshanbe (who is another personage from the pantheon of Central Asian legends). At the outset, both Guzal and Asiya read *sura* Yasin, various *salovats*,²⁴¹ and *duas*,²⁴² but they did not read the story of the poor woodcutter, which is a core part of the traditional celebration. Instead, Guzal and I told the story together later and in Russian, which is unusual (traditionally, the story is read in the old Chagatai language). As such, it was a simplified and modernized version of the ritual.

After the spiritual part of the ritual was over, we discussed a variety of topics while eating, including the political, social, and economic situation in Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Russia. Both women criticized the corruption, theft, nepotism, and predatory behavior of governmental officials and their associates. In their opinion, the rapacious state powers behave contrary to the good of the people, justice, and religion. They perceive Islam as an ideal system that responds to the evil of this world. They do, however, strongly condemn terrorism, claiming that the Islamic State was created by the US and Russia to destroy Islam (quite a common opinion in Central Asia).

²³⁹ See Cieřlewska, *Islam with a Female Face*; Sultanova, *From Shamanism to Sufism*; A. Kramer, "Mushkul Kushad," in *Islam na territorii byvshei Rossiiskoi Imperii (Entsiklopedicheskii Slovar IV)*, ed. S.M. Prozorov (Moscow: Vostochnaia Literatura, 2003), 5.

²⁴⁰ *Halvatar* is a thick brown paste made of deep-fried flour in oil with added sugar served at funerals, death remembrance days, and some other rituals.

²⁴¹ *Salovat*—praising Prophets/God.

²⁴² *Dua*—a prayer, an act of supplication.

As we finished the Bibi Mushkil-kusho ritual, Guzal commented that the organization of religious celebrations in Tajikistan is banned to prevent people from gathering and discussing sensitive topics. Like many Tajiks I spoke to, she believed that religious leaders and Islam are the only force that can challenge the authoritarian regime in Tajikistan, which is why President Emomali Rahmon seeks control over religious affairs. Asiya added that Karimov likewise attempted to destroy Islam and Muslims. She was disgusted that he was buried inside the Shah-i-Zinda necropolis in Samarkand (considered a sacred site) and that the *janazah namaz* (funeral prayer) was performed for him. In her opinion, he had persecuted Islam and fostered terrorism in Uzbekistan. She was glad that Gulnara Karimova, the older daughter of the late president, was finally being held accountable for her actions. Guzal commented: “If Rahmon dies, the very same thing will happen with his children: people will kick them out.” The two women spent some time discussing who was the worse ruler—Karimov or Rahmon—and how the situation might develop with Mirziyoyev in power.

Summarizing the political discussion, Guzal told the following story:

Once upon a time, there was a vizier who served in office for 20 years. One day, a Padishah of the country decided to examine the vizier’s competence and loyalty, so he asked him three questions: 1. What does Allah do? 2. What does Allah cover? 3. And what does Allah eat? He gave the vizier twenty days to find the answers. The vizier gathered his people and asked them the same questions, and he gave them the same twenty days to provide the desired information, but no one was able to find a solution to the puzzle. Soon thereafter, the vizier met a poor man (*fakir*) and asked him the same questions. The *fakir* told him that the answers are remarkably simple. He provided the answers for the last two questions: 2. Allah covers (accepts) our sins; 1. Allah eats our sorrows. “But I am not going to answer the first question now. I know that the Padishah ordered you to find the solution, so I will give the last answer only when the Padishah fulfils my request.” The vizier went to the Padishah and asked him to satisfy the *fakir*’s demand. The ruler agreed, and the *fakir* asked the Padishah to exchange clothes with him. The Padishah did so, and after that the *fakir* sat on the throne next to the vizier and said: “Now you can see what Allah is doing.” The Padishah said to the vizier: “I asked you three simple questions that a 5-year-old child can answer, but you did not even manage to find the answers within 20 days. The poor man is smarter than you, thus now he will be a vizier. You held this post for twenty years, but you became spoiled by privileges and wealth, and you forgot about people and Allah.”

