

**Reflections on Private and Political Islam.
Is There an Islamist Threat from Eastern Europe and Eurasia?**

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The Region?

Eastern Europe and Eurasia are the topic of our meeting today—this is a huge and broad swathe of territory, well over twice the size of the United States if we begin on the frontiers of Germany and set our gaze toward Vladivostok and the Pacific.

Does this constitute a definable region as the conference structure would suggest, and can we make generalizations across this territory? Certainly there is a shared heritage in Eastern Europe and Eurasia (which is our new term for the lands of the former Soviet Union). And this shared heritage comes not just from being part of the Soviet Union or of the Soviet or Eastern bloc after World War II, but from a much deeper history of interactions stretching back over several centuries. Part of this history has been shaped by the encounter between Christianity and Islam in the region, dating back over a millennium.

Bosnia-Herzegovina, Albania, and Russia, for example, mark the western and northernmost expansion of the boundaries of the Muslim world. In most of this region, in stark contrast with Western Europe, the Muslim populations are largely indigenous. They are not modern migrants from outside—as they are, say in Britain, France, and Germany—but historic Muslim communities, some of whom assumed Islam as their primary religion during the early years of its expansion beyond the Arab world and especially during the push west from the distant Eurasian *steppe* lands toward the gates of Vienna by the Mongol Golden Horde.

The borders of Islam today in this region, roughly follow the boundaries etched into Europe and Eurasia by the Golden Horde, and by Genghis Khan and successors like Uzbek Khan, who adopted Islam as the primary religion in 1312 and brutally repressed all other confessions that had previously enjoyed equal treatment.

But given the extent of these Muslim communities across this contiguous and historic geographic space, can we say that there is unity in Islam, in Eastern Europe and Eurasia. Can we invoke the term *In Pluribus Unum*? Many peoples but one religion.

The short answer to this is no. Eastern Europe and Eurasia do not form an homogenous region from the point of view of Islam.

Bosnia, Albania and Russia, the three countries I began with, have very different histories of conversion and of practice. So do Azerbaijan in the South Caucasus, and the Central Asian states, and Xinjiang, China's western province. Xinjiang is often considered to be the easternmost extent of Islam in Eurasia, but it should also be pointed out that there are ancient Muslim communities within China extending even further east into the Chinese heartland. Not all Muslims in China are Uighurs or other Turkic minorities like Kazakhs or Kyrgyz (contrary to popular depiction). Some are Han Chinese who converted to Islam at various junctures.

In some cases in this broad swathe of territory, groups, like the Tatars of the Volga region, adopted Islam even before neighboring Slavic communities adopted Christianity. The Tatars converted to Islam in 922, for example, half a century before Russia officially accepted Orthodoxy. So technically speaking Islam is the older religion in the lands of the modern Russian Federation, not Christianity.

In the Balkans, groups like the Bosnian Bogomils, converted to Islam from breakaway sects of Christianity under the Ottoman Empire. Other communities in the Balkans, in places like Macedonia represent Muslims migrations to Europe, of Turkic nomads, craftsmen, and farmers who moved from the Anatolian plains to the fertile lands and trading towns on the European side of the Bosphorous in the early years of the Ottoman Empire in the 15th and 16th Centuries.

Within Central Asia, the history, and practice, of Islam is different among the settled peoples of the old cities along the Silk Road in the heart of the region—which are now part of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, places like Bukhara, Khiva, Samarkand, Khudjand, and Osh—which were great centers of Islamic learning from the 14th to the 16th centuries. They are also different and among the nomadic peoples of the *Steppe* in modern Kazakhstan, as well as in the northern regions of Kyrgyzstan, who adopted

Islam in the late 18th and 19th Centuries and adapted it to earlier shamanistic and other practices.

