

The Islamic Factor in the Security Policy of the Russian Federation

Introduction

The tragic events of 11 September 2001 in the US have directed the attention of the world's public to the problem of terrorism emerging from extremist Islamic political organizations. Apart from the fact that Islamic extremism has the same roots everywhere, there is no direct connection, however, between Al-Qaida terrorism and the Islamic factor which has been developing in individual countries. According to the Russian Islam expert Aleksei Malashenko, one would have to admit that Islamic Salafiyya (in this case, the more correct designation for fundamentalism) as an immanent component of Islamic culture has found and will continue in future to find its political expression in the centre and at the periphery of the Muslim world.¹ The politicization of Islam and also its radicalization, of which individual groups and organizations are the bearers, can in no way, however, automatically be equated with extremism. The individual position of each of the different representatives of Islam towards violence is a decisive criterion. There is a tremendously wide spectrum here and only the most extremist forces use terrorist means to achieve their goals. The failure of the present-day "Islamic project" has led to the fact that a few fringe groups have made it their goal to "restore justice" and to overcome an apparently existent inferiority complex by making individual regimes the target of terrorist acts, including the leading world power, through whom foreign values are allegedly being forced upon the Islamic world in the course of globalization.

Phenomena like Al-Qaida and national Islamic radicalism exhibit organizational parallels as well as similarities in form and content.

Al-Qaida is a global network that is closely linked to the periphery of the Muslim world and consists of a curious mixture of Muslim mercenaries, generated by global modernization, and the half-medieval traditions and tribal structures of the Islamic periphery.² While neofundamentalism claims to represent and/or protect throughout the entire world the interests of the whole Islamic *umma* (community), which recognizes neither national nor state borders, *national* radical Islam, which has either united with nationalism in various different ways or replaced it, is merely dealing with the limited task of shaping the development of its people, its ethnic group or its state according to the rules of Islam.

1 Cf. Aleksei Malashenko, *Islamskie orientiry Severnogo Kavkaza*, Moscow 2001, p. 139.

2 Cf. Olivier Roy, *Ben Laden: apokalipticheskaya sekta, otkolovshayasya ot politicheskogo islama*, in: *Konstitutsionnoe pravo: vostochnoevropeskoe obosrenie* 4/2001, pp. 72-76.

As is the case in many countries in which a large part of the population is Muslim, also in Russia, the Islamic factor is linked to nationalism and social protest and despite the unquestionable existence of links between local radical groups and international Islamic foundations and despite the financing of the activities of these groups from outside sources, it has primarily local character. Of course, the global extremist threat to Russia should not be underestimated. However, that is not the subject of this article. Here, the focus will instead be on those security threats that stem from radical Islamic forces within the Russian context.

Measured by the number of its Muslim inhabitants, the Russian Federation is correctly regarded as one of the largest Muslim powers in the world. According to information from the Russian scholar Vitaly V. Naumkin, the 13.2 million "ethnic Muslims" currently in the Russian Federation make up nine per cent of its total population. However, not only the number of Russian citizens who profess the Islamic faith is important, but also their influence on the culture, the religion and the political situation in the country.

In this article, the causes for the politicization and/or radicalization of Islam in individual regions and republics of the Russian Federation will be elucidated as well as clarifying the influence that the Islamic factor as a socio-political phenomenon exerts on state security which is based on the maintenance of territorial integrity and the political stability of the Russian Federation. Because the security of Russia is in the foreground here, the sheer politicization of Islam, the foundation of Islamic political parties that co-operate with the government as well as the role of official Islam will not be dealt with in detail at this point. Instead, the manifestations of the Islamic factor in those republics in which it has a destructive character will be examined. Particular attention will be paid to the activities of the extremely radical representatives of unofficial Salafi Islam, which has become politicized, and which strives to change the existing socio-political system by using violence. One criterion for extremism in this context is the attitude towards violence.

