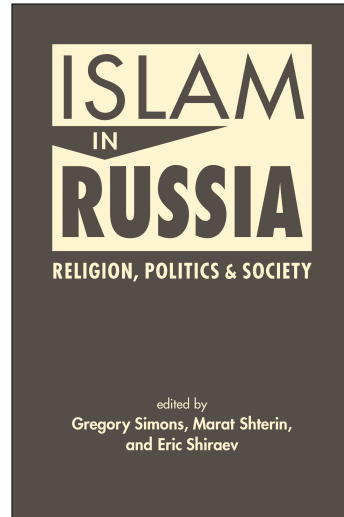


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Religion, Politics,  
and Society

edited by  
Gregory Simons,  
Marat Shterin,  
and Eric Shiraev

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# 1

## Islam in Russian Politics and Society

*Greg Simons, Marat Shterin,  
and Eric Shiraev*

**Russia's Muslims have enjoyed quite limited attention in the growing** body of English-language literature on Islam and its multifaceted manifestations in global, regional, and local contexts. This is somewhat surprising, considering the size and diversity of the country's Muslim population, the vibrancy of their engagements with the changing society, and the scale and variety of issues associated with various expressions of the religion in Russia. In this book, the authors aim to make a contribution to the existing literature by offering frank and open discussions based on academic research and focused on (1) how the image of Islam in Russia is constructed by various actors in a variety of local contexts, and (2) what implications this has for Russian politics and society. The book's focus inevitably implies a multidisciplinary perspective that could illuminate the different aspects of Islam's diversity in Russia, both historical and contemporary. This includes the academic disciplines of history, political science, sociology, religious studies, and media studies.

Many scholars have observed that in the last three decades or so religion has played an increasing role in the global rise of identity politics (Brubaker 2017b). With respect to Russia, the collapse of the Soviet Union and its system of "developed socialism" imparted additional complexity and even dramatic turns to this process. While creating an overarching and overriding Soviet identity was already part and parcel of the Soviet project of "constructing communism" in the 1920s, it became gradually complemented and at certain points even superseded by the policy of "nationbuilding," which historian Yuri Slezkina (1994, 414) describes as a "spectacularly successful attempt at a state-sponsored conflation of language, 'culture,' territory and

quota-fed bureaucracy.” As state-enforced atheism was another pillar of the Soviet project, the official “nationality policy” did not allow religion to remain part of ethnic self-identification, let alone become a basis for national self-determination. With respect to ethnic Muslims, Soviet authorities, in particular under Stalin, imposed the creation of their homelands, either in the form of Soviet socialist republics, such as Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Azerbaijan, or of “autonomous republics” and *oblasti* (regions), such as Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, Kabardino-Balkaria, Checheno-Ingushetia, and Adygeia. In other words, Muslims were supposed to enjoy their homelands and celebrate their “distinctive” cultures—but without referring to their religious identity or practicing their religion and while remaining within the confines of the official communist ideology.

Despite this, academic research (Ro’i 2000; Fowkes and Gökay 2009; Rubin 2018; Di Puppò 2019) has produced ample evidence that Islam remained engrained in the ways Tatars, Bashkirs, Chechens, and other Muslim ethnicities saw their identity without contrasting it with their Soviet identity: the notion of the “Muslim communist” (*musul'manskie kommunisty*) was not necessarily seen as a contradiction in terms (Pelkmans 2009). The demise of the Soviet Union and the post-Soviet nation-building has brought the significance of Muslim identity in the Soviet-created homelands to the fore (Ro’i 2000; Malashenko 2007; Emelianova 2010). There are now nine republics with Muslim majorities in the Russian Federation: Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, Dagestan, Adygeya, Chechnya, Ingushetia, Northern Ossetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, and Karachayev-Cherkessia (Kerimov 1996, 183).

