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ISLAMIC FUNDAMENTALISM IN THE NORTHERN CAUCASUS: TOWARDS A FORMULATION OF THE PROBLEM

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The Northern Caucasus belongs to those regions, which have always attracted a high degree of academic interest. This may be explained by a myriad of factors, including, undoubtedly, the high concentration of different peoples and cultures in a comparatively small area.

The multiethnic community of the Northern Caucasus has been traditionally poly-confessional. Here, along with the autochthonous pagan beliefs, at various times of history Christianity, Judaism and Islam have been widespread. In the XVII – XIX centuries Sunni Islam became the indisputably dominant religion in the region. In the first half of the XIX century Islam acquired the ideological banner of the national movement for independence of the mountain people of the Northern Caucasus, which strengthened itself in the minds of those who previously were very often Islamicised only on the surface (excluding the inhabitants of Southern and Central Dagestan). The exception was the people of the Indo-European language group – the Ossetians, who were and are predominantly of the Orthodox Church, and the Tats in the northern part of the Caucasus, who for a long time were referred to as "the mountain Jews", because Judaism was the dominant faith among them.

The documentation available today allows us to divide the Northern Caucasus region into two areas based on religion: the North-East Caucasus, including Dagestan, Chechnia and Ingushetia, where the population is traditionally more religious; and the North-West Caucasus, encompassing mainly Adigei and Turkic people (apart from the Kumiks). Islam did not take root among them as much as it did among their eastern neighbours. In the first area Sufism became widespread through its Nakshbandisk, Kadirisk and in recent years, its Shasiliisk branches. Sufism was not common in the second area. These peculiarities later played a big role in the story of Islam in the Caucasus during the Soviet years: Dagestan and Checheno-Ingushetia, particularly the mountainous

regions, have never ceased the tradition of Islamic education and Muslim rites (this might have been the reason why, in 1944, when the secular clergy of the Muslims of the Northern Caucasus was established, Buinask was chosen as the centre of residence; later on its activity spread mainly through Dagestan and Checheno-Ingushetia). In the North-West Caucasus the position of Islam was much undermined.

The religious revival which started from the years of Perestroika has been developing absolutely differently in these two areas. If in the North-West Caucasus, this was really a re-creation of a semi-forgotten religion, in Dagestan and Checheno-Ingushetia this was more an outlet from a "quasi-somnolent" condition and the development of a continuing tradition, rather than its revival.

The processes of religious revival have played a tremendous role in the lives of the people of the former Soviet Union. Islam, being the second religion according to the number of its adherents within the borders of the Russian Federation, was right in the middle of the interesting and paradoxical events taking place in the country. Islam does not separate the secular life from the clerical one. Here is the reason for its active involvement and influence on the course of political events in the Northern Caucasus. The concepts "Islamic" and "National" are closely intertwined in Muslim perception. During the years of Soviet atheism, people continued to follow Islamic customs and rites, understanding them as national and not religious.

All these above-mentioned factors indicate the importance of knowledge and understanding of what is going on in the religious field, since it can assist in analyzing the processes of today which are causing noticeable changes in many spheres of people's lives. The situation has become particularly complicated and disturbing in the Northern Caucasus. Here there are traditionally two versions of Sunni Islam – Khanafit and Shafit, different Sufi orders, and small Shiite communities (mostly in Southern Dagestan). During recent years supporters of the fundamentalist movements, labelled with the common name "vakhabists", have appeared on the multicoloured religious map of the Northern Caucasus. This article will try to examine them.

The concept of "Islamic Fundamentalism" has become so strongly entrenched in the minds of the Russian philistine, thanks to the efforts of the mass media, that it seems difficult to imagine that fundamentalism can be something different. The concept itself appeared at the beginning of the 20th century in conjunction with the movement of radical Protestants directed against rationalism and modernism. (1) Similar movements do exist in Judaism, as well as in non-monotheistic religions such as Hinduism, which calls for the resurrection of what had never existed in history—a pure, unalloyed Hinduism ("Khindutvs"). (2) To be fair, it needs to be mentioned that Islamic fundamentalism has shown itself on the largest scale and to be the best organized. The reasons for this are hidden in the peculiarities of Islam, which is not only a religion but a modus vivendi and this fact very easily transforms it into one of the factors in the political game, which is being played on different levels.

