

## The Increasing Religious Radicalism In The Tatarstan Republic, And The Putin's Response

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**Abstract:** The Republic of Tatarstan once used to be known for communal harmony and peace is now in news for terrorist attacks. Radical Islamist threat intensified after the collapse of USSR. The Russian political elite never realised that, nascent Russia would ever face treat from radical Islamist forces. Yeltsin flexible approach towards Russian regions provided adequate time to Muslims for establishing outside contact. In the name of religious revivalism, Islamist radical activities proliferated in the middle Volga and the North Caucasus region. Putin's repressive measures yielded only limited result. Therefore, the present paper attempts to analyse the reason for increasing Islamist radicalisation in the Russian Republic of Tatarstan and the adjoining region. It shall also strive to study the Russian authority response towards countering the radical Islamist challenges.

**Key Words:** Tatarstan, Islamist, Radical, Muslims, Revivalism.

### INTRODUCTION

The 'Tatar' population of Tatarstn Republic has historically been adherents of Islam. The conflict over religious identity and particularly between Islam and Christainity dates back to the Tsarist period. The conflict over religious identity can easily be noticed in the portrayal of Muslims in Russian and the Tatar history textbooks. Most of the Russian history textbook depicts horrible image of Muslims and associate them with past barbaric events like; invasion, aggressive military rule, the horrors of "Horde Yoke", the aggressive wars of Mohammed, the Ottoman conquest of Byzantium, the Crusades, the Russian-Turkish wars and the conquest of Caucasus (Hovaiskii 1900: 115). On the other hand, Tatar textbook depicted an Islamic view of the world history and such text begins with the religious blessings (Atlasi 1911: 3).

Most of the history textbooks of nineteenth century considered incompatibility of Islam with intellectual culture. In Tatarstan the objective was to develop friendship between Tatars and Russians. However, influence of Islam on Russian culture was absolutely unacceptable. Therefore, in Russian Schools Tatar teachers were not allowed to teach historical and philosophical subjects. In official Russian Schools of Tatarstan, teachers of humanities were

required to be Russians (Budilovicha 1915: 10-78). However, before 1917 Tatar intellectuals acted independently and they had their own history textbooks. They were not dependent on state funding therefore, Tatars Schools were offering subjects on Islamic history as well as the world history (Valiullin 2001: 17).

In the new history textbook of Russia, Islam is again associated with all sort of negative phenomena. The imperial conquest of Russia is justified on the basis of barbarism caused by the Muslim rulers. Therefore, across different phases of the Russian history Muslims have depicted negatively. The social gap between Muslims and Russians widened to an unexpected level during the post Soviet period. Also, religious revivalism of post Soviet era provided them opportunity to establish relations with outside Muslim world and strengthen their identity. However, no one was aware with the fact that, religious revivalism of Tatar and other Muslim would take violent and ugly form (Gibatdinov 2007: 273-287).

### **ISLAMIST RADICALISATION OF VOLGA REGION**

On 19 July 2012 Valiulla Yakupov- a pro Kremlin Muslim leader was shot dead in Kazan and later that day the *Mufti* of Tatarstan- Ildus Fayzov was seriously wounded in car bombing. *Mufti* Farid Salman- a well known theologian told in an interview to the BBC “the explosions and the gunfire that just rang out are only the beginning”. According to him, there are already more than 3000 radical Islamists in Tatarstan who are not willing to peaceful dialogue (Ivshina 2012). *Mufti* Farid Salman says, the July attacks were “an overt, bold provocation” and “it seems we have already reached a point of no return. More than one generation of convinced Wahabis has already come of age in Tatarstan” (Ibid.). Artyom Khokhorin- the head of local interior ministry, after the assassination attempt on Tatarstan’s *Mufti*, admits that “an undeclared war has been going on in the region for 13 years” (Ibid.).

Tatarstan despite having predominant Muslim population has long been seen as bastion of communal harmony and stability. During Soviet period it was perceived as a model of peaceful coexistence for different nationalities and religions (Ibid.). Despite being hugely being Russified region, Tatarstan has witnessed unexpected increase in radicalisation since 1980s. There were demonstrations in Tatarstan in support of Islamist in the Middle East. Radicalisation in Tatarstan has gone to the extent that now phrases like “Caucasisation of Tatarstan” is used to describe the changes in the largest Muslim Republic of the Volga basin (Malashenko 2015: 1).