Causes of the Radicalization of Islam in Russia

The emergence of radical Islamic movements can be attributed primarily to the following causes:

1. The process of Islamic rebirth in Russia and the politicization of Islam connected with this took place in the framework of the search for national identity that characterized the entire post-Soviet space. In the course of the erosion of the term "Soviet people", the multi-ethnic and multi-confessional composition of Russia quickly led to the search for historical and cultural characteristics and induced ethnic communities to search for their own identities as well as for features that would distinguish them from other peoples and ethnic groups. This search was born of, on the one hand, the understand-

able desire to again restore the cultural heritage of the peoples who had become progressively dissolved into one single "Soviet melting pot". On the other hand, belonging to the titular nation of the individual republics of the Russian Federation in the course of the extension of their autonomy proved an advantage in the redistribution of power and state functions, which in addition also guaranteed control of local resources.

In the Muslim enclaves, the national reawakening went hand in hand with the rebirth of Islam and its politicization. Islam is not only a religion, it is also a way of life: It assumes local traditions, but subordinates them to religious behavioural models. Furthermore, there is a clear connection between Islam and politics. In those places where Muslims are ethnic minorities, their religious identity is an important component of their national identity. Therefore, belonging to Islam as well as belonging to a specific ethnic group is an important distinguishing feature that consolidates the identity of a particular minority in contrast to the Russian majority. In Russia, the close connection between Islamic and ethnic identity has led to a rather indistinct Islamic community feeling and to the dominance of local political culture and traditions.

Unofficial and/or non-system Islam in Russia became the ideological vehicle and framework of social protest that was, to a certain extent, the result of Soviet religious policy. Official Soviet atheism not only limited the possibilities for Muslims living in Russia to perform their religion, but also to practice their traditional way of life (despite the fact that mosques existed, if only a small number thereof). Because of this, the Muslim tradition as an important component of ethnic identity was eroded. The ever-increasing gulf between ethnic communities, which varied enormously with respect to the manner in which they adapted to modern life, as well as the deep rifts within individual ethnic groups, were, in connection with the ban on the further development of religious and philosophical thought typical of the USSR, the cause of the fact that the process of a resurgence of Islam in Russia has been taking place at different speeds and with different focal points. "High Islam" (handed down in writing) was superseded by a "people's Islam" (handed down by word of mouth), which replaced the philosophy of the religion and/or its ethics with rituals and doubtful interpretations of the Koran made by badly or hardly trained mullahs. This "primitive" form of Islam was not able to counteract the radicals.

2. The development of the Islamic factor was doubtlessly fostered by the general economic and social problems that confronted Russia during the transition period and which were significantly more noticeable in the periphery areas. Deterioration in the living standard, impoverishment and marginalization of large parts of the population, increasing unemployment, economic decline of entire regions as a result of the decrease in production or complete closure of large state-owned companies - all these factors combined not only encouraged the politicization of Islam, but also furthered its radicalization.

The corruption often typical for traditional societies, i.e., the necessity to rely on “one’s own” clan in the local administrative structures, barred a large majority of the population from breaking out of the social structures that were becoming increasingly restricted and archaic. The desperation and hopelessness, in particular among the unemployed youth who neither had educational opportunities nor were able to find their place under the new conditions dictated by the “wild market”, provided the social dynamite that extreme nationalist tendencies, which also employed Islamic slogans for social mobilization, could easily use. In this manner, Islamic radicalism joined forces with nationalism and separatism.

3. Support and influences from foreign countries have also been another cause for the development of the Islamic factor in Russia. International Islamic foundations have generously funded the ideological intrusion of Islam, which led to a ready willingness among some Muslims to accept the radical ideas that were new to them. The tradition of High Islam, which was interrupted during the Soviet period, was a standard for the trend towards Islamic education, for taking advantage of study programmes in foreign countries and an uncritical attitude towards the Muslim literature that was pouring into the country. In the Muslim states of the Orient, radical Muslim groups and tendencies, which had an interest in extending their influence to their fellow believers in Russia, had been operating for a long time. Particularly in the framework of these ideologies, ideas were developed that justified using violence as the main instrument to reach targeted goals. The term “utopia” would be more applicable for the radical Islamic ideologies imported alongside elements of High Islam because utopias, in contrast to ideologies, lack theoretical basis and their striving for social revenge is hardly realistic.

