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A Clear and Present Danger: "Wahhabism" as a Rhetorical Foil

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Prologue

In the vast body of literature on the political developments along Russia's southern border over the past decade, one cannot help but be struck by the frequency with which "Wahhabism" and/or "Wahhabi Islam" is invoked by Western and Russian journalists, academics, and political analysts as the principal cause of troubles and political instability in these areas. This is especially true of the Muslim areas of the Northern Caucasus and Central Asia, although the autonomous Russian republics of Tatarstan and Bashkortan also figure prominently in this regard.

Equally surprising is the unanimity with which popular Russian and Western journalism and academic studies depict the ongoing Muslim resurgence in the former Soviet Union as a life-and-death struggle between the "Sufi" and "Wahhabi" versions of the Islamic religion. These Islamic movements in the territory of the former Soviet Union are frequently portrayed by both laymen and experts as incompatible and mutually hostile interpretations of Islam adopted by their adherents in an attempt to fill the vacuum left by the implosion of the Communist ideology and system of values. The "Wahhabi-Sufi" confrontation is frequently invoked in the public speeches of high ranking Russian and Central Asian politicians, such as presidents Karimov of Uzbekistan or Shaymiev of Tatarstan, who never tire of invoking "Wahhabism" as a mortal threat to the very existence of their countries. Although many Western and Russian observers agree that the activism of these "mutually opposed" movements is a response to the dire economic and social conditions of the post-Soviet era and the ideological void created by the collapse of official Marxism-Leninism, they nevertheless tend to focus their analysis on the religious premises of each group.

Let us review the ways in which these axioms are construed by both Russian and Western experts on Islam in the former Soviet Union.

Sufism and Wahhabism Juxtaposed

The advocates of “Sufism,” according to many Russian and Western commentators, promote a revival of “traditional religiosity,” that is, one that integrates elements of “pre-Islamic” cultures, beliefs and social institutions of the area with the Islamic religion professed by its population. Known collectively as “customary law” these socio-cultural elements are seen as harking back to the “pre-Islamic” local tribal and clan structures as well as ancient belief systems such as, for instance, the cult of local shrines, departed saints, tribal/family ancestors, and sacred sites or objects. These structures and beliefs, goes the argument, serve local Muslims as powerful sources of identity and pride vis-à-vis the Muslim community at large and the rest of the world. Outside observers, as well as educated representatives of local Muslim communities, routinely identify these structures and beliefs with one or the other version of Sufism without, however, providing any solid historical evidence to substantiate their claims. If we agree with this argument, we should acknowledge that “traditional” or “Sufi” Islam can serve as a natural vehicle of nationalist ideology. While, according to most commentators and historians, Sufism may, on occasion, become a means of Muslim mass mobilization and armed struggle against internal or external forces, its otherworldly, inward-looking orientation usually outweighs its militant potential.

The “Wahhabis,” on the other hand, are usually presented by political commentators, journalists and commentators as supporters of the “pure” and “authentic” Islam of the first Muslim community at Medina, when it was led by the Prophet himself and thus divinely protected from any error. In line with this view, the chief goal of “Wahhabi” ideologues is to restore Islam to its primeval purity as they understand it. This means, first and foremost, purifying it of “alien,” “non-Islamic” beliefs and practices that have crept into the Muslim tradition in the course of the thirteen centuries of its existence.

According to many experts on “post-Soviet” Islam, the “Wahhabis” identify the cult of local saints and sacred objects, popular superstitions and adherence to customary law in legal practice as gross transgressions against “pure” Islam. These must be eradicated by all means necessary, including violence and coercion. While the “Sufi” party is seen by most Western and Russian journalists, political commentators, military analysts and academics as more-or-less politically “benign” or even “pacifist,” the “Wahhabis” are routinely portrayed as politically “activist,” “fanatical” and prone to indiscriminate violence against non-Muslims as well as any fellow believers who disagree with their precepts.

It should be pointed out that the wholesale condemnation by “Wahhabis” of local religious practices and beliefs is often construed by academics as an attempt to transcend the parochialism of local Muslim communities and to create a global movement as envisioned by early-twentieth century proponents of pan-Islamism. The terms chosen by commentators and politicians to designate each group often reflect their religio-political views and intellectual preferences. In contemporary Russian academic and non-academic literature and media broadcasts, the followers of “Sufi” Islam are usually called “traditionalists.” The “Wahhabis” are usually referred to by their opponents as “fundamentalists,” “Islamists,” “Islamic radicals,” “Islamic militants,” “puritans of Islam,” or simply “Islamic terrorists.” I will now discuss how “Wahhabism” has become a “catch-all” explanatory category both in Russia and its former

Muslim dependencies.