According to an authoritative study conducted by the research center Arena in 2012, the total number of Muslims in Russia was 9.4 million, or 6.5 percent of the population (Arena 2012). We have to note that the security situation in Chechnya and Ingushetia precluded inclusion of their populations (around two million) in the survey, and, in addition, there are some other unaccounted-for groups of Muslims, such as unregistered migrants in large Russian cities; thus some scholars estimate the total number of Muslim at fourteen million (Filatov 2006, 34; Warhola 2007, 937; Le Torrivellec 2013). However, there is little sense in seeing Russian Muslims as a monolithic block of people defined by their shared religious identity; nor do we have any evidence to suggest that they tend to form and mobilize coherent political alliances across Russia or within the borders of their own homelands (Malashenko 2007a; Giuliano 2005, 215). As elsewhere, Russia’s Muslims have historically been and remain religiously divided by boundaries that run within Islam, such as between Sunnis (around 88 percent) and Shia (10 percent), between different Islamic legal schools of Hanafi’ and Shafi’ (Le Torrivellec 2013, 10), and between different Islamic orders

and movements (Rubin 2018). No generally recognized centralized authority exists within Russian Islam, despite ardent attempts and at times fierce competition among some clergy to create it (Hunter 2004; Malashenko 2007a; Bekkin 2020).

As the contributions to this book show, Muslim identities and their perceptions by non-Muslims in Russia are complex, fluid, and shaped by ever-changing interactions of historical legacies of pre-Soviet and Soviet developments (Malashenko 2007a); by local cultures, in particular languages (Rubin 2018); by external influences, such as international Islamic organizations and transnational Islamic movements (Yemelianova 2010; Shterin and Yarlykapov 2013; Rubin 2018); by demography, in particular as far as the post-Soviet generations of Muslims are concerned (Shterin and Spalek 2011); by urban and rural environments (Kisriev 2004); by new trends in gender relations (Kerimova 2013; Di Puppò 2019; Di Puppò and Schmoller 2020); and by political conflicts and government interventions (Hunter 2004; Malashenko 2007b; Shterin and Spalek 2011; Sagramoso and Yarlykapov 2013; Rubin 2018). As one of the most significant large-scale factors, many scholars have pointed out the different environments in which Muslims engage with and construe their multifaceted relationships with Islam in its different forms (Pilkington and Yemelianova 2003).

In one of the Muslim-majority republics, Tatarstan, Muslims have for centuries been living side by side with ethnic Russians who make up over 40 percent of the republic's population (Musina 2010; Benussi 2018). The capital, Kazan, has long been one of the prime centers of both Russian and Tatar secular education and culture; many ethnic Tatars have for generations been living in major Russian cities such as Moscow and St. Petersburg, and some have entered into the Russian political and cultural elite. In our times, oil-rich and industrial Tatarstan is among the more prosperous regions of the Russian Federation. This legacy and the contemporary situation have given rise to the idea of a distinctive Tatar brand, or "model," of Islam, apparently characterized by a close affinity with secular culture and both Russian and Western modernity (Khakimov 1998b). In the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s, Tatarstan's Islamic clergy generally supported the efforts of the local political elites to achieve more independence from Moscow, one result of which was the establishment of the Muslim Spiritual Board of the Republic of Tatarstan in the 1990s (Bilz-Leonhardt 2007, 239–240). In their turn, as part of their claim for more independence, republican authorities sought to promote the idea of "Tatar Islam" as the basis of a distinctive Tatar identity (Yemelianova 1999; Benussi 2018).