The Phenomenon of Salafi Islam in Russia

During the transition period, in those regions of the Russian Federation that were particularly affected by problems, these utopias gained much more resonance than the traditional Islamic philosophy. In this situation, the Islamic factor developed in the context of unsystematic Islamic approaches which were focused on political and social utopias as well as violence as a means for their realization. The bearers of this radical ideology were the Salafis or - as they are also called - the “Wahhabis”. Their appearance in the republics of the Russian Federation where Sufism had always been the predominant persuasion, however, cannot be explained exclusively with the appearance of foreign missionaries and/or with economic support by individual Muslim foundations. Instead, internal causes played an equally important role in this as they allowed - unofficial, radical - Salafi Islam to gain supporters on the territory of the Russian Federation.

Salafism is based on the endeavour to free Islam from innovative elements and to restore the principle of monotheism in its original purity. Its approach is essentially determined by the principle of “*jihad*” (“holy war”), which is not understood primarily as achieving spiritual perfection but above all as the struggle to spread Islam and create a better society. These motives are particularly attractive to those parts of the population that suffer the most from injustice and corruption - and thus also especially for young people who are willing to begin changing society as quickly as possible. Traditional Islam, which is today experiencing a renaissance, did meet cultural and national and/or ethnic concerns of Muslims in Russia, but it has proved powerless in solving increasingly acute social problems. Although traditional Islam also temporarily did become the mouthpiece of opposition sentiments, only unofficial Salafi Islam was in a position to offer a radical alternative to the existing order. Within its framework, not only violence against non-Muslims could be justified, but also against those Muslims who refused to accept hard-line Salafi demands. “In Chechnya for example, respected representatives of Islam issue the *fatva* (approval) to take hostages and in doing so invoke the prophet Mohammed who in the 7th century had captured pagans to gain ransom money used for the livelihood of the Muslim community.”³

In fact, however, the Salafis remained dependent on the political situation. When they endangered local rulers, these rulers battled against them. If however, the goals of these same rulers changed, they could again count on the Salafis. A good example of this is the relationship of the Chechen President Aslan Maskhadov with Islamic extremists during his period in office, but also after he lost power as a result of the second Chechnya war. In July 1998 in Gudermes, there was a bloody conflict between the “Wahhabis” and the supporters of traditional Islam in Chechnya. “President Maskhadov explained that the reasons for this conflict can be found in the activities of the Wahhabites, who have created parallel military and political structures, who refuse to take orders from bodies of power, and who abduct and beat up people with the butts of their guns accusing them of drinking and other anti-*Shari’ah* offences (...) However, because Vice-President Vakha Arsanov and Shamil Basayev intervened in the conflict, the Wahhabites (had) not been completely banished. They were saved from total defeat by this intervention.”⁴ Maskhadov’s conduct can be explained in this case by the fact that the efforts by the “Wahhabis” to build parallel structures in Chechnya, which were not under his control, were a challenge for his already weakened position of power and he of course tried to consolidate his position and to get rid of his political enemies who had gained strength. However, after Maskhadov

3 Aleksei Malashenkov, *A mir ostaetsa prekhnim ...*, in: *Rossiia i musulmansky mir* 117/2002, p. 10 (this and all the following quotes in a foreign language have been translated by the author).

4 Vakhit Akaev, *Religious-Political Conflict in the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria*, in: Lena Jonson/Murad Esenov (Eds.), *Political Islam and Conflicts in Russia and Central Asia*, Stockholm 1999, pp. 49-50.

had lost power, the radical forces among the Chechen rebels became his allies in the resistance against the Russian Chechnya policy. In Russia, radical Islam became, above all, a protest movement whose manifestations, depending on the degree of social tension and the political situation, present challenges different in intensity to the security of the Russian Federation.