Islamic Fundamentalism is a movement which demands a return to the

original Islam of the days of the Prophet and His first successors.(3) The basis for it should only be the Koran and Sunnah of the Prophet; the majority of what was achieved through Muslim thought involving other resources and implicit in the life of the Muslim community (including beliefs, as well as everyday life) is declared prohibited innovation and is rejected. It is worth underlining the fact that Islamic Fundamentalism is not a product of the XX century, as it might appear to an unsophisticated contemporary observer. This idea has a long history and even a particular symbol in Islam: those supporting fundamentalist ideas are named Salafites (as-salafiya).(4) In Sunni Islam the fundamentalist ideas found expression in one of the four renderings – Hanbalist Mazhab (originally it was formed as a religious-political fundamentalist movement in the IX century, and only later was transformed into a dogmatic legal school at the beginning of the XI century).(5) Later, in the XVIII century, Muhammad Ibn Abd Al-Wahhab elaborated his own teachings based on the Hanbalist ideology, and this still remains the most commonly followed and best organized form of Islamic Fundamentalism.

Although Fundamentalism has been broadly spread in the Northern Caucasus since the start of Perestroika at the beginning of the 1990s, it had appeared already there in the seventies of the XX century.(6) With the slackening of state control over religion, and later on its complete disappearance, the Fundamentalists launched a lively missionary activity. It is interesting that Wahhabites – supporters of the religious-political teaching elaborated by Muhammad Ibn Abd Al-Wahhab which is today the official ideology of Saudi Arabia, were the most active. The market, which had experienced a huge deficit of religious literature, was immediately full of well-written and published Wahhabi productions. The printing house was in the notorious Dagestan village Pervomaisk; it is named after the homeland of the religious leader of the Dagestan Wahhabites, mullah Bagautdin – "Santlada". It is interesting that the Fundamentalist ideas found supporters only in the communities of Avar and Dargin settlers and only within two regions – Buinaksk and Kizilyurtov, as well as in the town of Astrakhan. In the mountains the Wahhabites were supported by the Dzhammats of only two auls of the Tsumadin region – Satlanta and Tlondoda, also one third of the aul of Kvanada. The town of Kizilyurt today has the role of being the centre of Wahhabism not only in Dagestan, but in the whole Northern Caucasus as well, where 700 persons are trained in just one Medressa. (7)

Fundamentalist ideas have been widely spread under clouds of Wahhabism in neighboring Chechnya as well. The establishing of the Dudayev regime, which aimed at building an "Islamic state" (8) promoted the spread as well. Such prominent politicians as Zelimkhan Yandarbiev and Movladi Udugov (9) are considered the protectors of the Wahhabites. The war also promoted the strengthening of the Wahhabites' positions; volunteers from many Muslim countries, including those with fundamentalist beliefs, flooded Chechnya. The army commander Khattab, a Wahhabi and a Chechen from Jordan, is their leader.

In these circumstances, the North-West Caucasus looks like an island of peace. But this peace only exists at first sight. In comparison with the neighboring region, the current processes are less turbulent, but this does

not mean the absence of the Vakhabit advocates' activities. Thanks to their efforts the group of advocates for Vakhabistic teachings have appeared not only in the National Republics, but also in the places of concentration of Muslims in the Stavropol Region, namely, in Neftekumsk.(10) We will talk about some of the reasons for the comparatively modest success of the Vakhabists in these areas later. Now we will mention only one of them. In the Republics of the North-West Caucasus the counter-advocacy of the official Islamic structures is managed very adroitly: Mullah-traditionalists immediately follow the Vakhabit advocates and work with the population, giving explanations. The best feedback on the fundamentalist propaganda comes from the representatives of the two ethnoses repressed in Stalin's time: the Karachentses and Balkars. An Islamicist party using the traditional Islamic symbol operates among the Karachentses.