Russia is also home to several distinct and historic Muslim communities, not just the Tatars and other Muslims in the Volga region, but also in the North Caucasus. Indeed, in the case of Russia, it must be borne in mind that although 80% of the population would describe themselves as ethnically or linguistically Russian (and perhaps even nominally Russian Orthodox)—which makes the state more homogenous than at any other point in its modern history—the Russian Federation remains heterogeneous, a multi-ethnic state and multi-confessional state (now that atheism is no longer the official state “non-religion”). Approximately 20 million people—about 14% of the Russian population—are culturally Muslim. Although this is a crude division that should be treated with care.

And 10 million of those 20 million are the Tatars, the historic bearers of Islam in Eurasia. For some in the region, the Tatars are the Muslim *Morzhey* (the Russian term for walruses). The northernmost Muslims on the planet—within hailing distance of the Arctic Circle and the polar icecap, all a far cry from the desert sands and searing heat of the Arabian peninsula.

The Tatars pride themselves in remaining at the forefront of reform in Islam—long after it ended in the Arab world—and point to a religious revival that began under Catherine the Great in the 18th Century. The Tatars initiated the *Jadidist* movement in Islam in the 19th Century, which promoted reform, renovation, independent thought and critical thinking and pushed higher education to the forefront. Tatar theologians brought their reformist ideas to the Ottoman empire and had a major impact on the development of Islam in modern Turkey. It is no accident that Tatarstan’s capital, Kazan, has one of the most famous universities in Russia, and now boasts Russia’s first Islamic University.

Russia’s North Caucasus region also offers some interesting perspectives on the adoption and role of Islam in the region. In sharp contrast to Tatarstan, Islam came late to the North Caucasus as an organized religion—about 5 centuries later than in the Volga region. In this case, it was carried by Sufi missionaries from the Sunni Muslim Ottoman Empire, rather than from the neighboring Shi’ite Iranian Empire (which brought Islam to what is now modern Azerbaijan). Islam did not really take hold in the mountainous regions of Dagestan until the 16th century. It came even later to Chechnya, Ingushetia

and the northwestern reaches of the North Caucasus in the 19th century, which we now associate so strongly with Islam. Here the spread of Islam coincided with the expansion of the Russian Empire and it came to play a unifying role for the disparate peoples of the North Caucasus against the Orthodox Christian Russian Empire in the Caucasus Wars. Although as I just noted, Islam was not a factor in precipitating the conflict in any way. The Caucasus Wars of the 19th Century were a classic colonial war.

As a result of the Russian invasion of the Caucasus, the spread of Islam to the northwestern regions of the North Caucasus was interrupted. Its practice was really only consolidated in the northeast, where Dagestan became a focus for ‘enlightened Islam’ centered on a cult of books and scholars—somewhat similar to the earlier experience of Tatarstan. Chechnya also became a center of “Sufism,” where the Sufi brotherhoods operated largely according to their own rules and were often in conflict with each other over religious practice. Imam Shamil, the celebrated religious leader of Dagestan and Chechnya who led the resistance to Russian in the Caucasian Wars of the 19th century, was part of a Sufi brotherhood.

By virtue of its late arrival in the region, Islam did not have a great impact on the social structure of the North Caucasus—which is also incidentally the case in the Balkans. The region’s pre-Islamic features were retained, although religious ritual came to regulate the general conduct of public and private life. The Islamic law code, *Shari’a*, was not imposed on the region, but was assimilated into local customary law, or what the Russian invaders called “Mountain Law”—*Adat* in Dagestan. The *Adat* codes often contradicted *Shari’a*, and religious leaders engaged in a constant struggle to assert the primacy of religious law. This contradicts claims of the strict observance of Islamic law in the region prior to the Russian invasion, which are a common myth in discussions of Islam in the North Caucasus.

In addition in the North Caucasus, as in the Balkans, there was a long history of coexistence with neighboring groups of different religions, prior to the advent of Islam—including Mountain Jews, and Georgian and Armenian Christians in this instance. This encouraged tolerance toward other confessional practices. Prior to the Russian-Caucasian wars, there was no campaign of forced conversion to Islam and no record of inter-group conflict on a religious basis. Dagestani leaders, for example, were in the habit of currying favor with their multi-ethnic and multi-confessional subjects by attending services at the local mosque, church, and synagogue on the

respective holy days.