"Wahhabism," A Rhetoric Of Fear

The descriptions of the supposed conflict between "Sufis" and "Wahhabis." are presented from a wide variety of perspectives ranging from (at least outwardly) objective to wantonly partisan . All of these different analytical approaches to the "Sufism-versus-Wahhabism" phenomenon have one feature in common: even when differences between regional manifestations of the "Wahhabi" movement in Central Asia and the Caucasus are duly acknowledged, their similarities are nonetheless deemed sufficient to classify them as variants of a single phenomenon.

Over the past ten years, accounts in the contemporary Russian press and media broadcasts of Muslim movements in the territories of the former Soviet Union have grown increasingly negative. One should, however, point out that negative attitudes toward Islam and Muslims predated the collapse of the Soviet Union. They were in evidence already in the early 1980s and were determined, in part, by the fear of a global Islamic "explosion" in the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution and the Soviet Army's debacle in Afghanistan. On a more popular level these negative perceptions were fed by the fear that Muslim ethnic groups would soon "outbreed" the Russians to become the majority population of the Soviet Union.

The negative tendency in Russian public discussions of Islam and Muslims gained further momentum after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the discrediting of the official Communist notions of "internationalism" and the "friendship of nations." It is now an "us-versus-them" situation, in which Russia's new identity is routinely seen as determined first and foremost from its allegiance to Orthodox Christianity. The violent conflicts on the fringes of the former Soviet Empire, especially in Nagorny Karabagh and Tajikistan, and later also in Chechnya and Daghestan, have contributed to the already strong anti-Muslim bias of Russian media outlets and, to a lesser extent, academic publications. This process reached its peak following the string of apartment complex bombings in Moscow and South Russia in September 1999, and more recently, the events of September 11 in the U.S. While the alleged Muslim perpetrators of the former remain at large, the overwhelming majority of Russians are convinced that these tragic events were orchestrated by the Chechen and Daghestani separatists led by their field commanders Shamil Basaev and Khattab. This duo is usually portrayed by the Russian media as rabid "Wahhabis."

In light of the protracted military conflicts in Chechnya, Afghanistan and Tajikistan, the actual or imaginary Muslim resurgence in Russia and its former satellites has come to be seen by many Russians as a grave threat to Russia's stability, if not to its very existence as a sovereign "Christian" state. Occasional calls from some Russian political analysts and commentators not to exaggerate the "Islamic threat" and not to paint all Muslims with the same brush have not changed the overall negative view of Islam and its followers among the Russian public at large. The war in the former Yugoslavia, in which NATO forces supported the Muslim Kosovars against the Christian Serbs, was seen by many Russian public figures as an act of betrayal of the "Christian" cause by the wrong-headed members of the Western military coalition. While most ordinary Russians are not familiar with the Huntingtonian "clash-of-civilizations" thesis, I have

little doubt that they would eagerly subscribe to it, as they tend to see the recent and ongoing ethnic conflicts in the former Soviet Union as driven by incompatible religious and moral values.

The Russian Orthodox Church has also contributed to the increasingly dim view of Islam among the Russians. It has historically posited itself as the sole legitimate guarantor of “genuine” Russian cultural and moral values. No wonder therefore that its present leadership is innately suspicious of any religious denomination in its traditional spheres of influence. In this connection, one should point out that over the past decade the influence of the Russian church has grown dramatically at all levels of Russian society, including policy-making bodies and the media. Despite their lip service to religious tolerance, the leaders of the Russian Orthodox Church from the patriarch down view Islam as a dangerous and unwelcome rival, whose values and practices are at odds with those of the majority of Russians. To put this in perspective, they view the Roman Catholic Church as an even more insidious enemy.

"Wahhabiam" Is The Answer: An Intricate Intertwining Of Discursive Strands

It is against the background of this complex and unstable ideological landscape that one should view the discussions of the “Wahhabi” threat in the contemporary Russian media. Many Russian journalists and media personalities, including those who during the Soviet era had demonized the Sufi brotherhoods of the Caucasus and Central Asia by comparing them to clandestine Masonic organizations, now see them as a “lesser evil” in comparison to the “genuine and deadly threat” posed by “Wahhabi fundamentalism.” In line with the principle “my enemy’s enemy is my friend,” former Russian critics of Sufism now praise it as a more tolerant and therefore acceptable version of Islam, whose emphasis on individual freedom and spiritual quest and self-perfection makes it compatible with the construction of a new civil society in Russia. Consequently, Sufism, according to many commentators, should be encouraged and supported by the secular authorities of the Muslim republics in order to forestall the impending onslaught of the “militant” and “retrograde” ideology of Wahhabism.

