

Research Paper

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# Transnational Islam in Russia and Crimea



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## Summary

- Islam in Russia is changing. Its presence is no longer confined to traditional forms and established centres of Muslim power; it also increasingly includes transnational Islam. Islamic groups with transnational connections are part of wider Islamic networks, and they should be approached as such rather than as isolated organizations.
- While some transnational Islamic groups may share a similar goal of dominance and Islamization, they may differ in their methods and discourses that facilitate recruitment and the spread of their ideology. Some groups (e.g. Salafi jihadists) opt for insurgency and terrorist tactics. Others (Hizb ut-Tahrir, the Muslim Brotherhood or the Fethullah Gülen movement) prefer gradualist approaches. They tend to avoid violent means and instead may focus on social work, education and dialogue initiatives.
- The Russian government has consistently used repressive measures against both insurgent and gradualist transnational Islamic groups. This has been controversial and at times counter-productive. However, the processes of growth, fragmentation and radicalization in Russia's Muslim community are not straightforward, and radicalization may occur regardless of repression or tolerance.
- The local and transnational dimensions interplay in the development of a new kind of Islam and also a new kind of Muslim in Russia. One consequence is the growing number of Muslims who describe themselves as 'observant'. They seek to follow the 'true' Islam, as expounded by the Islamic organization to which they belong, and this defines their identity. This combination of ideology and identity is extremely powerful. It is possible to tap into this pool of committed believers and use them for political purposes.
- In Crimea transnational Islamic groups used to operate freely under Ukrainian legislation. Since Crimea was annexed by Russia, they have been considered a security threat and became a target for the law-enforcement agencies. This may potentially lead to radicalization among some Muslims in Crimea.
- Foreign fighters from Russia and Crimea have become an integral part of the insurgency in the Middle East. The escalation of the crisis in Syria and Iraq may lead to further recruitment among Muslims in Russia, Ukraine, Caucasus and Central Asia. It also increases the terror threat for Russia and Crimea from militants returning with significant combat experience and an entrenched radical ideology.
- Repressive government policies towards Islam in its local and transnational forms, growing ethno-social tensions in Russian society, and deepening sectarian divisions in Islam itself can influence the socio-political situation in Russia. Russia's clamp-down on Muslims in Crimea in particular may destabilize the situation.

## Introduction

Islam in Russia has undergone significant change since the demise of the Soviet Union. Some describe this period as having seen a revival of Islam in the country as well as in other former Soviet states. For others the Muslim community has become ever more divided, while government surveillance of it has not subsided. In the 1990s, when the free practice of religion was allowed, Islamic preachers and teachers streamed to Russia and other post-Soviet countries from the Middle East and South Asia. They helped to establish new Muslim communities, build mosques and provide religious training. There was also a proliferation of Islamic literature, and intense educational exchange between Russia (particularly the North Caucasus and Tatarstan) and Middle Eastern countries.

The officially endorsed version of Islam, also known as traditional Islam, became challenged from many sides in Russia. New Islamic groups with transnational connections to the Middle East and South Asia have claimed to bring an authentic Islam untainted by secularism or atheism. They have often pursued political means, and some have resorted to violent ones. Transnational Islam in Russia forms a complex, diverse phenomenon ranging from the so-called jihadists to more moderate groups such as the Fethullah Gülen movement. The Salafi jihadists have gone as far as carrying out terrorist attacks and insurgency in the North Caucasus. They were behind a spate of killings of Muslim clerics representing ‘traditional’ Islam in Dagestan and Tatarstan in 2011–12. Meanwhile such groups as Hizb ut-Tahrir and followers of Fethullah Gülen refrained from violence (though they are still accused of harbouring a secret agenda). These new Islamic groups have captured media and public attention and were initially referred to under the blanket term ‘Wahhabis’. However, transnational Islam is not monolithic and should not be equated to terrorism or reduced to a label. Furthermore, the appearance of new forms of religious expression is often emblematic of changes in power dynamics. Some of these groups have started playing an influential role in the development of Islam and Muslim society in the region. They have also had an impact on society and on official policy towards the Muslim community.

The tactics of the jihadists or ‘extremist’ Muslims differ greatly from those who can be described as ‘gradualists’.<sup>1</sup> The latter base their approach on the aspiration to generate social change through active and responsible citizenship within the boundaries of their religion. They aim to do so through civil society, albeit on their terms – through a ‘Sharia-compliant’ civil society – with social interaction in the public sphere, academia, and traditional and digital media taking place within the parameters of Islam. The missionary (*da’wa*) vision motivates these organizations to use a variety of tactics and to deploy a range of discourses. Education is often the key as they seek to create opportunities, through official programmes or grassroots training, to propagate their interpretation of Islam. They may use social activism and volunteering as a form of outreach. Tending to the disadvantaged and the poor allows them to attract potential recruits and, more importantly, to gain broader support and credibility in the community. The Islam they present is not only a religious notion, but also a viable social, moral and even economic alternative. They may apply the term ‘moderate’ to themselves. However, they remain fundamentalists when it comes to their faith, and their definition of moderation and tolerance may differ from a conventional understanding.

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<sup>1</sup> Hrair Dekmejian, *Islam in Revolution: Fundamentalism in the Arab World*, 2nd edn (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1995), p. 21.

Transnational Islamic organizations represent a new brand of Islam in Russia. They may differ in their methods and tactics, but what is their ultimate goal? While not numerically the largest in the local Muslim community, their focus is on impact and influence. For Islamic organizations associated with the Muslim Brotherhood ideology (such as Alraid in Crimea<sup>2</sup> and the al-Wasatiyya Centre in Russia<sup>3</sup>) the overarching goal is socio-political, i.e. encouraging local Muslims to become religiously observant and to contribute to society in a meaningful and constructive way. Some, like the Fethullah Gülen movement or Tablighi Jamaat, claim to pursue only social goals such as religious observance, while others frame their goals in distinctively political (albeit vague and utopian) terms, as is the case with Hizb ut-Tahrir with its aim to establish a caliphate in the Muslim enclaves of Russia.

There has been a degree of distrust towards such groups as the Muslim Brotherhood, Hizb ut-Tahrir and the Fethullah Gülen movement when it comes to their long-term goals in the Middle East and the West. For some, these groups provide potential partners for dealing with radical Islam. This has been the approach in the United States and in the United Kingdom, in particular. Others argue that, while the tactics of these groups differ, they share the same basic goal of dominance and spreading their influence. For instance, the Muslim Brotherhood has long been controversial in Egypt (where it was designated a terrorist organization in December 2013), and also in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (where it was designated a terrorist organization in March 2014), while in Turkey the Fethullah Gülen movement is no longer viewed as a political counterpart to Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's government, but rather as a rival. Meanwhile Russia has pursued a consistent policy in dealing with non-traditional forms of Islam: they are all essentially treated as a security threat. Most Islamic organizations with transnational connections have been banned: Salafis in 2002, the Muslim Brotherhood in 2003, Hizb ut-Tahrir in 2004, the Fethullah Gülen movement in 2008 and Tablighi Jamaat in 2009.