Challenges to Security

One can identify various challenges to security which are connected with the activities of the Islamists in Russia and which can be traced back to their attempts to implement Salafi Islam at the local and regional level as well as on the level of the republics.

Separatism

Russia is confronted with this challenge, for example, in Chechnya, where extreme nationalism has allied itself *de facto* with radical Salafism in the fight for secession of the republic from Russia. On the one hand, this is due to the lack of an Islamic tradition in this republic whose people have nothing to counter the penetration of aggressive "Wahhabism". The low standard of religious education, which had been replaced by rituals, furthered the increasing willingness to introduce radical methods of Sharia which, in this war-torn society where extensive lawlessness ruled, was viewed as the only guarantor to prevent unbridled crime and the restoration of social order. On the other hand, the effects of the first war (1994-1996) could still be felt through which large numbers of young people in particular were pushed to the edges of Chechen society. These saw radical Islamism not only as an instrument of national struggle, but also as a means to unfold their own identity. The Chechnya conflict became an important factor in the radicalization of political Islam and in its conversion to armed resistance. It started as a separatist movement in whose beginning phases the religious element did not play any substantial role or merely fulfilled a subordinate function. The goals of Jokhar Dudaev were to separate Chechnya from Russia and to build a secular state. However, in the course of the conflict the significance of the religious factor became more important. It no longer merely served as an instrument for mobilization; but rather, by misusing religious slogans, extremists were able to seize the nationalist movement and to lend it the quality of a "*ji-had*", among other things, also because foreign Islamic sources of funding were more than ready to finance a "*ji-had*". After the ceasefire agreement was signed and hostilities were suspended, the Chechen radical forces were in effect forced to continue the "*ji-had*" as otherwise they would have lost their *raison d'être* and the legitimization of military resistance. "After Chechnya emerged from the conflict with *de facto* independence in 1996, hundreds of

enthusiastic young men from the country's Muslim communities went there to learn more about Islam and jihad in militarized camps set up by warlords of Arab origin."⁵

At the same time, radical Islam allowed the young people to overcome those limitations imposed upon them by the traditions of Chechen society: "The tendency of young Chechens to adopt Wahhabism" - according to the Russian scholar Dmitri Makarov - "reflects the far-reaching change in social role allocation resulting from the war: The young people, who had carried the main burden of the fight for independence, no longer wanted to subordinate themselves to the authority of the older generation nor did they want to follow the customs of their fathers. A renunciation of traditions of this seriousness requires a convincing ideological foundation and this was offered by Wahhabism, which rejects many of the traditional orientations, among them the 'excessive' reverence of the older generation, as this is allegedly contrary to the Tawhid principle (monotheism, i.e. the exclusive worship of Allah)."⁶ Today, in a situation where separatist units have for the most part been destroyed, Wahhabism mobilizes the rebels to continue their resistance. Ending the conflict would take away their perspectives and their goal, not to mention cutting off their source of income guaranteed through assistance and support from abroad. Generally speaking, one could say that Chechnya has a "lost generation" that grew up during war and will never be able to adapt to a life during peace. These people are - similar to their foreign "godfathers", e.g. Khattab - condemned to become Islamic mercenaries and to fill the ranks of radical groups like Al-Qaida. Conceivably, they could form resistance groups in those areas and republics in the Russian Federation in which, depending on the situation, they could play into the hands of local radical forces.