Guzal concluded: "The moral is that people at the top are not smarter than we are, and they can easily be replaced if they go too far."

Using poetry or parables to present one's opinion, explicate a particular point of view, or describe certain events is common in Central Asia. The ritual organized in Moscow was conducted in a same manner as the female *ehsons* I observed in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan among Tajiks and Uzbeks. But Guzal and Asiya met only in Moscow; they belong to the different ethnic groups and countries. Asiya did not consider Bibi Mushkil-kusho part of her national/ethnic tradition. In Moscow, however, participation in the ritual made her feel closer to her home in the Ferghana Valley. For that moment, Guzal's apartment turned into a sacred place of Central Asian spirituality.

In Russia, women can attend the mosque. However, the mosque is subjected to the bureaucratic control of the state, which imposes a certain religious and regulatory framework. Moreover, while women have their own chapel in which to pray, they are subordinated to an invisible imam separated from them by a wall; they can only listen to him through loudspeakers or watch on the big screen.

In contrast, female religious gatherings in Central Asia form an autonomous world from men's affairs where woman can express themselves and relax. The female religious leader is a central figure who decides on the order, form, and content of rituals. After the religious part, there is a social part during which women eat and discuss various matters related not only to religion, but also to family, community, and sometimes politics. Hence, besides their sacred function, female celebrations are of great social significance. Female religious leaders conduct rituals and teach Islam, but they also offer advice on different areas of life.²⁴³

Roche points out that the substantial efforts of the Tajik state to limit women's gatherings bears out that they are socially important.²⁴⁴ Limiting the organization of religious events serves to loosen social ties and destabilize social institutions. In the long term, it can lead to the fragmentation of society, depriving it of the social capital necessary to rebel against an oppressive state system. In

²⁴³ See Cieřlewska, *Islam with a Female Face*; Peshkova, *Women, Islam, and Identity*; Sultanova, *From Shamanism to Sufism*; Kramer, "Otin."

²⁴⁴ Sophie Roche, "Women's Sociability: The *qalandar khona* of Khujand (Tajikistan) in the Context of Political Events," in *Female Shamanism in Asia: Gender, Religion and the State*, ed. Davide Torri and Sophie Roche (New York: Routledge, 2020), 191-207.

this context, for some migrants, Russia is a place of relative freedom in terms of religious practice, especially when compared to Tajikistan, Turkmenistan.²⁴⁵

It is difficult to assess how the experience of participating in common rituals in the mosque affects female migrants from Central Asia. Without a doubt, the mosque is a hub for networking. But it also imparts specific knowledge on Islam that differs from the practices performed within some female circles. As Guest indicates, the transmission and reproduction of different kinds of knowledge does not necessarily depend on mainstream religious institutions, but on small, alternative community structures.²⁴⁶ Langer finds that cultural performances such as rituals are shaped by nature, society, and various sociocultural, political, and economic processes.²⁴⁷ Hence, they change over time, perhaps even more intensively due to migration. In addition, other contextual aspects—such as media, space, ecosystem, culture, religion, politics, economy, society, gender, and social groups—impact rituals or parts of rituals. Consequently, the function of the ritual may transform, while its performance and content may be adjusted to the new situation.

In the next section, I will present how the Mushkil-kusho ritual takes on an international dimension by combining various traditions of female migrants and their spiritual practices in the Moscow context.