In addition, the Russian government monitors Islamic publications and online presence closely. In 2012 the authorities updated the Federal List of Extremist Materials, which now includes classical books on Islam and the works of Fethullah Gülen and Said Nursi (these are legal in most countries). This is controversial not only because of the range of banned books, but also because the presence of such literature at a mosque or an Islamic centre gives the public prosecution office grounds to close it down.<sup>4</sup> The list keeps expanding to include personal accounts on social networking websites, posters and leaflets. Even one of the editions of the Qur'an in Russian was banned in 2013. The government also selectively censors the internet, blocks and blacklists websites, and puts pressure on other governments to shut down servers (e.g. those of Lithuania and Sweden where the Caucasus Emirate's controversial Kavkaz Centre website was hosted<sup>5</sup>). Bans on selected Islamic organizations and Islamic literature have been repeatedly used for prosecution and imprisonment in Russia, and now also in Crimea.

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<sup>2</sup> Alraid grew from a student-based organization into a well-organized and vibrant network of Islamic organizations in Ukraine, with its headquarters in Kiev and one of its important Islamic centres in Simferopol, Crimea. Alraid has been working closely with the Muslim Religious Board of Crimea, and they partnered in running the Islamic religious school (School of Hafiz).

<sup>3</sup> The Al-Wasatiyya Centre in Moscow is supported by its central donor, the Al-Wasatiyya Centre in Kuwait, which is also known as the International Moderation Centre (IMC), an organization linked to the Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs in Kuwait.

<sup>4</sup> This was the case with the Islamic Cultural Centre of St Petersburg in March 2013.

<sup>5</sup> The Caucasus Emirate is a virtual entity declared in 2007 over six *wilayah* or 'provinces', including Chechnya, Dagestan and Ingushetia.



## Islam in Russia: context, continuities and changes

There is a long and often tumultuous history of interaction between Russia and its Muslim neighbours. Between the 13th and 16th centuries Russia suffered from continual slave and booty raids (first by Mongols, who later adopted Islam, and then by the Khanates from the disintegrated Golden Horde). Its fortunes were only reversed in the middle of the 16th century, when Ivan the Terrible conquered the Kazan Khanate and forcibly converted a number of Tatars to Christianity. This started Russian expansion not only to what is part of Russia today (e.g. Tatarstan, Bashkortostan and the North Caucasus) but also to Crimea, the South Caucasus and Central Asia. Historically, there has always been a certain level of distrust, and at times even deep-seated animosity, between Muslims and non-Muslims in Russia. The Soviet Union downplayed the role of religion and tried to level out religious identities, but things changed from the 1990s. Muslims in Russia were able to reconsider their identity and the role of their religion, and for some their national struggle became part of their religious struggle.

Russia's Muslim population has grown and it is now estimated at around 16.4 million, or 11.7 per cent of the population.<sup>6</sup> Further growth is expected. According to Pew Forum, 'Russia will continue to have the largest Muslim population (in absolute numbers) in Europe in 2030. Its Muslim population is expected to rise from 16.4 million in 2010 to 18.6 million in 2030.'<sup>7</sup> This demographic change is in part caused by migration. Russia has become a destination for a growing number of labour migrants, including illegal immigrants.<sup>8</sup> The OECD estimates immigration at 356,000 per year.<sup>9</sup> This includes a significant number of Muslims from the 'near abroad' (Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan) as well as from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran and Turkey.

Internal labour migration also means that Muslims are no longer confined to traditional homelands in Russia, such as Tatarstan or the North Caucasus. In recent years there has been an increase in the flow of Muslim migrants from the Caucasus and Central Asia to Moscow, St Petersburg and other urban centres, where employment opportunities became available. Unrestricted immigration has become a contentious issue in Russia. The far right has exploited the rising tensions that have been linked to this, and ethnic clashes have occasionally acquired religious connotations. In turn, the government has not had a consistent approach to dealing with immigration. Concerns about migrants have become lumped with issues of terrorism, illegal immigration, crime and trafficking in the region. The slew of raids and arrests at places of congregation (mosques, Islamic centres, markets and hostels) in Moscow and St Petersburg in 2013 reflected this policy. Though initially presented as actions against Islamic extremists, these were essentially raids against illegal immigrants, and possible drug- and weapons-traffickers.

Russia's Muslim community has inherited from the Russian empire and the Soviet Union an institutional legacy in the shape of Muftiats. These official Islamic organizations with hierarchical structures attempt to preserve a high degree of centralized control over their communities. The key

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<sup>6</sup> 'The Future of the Global Muslim Population', Pew Forum, 27 January 2011, [www.pewforum.org/2011/01/27/the-future-of-the-global-muslim-population/](http://www.pewforum.org/2011/01/27/the-future-of-the-global-muslim-population/).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Kirill Kalinnikov, 'Russia Reports 3 Mln Illegal Migrants', RiaNovosti, 22 March 2013, <http://en.rian.ru/russia/20130322/180185997.html?id=>.

<sup>9</sup> Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, *International Migration Outlook* (Paris: OECD, 2013), p. 290.

ones are the Council of Muftis (in Moscow) and its main rival, the Central Religious Board of Russian Muslims (in Ufa). Muslim religious boards represent so-called 'traditional' Islam, though not as one unified body but as rival factions split along geographical and ideological lines. They also have to compete with the transnational Islamic groups that have found their way to Russia. The latter have to operate mostly underground or informally. Despite the constant government surveillance, they present a real challenge to the traditional Muslim authorities.

The targeted audience of these transnational Islamic groups is usually young, educated, middle-class students or professionals in the early stages of their careers. They strongly encourage conversion to Islam among the Slavic population, and numbers of converts have been growing.<sup>10</sup> These groups pay special attention to women, empowering them as the cornerstones of Muslim families and society. By being socially active and politically attuned, women in organizations such as Hizb ut-Tahrir or Alraid challenge the stereotype of Islam as an oppressive force. Some Islamic groups also target prisons and penal institutions, which have increasingly become a place of recruitment. This phenomenon is similar to the development of 'Prislam' in the West, and to the targeted outreach by Hizb ut-Tahrir to inmates of prisons in Uzbekistan.

Followers of transnational Islamic groups tend to act provocatively towards traditional forms of Islam and traditional Muslims. They claim to be 'true' Muslims and to represent 'true' Islam, and this claim strikes at the core issues of identity and legitimacy. Their discourse is often permeated with imagery of conflicts and grievances, both perceived and real, in the Muslim world. They highlight cases of Islamophobia and unfair treatment of Muslim communities in the region and globally (e.g. the 'occupations' in Gaza, Afghanistan and Iraq, and 'repression' in Russia, Uzbekistan and other Central Asian states). Conspiracy theories against Islam and Muslims, and even against one another, often dominate their discourse. Claims of conspiracies are ubiquitous, whether it is exposing Hizb ut-Tahrir as a divisive tool of the West,<sup>11</sup> revealing the 'true nature' of 9/11 and the Boston bombing, or accusing Islamic State (IS) of being a Shia project that aims to undermine jihad in Syria. Grand conspiracies surrounding Jews or the West find fertile ground as they often tap prejudices and entrenched attitudes.<sup>12</sup> Conspiracies also feed discourses that promise to bring justice, fairness and a true Islamic order. Transnational Islamic organizations differ, however, as to how this will be accomplished, ranging from confrontational ways to slow and progressive measures.