Quite different legacies and contemporary dynamics have shaped Islam and Muslim communities in the Northern Caucasus.<sup>1</sup> Immensely ethnically

diverse, this region has been marked by a history of anticolonial struggle against Russian imperial expansion in the nineteenth century, of resistance to the imposition of Bolshevism well into the 1930s and even 1940s (Gammer 2005; Zelkina 2000; Ware 2013), and of mass deportations on Stalin's orders during World War II. In different parts of Dagestan, Chechnya, and other regions, Muslims have developed distinctive Islamic brotherhoods, deeply entwined with communal life and involving strong internal ties and commitment to the leader, or sheikh (Kisriev 2004). It is not surprising that the unraveling and then demise of the Soviet layer of local identities in the 1980s and 1990s gave rise to the "Islamic revival" (Malashenko 1998), which revealed the religion's role in almost every aspect of individual and communal life as well as in wider politics. Islam has become part and parcel of local political elites' claim on authority in various parts of the Northern Caucasus and in some cases, most conspicuously in Chechnya, their separatist agendas (Yemelianova 1999; Malashenko 1999; Kisriev 2004). Some prominent leaders of Sufi brotherhoods, such as Said Afandi al-Chirkawi (1937–2012), were to differing degrees involved in these politics (Kisriev 2004; Shterin and Yarlykapov 2013). Islam has also become a significant factor in shaping and legitimizing opposition to both local and Russian federal authorities. Salafi Islam (often derogatorily referred to as "Wahhabism" in Russia) found appeal among some younger Muslims (Dannreuther 2010; Shterin and Yarlykapov 2011, 2013), shaping their radical protest against pervasive corruption, joblessness, and political turmoil, in some cases leading to their involvement in violent jihad.

Undoubtedly, this "tumult in Russia's Deep South" (Dunlop 2006, 97), which had multiple causes, has had profound impact on shaping the image of Islam and Muslims in Russia, in particular when it spilled outside the Northern Caucasus. Russian mass media and politicians have contributed to the worldwide trend toward securitization of Islam (Croft 2012; Dannreuther 2010; Ragozina 2020), which was compounded by the growing resonance of chauvinistic and anti-Muslim groups and ideologies in Russia (Dannreuther 2010; Ragozina 2020). When seen as committed by "Muslims," acts of terrorism create an environment where hate speech emerges and suspicion grows (Verkhovsky 2010). Some poor practices in Russian journalism of reporting on Islam and Muslims have contributed to the formation and entrenchment of negative images of Islam and Muslims (Kouznetsova-Morenko, [2003] 2004, 54; Ragozina 2020).

The post-Soviet migration into big metropolitan areas is another cause of anti-Muslim and anti-Islamic sentiments. Having moved from the economically deprived areas of Central Asia such as Tajikistan and Uzbekistan and from the Northern Caucasus, Muslim migrants have been indispensable to the post-Soviet construction and maintenance of urban infrastructures and housing, and yet their increasing numerical growth and visibility are

often entangled with fear and suspicion (Turaeva 2018). Elena Lisovskaya (2010) has located some of these tensions in her study of the introduction of religious education in Russian schools in the 2000s. She argues that dominated by alliances between political and ecclesiastical elites and focused on the comprehensive pro-Orthodox curriculum (“The Foundations of the Russian Orthodox Culture”), this policy fueled Orthodox-Muslim tensions among younger generations. However, some scholars have also noted the efforts of Muslims to exercise their agency in opposing discrimination and Islamophobic representations in the public domain (Kuznetsova-Morenko 2009).

Thus, summarizing the factors causing Islamophobia in Russia in the 2000s, Alexey Malashenko (2006a, 41) identifies “conflicts in the North Caucasus,” the rise of nationalism in Russia’s “Muslim republics,” migration, and international and domestic terrorism. The main sources of fear are largely personified in the “evil Chechen” and the “evil Arab.” These various tensions, together with the emphasis on the overarching Russian national identity and security concerns, have stimulated some level of official engagement with Muslim communities in terms of promoting a “moderate” vision and practice of Islam. It has been noted that “a striking feature of state-Muslim relations in Russia is the historical continuity of Muslim administrative structures and their close ties with government” (Braginskaia 2012, 599; see also Aitamurto 2016). Historically, the state approach to the issue has been a top-down initiative aimed at assimilation (Warhola 2008). Braginskaia (2012, 601) has noted three broad and at times conflicting approaches used by the Russian state in managing Muslim communities. The first approach focuses on the assimilation of indigenous and migrant Muslim communities. The second tendency is to recognize the differences among Muslim communities and to attempt to liberalize Islamic institutions. The final approach involves suppressing or “hollowing-out” Muslim institutions to ensure that they align with state security concerns and ideological priorities.