Healing, Mushkil-Kusho, and a Kazakh Businesswoman, 2018

We became acquainted with 63-year-old Zhanar through Guzal and Asiya, who met her in the Prospekt Mira mosque. In 2018 Zhanar sold leather clothes in Moscow. In the 1990s she even traveled to Poland to sell her goods in local markets. She comes from a village not far from the famous Arslan-bob *mazar* in Kazakhstan²⁴⁸ and believes that she is spiritually connected to this place (as her ancestors were a part of the *mazar* network). Zhanar said that she possesses the gift (vocation) of

²⁴⁵ Muhammad Tahir and Bruce Pannier, “Majlis Podcast: The Threat To Religious Freedom In Central Asia,” *RFE/RL Media*, April 25, 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/majlis-podcast-threat-to-religious-freedom-central-asia/31221861.html>.

²⁴⁶ Matthew Guest, “The Reproduction and Transmission of Religion,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*, ed. Peter B. Clarke (Oxford Handbooks Online, 2011), 650–670.

²⁴⁷ Robert Langer, “‘Marginalised Islam’: The Transfer of Rural Rituals into Urban and Pluralist Contexts and the Emergence of Transnational ‘Communities of Practice,’” in *Ritual Matters: Dynamic Dimensions in Practice*, ed. Christiane Brosius and Ute Huesken (London: Routledge, 2010), 98.

²⁴⁸ Arslan-bob is one of the most important and old sacred places located in the Turkistan Region of Kazakhstan. It is related to the cult of the legendary teacher of shaikh Ahmad Yasawi, Arslan Bob. His mausoleum is located close to the village of Shaulder. In ancient times, the place was associated with worshipping nature. See A.K. Muminov, “Arslan-bob,” in *Islam na territorii byvshei Rossiiskoi Imperii (Entsiklopedicheskii Slovar I)*, ed. S.M. Prozorov (Moscow: Vostochnaia Literatura, 2006), 40–41.

healing, but since she refused to accept it three times, she cannot use the abilities associated with the gift. In her words, the first time the gift was offered to her by her ancestral spirits, she had an alcoholic husband and a lot of personal problems, so she was afraid to accept of it. Sometime later, she became a successful businesswoman, after which she was asked to take the gift once again, but she again rejected it. After that, her business collapsed and she lost everything.²⁴⁹ She believed that her misfortune was due to her refusal to accept the vocation.

In Moscow, Zhanar had worked as a personal assistant to a famous Kazakh female *ekstrasens*.²⁵⁰ At some point, however, Zhanar left the job following arguments with her boss, who became popular but also capricious and demanding. She said that the woman's spirits affected her emotional well-being, making her unstable and unpredictable. In Zhanar's opinion, good energy is transmitted from God through the heart (which is a concept accepted within various Sufi traditions).²⁵¹ She said that she started rewriting the Quran in the Russian language, which significantly changed her attitude to life and religion. Zhanar also believed that reincarnation and transmigration of souls were mentioned in the Quran and that most Islamic theologians were ignorant of Islam, leading them to distort the word of God. Zhanar's views on religion result from her personal spiritual journey, which began in Kazakhstan in her youth and continues to this day in Russia.

Guzal and Asiya trusted her deeply. Zhanar gave them advice related to their relatives, inferring from their photos what fate might befall them. But Zhanar's business was not going very well. Eventually, the women decided to organize the Mushkil-kusho ritual at Zhanar's home. She gladly accepted the offer even though she had never participated in this ritual, as it is not part of Kazakh tradition.

One sunny day, Zuzanna, Guzal, Asiya, and I, along with Bibi-Solikha, went to Zhanar's apartment. All three women were dressed in the festive Islamic clothes worn on the occasion of Mushkil-kusho. Guzal carried various accessories needed for the performance, of which she was a main initiator. We were walking slowly from the metro station, chatting along the way to Zhanar's home. As for 50-year-old Bibi Solikha, "the Moscow *otun*," she is an Uzbek born in Qurghonteppa

²⁴⁹ A person's refusal of a gift/vocation can evoke a series of unpleasant events, such as problems with childbirth; deaths of relatives; ills such as losing consciousness, temporary coma, or even paralysis; problems related to business and work, etc. There is a belief that people performing tasks associated with the spiritual world are specially designated by the spirits of their ancestors—see G.P. Snesev, *Relikty domusulmanskikh verovanii i obriadov u Uzbekov Khorezma* (Moscow: Nauka, 1969); Manichkin, *Shamanizm*.