This is something which the Tatars have also enshrined today—in what they call “Euro-Islam” a fusion of western and eastern practice that continues the tradition of *Jadidism*. In Tatarstan today, for example, although 80% of the ethnic Tatar population considers themselves Muslim, less than 5% attend a mosque regularly. There is a great deal of inter-marriage with the large ethnic Russian community and a degree of observance in both mosque and the church for those with mixed heritage in the republic. Religion for Tatars has largely become a tool for preserving the Tatar community—especially outside of Tatarstan in the rest of Russia, where the bulk of Tatars live—in many respects similar to the role of the church for Armenian groups in the diaspora.

Religion as a Dominant Factor in Regional Calculations?

In sum, the history of Islam in this broad region is complex and locally specific. Yet, at the same time, Islam has, historically, been evoked as a general factor in wars in Eastern Europe and Eurasia.

In the Balkans it has been seen as part of the struggle between the Russian and Ottoman Empires in the 19th Century over the control of Orthodox holy sites (like Hagia Sophia and Constantinople with its Orthodox patriarchy). But when one looks closer, the Russo-Turkish wars were really more about geopolitics and prize pieces of real estate, like control over the Turkish Bosphorus straits, than about acute religious differences. Islam is also evoked in accounts of past conflicts in the Caucasus—like the Caucasus wars of the 19th Century. But again, on closer scrutiny it seems to be more of an additional motivating factor for a territorially or nationally or politically based conflict. Even in the more contemporary case of Armenia and Azerbaijan, and the struggle over Nagorno-Karabakh, religion hasn't really been a factor. Religion is a component of ethnicity in many respects in conflicts in the Caucasus, and in places like the Balkans between Bosnians, Albanians, and Serbs.

In general, in recent conflicts in the Balkans and the Caucasus, and in areas of tension in Central Asia and Xinjiang, the national factor seems to be more important than the Islamic revival and religious unity.

In large part, this is the result of the fact that Islam, as a major religion in the region, declined precipitously after the Russian Revolution. Of course

Christianity did too, as a direct result of the Bolshevik drive against religion and the establishment of a secular Soviet state. This extended to some degree to Eastern Europe and the Balkans after World War II, although to a far lesser extent. In the case of Islam, prior to the Russian Revolution, there were, for example, more than 2,000 mosques and 1,000 religious schools in the small North Caucasus republic of Dagestan alone. By 1941, there was not a single mosque or religious school left in Dagestan.

The Arabic language and script, on which Islamic teaching and Muslim culture were based, was outlawed across the Soviet Union in favor of the local vernacular and the development of local literary languages using the Cyrillic script. By 1991, the majority of official Muslim clerics were poorly educated and could not read Arabic. As it was intended to, this policy severed the links between Muslims in Eurasia, their traditional manuscripts, including the Koran, and the broader Muslim world. The process of secularization and increasing contacts and inter-marriage with ethnic Russians and other non-Muslims also encouraged entire ethnic groups to move away from Islam.

The Threat?

So why do we see a threat from political Islam in Eurasia—as the title of this conference suggests?

For the most part in the region, since 1991, Muslims have simply attempted to restore their links with the past and with the rest of the Muslim world—especially in the new states of the former Soviet Union. Their Islamic revival has not been confined to specifically confessional issues. The exploration of their cultural legacy has perhaps been the most important feature. Indeed, Islam for most of the region is seen as a way of life rather than a religion, shaping value systems, and customs. In Russia, the Islamic revival has been greatest in Tatarstan and the eastern North Caucasus, in Dagestan and Chechnya, where it was traditionally the most ingrained. In Central Asia, Islam has revived more quickly in the traditional and historic sites of Islamic learning, in the Fergana Valley, and along the old Silk Road routes, where in many respects basic Islamic practices were never entirely extinguished as part of the daily routine of life—and much more slowly in states like Kazakhstan, where efforts to restore Muslim identity have been superseded by attempts to find a new state and national identity and a new regional role.