Although there have been a lot of publications in the mass media about the problems of Islamic Fundamentalism in the Northern Caucasus, the issue is still not completely clear. Scholars are unfortunately less active here than the journalists are and there has not yet been any more or less serious academic publication on this topic. We will try to cover the situation based on the materials available today.

The Vakhabists, accusing traditional Islam of departing from the original teachings, in their innovations (bida') reject many customs and rites entrenched in the minds of people as Islamic. Thus it is forbidden to read the Koran over a grave or in the house of the deceased, to read Talkin (instructions to the deceased) at funerals, to use beads etc.(11) Not acknowledging the special virtues of the Prophet, the Vakhabists are against the celebration of the Mavlid, the birthday of Muhammad. A special target for attacks is Sufism, traditional in the North-East Caucasus, the cult of the saints and Ziyarat (pilgrimage) to holy places, which is closely linked to Sufism and is sharply condemned as polytheism (Shirk). The extremism of the Vakhabists sometimes exceeds reasonable limits: the most radical of them do not even permit their supporters to communicate not only with foreigners but with Muslim-traditionalists. They forbid them to go to mosques where the Imams are Mullah-traditionalists. The Muslims who are antipathetic to Vakhabism are accused of idolatry. This creates discords in families and confrontations in mosques. In May 1997, we witnessed violent events in the Dagestan villages of Karamakhi and Chabanmakhi, split into two parts in this way.(12)

It is notable first of all that the Fundamentalist ideas have been disseminated mainly in those areas where the economic and social situation is unstable: Chechnia and the foothills of Dagestan. The main accent is on youth. The young people have not yet become integrated into the life of the community of its Dzamaat. They have not yet fully perceived the traditional culture, or even protest against some of its components. In the course of teaching, great attention is given to learning the Arabic language, and to studying the Koran and Khadises in the original language. In this way the neophytes are being trained for forthcoming discussions. It is no secret that propaganda for Fundamentalism receives significant financial support from abroad. For this reason, quite soon, the people of Dagestan christened Vakhabism

"Dollar Islam".(13) And money is not the least significant factor in such poor republics as Chechnia and Dagestan, especially for young people, who are just starting their lives. The fact that Vakhabism receives support firstly in the traditional community which has split from the system, and is lumpenised, and from young people full of energy, and the radical extremism of the ideas themselves, able to rouse these people and call them to fight to realise these ideas, indicates the destabilizing potential of Vakhabism in the North Caucasus. It should also be borne in mind that the territory where Vakhabism is widely spread is a territory where it is not difficult to obtain weapons, if the same dollars are available.

However, it has already become clear that the ideas of Vakhabism have exhausted their capacity for being disseminated among the population of the North Caucasus Republics. The time of rapid growth of the supporters of Vakhabism has come to an end. The situation has stabilized. And the reason for this is not the openly hostile position of the official leadership of secular Muslim clergy and other Muftis nor the coming to power in Chechnia of Aslan Maskhadov, who is considered an opponent of the Vakhabists. Criticism of Vakhabism is very often not competent, from a position which very often could be expressed with the words "you are stupid yourself". The official body of the secular clergy of the Muslims, the newspaper "Assalam", for example, published polemical articles, in which even the name of the movement is misspelt.(14) The other opponents of Vakhabism are no more competent. For instance, the newspaper "Pravda – 5" has published a savage article with the loud headline "the Vakhbbits (sic) as a ideological threat".(15) There are two mistakes in the name of the movement, which may cause bewilderment and vexation in a well-educated reader. The fact is that fanaticism and isolationism have only a limited influence. They cannot offer people creative projects for the future.

Nowadays, perhaps there is not a single Islamic country without Vakhabits or a related movement, but in none of them have they taken the central position. Even in Saudi Arabia, where Vakhabism continues to be the official ideology of the state, it is far from the Vakhabism that was preached there in the XVIII century. The same peripheral role falls to the Vakhabists in the North Caucasus. The latest scandalous operations of the Vakhabists: bloody clashes, terrorist acts (it should be mentioned that these acts are alleged to be committed by the Vakhabists), and the publication of books such as "The Rebel Armies of the Imam" apparently have not increased the numbers of their supporters.