²⁵⁰ *Ekstrasens* is a person who apparently possesses extrasensory perception and sometimes clairvoyance.

²⁵¹ See Szymon Skalski, *Forma i znaczenie rytuału zikru we współczesnym Afganistanie na przykładzie chanqa Chejchane w Kabulu* (Krakow: Universitas, 2020).

(Tajikistan), but her extended family came from Urgut, a town in the Samarqand Region of Uzbekistan. In 1988 she got married and moved to Dushanbe. Her family was always pious: her father, Usto Mansur, was known all over Qurghonteppa for providing circumcision services to boys, while her older sister teaches Islam and carries out rites for women. In the 1970s her sister's husband served as an imam at the Central Mosque in Dushanbe. The family was relatively well-off, but the civil war changed everything. In 2008, Bibi Solikha and her family emigrated to Russia to seek a better life. She began conducting the rituals and prayers following the death of her daughter in 2000. The latter was a great shock for her, from which it took a long time for her to recover.

Bibi Solikha did not consider herself an *otun*, as she had not received *fatiha*.²⁵² Nevertheless, female migrants called her *otun/otyncha* because she read the Quran and performed traditional practices during female religious events. Thus, she is considered “the Moscow *otun*” for a narrow circle of women. Bibi Solikha obtained Russian citizenship some time ago and had a stable job as a cashier in a supermarket.

Shortly after we arrived at Zhanar's house, the ritual began. Zhanar prepared a table on which various food products were displayed, such as bread, salt, sugar, water, tea, cake, cookies, and the ritual herb *isyryk*.²⁵³ In Central Asia there is a belief in healing through prayers performed over the food products, which should afterwards be consumed. Bibi Solikha began melodic recitation of *suras* in Arabic and *duas*, *ghazal*, and various spiritual sequences²⁵⁴ in Tajik and Uzbek.

Guzal actively participated in the ritual, singing some of the poetic parts. Zhanar followed her, but apart from the traditional Muslim prayers, it was mostly new to her. Nevertheless, she was emotionally engaged in the ritual process. Asiya, meanwhile, unlike during the Mushkil-kusho in 2017, did not participate in reading spiritual sequences; she sat off to one side, engaging only when *suras* from the Quran or *salovats* were read. At the end, the entire room was fumigated with *isyryk* and Zhanar underwent a ritual cleansing with smoke from the plant.

As is the custom, after the spiritual part, a meal was served. However, there were none of the traditional dishes of the Mushkil-kusho ritual. Instead, Zhanar had prepared *beshbarmak*, the national dish of Kazakhstan, which consists of boiled meat served on a bed of thick, flat noodles covered in a special sauce. While eating, we talked about the difficulties Zhanar was experiencing, as well as Guzal's preparation for the *haji*, for which she was due to leave shortly. Asiya and her family had

²⁵² *Fatiha* or *pata* (in Uzbek) (there are also other terms)—a customary blessing given to a candidate for spiritual leader by his/her teacher.

²⁵³ *Isyryk* (*hazor ispanid, ruta*)—a herb used for ritual incense.

²⁵⁴ *Ghazal*—a genre of poetry.

decided to return to Uzbekistan. In her opinion, conditions for migrants in Russia were getting worse and religion was increasingly under state control. Meanwhile, Mirziyoyev had introduced changes in Uzbekistan and she hoped for some improvement there.

Asiya and Guzal also discussed why the former did not want to participate in the ritual, turning sideways and not looking toward Bibi Solikha, who performed the prayers. Asiya claimed that her sons had explained to her that Bibi Mushkil-kusho is not included in the Quran; thus, conducting it is against Islam. The old “un-Islamic” practices, she said, should be eliminated.