It has also been noted that while influenced by state and religious institutions, individual perceptions and constructions of Muslim identities are much more complex and nuanced (Pilkington and Yemelianova 2003). Among other things, religious self-identification and cultural religiosity have an important bearing on members of a specific community. Someone who says she or he belongs to a particular religious tradition may not necessarily subscribe to, or even be aware of, its doctrines, participate in its rituals or sacraments, or be a member of one of its communities. Even if an individual recognizes links with a historical faith, this does not automatically entail any feelings of religious obligation. Islamic self-identification among the traditionally Muslim peoples in Russia varies widely. Nevertheless, the very fact that a person claims this identity can point to something

important about his or her moral, cultural, and political outlook (Filatov 2006, 35; Rubin 2018).

### **The Foci of This Book**

This book attempts to pay due attention to these multifaceted manifestations of Islam in Russia and the diverse ways of being a Muslim. This includes constructions of individual identity, engagement with politics, the role of the “Islamic factor” in Russia’s foreign policy, and representation of Islam and Muslims in the Russian media. It is about the image of Islam as created by Muslims themselves and by those who portray them. In engaging this diversity of themes and images, the book raises three broad questions.

The first question concerns Islam as seen by the Russian state and regional authorities. To what extent do their concerns and interests play a role in shaping Islam in Russia? This question is evoked by the complex and at times turbulent history of the Russian state’s relationship with Islam and Muslims. At its most basic, it is a history of suppression, resistance, and accommodation. The recent decades have seen Islam as a feared source of radicalism (Dannreuther and March 2010) but also as one of the country’s “traditional religions,” recognized as such in the preamble to the 1997 Law on the Freedom of Religion and Religious Associations (Shterin 2016). “Foreign Islam” is seen as both a potential groundswell of threats to national security and a potential ally in gaining geopolitical advantages (Curanović 2012, 191–213; Sagramoso 2020).

The second question the book asks concerns mediated Islam: How is the image of Islam constructed by the Russian mass media and with what consequences for its perception by the wider public, by Muslims themselves, and for Russian domestic and international politics? As in any country, mass media are a center of cultural production, with their ability to use timing and content to convey particular images of people and events to large publics. This question is particularly pertinent in a context in which journalists and other mass media professionals gradually gravitate away from the notion of a civic duty to inform the public with facts and, as much as possible, unbiased analysis toward an interpretive form of journalism geared toward persuading and influencing target audiences (Simons and Strovsky 2006). This was the role Russian mass media played during the Second Chechen War, creating the impression that the insurgents were of foreign origin and a threat to Russian citizens. Yet Muslims’ increasing presence, visibility, and contributions to society and their footprint on culture and politics present a challenge to this view.

Our third question focuses more closely on foreign policy: What specific factors shape Russia’s Islamic vector in international relations? Russia has



had a long history of interaction with Islam and Muslim-majority countries, including both alliances and conflicts, for example with the Ottoman Empire, Iran, and Afghanistan. The twenty-first century brings new needs and opportunities in the country's relationships and ties with the Muslim world, as Russian participation in international organizations, such as the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, testifies. Russia has attempted to leverage its own Islamic credentials and its long-standing historical interaction with Islam and Muslims as a means to gain further influence in regions such as the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) at the expense of its foreign policy rivals.

## **Overview of the Chapters**

This book consists of nine chapters, which cover a wide range of perspectives and aspects concerning the image of and relationships with Islam in Russia.