Wahhabi Islam, for which the unity of the *umma* is important, but not ethnic affiliation, also offered the ideological foundation for the attempt of the Chechen rebels to extend their influence to the entire region. Although the invasion of Shamil Basaev's troops into Dagestan in the autumn of 1999 also had pragmatic reasons, it is significant that the Chechens attempted to instrumentalize the Islamic factor there by claiming that they wanted to take "pure Islam" to Dagestan cleansed of all innovation and mistakes that were in contradiction to the words and deeds of Mohammed.⁷ However, this rallying cry proved highly counterproductive. In Dagestan, which looks back on a long Islamic tradition and is correctly seen as the centre of the Muslim enlightenment, such escapades by the Basaev rebels, who were far from real Islam and

5 Nabi Abdullaev, *The Growth of Islamic Radicalism in Russia*, The Jamestown Foundation Prism, A monthly on the post-Soviet states, Volume VII, Issue 11, Part 2, November 2001.

6 Dmitri V. Makarov, *Radikalnyi Islamismus na Severnom Kavkaze: Dagestan i Chechnya*, in: *Konflikt - Dialog - Sotrudnichestvo* 1/1999, p. 47.

7 Cf. Yu. Anchabandze, *Kavkaz posle novoi chechenskoi kampanii*, in: *Konflikt - Dialog - Sotrudnichestvo*, cited above (Note 6), p. 35.

who represented a rather backward part of Chechen society, were perceived not as a call for Islamic solidarity but as an insult.

Thus neither in the Russian Federation as a whole nor in the narrower regional context - in the North Caucasus - is the Islamic factor represented by unified radical movements fighting for common goals. As the events in Dagestan have shown, the Islamic factor can even divide Muslims rather than unifying them.

The Introduction of the Sharia in Special Areas

The attempt of Islamists to create special areas ruled according to Islamic law and thus separated from the legal system of the republics and the Russian Federation is not that important as a threat to the Russian Federation, but nevertheless it does represent the danger of a possible destabilization. An example for this is Dagestan, where in 1998, several villages in the Kadar zone fell under the *de facto* control of Islamic radical forces.⁸ Social reasons played a special role in this case: "The Wahhabis made no secret of the fact that they were fighting to introduce the Sharia. By this, they understood the elimination of the corruption, which had poisoned society, the eradication of theft, fraud and violence as well as the elimination of drugs and drug trafficking, alcoholism and moral weakness. However, they were not just satisfied with making statements, but they began to implement these in practice."⁹ This resulted in clashes between locals and the police. The police officers were reproached for corruption and expelled from the villages in the Kadar zone. At the beginning of August 1998, the "Kadar Jamaat" openly challenged those in power and declared itself an "independent Islamic territory" governed by the Sharia. On 1 September 1998, a compromise solution was reached. "As a result of the negotiations of M. Magomedov with representatives of the Buinaksk Jamaat, a protocol was signed in which the Jamaats of Karamakhi and Chabanmakhi (villages in the Kadar zone, author's insertion) committed themselves to refraining from unconstitutional acts and to support the activities of the municipal self-government and other state authorities. In return, the Dagestan government promised the Jamaat freedom of conscience, the renunciation of the term 'Wahhabism' in official language use as well as joint consultations on some of the regulations and interpretations of the 'Law on Freedom of Conscience' with regard to their conformity with the Russian and Dagestan constitutions."¹⁰ However, with this compromise solution the problem could not be contained. The continuing radicalization of the Dagestan "Wahhabis" was not only furthered by the escalation of the problem in Dagestan itself, but also by external support as well as Chechen influence, in

8 For more details see Dmitri V. Makarov, *Ofitsialnyi i neofitsialnyi islam v Dagestane*, Moscow 2000.

9 Anatoli Savateev, "Vahhabit", "Vahhabitu" rozn', in: *Asia i Afrika segodnja* 3/2002, p. 24.

10 Makarov, cited above (Note 8), p. 44.

particular that of the radical Chechen field commanders in whose units many young Dagestani had fought in the first Chechen war. It is no coincidence that the inhabitants in the Kadar zone, who had hoarded weapons to use in resistance against local state authorities, did not make a secret of their connections with Basaev and Khattab and even boasted of these. However, after Basaev's units invaded Dagestan, these connections with the Chechen rebels discredited them politically and morally within Dagestan society, which had joined together in the fight against the aggressors.

