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Radical Islamic threats
in states of the Russian Federation

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I-Introduction

Russia is facing substantial threat of from homegrown extremists, with the potential for tens of thousands of radicalized Muslims to be living within its borders and to be plotting attacks, among the 30 million Muslims present in Russia.

In the past decades, islamic terrorism has deeply affected the lives of many people around the world and, although the Russian Federation and its territory have been, and still are, targets of many Islamist movements, the United Nations Security Council has never discussed a Resolution on the topic.

The peak in terrorist attacks within Russian borders was reached in 2010, with 250 attacks. In the following years this number progressively decreased, but it still remains alarmingly high: 54 attacks took place in 2016 and 30 in 2017.

Nevertheless, the challenges posed by the Islamist radicalization and resurgence go beyond the immediate security threat. The risk of a clash of juridical values and legal systems is very high and this could endanger Russia's very nature as a state.

President Putin's legal reforms are aimed at harmonizing Russian civil and criminal law with norms accepted in the European Union. This is an important legal and civilizational step, solidifying Russian connections to the West. Radical Islamists, however, demand the introduction of Islamic law, the Sharia, in their areas of residence. As Muslim consciousness grows, Islamic politicians demand the introduction of Islamic courts as well as Sharia law.



Areas in Russian Federation with a significant Muslim population

II- Possible causes

The war in Syria, state oppression of religious minorities and high youth unemployment have combined to create the "perfect" conditions for radicalization. The problem may lie in the multinational structure of the Russian society.

Conflicts in Chechnya are also to be blamed for the problem of radicalization. An unemployment rate of more than 80 % amongst young people in the north Caucasus is leading them towards joining terrorists groups. By comparison, unemployment rates of between 40 and 50 % were enough to spark the Arab Spring and the toppling of governments across the Middle East.

Estimates suggest that nearly 2,900 Russians have travelled to Iraq and Syria to fight alongside militants since 2014, especially from the north Caucasus region.



III- Historical Background

The Islamic religion has been present in the regions of the current Russian Federation since the 7th century, when through the Arab conquest of Persia, the religion arrived in the Caucasus area. In the following centuries, many of the ethnicities, which currently inhabit the Russian Federation, converted to Islam, such as the Dagestani, Tatar and Turkic peoples.

Between the 16th and the 19th century, the area of the Caucasus was dominated by Iranian empires and Ottoman rulers, and through the domain of Islamic Rulers, both Shia and Sunni Islam spread. With the constitution of the Russian Empire and the conquest of the area of Kazan in the 16th century, discriminatory policies towards Muslims were introduced and many mosques and Islamic monuments were destroyed. In response to that, the Kazakhs began to spread ideas of Pan-Turkism.

Repression policies were adopted, once again, in the 19th century, when, in order to obtain an homogeneous Russian-Orthodox population, many Muslims were displaced and deported to the Ottoman Empire.

In the early phases of the USSR, Muslim communities were given more religious autonomy, when compared to the Orthodox Church, and some Islamic socialists were even given positions within the Government. Everything changed under Joseph Stalin's rule, who started persecuting religious leaders and closing mosques.

In many instances through History, political leaders and Russian rulers have put into action a process called "Russification", which consists in cultural assimilation of minorities; this process has affected Muslim communities within the Russian borders.

Due to the situation of political instability of the Russian Federation, in the last decades many Islamist groups have participated in numerous conflicts, which have occurred, in particular, in the Caucasus area. The most important instances in which this has happened were the Second Chechen War and the War in Ingushetia.

IV - Chronology of Major Recent Terrorist Attacks

The most recent wave of Terrorist attacks began in June 1995, when Chechen Islamists attacked a hospital in Budyonnovsk, taking 2000 hostages and threatening to kill them unless the war ended. In September 1999 a series of bombings, targeting civil apartments in Moscow killed almost 300. The attacks were blamed on Chechen separatists and eventually led to the Second Chechen War.