In my research in the Ferghana Valley in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, I repeatedly observed how female rituals were subjected to criticism from various parties despite their often-conflicting views on political and/or religious matters. These critics included employees of the public administration, representatives of an austere version of Islam, and people who considered themselves “moderate” or even “traditionalist,” such as *shaikhs* at *mazars*. Special attention was paid to female rituals in the context of what is “Islamic” or “un-Islamic” (that is, “contrary to the tenets of Islam” in the opinion of a certain person or group); they were often described as *shirk*²⁵⁵ or *bid’a*.²⁵⁶ This criticism aimed to regulate and modify female rituals, and in so doing control woman and their gatherings. No one, however, disputed that the rich tradition of mystic poetry, stories, and legends passed on from generation to generation by female religious leaders has been discredited.²⁵⁷

Sophie Roche explains that in Tajikistan, “The conflict over women’s gatherings is at best pseudo-theological; there are no debates or theological arguments but simply blunt accusations, equally by Salafi and by the government. The government seems nervous about women authorities having an audience that is outside its control.”²⁵⁸ Danuta Penkala-Gawęcka, who writes on the role of female healers in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, explores how the discussion of what is “compatible” or “incompatible” with Islam affects traditional healing practices performed by women,²⁵⁹ noting that despite the impact of ideas about purifying Islam, “old” Kazakh or Kyrgyz practices still enjoy great popularity in society.

²⁵⁵ *Shirk*—the presence at God’s side of other divinities or associates.

²⁵⁶ *Bid’a*—innovation regarding religious matters.

²⁵⁷ See Anna Cieřlewska, “Transforming the Social Role of Female Religious Professionals in Tajikistan,” *Asian Studies Review* 40, no. 4 (2016): 510-526; Cieřlewska, *Islam with a Female Face*.

²⁵⁸ Roche, “Women’s Sociability,” 203.

²⁵⁹ Danuta Penkala-Gawęcka, “Shamans, Islam and the State Medical Policy in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan,” in *Female Shamanism in Asia: Gender, Religion and the State*, ed. Davide Torre and Sophie Roche (New York: Routledge, 2020), 103-132, 119-125.

As for Asiya, she was influenced by the religious views of her sons, who were educated at one of the most prestigious Islamic universities. Yet she tolerated Guzal's flexible attitude toward religious practices and even Zhanar's individualistic approach to Islam. Although Asiya manifested her attachment to a certain religious canon, for her (as well as for other participants) the ritual held social and cultural significance. Even if the ritual process meant something different for each of the women, it demonstrates how various social interactions support migrants' absorption of religious ideas. Levitt has found that syncretism is common among migrants.²⁶⁰ This is illustrated by the example of Zhanar, who absorbed a variety of views and spiritual traditions, and even Asiya, who, despite her criticism of the ritual, accepted its course.

In Russia, migrants do not have sacred places as they do in Central Asia, where pilgrimages to *mazars* are common expression of religiosity. Guzal once said: "We do not have *mazars* in Russia, because it is not our land." Zuzanna Błajet and I, during our research in 2018, traveled to Bashkortostan for a conference. The trip became for us an opportunity to observe whether migrants visit the same sacred places as Bashkirs. From this short visit, we gathered that migrants do not make pilgrimages to local shrines, which remain the places of worship of local Muslims and sometimes Christians. This topic requires more detailed research and analysis, but it seems that some forms of spirituality—such as various healing methods or ideologically and politically driven religious ideas—are more globalized and can be transferred with migrants; others, however, remain attached to a specific place. The question then arises of whether/how a second and third generation of migrants is, or will be, connected to the sacred places of their mystical or real ancestors in the countries of origin of their parents.