The foundation of the political movement "The Islamic Nation" in the middle of last year was accompanied by a lot of fuss. M. Udugov was elected the leader (Amir) of this movement.(16) This formally fundamentalist organization has its political objective, which was put forward by Udugov as follows: "When I talk about Dagestan, I mean Chechnia as well. It never seceded itself from Dagestan and is its constituent part".(17) Certainly, access to the Caspian Sea through unification with Dagestan is very important for Ichkeria. However, it would be very difficult to find many supporters of the idea of building an Islamic nation through unification with the neighbouring turbulent republic, when every week there are sorties ending with hostage-taking, looting, pillage, etc. The Islamic texts (first of all, the Koran and

Khadists), as is known, do not approve of this.

Despite the destabilizing potential of the Vakhabist ideas disseminated in the region of the Northern Caucasus, one should not overdramatize the existing situation. Fundamentalism has the capacity to grow, but this capacity is not limitless; everything suggests that it has already in principle exhausted its capacity. With competent and correct arguments from the side of its opponents, especially the official religious structures, the situation will finally be stabilized and Vakhabism will take its place within the structures of Northern Caucasus society, attracting the people with the most radical views. The experience of Saudi Arabia, where now only memories are left of the radicalism and the irreconcilability of Vakhabists, convince us of this.

As was mentioned, scholarly work on the question of Islamic Fundamentalism in the Northern Caucasus, first of all in the form of Vakhabism, is at zero level. More has been written about fundamentalism in the countries of the Middle East. Based on these materials, one could draw conclusions about the almost similar nature of the manifestations of Fundamentalism in both regions and about their similar roots. At the same time, many questions of serious scholarly interest still remain unanswered.

Principal among them is what to call the fundamentalists both in the Northern Caucasus and in the Middle East. Very often nowadays one hears that the term "the Vakhabits" is allegedly incorrect, because the Vakhabists do not call themselves this and protest against such a name. (18) Another term is offered, "the Salafits". (19) Some scholars think "the term Vakhabits was brought into use by the orientalist Miloslavski from Moscow" (A. Muminov). Others believe that it was introduced by the KGB in the seventies" (A. Malashenko). (20) The fundamentalists themselves denounce the name "Vakhabism", considering it a "deprecating label, introduced by the Russian special services" and call themselves "true Muslims".

First of all, in 1805, when there was no KGB and of course the orientalist Miloslavski from Moscow did not exist at all, there appeared an article in the "Magazine of Various Subjects of Literature" under the following headline: "About the sect of Vaabs split from Mohammedanism". (21) Besides, the term "Alvakhabaia" was firmly rooted in the Muslim world; this term is used precisely to name the supporters of Muhammad Ibn Abd Al-Vakhab in the works of famous Muslim scholars, such as Ibn As-Suvaidi, Abdullah Ali al-Kasimi, Muhammad Rashid Rida and others. However, the supporters of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Vakhab in Saudi Arabia, as well as in other countries of the Islamic world, prefer to call themselves not Vakhabists, but the "true Muslims" or "monotheists" (akhl al-mavkhid or muvakhidun) (22), who have returned to the purity of the original Islam. However, everywhere they are known as "al'vakhabaia" i.e. the Vakhabits.

Secondly, the term "Salafits" in principle complies with the essence of the Vakhabits' teachings. As was already mentioned, Muslim religious activists who in different periods of history called for a return to the modus vivendi and beliefs of the early Muslim community through the

rejection of innovations (bida') are known as Salafits. The Sunni Imam-mudzhtakhids Ibn Khanbal and ash-Shafi'I, Muhammad ibn Abd al-Vakhab and his supporters belong to the Salafits as well.(23) Thus, even though the term "Salafits" is appropriate for defining the Fundamentalists of the North Caucasus, it is still general and vague. The term "Vakhabists" carries in itself a more specific content.