The media campaign in Russia aimed at demonizing the “Wahhabi sect” gained further momentum in 1998, when several so-called “Wahhabi” communities in Daghestan declared their independence of the central authorities. Muslim leaders of these villages proclaimed them to be enclaves of *shari‘a* legislation, which were not subject to the “infidel” rule of the secular government of Daghestan. The reasons for the Daghestani uprising are complex and need not be detailed here. What matters is that it was presented by many analysts and politicians as the beginning of a “Wahhabi” revolution that threatened to engulf the entire Northern Caucasus and, potentially, Central Asia as well.

The anti-“Wahhabi” rhetoric in the Russian media and analytical literature became particularly pervasive in August-September 1999, when a Chechen-Daghestani force led by Shamil Basaev and Khattab invaded Daghestan allegedly under the pretext of helping their fellow-“Wahhabis” in their unequal struggle against the corrupt government of the Republic of Daghestan and its Russian backers. The three Daghestani villages which had proclaimed the rule of the *shari‘a* were attacked by Russian troops and Daghestani militia loyal to the government, bombarded and eventually razed to the ground. The fierce resistance put up by their defenders, who were routinely identified as Daghestani and Chechen “Wahhabis,” was attributed to their support by

militant Islamic organizations based in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, UAE, Yemen, Sudan, and Afghanistan. “Wahhabi” ideas and practices disseminated among the rebels by these organizations along with the financial and logistical aid was cited by the Russian media as the primary motivation and driving force behind the hostilities in Daghestan and Chechnya. Following the “liberation” of Daghestan from the Basaev-Khattab troops the hostilities were transferred to Chechnya. The alleged “meddling” of foreign powers and organizations sympathetic to militant “Wahhabism” offered the Russian military a handy explanation of their humiliating defeat at the hands of Chechen separatists in the 1994-1996 war. This early failure and the current stalemate in the Russo-Chechen hostilities, despite the initial victories of the Russian army in late 1999-early 2000, were conveniently attributed to the generous ideological, financial and logistical support from “Muslim terrorist organizations” based in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. Vague and usually unverifiable references to elusive “foreign detachments” led by “Wahhabi” commanders from Saudi Arabia, the Gulf and Yemen abound in the reportage of the second Russo-Chechen war, which is closely censored by the Russian military command in the Northern Caucasus.

From the very outset, the secular post-Communist (some would say “neo-Communist”) regimes of Central Asia and of some North Caucasian republics of Russia have viewed Islamic political activism as the greatest challenge and the gravest of threats to their, for the most part, authoritarian and oppressive rule. This perception on the part of the new leaders of some Central Asian and Caucasian republics springs from their lack of Islamic legitimacy, which they try to overcome by paying lip service to the (first and foremost) cultural and scientific achievements of Islamic civilization and by very cautious attempts to sponsor a moderate revival of Islamic symbolism and educational institutions. Usually these half-hearted gestures fail to placate their Islamic critics both inside and outside their countries, as such critics view them as insincere, cynical and opportunistic. Faced with the criticisms of their domestic policies by perceived or real “Islamist” groups, the “neo-Communist” rulers routinely couch their rejoinders in an anti-“Wahhabi” idiom. The critics are routinely condemned as “radicals,” “extremists” and “terrorists” on the payroll of foreign powers. The term “Wahhabism” is deployed by the “neo-Communist” rulers consistently and indiscriminately against anyone who dares to raise their voices against the inequities of their rule. These verbal invectives are followed by ruthless suppression of anything that can be interpreted as “Islamist” opposition. One might venture a guess that if “Wahhabism” had never existed, presidents Karimov of Uzbekistan, Shaymiev of Tatarstan and their colleagues in the Northern Caucasus would have invented it. Or, perhaps, invent it they did?