Hagan points out that when migrants cross religious boundaries, they break away from the religious traditions of their communities and attempt to absorb other ideas.²⁶¹ Moscow offers a wide range of options for religious searching and change. All participants in the ritual of Mushkil-kusho—Bibi Solikha, Guzal, Asiya, and Zhanar—differ in their understandings of religion, God, and spiritual practices. They all knew each other from the Prospekt Mira mosque that connected them in Moscow. A woman from Uzbekistan whom I met during *Laylatu l-qadr*²⁶² there in 2018 said: "This mosque is a meeting place for women. It is a female enclave. I feel here as at home. Sometimes it is difficult to go

²⁶⁰ Peggy Levitt, *God Needs No Passport: Immigrants and the Changing American Religious Landscape* (New York and London: The New Press, 2007).

²⁶¹ Hagan, "Religion on the Move."

²⁶² *Laylatu l-qadr* is held on one of the odd nights of the last ten days of Ramadan. According to Islamic tradition, on this night several *ayats* of *sura al-Alaq* (the 96th *sura* of the Quran) were revealed to the Prophet Muhammad as the first part of the Quran.

out and meet friends or to invite guests in Moscow, but here there is always something interesting going on apart from practicing religion.” In a sense, the Prospect Mira mosque is an institution of civil society largely based on informal networks connecting people in the Moscow megalopolis.

As regards the ritual of Mushkil-kusho conducted by the Uzbek *otun* in Moscow, it was transformed by the participation of the woman from Kazakhstan, who spontaneously reformulated its meaning. Langer et al. indicate that “whereas ‘transfer of ritual’ is always a form of ‘ritual dynamics’, not all ‘ritual dynamics’ is also a transfer of ritual.”²⁶³ That is, the ritual’s expression may change in response to different circumstances, but the transfer is only part of the change. The Mushkil-kusho ritual occupies a niche in Moscow that is related exclusively to the spirituality of some female migrants from Central Asia. It is performed by people who know the ritual and how to read the Quran, but they are not religious leaders in the traditional sense. The Moscow *otun* is invited by the female migrants to perform rituals, but she does not have her own congregation composed of students or/and followers from her family/neighbor/friend networks in the same way as female religious leaders in Central Asia do.²⁶⁴ Nevertheless, Bibi Solikha enjoys high esteem among female migrants due to her knowledge of rituals and practices.

Conclusion

My research shows that female migrants employ a wide range of approaches to religion that form their religious experiences in migration. They participate in spiritual practices in private spaces and performed exclusively within a female circle and/or attend the mosque to absorb religious ideas and make new friends. They learn about religion not only within migrant networks, but also from other sources. Consequently, their religious experience is shaped by different patterns and channeled through a variety of religious clusters. The female gatherings in Moscow resemble the Central Asian *ehsons*, which formed not only spiritual but also social bonds. But in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, religious gatherings are usually organized within a narrow circle of family and friends, whereas Moscow is a place for making new acquaintances, thereby creating new “gaps.”

Brown and Yeoh point out that while seeking continuity and maintaining their traditions, a central aspect of the migratory journey is to challenge religious practices and long-standing traditional rituals, which can become a source of inspiration for developing religion and spiritual

²⁶³ Robert Langer, Dorothea Lüddeckens, Kerstin Radde, and Jan Snoek, “Transfer of Ritual,” *Journal of Ritual Studies* 20, no. 1 (2006): 1-10, 1.

²⁶⁴ See Cieřlewska, *Islam with a Female Face*; Peshkova, *Women, Islam, and Identity*; Sultanova, *From Shamanism to Sufism*.

interests in new ways.²⁶⁵ Moscow offers an opportunity to learn and express various ideas at least within informal groups. Women's religious views and aspirations are the result of their individual choice, the spiritual traditions of their ancestral groups/countries of origin, and their experience as migrants. Islam is always a point of reference that gives them a sense of belonging to a certain spiritual and social system that can nevertheless be explored and expressed in various ways.

²⁶⁵ Brown and Yeoh, "Introduction," 14.

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