Salafis were among the first transnational Islamic groups to be banned in Russia. The insurgency in Chechnya and Dagestan initially started as a nationalist struggle but later was rebranded as a religious one. This helped to draw support from neighbouring Muslim countries and attract like-minded individuals from Afghanistan and the Middle East. The current incarnation of this struggle is the Caucasus Emirate which, under its now-deceased leader Doku Umarov, carried out attacks against military and civilian targets in Russia (e.g. the bombings of the Moscow Metro in 2010 and at Domodedovo Airport in 2011). There was a brief halt in the attacks on civilians in 2012, but they

<sup>10</sup> Alexey Malashenko, *The Dynamics of Russian Islam* (Carnegie Moscow Centre, 2013), p. 3.

<sup>11</sup> Irina Borogan, 'FSB presentovala novuiu ugrozu iz tsentralnoi azii' [FSB presented a new threat from Central Asia], *Ezhednevniy Zhurnal*, 3 April 2008, <http://ej.ru/?a=note&id=7954>.

<sup>12</sup> See the account of the Western deception, propaganda and information war against Communism and then against the Muslim world in Ali Polosin, 'Informatsionnaia bezopasnost rossiiskoi ummi' [Informational security of the Russian umma], *Islam Wasatiyya*, 6 June 2011, <http://islam-wasatiya.ru/islam-i-gosudarstvo/informatsionnaya-bez/>.

resumed around the time of the winter Olympics in 2013–14. However, the struggle of the Caucasus Emirate is no longer confined to the North Caucasus. With its close ties to Al-Qaeda, it has become a part of the global jihadist movement.<sup>13</sup> As a result it has become involved in the insurgency in Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq.

Despite being banned in Russia, groups like Hizb ut-Tahrir or the Fethullah Gülen movement are able to operate on an informal level through networks of friends and families, and even gain access to local mosques and institutions.<sup>14</sup> The Fethullah Gülen movement is also known in Russia as the Nurcular movement, and is often conflated with the original movement of Said Nursi. It has operated in the North Caucasus, Tatarstan and Bashkortostan since the 1990s, opened a number of schools, and spread its teaching via its institutions and personal contacts among the Tatars and Bashkirs, and also among the Azeri diaspora in Moscow. However, it became controversial, and its schools were closed down and staff deported between 2001 and 2006. The organization was outlawed and its members have been under constant scrutiny by the security services. The Russian civil rights NGO Memorial has highlighted the treatment of Nursi's adherents.<sup>15</sup>

Hizb ut-Tahrir has attracted increasing attention from the authorities. Its members are routinely arrested and jailed 'for organizing and coordinating an extremist religious group'.<sup>16</sup> Since being banned it has had to operate through informal networks and secret meetings. Nevertheless, it has managed to actively distribute its publications, and even hold annual public conferences in Moscow in 2010, 2011 and 2012.<sup>17</sup> It has manifested itself in other ways as well. For instance, during the 2013 Summer Universiade in Kazan some Hizb ut-Tahrir members ventured into the streets of the city wearing T-shirts proclaiming 'I want to live under Caliphate'. Hizb ut-Tahrir is also active on the internet through numerous websites, social media or channels on YouTube. As it tries to make religion more salient in the public sphere, its efforts can appear to undermine social cohesion, political stability and security in the eyes of the authorities and local community. Though the organization's leaders constantly deny that it has terrorist inclinations, its potential to be a 'fifth column' means that the state perceives it as a threat,<sup>18</sup> and consequently its members are routinely targeted and arrested. It has been argued that the increasing number of arrests and fabricated trials against members is due to rising criticism of the security forces' ineptness in dealing with real terrorists.<sup>19</sup>

Hizb ut-Tahrir has been increasingly accused of being a potential recruitment agent for insurgency in the Middle East. Such mobilization has been taking place in Russia and Crimea, enhanced by the proximity to Turkey's porous borders. Though the link is not straightforward, some believe that

13 Gordon M. Hahn, *Getting the Caucasus Emirate Right* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2011), pp. 1–14.

14 Banned in many countries, Hizb ut-Tahrir is allowed and active in Ukraine and the United Kingdom. Controversy surrounding it is further increased by the appearance of websites, especially its English-language ones, with a sanitized view of its ideology. One possible explanation of this discrepancy is that propaganda-savvy young people with a sophisticated agenda are producing a custom-made version of Hizb ut-Tahrir for its English-speaking audience in the West.

15 See, for example, Vitaly Ponomarev, *Rossiiskie spetssluzhbi protiv 'Risale-i-Nur': 2001–2012* [Russian security services against the Risale-i-Nur: 2001–2012] (Moscow: Memorial, 2012).

16 'Five Hizb ut-Tahrir Members Sentenced In Russia's Bashkortostan', Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 25 April 2014, [www.rferl.org/content/five-hizb-ut-tahrir-members-sentenced-in-russias-bashkortostan/25362526.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/five-hizb-ut-tahrir-members-sentenced-in-russias-bashkortostan/25362526.html).

17 'Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami', *Kavkazsky Uzel*, 10 June 2014, <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/235276/>. The conferences were presented as an opportunity for Muslims to unite. It is unclear, though, how they could be held openly.

18 Smirnov, 'Islamsky radikalizm: vizov sovremennomu miru' [Islamic radicalism: a challenge to the modern-day world], National Anti-Terror Committee, [nac.gov.ru/content/4271.html](http://nac.gov.ru/content/4271.html).

19 Claire Bigg, 'Russia: Muslims and Rights Groups Denounce Repression', UNPO, 6 May 2005, <http://www.unpo.org/article/2449#sthash.5sWvD8C2.dpuf> [www.unpo.org/article/2449](http://www.unpo.org/article/2449).

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Hizb ut-Tahrir's ideological closeness to Salafism may facilitate a radicalization process for some its members.<sup>20</sup> With its members targeted and detained, Hizb ut-Tahrir launched a global campaign in support of 'repressed Muslims in Russia' in 2011–12. As part of these efforts, its members in Crimea organized rallies in front of the Russian consulate in Simferopol.

## Crimea and its Muslim population

The dramatic events in Crimea and eastern Ukraine in early 2014, and the protracted conflict that has ensued, have led to significant population movements. As of September 2014 there were more than one million displaced persons in Ukraine, and the numbers are rising.<sup>21</sup> Crimean Tatars were among the first refugees who left Crimea in February and March, even though they are its main indigenous ethnic groups with claims to the territory and a special status there. They account for 12–15 per cent of the Crimean population, and have been among the most vocal and well-organized minorities. They have a tragic history of deportation, but in addition a history of resettling in Crimea, setting up a cohesive power structure and adapting to life in Ukraine. They also have their own official Muftiat – the Muslim Religious Board of Crimea – and the Mejlis, an unregistered representative body. Owing to their strong pro-Ukrainian stance both organizations have become a target of the new Russian authorities in Crimea. The Russian government attempted to weaken the Mejlis by removing its two main leaders – the iconic dissident and nationalist figure Mustafa Jemiliv and the Mejlis leader Rufat Chubarov (both of whom had problems returning to Crimea after trips to mainland Ukraine) – and then by evicting the Mejlis from its building in Simferopol.