There is considerable increase in Muslim population in Russia. According to 2002 Census of Russia—Muslim population accounted for 14.5 million. Due to Muslim migration from Central Asia and Azerbaijan, the Muslim population accounts for 6.4 percent of the total population at present (2010 Census of Russia).

The proliferation of radical Islamist forces has occurred after the collapse of the Soviet Union and associated with this the uses of terms like Wahabism, *Salafism*, Fundamentalism and Islamism has increased rapidly. Among the prominent factors responsible for rising fundamentalism in North Caucasus and Volga region includes; the two Chechan Wars, conflict between Traditional and Contemporary version of Islam, the *Salafist* Movement, migration from Central Asia and North Caucasus, and the internal rivalry between Muslim Clergies. The first Chechan War of 1993-1996 and the Second Chechen War of 1999-2009 led to the establishment of pro Russian Chechen Government, despite this, the two events intensified religious radicalism and extremism across the North Caucasus and the Volga Basin region (Malashenko 2015:1).

Apart from this, the traditional Islam and its ideologues have been losing authority and the adherents of traditional Islam belong mostly to the older generation. Traditional Islam, in experts view has failed to offer an attractive image of it to the Russian Muslim community. The radical element perceives the ideologues of the traditional element as sympathisers or the promoters of the state sponsored Islam and for this reason, Tatarstan's most prominent ideologist of Traditional Islam was assassinated in July 2012 (Ibid: 2).

### **RISE OF SALAFIST ACTIVITY IN THE VOLGA REGION**

*Salafi* Muslim became more active in Volga region after collapse of the Soviet Union. The Russian media label these Muslims as Wahhabis—however as per interpretators of Islam – it is incorrect to refer “Wahhabism” analogous to *Salafism* in both academic and applied sense of the term. Advocates of *Salafism* have never called themselves as Wahhabis and they consider the ‘term’ has been imposed by the Russian Intelligence Services. Muhammad ibn Abd al- Wahhab was the founder of this conservative branch of Islam, and the word “*al-Wahhabiya*” has been derived from his name. Later his teachings became the official ideology of the Saudi State. Remarkably, his followers have never referred themselves as Wahhabis, because identifying with the name of a single person would be categorised as sin—as idol worship is not permitted in Islam. Rather, the followers of al-Wahhab call themselves *muwahhidun* (monothest) and adherents of the original pure Islam, *Salafiyeen* (Markedonov 2013: 14).

In view of Malashenko—“nontraditional Islam or *Salafism* is a religious movement whose followers advocate for the re-Islamisation of society, return to the canons of Islam, strict observance of the rites, taboos, and code of conduct and finally Islams involvement in politics” (Malashenko 2015: 3). The goal of *Salafist* is to creat a kind of Islamic space or an independent Islamic state. According to Malashenko, the first wave of radical *Salafi* activism emerged in early 2000s and in 2003 it established an assembly (*jamaat*) in the Nurlat district of Tatarstan. Its member lived in an abandoned area located far away from the city. However, the *jamaat* failed to

survive for longer period and equally it failed to impact the religious situation of the region in any relevant way. Without much trouble, the Interior Ministry of Tatarstan closed it in 2010 (Ibid: 4).

Hizb ut-Tahir (Hut)—Islamic Liberation Party operating initially in Central Asia, showed its first presence in Tatarstan in 1996. Alisher Usmanov—Uzbek and member of HuT came to Kazan for propagating its ideology. This radical outfit was banned in 2003, however, it remained operational from the backdoor and in 2006—25 members belonging to HuT were arrested out of which 12 were convicted by the Court. Hizb ut-Tahir cells exist in almost all the major cities of Tatarstan and Bashkortostan moreover; it has also penetrated the Urals and Siberian regions (Ibid.).