The Potential for the Mobilization of Islamic Radicalism

Also in Tatarstan, radical slogans found their way into the national movement. In the areas particularly disadvantaged economically, favourable conditions emerged for mobilizing the youth. This is true, among others, of Naberezhnye Chelny where the fall in output in the largest company there - the automobile factory KAMAZ - led to unemployment and impoverishment. In the opinion of the Tatar political scientist Aidar Khabutdinov, "reproaching Wahhabism is a common accusation comparable to 'enemy of the people' from the year 1937. Most clerics do not have sufficient theoretical knowledge to explain the situation and to convey this to ordinary Muslims. Under these circumstances, in the eyes of the radical young people, the Wahhabis have a nimbus as the advocates of Tatarstan's independence, which gives cause for concern."¹¹

Elements of Islamic extremism became particularly evident in Tatarstan after the start of the anti-terrorist operations in Afghanistan. In October 2001, radical nationalists and Islamists in Tatarstan declared their willingness to go to Afghanistan to support the Taliban in the *jihād* against the US-led anti-terrorist coalition. A group of 25 people from Naberezhnye Chelny asked the local branch of the Tatar Public Centre to send them to Afghanistan. Some of the representatives of Tatarstan's religious leadership also shared the feelings of these volunteers, although they did not agree with their methods. A member of the Spiritual Board of the Muslims of Tatarstan declared that one ought to pray to Allah for an end to this war and for punishment of those nations led by Satan.¹²

Over time, the number of volunteers even increased. According to information from the Director of the Tatar Public Centre, since the beginning of the anti-terrorist operation, around 1,000 Islamists from Tatarstan have requested to be sent to Afghanistan to join the Al-Qaida fighters. However, he did not know whether they reached Afghanistan to fight for their faith.¹³ In any case, these kinds of testimony to solidarity are evidence that an increasing number

11 Aidar Khabutdinov, *Sovremennyi Tatarstan: mezhdú nationalismom i islamismom*, in: *Konflikt - Dialog - Sotrudnichestvo* 2/2000, pp. 121-122.

12 Cf. *The Jamestown Monitor* of 12 October 2001, Vol. 188.

13 Cf. *Rossiiskii Telekanal, Vesti Nedeli* of 7 April 2002.

of young people, who could not gain ground in their own society, were prepared because of their ideological convictions (also perhaps, only to earn money) to fight for the Islamic cause all over the world.

Conclusions

Radical Islamism in Russia is in and of itself not a factor that threatens the security of the Russian Federation. Yet if it is combined with nationalist and separatist movements, its potential for mobilization can increase as well as adding an interconfessional dimension to the confrontation. Particularly the religious element, however, can change a conflict of interests into a conflict of values, which ultimately makes compromise clearly more difficult.

Radical Islam remains an expression of the social protest movements in the Muslim regions of Russia and gives them a framework; simultaneously it offers individual groups a camouflage for their fight for power and the control of resources. Islam not only legitimizes this fight in the eyes of the people, but in addition, it characterizes these cynical and egotistical goals as a “*ji-had*” for the just and fair transformation of society.

Alongside the internal causes in Russia that favour the emergence of radicalism and extremism, financing from Islamic foundations abroad plays a significant role. This support not only makes resistance possible, but also keeps it alive.

On the whole, a decrease in radical movements today can be ascertained in the North Caucasus and in other regions of the Russian Federation, which can be attributed, among other things, to the emerging decrease in nationalist movements characterized by separatism similar to that in Chechnya. Existing differences have less to do with the relations between the subjects of the Federation and the centre. Anti-terrorist activities have also played a role in this. Nevertheless, there is no reason for recklessness in politics. Radical Islamism is and will remain a part of Islamic political culture. It will have to be taken into consideration in the political decision-making process; a dialogue must be conducted with its supporters so that extremists will be marginalized. In the end, it is the Muslims themselves, who have an interest in the development of their state without any crises and fractures, who will be able to take the most effective action against Islamic extremists.