The 'national factor' is an important issue for Crimean Tatars. Over the past 20 years they have conventionally positioned themselves as a counterbalance to pro-Russian forces in Crimea. Their political leaders also formed a coalition with the nationalist and ultra-nationalist organizations in Ukraine such as the Ukrainian National Assembly and the All-Ukrainian Union 'Svoboda' ('Freedom'). The two sides have often been united in their rhetoric against Russia, its foreign policy and its involvement in the North Caucasus and in Crimea. However, the alliance between Crimean Tatars and the Ukrainian far right became a liability during the presidency of Viktor Yanukovich, as his government aimed for a centralization of power in Crimea. The situation has become even more complicated since Crimea was annexed by Russia. Crimean Tatars and their leadership tried to boycott the March referendum in Crimea and have maintained a pro-Ukrainian stance. Furthermore, as a Turkic-speaking people professing Islam, they appealed not only to the Turkic-speaking world, particularly Turkey, but also to the Muslim world more broadly.<sup>22</sup>

Crimean Tatars have a strong affinity with Chechens, to whom they have provided a supportive voice and some practical help (e.g. hosting Chechen children at Crimean resorts) over the years. But this connection has been tested recently, as Chechens have aligned with both sides in the Ukrainian conflict. There has been some evidence of the presence of Chechen combatants on the pro-Russian

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20 Ron Synovitz and Eleonora Beishenbek, 'Tracking Central Asians' Trails to Jihad In Syria', Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 4 December 2013, [www.rferl.org/content/central-asia-trail-jihad/25188721.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/central-asia-trail-jihad/25188721.html).

21 UN High Commissioner for Refugees, 'Number of displaced inside Ukraine more than doubles since early August to 260,000', 2 September 2014, <http://www.unhcr.org/540590ae9.html> (by early September there were about 260,000 displaced within Ukraine, and 814,000 Ukrainian nationals had left for Russia).

22 For instance, the Organization of Islamic Conference highlighted the situation with Crimea and Crimean Tatars in its annual report, *Report on Islamophobia: October 2013–April 2014* (Jedda: OIC, 2014), pp. 43–44.



side in eastern Ukraine.<sup>23</sup> On the other hand, pro-independence Chechens have always supported the independence claims of Ukrainians and Crimean Tatars. For instance, there has been regular coverage of the events in Ukraine on the regional internet media sites such as Kavkaz Uzel and Kavkaz Centre. Solidarity and opportunism among Chechens have added layers of complexity to the crisis in Ukraine.

After the annexation, the Russian government initially tried to woo the Crimean Tatar population by sending delegations from Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, Chechnya and Moscow, and by promising it special status and rights. This did not work, however, and instead the government quickly started endorsing rival institutions to the Mejlis and the Muftiat, such as the marginal Milli Firka Party and the Religious Centre of Muslims of Crimea. The latter is a chapter of the Muslim Religious Board of Ukraine (DUMU), which has a power base in Kiev and has competed with the Muftiat for control over Crimean Tatars. Its head, Ahmad Tamim, is closely associated with the Habashis, who have a Sufi interpretation of Islam. DUMU has a very strong and vocal stance against Hizb ut-Tahrir, Salafis and the Alraid centre in Ukraine and Crimea. Its rivalry with the Muftiat has been convenient for the new Russian authorities in Crimea as they attempt to undermine the influence of the latter and of the Mejlis, and to target transnational Islamic groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir in Crimea.

With the annexation, Crimean Tatars and other Muslims in Crimea have come under new jurisdiction. Most of the Islamic organizations with transnational connections are now designated or banned as terrorist organizations. Islamic literature is closely monitored and some publications are banned as 'extremist literature'. Among the first targets were the 'unregistered mosques' (mostly run by Salafi and Hizb ut-Tahrir) and institutions run by Alraid (its Islamic centre as well as its Islamic religious school, which was among the first to be raided in June). Furthermore, with only the official brand of Islam now allowed, Crimea has become another contested territory for the various official Islamic institutions from Russia that are trying to establish spheres of influence there. Ravil Gainutdin, the head of the Council of Muftis and the Religious Board of Muslims of the European Part of Russia (DUMER), and Talgat Safa Tajuddin, the head of the Central Muslim Religious Board of Russia (TsDUM), have visited Crimea and sought closer partnership with the Muftiat there.<sup>24</sup>

Hizb ut-Tahrir provides an example of the significant changes facing the Muslim community in Crimea, and especially those who associate with transnational Islamic groups. It had a fair degree of freedom under the Ukrainian legal system, operating openly when it came to staging meetings, conferences and rallies. In June about 1,500 of its members staged a rally in Simferopol in commemoration of the dissolution of the Caliphate in 1924 by Kemal Atatürk.<sup>25</sup> The Hizb ut-Tahrir members projected a significant presence during its rallies by employing 'swarming tactics' – converging at one place and time in the centre of Simferopol. This led to calls to restrain Hizb ut-

23 Mairbek Vatchagaev, 'Understanding the Mysterious Appearance of the Chechen "Vostok" Battalion in Eastern Ukraine', Jamestown Foundation, 30 May 2014, [www.jamestown.org/single/?tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=42447#.U7tOsJSwLgI](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=42447#.U7tOsJSwLgI). Unsurprisingly, this was not confirmed by the Russian officials, and has been denied by the president of Chechnya, Ramzan Kadyrov.

24 Anatoli Beketov, 'Islamskie Lideri Rossii v Borbe za Vliianie nad Krymom' [Russia's Islamic Leaders Fight over Influence in Crimea], Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 25 June 2014, [ru.krymr.com/content/article/25434288.html](http://ru.krymr.com/content/article/25434288.html).

25 'Hizb Ut-Tahrir Activists Rally In Crimea', Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 6 June 2013, [www.rferl.org/content/hizb-ut-tahrir-crimea/25009325.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/hizb-ut-tahrir-crimea/25009325.html). A rally to commemorate the dissolution of caliphate is co-ordinated globally in the month of Rajab of the Islamic calendar.