Early efforts to revive Islam in Eurasia concentrated on producing books on

the basic tenets of Islam, including “How to Pray” manuals for the majority who had lost their religious connections. New mosques were built (mostly with foreign funding from Turkey, Iran and the Gulf states) and religious schools were also established to prepare a new generation of Islamic clergy. In addition, pilgrimages to Mecca were encouraged. In Russia, for example, 5,000 new mosques have been built country-wide over the last 10 years, including 1,000 in Tatarstan alone.

But our focus has been drawn away from these developments to the Balkan wars of the 1990s and their propensity to draw in small groups of Muslims from outside to fight in Bosnia and Kosovo. To the civil war in Tajikistan and its interactions with the war in Afghanistan. To the rise of Islamic parties in Central Asia and their morphing into militant movements like the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. And, in large part, our attention has been drawn to the war in Chechnya.

Afghanistan has loomed large in all these scenarios—from Central Asia to the Balkans.

Radical Islamic opposition movements have a long history in Central Asia and Afghanistan dating back to the Tsarist era and the expansion of the Russian and British empires into the region in the late 19th Century. During World War I, Islamic militants took up arms to oppose the Russian government’s attempts to mobilize Muslims for the war effort. Again, in the 1920s, Muslim partisans in the so-called *Basmachi* movement opposed the Bolshevik takeover and the advance of Soviet power into Central Asia.

And, the most recent resurgence of Islamic opposition was spurred by the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. This tied Eurasia’s and Afghanistan’s fates together.

Central Asian Muslims sent to fight in Afghanistan gained a new appreciation for their history and religion and drew inspiration from the *mujaheddin* fighters that opposed the invasion. After the 1989 Soviet withdrawal and the subsequent collapse of the USSR, the creation of international Muslim brigades, with Pakistani, Saudi (and of course U.S.) backing to fight the occupying Soviet forces in Afghanistan, set the tone and provided manpower for Islamist insurgents in the Balkans—in Bosnia and Kosovo—as well as Central Asia and Chechnya.

In 1992-1997, during the Tajikistan civil war, Tajik Islamic opposition forces found a safe haven and staging ground across the border in Afghanistan. At the end of civil war, those who refused to participate in a new united Tajik government stayed in Afghanistan and joined the Tajik-dominated Northern Alliance. Others joined forces with the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (the IMU). This was a self-proclaimed radical Islamic and political group, formed around 1997 by two ethnic Uzbeks from the Fergana Valley with the express goal of overthrowing the government of President Islam Karimov and establishing an Islamic state in Uzbekistan. Having been expelled from Uzbekistan in the early 1990s, the two traveled variously and separately in Muslim countries including Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates—as well as to Chechnya—and established contacts with Islamic movements, financial sources, and intelligence services. They established close relations with Taliban leaders, were reported to have secured the support and financial backing of Osama bin Laden, and relocated permanently to Afghanistan in 2001 after terrorizing the border regions of Central Asia. Only the U.S. campaign in Afghanistan after September 11, curtailed the activities of the IMU—although their specter has been raised again by recent events in Uzbekistan.

Now, Chechnya is seen as the second Afghanistan for *ihadists*, those engaged in an armed struggle for the restoration of Islam on a regional if not global scale. Chechnya is depicted as the new training camp and staging area. And it is certainly true that there are some Muslim fighters in Chechnya, who are there for their own broader reasons, unrelated to the underlying conflict. The war in Chechnya has now continued for a decade and gradually assumed different forms. It has transformed itself from a civil war within Chechnya, into an all-out war between Moscow and Chechnya; then from a political conflict into an ethnic conflict between Russians and Chechens; and now, seemingly into another front in the international war on terrorism and a struggle with Islamic militancy.

This seems to undermine my earlier thesis that territorial and nationally-based conflicts generally supersede religious motivations in Eastern Europe and Eurasia, historically and today. So how has this happened?