Chapter 2, "Muslims With and Without Islam," by Marat Shterin deploys the concept of "ambient Islam" as an effective lens to explore the ways in which Muslims engage with their religion in the post-Soviet situation when ethnicity and religion have become increasingly important in forming individual and group identities. Rather than assuming that Muslims necessarily embrace Islam as an identifiable system of beliefs and practices, Shterin shows how they learn about and make sense of the religion in different cultural environments and depending on their moral, social, and political concerns. As a result, they construct their own cultural, social, and political visions of Islam, which they see as meaningful at certain intersections of their biographies and the histories of their communities, their country, and the wider world. The chapter explores the implications of conceptualizing Islam as ambient religion for our understanding of religiously inflected radicalism and the state's policies toward it.

Marlene Laruelle in Chapter 3, "Islamic Political Ideologies in Post-Soviet Russia," argues that the interaction and relationship between Russia and Islam have been studied through the prism of conflict, such as the two Chechen wars. She puts her focus on the largely understudied aspects of the construction of post-Soviet Muslim identity when being a Russian "patriot" and being Muslim merge and even become part of an Islamic agenda—something that can be easily overlooked if seen through the lens of conflict. Laruelle argues that these two aspects should be seen not as contradictory but rather as complementary in the evolving political and ideological landscape in the wake of the Soviet collapse in 1991.

In Chapter 4, "Reporting on 'Islam' and 'Terror' in Russian vs. US Media," Sergei A. Samoilenko, Olga Logunova, Sergey G. Davydov, and Eric

Shiraev present a comparative study of newspaper coverage of the Islamic State and the idea of Islamic-based terrorism in the United States and Russia. It reveals a number of similarities in the mass-mediated coverage in both countries, which tends to create a binary opposition and dualistic categories of “us” vs. “them.” Carefully constructed yet easy-to-understand narratives are intended to guide the audience’s conclusions, perceptions, and opinions regarding the relationship between Islam and terrorism. One of the main differences in this coverage is that US media portrayed the Islamic State as a largely external and foreign problem, whereas Russian media tended to see it as both an external and an internal threat.

In Chapter 5, “Perceptions of the Hajj,” Zilya Khabibullina’s analysis focuses on the regional practices of Islamic pilgrimage present in the Southern Urals. As the restrictions on participation in the Hajj and travel to Mecca were eased after the collapse of the Soviet Union, there has been an increase in the number of pilgrims making this spiritual journey, amounting to some 20,500 each year since the early 1990s. Khabibullina offers valuable insight into the social and political impact of this individual experience.

In Chapter 6, “Between Russia and Islam,” Rahim Rahimov raises the question of why Chechnya’s reputation and “brand” have become so notoriously different from those of the other Muslim-majority areas of the Russian Federation and former Soviet republics. He argues that while the other regions and countries have tended to represent secular Muslim entities with the separation of religion and state, these characteristics only formally exist in Chechnya, while violent ideological radicalism and extremism are seen as flourishing under the conditions of a long history of armed conflict and nationalism.

In Chapter 7, “The Role of Islam in Russia’s Middle East Policy,” Nicolas Dreyer suggests that Russian foreign policy has become gradually more informed and influenced by Islamic factors in the MENA region, which has gained greater significance for Russia in the wake of regime changes, in particular those associated with the Arab Spring. For a variety of reasons, Russia seems to view the operationalization of an Islamic identity in its foreign policy as a pragmatic opportunity to increase the prospects of its increasing influence in that geopolitical environment.

Chapter 8, “The Impact of Islam on Russia-Iran Relations,” by Hamidreza Azizi considers the many centuries of interactions and relations between Iran and the Russian Federation, which ebbed and flowed between positive and negative dynamics. Taking the end of the Cold War as his point of departure, Azizi examines the contemporary relationship that exists between Tehran and Moscow, with a special emphasis on the role of Islam in these relational dynamics.

In the concluding chapter, “What Have We Learned,” we return to the research questions posed in this introductory chapter, identifying patterns and trends that emerge in the book and proposing an agenda for further research.

## **Notes**

1. On broader social and political differences between the republics of Chechnya and Tatarstan, see an excellent paper by Gulnaz Sharafutdinova (2000).