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Tahrir in the peninsula. The Mejlis and the Muftiat were particularly vocal as they perceived Hizb ut-Tahrir as a dangerous rival. Hizb ut-Tahrir has been active and held rallies on other controversial occasions, e.g. protests at the film *Innocence of Muslims* and at suppressive measures by the government against the Muslim community in Russia, campaigning in solidarity for Muslims in Palestine and Syria. Over the past few years Hizb ut-Tahrir in Ukraine developed legal action and lobbying as part of its tactics. In 2009–10 it was at the forefront of the so-called ‘hijab case’, lobbying for Muslim women to be allowed to wear head-covering when being photographed for identification documents (see below). Since 2010 it has also highlighted cases of discrimination by the Ukrainian authorities, e.g. the deportation of Uzbek citizens from Ukraine, arrests during the 2012 anti-terror campaign or the kidnapping of an Islamic activist and missionary in 2014. It has framed stories as human rights abuse cases on their website, and also on the website of the Human Rights Movement of Crimea, an organization that acts as a front for Hizb ut-Tahrir.<sup>26</sup>

Rather than repressing different factions within the Muslim community, the Ukrainian government seemed to play them off against one another. Non-traditional organizations were perceived as a threat not so much to the state as to the traditional Muslim establishment (the Muftiat and other Muslim religious boards) and the Mejlis. Hizb ut-Tahrir started experiencing indirect pressure as means of controlling its activities only in 2012–13. Despite some manipulation and inconsistent regulations, the Ukrainian government in Crimea did not generally adopt a heavy-handed approach in dealing with non-traditional Islamic groups. The reported cases related either to individual arrests or to allegations in being involved in terrorism. A series of such arrests (including set-up cases with planted weapons) took place in 2012, as part of the ‘anti-terror’ campaign around the time of the Euro 2012 football tournament.<sup>27</sup> There were also some attempts to shut down Hizb ut-Tahrir’s rallies and its international forum in 2013, which the organization swiftly presented as examples of persecution. However, this was not comparable to its repression in Russia. Upon gaining control over Crimea, the Russian government almost immediately singled out Hizb ut-Tahrir as a potential target there and made a reference to its illegal status in Russia. Many of its followers preferred to leave Crimea for mainland Ukraine and other countries, while those who have stayed face an uncertain future. A number of Crimean Tatars, including members of Hizb ut-Tahrir, have suffered raids and prosecution over religious literature since June 2014.<sup>28</sup>

## Islam in Russia: channels for transnationalizing Islam

The Russian government’s attempts at controlling and containing Islamism and transnational Islam have proved to be a challenge, not only in the insurgency in the North Caucasus, but also with regard to other Islamic groups. The structure, discourses, references tactics and goals of organizations such as Hizb ut-Tahrir in Russia and Crimea closely follow the format of their other chapters elsewhere. For instance, Alraid in Crimea and Ukraine is a member of the Brussels-based Federation of Islamic Organizations in Europe, an umbrella organization for the Muslim Brotherhood and its counterparts in countries such as Poland, Hungary, Bosnia, Germany and the

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<sup>26</sup> The Human Rights Movement of Crimea has its own website (<http://www.humanrights.rk.ua/>) and accounts on social networking websites such as VKontakte and Facebook.

<sup>27</sup> ‘Igra v odni vorota’ [A one-street case], Ukrainian Helsinki Human Rights Union, 12 June 2012.

<sup>28</sup> Felix Corley, ‘CRIMEA: First known Russian religious literature “extremism” prosecution’, *Forum 18*, 26 August 2014, [www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=1989](http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1989).

United Kingdom.<sup>29</sup> The focal person of these networks is Yusuf al-Qaradawi, the Egyptian scholar based in Qatar who is one of the chief proponents of the 'centrist' principle in Islam. Other factors such as financial resources, rhetoric and the choice of discourse, as well as the commitment of adherents and the charisma of leaders, play a role in the expansion of different transnational organizations in Russia and Crimea.

There are different conduits for 'transnationalizing' Islam in Russia. This is chiefly to do with the movement of people and ideas. One of the important factors is migration, immigration and diaspora communities. Immigrants from Central Asia, the Middle East and Southeast Asia have not only formed their own ethnic communities, they have also affected local Muslim communities through their cultural and religious practices. Russia has connections to Africa, the Middle East and South Asia dating back to the 1960s and the Soviet initiative on educational exchanges, especially in the medical and engineering fields. Some of the foreign students who came to the Soviet Union played an important role in providing support and encouragement to the local Muslims, and even setting up a basic infrastructure, connections or informal mosques on university premises. This pattern of students setting up informal Islamic networks that grew into organizations has been observed in European countries too.<sup>30</sup> Alraid emerged from such a pre-existing network of Arab students in Crimea and in mainland Ukraine. By contrast, similar initiatives in Russia have been closely monitored and regulated, as in the case of the (now closed down) Islamic Cultural Centre of St Petersburg.

Controversy over language is another example of changes occurring in local Muslim communities. Some mosques in Russia (particularly in the Moscow region and in Tatarstan) are under communal pressure to change from using the Tatar language to Russian in order to accommodate Muslims coming from Central Asia and the North Caucasus.<sup>31</sup> Salafis and Hizb ut-Tahrir also deliberately use the Russian language, however, in order to downplay nationalism and promote a pan-Islamic identity.<sup>32</sup> By and large, Russian remains the lingua franca for transnational Islamic groups attempting to disseminate their ideas to a wider audience via traditional and electronic ways of communication. Transnational Islamic groups deliberately target non-Muslims who might convert and serve as a bridge to wider society, and therefore broaden the mobilization pool. Converts are often at the forefront of Islamic organizations, as they contribute to the process of redefining Islam for non-Muslims. Ali Vyacheslav Polosin, a former Orthodox priest, is one of the most renowned. Converts present their newly found religion as a viable option for non-Muslim population and are contributing to the changing face of Islam. The numbers for people converting to Islam are hard to come by, and some circulated figures are deliberately inflated. Importantly, though, there is a tendency towards radicalization among some converts. The case of Aleksandr Tikhomirov (also known as Said Buryatsky) is perhaps the most prominent, not only for his extremist activity but

29 Alison Pargeter, *The Muslim Brotherhood: The Burden of Tradition* (London: Saqi, 2010), p. 173.

30 Lorenzo Vidino describes this as a 'pattern of development' of Muslim organizations linked to the Muslim Brotherhood in most Western countries, in *The New Muslim Brotherhood in the West* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), p. 37.

31 'V mechetiakh podmoskov'ia pereshli na russkii iazik' [A switch to Russian language at the mosques in Moscow region], *Golos Islama*, 14 June 2013, <http://golosislama.ru/news.php?id=17596>.

32 Rais Suleimanov, 'Vahhabism vedet tatar k assimiatsii' [Wahhabism causes the assimilation of Tatars], APN, 25 June 2013, <http://www.apn.ru/publications/article29442.htm>.

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additionally because of his ideological legacy.<sup>33</sup> Converts therefore increasingly attract the attention of the security services in Russia.