In the case of Chechnya, the rise of militant Islamic groups is relatively recent and is very much a product of the war. It dates back to 1995 and the emergence of Shamil Basayev as the key figure in the Chechen resistance after his raid on the Russian town of Budennovsk in Stavropol Krai in June of that

year. This was the seminal event—not Dzhokhar Dudayev’s decision to take his oath of office on the Koran when he assumed the position of President to curry favor with the local Muslim clergy and Islamic nationalist parties in his bid for power. Basayev’s calls for a *Gazavat*, or holy war, during the attack evoked earlier appeals by Sheikh Shamil in the Caucasus Wars of the 19th Century and were intended to recruit fighters from further afield as well to secure financing. Basayev had a pretty canny assessment (based on his knowledge of Afghanistan and other regional wars) of where he could get men and money from. And, indeed, Islamic militants did rally to Basayev after 1995, including many who had fought in Afghanistan and later in Bosnia.

Elsewhere in Eurasia, the threat may be more perceived than real, and has become entangled in a larger, complex relationship between state and religion.

With the general religious revival—not just of Islam, but also of Christianity and other religions—since the collapse of Communism and the Soviet Union, robust and well-financed proselytizing religions and political movements with a religious platform have entered Russia and other new states from abroad. In doing so they have challenged the states new and fragile political unity.

As a result, regional leaders have strived to create and maintain exclusively *indigenous* or traditional forms of religion, where adherents share their national rebuilding projects—not some externally projected spiritual, cultural, or political goals. The Russian leadership, in particular, has tried to use “home-grown” religion as a means of building state unity. The place of the Russian Orthodox Church at the center of Russian spiritual, cultural, and social life has been restored, along—to a lesser degree—with Islam, Judaism and Buddhism which are also seen as traditional to the Russian state.

Most notably, in this context, Catholicism in Russia—not Islam—has been denied the status of a “traditional” religion. And to date the Russian government has refused all requests by Pope John Paul II to visit Russia, although he has already visited Ukraine, Armenia, and Kazakhstan. Ostensibly this is on the basis that before the 1917 Revolution, Catholics lived primarily in the part of the Russian Empire that is now Poland. But deeper than this, the Russian state sees a threat from Catholicism, one of the world’s richest, most powerful, and most numerous religions. Outside loyalties to the Catholic Church and the Pope in Rome could potentially

present an alternative source of loyalty to the Russian state (from Moscow's perspective).

Islam's threat is seen as similar although a little more nuanced. The threat is not so much from a broader Islamic world, which the Russian state recognizes as quite fragmented, but from specific, organized political and militant forms of Islam as propounded by organizations like *Hizb-ut-Tahrir*, or by rich states with a long reach like Saudi Arabia. Russia has launched concerted campaigns to remove "Wahhabist" and other "alien" Islamic religious and political movements from the North Caucasus. And has actively co-opted "traditional" Islamic communities in places like Tatarstan as an antidote to these. For example, in Tatarstan, the Russian central government has enthusiastically supported the rebuilding of a major mosque in the Kazan Kremlin, as well as the creation of the Islamic University, which it keeps a close eye on. Shi'ite Iran has also been engaged as a major state partner and counter-weight to Saudi Arabia, in large part because there are no significant Shi'ia populations in Russia, and the bulk of the Russian Muslim population is Sunni.

In Uzbekistan, the state has adopted a similar approach to Russia in trying to stamp out not only the militant Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, but groups linked to *Hizb-ut-Tahrir*. However, the Uzbek government has gone much further in clamping down on all unsanctioned forms of religious observance to ensure the dominance of a tightly-controlled "official Islam"—something which Russia has not done.

Islamophobia—an equal threat?