Markedonov admits that, *Salafi* propaganda since 1990s has acquired predominant focus in Tatarstan. Taiba—Saudi Arabian charity organisation signed an agreement with the newly created Yoldyz Madarssa at a mosque in Naberezhnye Chelny. In 1999, one of the suspects of terrorist attacks in Moscow belonged to this organisation. Later on it was proved that students from this organisation were related with North Caucasus Islamist group. There were an estimated 200 other *Salafi* groups in Kukmor and approximately 50 in Neftekamsk as well as 150 individual *Salafi* groups in both Vyatka Glades and Almetyevsk (Markedonov 2013: 18).

Terrorist activity intensified in 2010 in Tatarstan and entire Volga-Urals came under its effect. Ildus Fayzov—Tatarstan’s Islamic Scholar was badly injured and his aid Yakupov lost his life in terrorist attack of July 2012 in Kazan. On 16 November 2013 missile attack was launched against a major oil refining facility in Nizhnekamsk—located in Volga-Ural region. President Rustom Minikhanov ignoring the extremist threat in 2012 said—“threat of radical Islam is exaggerated”, however, while addressing the deputies of the Nizhnekamsk municipality in 2014 he changed his stance and said—“unless we ensure stability and tranquility in this territory, no investment and investor would be coming” (Malashenko 2015: 6).

## **MIGRATION EFFECT**

The number of illegal migrants to Russia has become countless since 2010. Most of the illegal migrants belong to Central Asian Republics and they are scattered across Russia but predominantly settled in the Volga and Urals regions and in the north of the country. As mentioned before, Hizb ut-Tahir—Uzbekistan based Islamic Liberation Party penetrated Tatarstan in 1996. Despite being banned in 2003, the organisation continued its operations particularly in North Caucasus and Volga region (Malashenko 2015: 5 and 6).

## **PUTIN’S RESPONSE**

Ronald Dannreuther (2010) absolutely reject the presumption that, Putin and his repressive measures, in containing the second Chechan War is responsible for increasing Islamist radicalisation in Russia. In his view, no one realised that a nascent Russia would face the cruel attack of radical Islamist forces. Yeltsin also ignored the fact that Islamic radicalisation would ever become threat to Russia. As a result, Muslims of Russia got conducive time for religious revivalism and most importantly to establish relations with the outside Muslim world. Putin inherited a fragmented Russia whose religious roots have never been strengthened by the previous regime. He used both—repressive and soft power measures for countering the extremist challenges. In initial response, Putin largely depended on repressive measures like use of military forces, centralised decisions and formulation of more stringent counter terror laws. He withdrew the liberal policies of Yeltsin era and dissociated Muslim Institutions like Schools and Lyceum from foreign funding. Analogous to US—anti terrorist legislation were established and a list of prohibited organisation including the Muslim Brotherhood was prepared (Dannreuther 2010: 116-117).

However, Putin’s repressive measures in dealing with terrorist threat had achieved only relative success. Terrorism and the associated organisations have transformed to different forms and are causing more threats to North Caucasus Republics like Ingushetiya and Dagestan. Critiques blamed that—Putin after the second Chechan War caused great damage to his image particularly in Muslim world. He faced criticism from the Muslim Organisations like Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC), which termed the Russian operation in Chechnya as—“inhuman act against the Muslim people of Chechny”. Russian support to US led “war on terror” and reliance on Israel for advices and support for counter terrorism strategy in North Caucasus further harmed the interest of Russia. In order to rebuild his personal image—Putin designed holistic approach towards Islamic republics. As part of changed strategy, Putin provided financial support to Muslim community. Nevertheless, the changed approach of Putin failed to achieve meaningful success as Islam till so far had already attained a universal character. Analogous Islam was viewed as deviation from the pure Pristine Islam—which is supposed to be free from all ethnic and national character (Ibid: 119 and 124).

## **CONCLUSION**

The repressive approach towards countering Islamist radical threats undertaken by the Russian authority yielded only limited results. The long drawn social gap between Muslims and the Russians has created trust deficit. Measures should be taken to fill the social gap between the two communities. Additionally, common youth deviated by radical Islamist ideology should be properly educated and brought into the mainstream of the society. No leniency should be shown towards individual or group found to be responsible for damaging life and property. The ideological masters should also be brought to justice. Strict monitoring of outside links and the

flow of radical ideas and people particularly coming from the Muslim world can prevent the spread of Islamist radicalisation in Tatarstan.

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