Another transnational factor is diasporic connections. Some ethnic Muslim communities in Russia and Crimea historically have their own diaspora in the Middle East. A sizeable Crimean Tatar diaspora in Turkey aspires to play not only a cultural and economic role but also a political and diplomatic one. Some have participated in religious exchanges, visiting Crimea during Ramadan and the Feast of Sacrifice. In turn, many young Crimean Tatars have gone to study in Turkey at secular and religious institutions. The Circassian diaspora in Jordan, Syria, Turkey and Egypt has been a source of support and inspiration for its community in the North Caucasus. However, the so-called 'Circassian Question' has been exacerbated by recent events, particularly the Syrian civil war, the migration of some Circassians back to the North Caucasus, and the Winter Olympic Games in Sochi, their ancestral land.<sup>34</sup>

Prominent itinerant speakers, religious leaders and representatives of Islamic organizations are also conduits for transnationalizing Islam as they bring new ideas and support some local or joint initiatives. While most of the links with Islamic communities in other countries have been severed by the Russian government, some initiatives were actually encouraged. For instance, Adel Al-Falah, the undersecretary of the Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs of Kuwait, played an important role in establishing the chapter of the Al-Wasatiyya Centre in Russia. He was presented with the Order of Friendship by President Dmitry Medvedev in 2010 and with the Order of Kadyrov by the president of Chechnya the following year for his work in the region. Al-Falah became one of the main proponents of 'centrist' Islam or 'Islam of the Golden Mean' in Russia by forging links between the Al-Wasatiyya Centre in Kuwait and Muslim communities in Moscow, the Volga region and southern Russia. This initiative and the spread of 'centrist' Islam correspond to Russia's acquisition of observer status in the Organization of Islamic Conference in 2005, which in turn facilitated the rapprochement between Russia and Kuwait.<sup>35</sup>

Ordinary Muslims also play a role in transnationalizing Islam in Russia and Crimea. Some have had a transformative experience and have become observant Muslims after visiting Muslim-majority countries, or after living among observant Muslims in the Middle East, or even in the West. Others have been affected by their pilgrimage to Mecca. The most vocal, however, are those who received an Islamic education in other countries such as Turkey, Egypt, Jordan, Syria or Saudi Arabia. Mostly young men, they often become a point of friction in local Muslim communities in Russia and Crimea, as their knowledge of Arabic and religion accords them credibility and respect. However, their preaching and teaching often challenge or directly confront local ways and beliefs. There has been a danger that some interaction and exchange of ideas with followers of transnational Islam may lead to propaganda and radicalization. Perhaps the most disturbing cases are those of indoctrinated men joining the insurgency in other countries. There have been a growing number of

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33 Among others are suicide bombers Vitaly Razdobudko and his wife Maria Khorosheva, Aminat Kurbanova (Alla Saprykina) and Vladimir Khodov.

34 Valery Dzutsev, 'Moscow Puts Restrictions on Circassian Immigration to the North Caucasus', Jamestown Foundation, 12 June 2013, <http://www.refworld.org/docid/51bb0c744.html>.

35 Farid Asadullin, 'Islam nuzhdaetsia v korrektnoi prezentatsii' [Islam needs a correct presentation], *Islam.Ru*, 22 December 2009, <http://news.rambler.ru/4774554/>.



reports suggesting that Chechen, Volga and Crimean Tatars were joining the Syrian opposition.<sup>36</sup> There is a risk that upon their return to Russia and Crimea, some of them may challenge indigenous customs and contribute to 'home-grown' terrorism.<sup>37</sup>

Traditional and modern media are another important means of spreading ideas and interpretations of Islam among the Muslim community. For example, Arsen Abu Yahya Krinsky, who was educated in Qatar and Kuwait and has been based in Simferopol, became known through a series of podcasts and lectures on topical issues. His strong online presence and reputation have allowed him to play an important role in the Russian-speaking Salafi community, not only locally, but increasingly in other countries as well. Transnational Islamic groups often compete with one another, and the media reflect this battle of ideas. They differ on interpretation and practices of Islam as 'true Islam'. These notions of authenticity and correctness are important, as adherents of transnational groups try to legitimize themselves as true Muslims. The Salafi internet forums are abuzz with discussions on the correct teaching and attacks on other groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Hizb ut-Tahrir, as well as Sufis and Shias. The online presence of Salafis in Russia is vibrant and creative; they not only own websites and forums (e.g. Salaf Forum), but also have accounts on social networking sites (Facebook, Vkontakte, Odnoklassniki, Moi Mir and Twitter), a YouTube channel, and even their own online channel, SalafTube.com. They broadcast lectures via Skype and PalTalk. Hizb ut-Tahrir has been using various online platforms alongside traditional ways to spread its ideas. Traditional media are still in use, especially leaflets. In Crimea Hizb ut-Tahrir used to actively distribute its newspaper, *Vozrozhdenie* (Revival).<sup>38</sup>

## Islam in Russia and Crimea: tendencies and dynamics

### Islam as a security threat

The state's relationship with Islam, especially in its 'non-traditional' or 'foreign' form, reflects a broader relationship with religion in Russia. Though Russia is not a confessional state, the government gives primacy to the Russian Orthodox Church and traditional religious establishments. It has a strong rhetoric against 'unconventional forms' of religion and puts pressure on non-traditional religious groups.<sup>39</sup> At the same time, it engages in 'religious diplomacy' by supporting high-level interfaith dialogue as an incentive for rapprochement between Russia and the Muslim world.<sup>40</sup> Treating certain Islamic groups as a security threat reflects the government's general suspicion of any organizations and of NGOs with externally determined agendas and external funding. It reflects a broader trend in Russia: the rise not only of government restrictions but also of social hostilities involving religion.<sup>41</sup> This has led to a growing distrust between the

36 Mairbek Vatchagaev, 'Russian Muslim Militants Are Joining the Ranks of Rebel Fighters in Syria', Jamestown Foundation, 20 June 2013, [http://www.jamestown.org/regions/thecaucasus/single/?tx\\_ttnews\[tt\\_news\]=41049&tx\\_ttnews\[backPid\]=639&cHash=a2d6a663c5767f38c631942e8353b9dc#.Udp\\_KoxwbIV](http://www.jamestown.org/regions/thecaucasus/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=41049&tx_ttnews[backPid]=639&cHash=a2d6a663c5767f38c631942e8353b9dc#.Udp_KoxwbIV).

37 'Terrorists from Syria May Sneak into Russia: Security Service', Xinhua, 30 May 2013, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/world/2013-05/30/c\\_132420378.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/world/2013-05/30/c_132420378.htm).

38 Owing to the reluctance of local publishing houses in late 2013, Hizb ut-Tahrir had to stop printing its newspaper, though it is still available in electronic format.

39 Geraldine Fagan, *Believing in Russia: Religious Policy after Communism* (London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 194–200.

40 Alicja Curanović, *The Religious Diplomacy of the Russian Federation* (Paris: IFRI, 2012).

41 In 2013 Pew Forum ranked Russia among the top most-populous countries with the most restrictions on religion when both government restrictions and social hostilities were considered. Since Pew started reporting on restrictions on religion in 2009, Russia kept moving up on

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Muslim community and the Russian state and the non-Muslim population. One can even argue that the government's harsh policies may have contributed to the growth of Islamism, including its militant variety.<sup>42</sup>

As a result of annexation, the Muslim community in Crimea has become a testing ground for different Russian government policies, after having experienced lax and at times inconsistent government engagement by the Ukrainian authorities. Instead of gradual change as was the case for the Muslim community in Russia, Muslims in Crimea have faced drastic and sudden restrictions. Transnational Islamic groups operating in Crimea will most likely persist, though they will have to change their tactics and mode of operations just as their counterparts have done in Russia. Thus Hizb ut-Tahrir members currently prefer to keep a low profile in Crimea, while some have chosen to relocate. However, government policy and regulations, whether restrictive or liberal, do not necessarily shape these organizations or prevent rising extremism. The processes of growth, fragmentation and radicalization in the Muslim community can occur regardless of repression or tolerance. The important question is whether such Islamic groups remain marginal or play an increasingly influential role, and whether and how some of their adherents may become radicalized or de-radicalized.