In 2002 a group of Chechen Islamists seized the crowded Dubrovka Theater in Moscow. The Police forces were obliged to pump a chemical agent into the Theatre, thus incapacitating the militants and creating the opportunity to begin the rescue operation. About 130 of 1000 hostages died.

The Islamists then perpetrated a series of suicide attacks throughout 2004. In May, the Separatists managed to kill Akhmad Kadyrov, who was the Chechen President at the time, along with 23 other people, while in August, the terrorists targeted Moscow's Airport, killing 100 people. The most shocking attack of 2004, was, however, the one of September, which targeted a school in North Ossetia and resulted in the death of 300 people, mostly children.

A series of attacks on Moscow, perpetrated by members of the Caucasus Emirate, began again in 2009, with a suicide bombing on the high-speed rail link between Moscow and St. Petersburg, and continued throughout 2010 and 2011.

Weeks before the start of the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, two suicide bombings targeted the city of Volgograd and killed 34 people.

Most recently, in April 2017, an explosive device was placed between two Metro Stations in St. Petersburg and its explosion caused the death of 8 people, including the perpetrator. An Islamist organization linked to al-Qaeda and operating in the North Caucasus has claimed responsibility for the attack.

V - Major Islamist Organizations Involved

The Russian Federation recognises the following Islamist Terrorist Organisations, which are either active within Russian borders or which have targeted Russia in the past:

“Imarat Kavkaz” (The Caucasus Emirate)

Active in the North Caucasus Area and part of Al-Qaeda, the organisation has had a marginal role in the First Chechen War and has actively taken part to the Second Chechen War. The Caucasus Emirate has carried out terrorist attacks with targets both in Chechnya and in Mainland Russia, in particular, it is responsible for the 2004 attacks in Moscow, as well as the 2004 attack in North Ossetia. As of 2017, the organisation is no longer active within Russian borders, and only a few branches remain operative in Syria.

Congress of the Peoples of Ichkeria and Dagestan or Islamic International Brigade (IBB)

Active between 1997 and 2002, the IBB came from Chechnya and proclaimed a territory comprehensive of parts of Dagestan and Chechnya independence, whilst also declaring a holy war against Russia. The Russian-Dagestani army wiped out the jihadists and this constituted the casus belli for the Second Chechen War, since many Islamic separatist groups from Chechnya became supportive of the concept of holy war against the Russians.

«Islamic Party of Liberation» («Hizb ut-Tahrir Al-Islami»)

The Islamic Party of Liberation is a pan-Islamist organisation, with the aim of creating an Islamic state. Although the organisation has not taken part in any terrorist activity, it has shown to be supportive of other Islamist organisations, among those the Caucasus Emirate. The organisation is included in “Unified Federal List Of Organizations Designated As Terrorist By The Courts Of The Russian Federation”, as the the Russian Federation’s governmental definition of terrorism includes anyone who has shown support towards Chechen independentists. The organisation is marginally present in Crimea.

«The Islamic State» (also known as: «The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria», «The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant», «The Islamic State of Iraq and the Sham») and «The Base» («Al Qaeda»)

Being the two largest Islamist organisations in the world, both have either supported or perpetrated terrorist action within Russian Borders. Even if opponents, both organisations have been active within the Caucasus Region, with Al-Qaeda supporting its own branches in the area (Caucasus Emirate), and with ISIS recruiting and training its soldiers in Chechnya.

VI- Possible Solutions

The challenge for the Russian leadership in the years to come is to develop adequate diplomatic, military, and security tools to halt the rise of the Islamist threat to Russia and its allies. Russia judges that it cannot stem the tide on its own, but its residual mistrust of NATO and the United States, as well as the current incompatibility of the military establishments that have been in place since the Cold War era, stands in the way of cooperation.

Although the Russian Federation might be reluctant in accepting foreign countries’ aid, it is absolutely necessary to initiate a process of international cooperation towards the creation of a safer environment for all Russian citizens.

VII- Sources

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