The correctness of using this term for the form of Islamic Fundamentalism prevalent in the Northern Caucasus is supported by the comparison of their guidelines with the Vakhabist teachings. The axis of this teaching is absolute and unconditional monotheism leading to its logic conclusion: only Allah may be worshipped. It was not in vain that the Vakhabists chose to call themselves "muvakhidun", which means monotheists. On this basis it is forbidden to worship holy places, and the cult of saints and the Sufism closely linked to them are also prohibited. Worship of the Prophet is forbidden.(24) The Vakhabists have even prohibited the uttering of His name: "Allah bless him and welcome him" (sall Allah 'aleikhi va sallam) and cut off the second part of the confession (this now has become the property of history).(25) Along with the "purification" of Islam is preached the strict following of Islamic principles in everything, including appearance (one could easily recognize a Vakhabist by his bearded face –without a moustache). It is not surprising that Vakhabism is based on the works of Mazkhab Ibn Khanbal – the most radical of all the four Sunni Mazkhab.

The preaching of Fundamentalism in the Northern Caucasus strictly follows these regulations. Formally acknowledging the principle "islam bila mazkhab" i.e. Islam without Mazkhab, the fundamentalists, trying to attract more people, preach within the framework of those Mazkhab who have strengthened their positions in those areas but nevertheless the elements of khanbalism prevail.(26) The significant success of Fundamentalism in the areas of Shafit mazkhab - the most isolated, and akin to Khanbalisms - clearly illustrates this. It is easier for Shafit to sap out the Fundamental ideas in the form of Vakhabism, than for Khanafit.

So, all doubts about the use of the term "Vakhabism" when referring to fundamentalism in the Northern Caucasus should be considered false. It is not the term the Vakhabists call themselves, but, nevertheless, the term is used to name a particular religious-political movement, characterized by its own set of features not only in the national but in foreign literature as well, including Arabic and Muslim literature, which is significant. With the characteristics described, the Northern Caucasus Fundamentalists are very easily defined as Vakhabists and therefore there is no need to reject this current term and entertain oneself inventing new ones.

The Vakhabists in the Northern Caucasus certainly have a particular destabilizing force, not only preconditioned by the extremist nature of their teachings, but also because of the difficult political and economic situation that has been shaped by recent events. A mass influx of neophytes into the Vakhabist community took place in the most troubled areas of the Northern Caucasus – Chechnia and Dagestan. The Vakhabists could become small change in the political game in the Northern Caucasus as well as in the whole territory of the former USSR. Various

powers are ready to play with them. Specifically, many politicians in the Republic of Chechnia plan their game based on the Vakhabists. On 20 May 1997 "the Army of General Dudaev", represented by Salman Raduev and "the Armed Forces of Islamic Dzamaats", a military wing of the Dagestan Vakhabists, signed a cooperation agreement. The purpose of this union was "to liberate Dagestan from Russian occupation".(27)

Lack of knowledge of the issue does not allow us in this article to review the organizational structure of the Vakhabist community in the Northern Caucasus. It is known only that this movement is not homogenous and monolithic as it may appear at first sight. Among the Vakhabists there are their own "radicals" led by Imam Ayub (who is located in Astrakhan), their own "centre" led by the leader of the Dagestan Vakhabists Bagautdin, and also a "moderate wing", led until recently by Akhmadkaadi Akhtaev (he died in March 1998).(28) The military wing of the Vakhabists in Dagestan was already mentioned. Everything indicates that the majority of the Vakhabists in the North-East Caucasus are armed. This cannot be maintained as regards the Vakhabists in the North-West Caucasus, since the information about them is very scarce and very contradictory.

The problem of Vakhabism requires a cautious approach. It is not only impossible (as it is with the religious stream), but is inadmissible to fight it through sanctions and repression. However, the state holds very important levers and their adroit use could narrow the social basis of fundamentalism. First of all there is the path of stimulation of the economic growth of the region. The Northern Caucasus became painted red and green not because of its reactionary attitude, but as a result of the shortsighted policy of the centre, which has pushed this strategically important region into beggary. A person living in prosperity would never take up arms voluntarily. To return a state of well-being to the Northern Caucasus would mean to give hope that peace and tranquillity would finally be reestablished.

Notes

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