There are no easy answers here, but government attempts at repression have not hampered radicalization in Russia. Some Islamic organizations with transnational connections claim to provide an alternative to radicalizing discourses and emphasize a counter-radicalization discourse. For instance, the Al-Wasatiyya Centre in Russia promotes a narrative of 'centrist', harmonious Islam, and tries to marginalize extremists and their discourse.<sup>43</sup> However, its initiatives and declarations are debatable and not taken on board by some, especially rival, more militant Islamic groups in Russia. The question of legal religious authority is crucial here. Among other things, the Al-Wasatiyya Centre's hitherto unsuccessful attempts at a counter-radicalization narrative bring into question the effectiveness of challenging the attraction of extremism from within Muslim communities.

### Increased religiosity and observance among Muslims

Another question is whether there is a correlation between extremism and religious observance. The growth of observance of Islam in Russia is an important phenomenon that needs to be taken into consideration. The localization processes of transnational Islam result in the emergence of a new kind of Muslims. They refer to themselves as 'observant' because of their strict adherence to the teachings and practices of Islam. Some live an isolationist lifestyle, while others choose an integrationist one, depending on their interpretation of Islam. Those observant Muslims who are well integrated may engender incremental but important changes in Muslim communities and in society. They do this by lobbying, at times successfully, for Islamic public holidays, allowing women,

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the scale of 'social hostilities'. Pew Research Centre, *Arab Spring Adds to Global Restrictions on Religion* (Washington, DC: Pew Forum, 2013).

<sup>42</sup> For instance see, James Hughes, *Chechnya: From Nationalism to Jihad* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

<sup>43</sup> The Al-Wasatiyya Centre in Kuwait promotes 'centrist' Islam not only in Russia but globally as well. Ideologically, 'centrism' or *al-wasatiyya* is conventionally associated with al-Qaradawi who coined the term. The Al-Wasatiyya Centre's existence in Russia points to the inconsistency of the Russian government in banning the Muslim Brotherhood, yet allowing an organization with a similar ideology to operate.

as noted, to have their passport pictures taken while wearing the *hijab*, introducing *halal* certification on products and services, shaping Islamic studies in the country, addressing local needs and grievances, or contributing to social and cultural development more generally.

Observant Muslims identify strongly with the global Islamic community, but they also engage with local contexts, socio-political dynamics and debates. Owing to their beliefs, they make certain adjustments to their lifestyle, especially in terms of appearance and clothes, consumption of food and beverages, celebrations and interactions with others. Women wearing the *hijab* are particularly important, symbolizing religious observance and causing social tensions. While in the West the *hijab* may be 'symptomatic of a reluctance to integrate',<sup>44</sup> in Russia and Crimea it also contests the traditions of local Muslims. The *hijab* question has become emblematic of the challenge that new transnational Islamic groups pose for traditional Muslim communities that were repressed during the Soviet era. It reveals tensions within the Muslim community and can serve as a dividing line between observant and non-observant. The wider social reaction in Russia and Crimea to observant Muslims and transnational forms of Islam has been mostly negative. Media coverage and a lingering association between transnational Islam and terrorism exacerbate this. Religious observance has been also connected with ethnic tensions and overarching issues such as immigration (especially illegal), crime and xenophobia. While some observant Muslims may adhere to an extremist interpretation of Islam, most are sincerely trying to implement their beliefs and practices in their everyday lives. Despite claims of forming a cohesive Muslim community, observant Muslims are not a solid group. They are often split along ideological lines, ranging from Salafis and Hizb ut-Tahrir to the Fethullah Gülen movement. While it may often be possible to recognize an observant Muslim, there are few visible identifiers to distinguish between the followers of different strands. It is usually in a religious discussion or ritual that their particular group can be ascertained.

### Exporting Islamic militants to the ongoing armed conflicts

While there has been growth in radicalization among Russia's Muslims since the 1990s, the process of recruiting and exporting Russian Islamic militants to zones of conflict is a relatively new development. Increasing numbers of Russian citizens, predominantly of Chechen origin but also from other regions of Russia (and alongside counterparts from other former Soviet states), have joined insurgencies abroad. One prominent example is Umar Shishani (Umar the Chechen).<sup>45</sup> He is considered to be one of the top commanders in Islamic State (IS), which he joined in late 2013. In the conflict between the Jabhat al-Nusra and IS, he sided with IS. Some Chechen insurgents, however, were unwilling to pledge allegiance (*bay'ah*) to IS and remained an independent group called Jaish al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar (the Army of Emigrants and Supporters).<sup>46</sup> This split reverberated back to Chechnya, where Abu Muhammad, the new leader of the Caucasus Emirate from March 2014, pursued a different line on the military commitments in Syria and Iraq.<sup>47</sup>

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44 Dominic McGoldrick, *Human Rights and Religion: The Islamic Headscarf Debate in Europe* (Oxford: Hart Publishing, 2006), p. 20.

45 He is not actually a Chechen but a Georgian convert to Islam, though his wife is of Chechen origin. Nina Akhmeteli, 'The Georgian roots of Isis commander Omar al-Shishani', BBC News, 8 July 2014, [www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-28217590](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-28217590).

46 Liz Fuller, 'North Caucasus Fighters in Syria Pledge Allegiance to Umarov's Successor', Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 31 March 2014, [www.rferl.org/content/caucasus-syria-fighters-allegiance-/25315330.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/caucasus-syria-fighters-allegiance-/25315330.html).

47 In a video statement Abu Muhammad, the new leader of the Caucasus Emirate, explained the roots of the division, sided with Al-Zawahiri and Al-Qaeda, and encouraged Umar Shishani to avoid the pitfall of division between Jubhat Al-Nusra and IS. The video was posted on

The number of insurgents from Russia fighting in Syria and Iraq is estimated at around 800 (though higher figures are also sometimes circulated).<sup>48</sup> Russia is among the top contributors of fighters in the conflict, along with Turkey, France, the United Kingdom, Tunisia, Morocco and Saudi Arabia. Chechens in particular have gained a reputation for their bravery, commitment and fearlessness on the battlefield. Their brigades have absorbed other militants from the former Soviet Union, notably the Volga region, Crimea, Azerbaijan and Central Asia, essentially forming a 'Russian/Chechen wing' along with Turkish, European and Arab 'wings' of insurgency in the conflict.

Insurgents from Russia operate not only on the frontline of Syria and Iraq but also on the internet. They actively encourage their compatriots to exodus (*hijra*) from the 'land of infidels', and to join the fighting (*jihad*) in Syria or the land of Sham, where the final eschatological battle for Muslims is believed to be taking place. With events unfolding in Ukraine and Crimea, one of the insurgent commanders of Crimean Tatar origin, Abdul Karim Krymsky, openly called for Crimean Tatars not to flee but to fight in Crimea.<sup>49</sup> Russian-speaking insurgents regularly update their social media followers on their advances with the insurgent groups of Jabhat al-Nusra and IS in Syria and Iraq. They raise funds for 'Brothers and Sisters in Sham' (Syria) via the Russian electronic payment services Yandex Money and Beeline.<sup>50</sup> The escalation of crisis in Syria and Iraq may lead to further recruitment among Russian-speaking Muslims, as well as increasing the terror threat for Russia and Crimea from fighters returning home.