The activities of the Uzbek government over the last several years raise another issue of "Islamophobia" and a backlash against Islam that could provoke the very militant, radical reactions that states fear. A case can certainly be made in Uzbekistan that mass arrests of observant Muslims as suspected members of radical Islamic groups and deaths from torture in police custody, along with increasing social deprivation from misguided economic policies, are feeding the further development of the militant groups that have already take root there. The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, gained traction by recruiting among disaffected young Muslims. Likewise, other radical groups like *Hizb-ut-Tahrir* have been able to play to widespread anger with the government, its persecution of observant Muslims, and the fact that there are no political parties and few other groups

to channel people's grievances. In Uzbekistan, Islamic radicalism, militancy, and violence have begun to fill the vacuum that the state has created in the political space between the people and the government.

In Russia, the war in Chechnya, and the various efforts toward restoring specifically national Russian and Orthodox symbols have created something different—a form of “populist nationalism,” which while not ideological is potentially dangerous. This has fostered a general atmosphere of animosity toward non-Russians (especially Chechens and other peoples from the Caucasus), in which reactionary forces—albeit small in number—feel themselves emboldened to act. There has been over the last couple of years a surge in extremist attacks, including by groups of skinheads across Russia.

Over the last decade, a new front for social upheaval has also emerged in Russia beyond Chechnya. Millions of migrants from Russia's former dependents in the Caucasus and Central Asia have moved to Moscow, St. Petersburg and many other regions to work—as well as to seek refuge from regional conflicts. Although language ties still predominate, and these include Christian Georgians and Armenians, the bulk of migrants are from the traditional Muslim regions of Central Asia, as well as from Azerbaijan. This raises the proportion of Muslims in the Russian state, although it is largely uncounted at this stage. Cities like St. Petersburg, which were 90% or so Russian just before the collapse of the Soviet Union, now have migrants—especially from Central Asia—accounting for about 20% of the population. Russia, in this respect, is becoming more European in its profile.

With these changes, the stability of Russia, the viability of its economy and labor migration may soon become one of the key issues in Eurasia. And the big human rights and nationalities story in Russia may soon be the plight of migrants (as increasingly it is in Europe) who are exploited and have no economic, social or political rights.

The concern about citizen's rights as workers in Russia is increasingly a factor in bilateral relations between Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Russia. And Central Asian states are increasingly fearful of social backlash against migrants in Russia that would result in large numbers being sent back. This is a potentially explosive issue for the region, given the fact that labor migration is increasingly a safety valve for impoverished and over-populated states like Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan—and perhaps even a factor in preventing a renewed outbreak of the civil war in Tajikistan.

In polls, most Russians see right-wing racism as quite a widespread phenomena, particularly in big cities. In one recent poll, almost 3/4 of Muscovites stated that they were aware of growing inter-ethnic intolerance. And in other surveys, Russians as a whole have expressed the desire to curtail the entry of migrants from Central Asia and elsewhere into the country—although the only group singled out on a religious basis in polls are Jews. Chechens are viewed negatively on the basis of their ethnicity.

The populist-nationalist atmosphere in Russia and perceived protection for extremist groups among the more reactionary elements of the rank and file police—another element noted in Russian polls—means that racist attacks are noticeable and not reined in. In other surveys, most Russians have a passive response to these incidents. Even if they do not sympathize with them, they are not prepared to take action against them—thus facilitating the phenomenon. Regional and local authorities also generally do little to protect the rights or actively defend the rights of religious or ethnic minorities.

As yet none of this has collided with the issue of political Islam, but given the example of Uzbekistan, similar developments in Europe, and growing disparities of wealth (especially on a regional basis) this could be the focus of future discussions like today's. And it is something we should bear in mind for the future.

Realistically, it is very difficult for Russia and other states in Eastern Europe and Eurasia to deal with these kinds of problems, especially as we look at similar phenomena all across Europe. Institutional arrangements remain weak and interventions that work in one locality may gain little traction in another because of the diversity of the region.

The basic conclusion is that just as there is no unity of Islam in Eastern Europe and Eurasia, there is no single Islamic threat or single source. Hopefully the discussions in the sessions today will enable us to explore this further, to understand the complexity of the vast territory we are looking at, and to identify different ways of approaching and addressing the array of issues we have to contend with.