## Conclusion

Over the past 20 years Islam has become more visible in Russia and other post-Soviet countries, whether through mosque construction, the launch of *halal* businesses (e.g. restaurants, clothes shops), Islamic education and awareness initiatives (e.g. conferences and dialogues), and a growing online presence. In addition, there are changes in Muslim communities owing to demography and migration. Furthermore, Islam no longer confines itself to historical Muslim areas, nor does it follow only traditional models. Transnational Islamic networks such as Salafis, Hizb ut-Tahrir, the Muslim Brotherhood, and the Fethullah Gülen movement have sought to extend their presence and influence in Russia, and they have played an important role in bringing changes to the region. Though these organizations are small, and they are currently restricted by Russian legislation, their active members have a growing impact on the Russian Muslim communities and beyond.

YouTube but was subsequently removed for violating YouTube policy on violence (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BxzdSGpooyc>). The video message provoked a slew of responses from both pro-IS and pro-Al-Nusra followers.

48 Richard Barret, *Foreign Fighters in Syria* (New York: The Soufan Group, 2014), pp. 13–15.

49 'Jaish al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar: Amir Salahaddin Shishani and Naib Abdul Karim Krymsky: "About Laramon, Crimea and Jihad"', Akhbar Sham, 13 May 2014, [akhbarsham.info/2014/05/13/material\\_53/](http://akhbarsham.info/2014/05/13/material_53/).

50 For instance, see social accounts in VKontakte: 'Sham Today', <http://vk.com/shamtoday> (over 7,000 followers); 'Novosti Siri', <http://vk.com/sham.newsi> (over 7,000 followers); 'fi al-'Iraq wa sh-Sham' <http://vk.com/public66693461> (about 1,000 followers); 'Ansar Daula' [http://vk.com/ansar\\_dawlah](http://vk.com/ansar_dawlah) (over 2,000 followers); 'Islamskoe Gosudarstvo' <http://vk.com/club69751505> (over 3,000 followers); 'Manhaj Salyaf Solih' <http://vk.com/manhajsalyafsolih> (over 2,000 followers); 'Daula Islamia', <http://vk.com/jamaatabuhanif> (almost 4,000 followers). There are also websites launched by the Russian-speaking militants in IS – [fisyria.info](http://fisyria.info) (the site also has an account on Twitter). Another site for "Muhajerees and Ansars" is <http://akhbarsham.info/>; it is linked to the sites of the Caucasus Emirate (<http://www.kavkazcenter.com> and <http://hunafa.com>). According to one report, Russian-speaking insurgents not only bring in their families, but also provide infrastructure for them (e.g. opening a school for Russian-speaking children in Raqqah, Syria, the headquarters of IS). See 'Daula Islamia', 24 May 2014, [http://vk.com/wall-59297872\\_49](http://vk.com/wall-59297872_49). Among the resources there is a very practical manual for Russian-speaking militants (mujahedeen). See <http://vk.com/manualmudjaheed>. Numerous accounts on YouTube on Syria and IS have often been removed for violating policies on violent or shocking content.



By redefining the concept of ‘true’ Islam and by prescribing what it means to be a ‘true’ Muslim, Islamic transnational organizations try to attain a dogmatic hold over the Muslim community. They encourage conversion to Islam and meaningful changes in the beliefs and practices of Muslims. They aim to uphold Islamic values in their everyday lives and to project them onto their immediate environment, i.e. community, workplace, universities, even prisons. As transnational actors, they challenge nationhood, borders and at times state sovereignty. They shape the ideology of observant Muslims, and develop and sustain their socio-political activism. Some may openly oppose the existing political and socio-economic system while others seek to generate change in society in an incremental way through a pious lifestyle and contributing to society.

The ‘gradualist’ Islamic groups try to enhance their capabilities by having a greater range of tactics and discourses, and by actively engaging with Muslim and non-Muslim communities. They choose to speak the language of civil society, dialogue and religious tolerance in order to carve a space for themselves, and to make a difference (i.e. to affect norms, assumptions, rules, laws and institutions). For them, a civil society paradigm for outreach becomes the continuation of politics by other means. It is an alternative channel to express political and ideological aspirations for those who are prevented from doing so openly. It is an additional channel for those who want to maximize their impact. This is a slow process entailing change and adaptation both in the Muslim community and in society as a whole.

Meanwhile, Islamic insurgency has been attracting attention and the Caucasus Emirate tops the threat list for the Russian government. It has been implicated not only in the insurgency in the North Caucasus, but also in spreading its influence to Tatarstan and other regions in Russia. It has been exporting militants to other global hotspots, particularly to the Middle East. This has increased the terror threat for Russia, as some are expected to return to Russia and Crimea with combat experience and militant ideology.

The Russian state is not always able to deal with both types of Islamic non-state actors, turning to control and suppression. It bans those implicated in insurgency and those that prefer a ‘gradualist’ approach. The response of Russian society too has been mostly negative. There has been a spike in ethno-religious tensions, far-right nationalism and xenophobia among the Russian population. At the same time, the likes of Hizb ut-Tahrir or Salafis are perceived as ‘foreign’ and disruptive, not only by wider society but also by the indigenous Muslim communities in Russia (e.g. Tatars in the Volga region), for whom the placing of religion above nationalism has been divisive. The transnational Islamic groups themselves, while claiming unity and solidarity, are actually divided and bitterly compete with one another. Their varied nature and approaches are likely to lead to the emergence of an even more heterogeneous and assertive Islam in Russia.

Another challenge for the Russian state is Crimean Muslim population. Here too, the government chose a policy of control and suppression. There have been concerns over the growing pressure on Crimean Tatars, as a result of their pro-Ukrainian stance. Crimean Tatar political leaders, social activists, and Muslim community leaders have been harassed, detained and interrogated. The Crimean Tatar Mejlis and Muftiat, and even the national library and the media, have been targeted. This only increased the distrust of the Crimean Tatar community in the Russian authorities and evoked memories of deportation and discrimination. With its leaders in exile and building appropriated, the Mejlis became almost a virtual entity that would have to seek official status and

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registration in Russia. The Muftiat of Crimea would like to retain its independent status, but most likely would be incorporated into the regional network of Muftiats of Russia. Meanwhile Crimea's unofficial mosques and Islamic organizations (mostly associated with Salafi and Hizb ut-Tahrir groups) expect to experience increasing problems under the Russian legal system, in which they would be considered 'extremist' and banned. One can potentially anticipate a backlash and a surge of revengeful radicalization in response to these restrictive measures against the Muslim community launched by the Russian government. Growing ethno-social tensions and deepening sectarian divisions are a further cause for concern, not only in the Russia's major Muslim enclaves such as the North Caucasus or the Volga region, but also in Moscow and other urban centres with significant Muslim populations.

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