Interestingly, the anti-“Wahhabi” invectives in the Russian secular media and in the public pronouncements of the “neo-Communist” leaders are often reiterated by the official Muslim clergy of the Russian Federation affiliated with the so-called “spiritual directorates” of various ethnic groups and regions of the Russian Federation. Many of its representatives, from the supreme *mufti* down to the *imam* of a local mosque, have gone on record as implacable critics of “Wahhabi” tenets, which they dismiss as contrary to the “traditional” Islam of the Muslim communities in Russia. The rhetoric of the Muslim officials is aimed at proving that “traditional,” “Sufi”-based Islam is much better suited than “Wahhabism” to the diverse and multi-ethnic society of the Russian Federation, in which Muslims will remain a minority for the foreseeable future. Even more vocally than Russian journalists, representatives of the Muslim

religious officialdom of the Russian Federation emphasize the “imported,” “foreign” character of “Wahhabi” Islam. This type of Islamic piety, goes the argument, may have been indeed highly appropriate for the uncouth Bedouins of Saudi Arabia, who, at the time of Muhammad Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab (d. 1792) were notorious for their religious laxity. However, the strictures of Wahhabism are totally alien to the Muslims of Daghestan, Tatarstan, Kabarda-Balrakia and other Muslim regions in Russia, who are committed to religious and cultural pluralism and tolerance. The “alien” nature of “Wahhabi” radicalism to the spirit of “Russian Islam” has found an eloquent expression in the fact that the dress code for men and women and comportment of the purported “Wahhabis” of Russia are described as “Arab.” What can be better evidence of their foreign roots?

While many Muslim clerics of Russia agree in principle with the negative view of “Wahhabism” espoused by secular authorities, they, nevertheless, have so far refused to approve the proposed ban on “Wahhabi” Islam in the Russian Federation. The refusal to do so was justified by Ravil Gainutdin(ov), chairman of the Council of Russian *muftis*, noting the vagueness of this category, which, in his opinion, made it impossible to implement the ban in real life. Although never openly stated, the reluctance to endorse the ban reflected the apprehension on the part of the religious leaders of the Russian Muslim community that it could be used as a pretext for a state crack-down on all “suspicious” Islamic groups, Wahhabi or not.

As already mentioned, in Russian academic and analytical literature, assessments of “Wahhabism” vary considerably. In many ways, they reflect the media and popular journalistic portrayals of this phenomenon outlined above, although Russian academics tend to provide far more details pertaining to the history of the movement and its position vis-à-vis other trends and schools of thought in Islam. In dealing with the historical roots of Wahhabism, Russian academics and political analysts often question the usefulness of this term when applied to actual Islamic political movements (commonly called “Islamist”) on the ground. Many prefer to use the term “Salafism,” which, in their view, carries less historical baggage and is, moreover, often used as a self-denomination of various Islamic political parties and activist groups that are referred to as “Wahhabi.” In academic and analytical accounts of Wahhabi/Salafi Islam conscientious attempts to gauge Wahhabism’s potential to launch and sustain anti-government and secessionist movements go side-by-side with Marxist-style inquiries into its social and economic roots. Dire predictions of the alleged potential of “Islamic terrorism” to undermine the very foundations of human civilization are offset by dismissals of the popular fear of the “Islamic threat,” including that of “Wahhabism,” as unrealistic and overly alarmist.

A similar lack of unanimity marks Western academic studies of Islamic political movements in the former Soviet Union and worldwide. Here we find a wide array of strictly negative assessments of “fundamentalist” Islam in general and “Wahhabism” in particular, many of which seem to have been inspired by, or elaborate upon, Samuel Huntington’s “clash of civilizations” thesis. On the other extreme we find studies that categorically deny any reality behind the “Wahhabi myth” and dismiss it as an expression of “traditional” Russian “Islamophobia.” One author even goes as far as to liken it to “the old canard of Russian political paranoia about a subversive conspiracy by Jews and Masons.”

Conclusions

The goal of this analytical survey was to examine how “Wahhabism” has been deployed as an explanatory category on various levels from popular journalism to “serious” academic literature. My preliminary analysis has shown that all levels of discourse on Wahhabism are intricately interwoven and engaged in ongoing dialogues with one another. While this process may appear rather sophisticated, the end result is not, in so far as most of the statements about “Wahhabism” discussed here consistently seek to reduce a wide range of diverse political, social and religious phenomena to the lowest common denominator and to come up with a simple and unproblematic explanation of sometimes vastly different religious, social and political phenomena.

In most of the discussions outlined above, we witness the continual elaboration and adjustment of the “Wahhabism” explanatory model in response to events “on the ground.” Thus, any new violent action construed by observers as being “Wahhabi” propels “Wahhabism” further along the scale of negativity, thereby reinforcing its image as “public enemy number one” of the Russian state and, by extension, of Western civilization as a whole. For all its arbitrariness and vagueness, the word “Wahhabism” has acquired, in the Russian public mentality, sufficient explanatory power to prevent it from being superceded by rival concepts, such as “Islamism,” “Islamic fundamentalism,” “political Islam,” etc.

When any of these terms are used, they are usually applied to Islamic movements in the Middle East, South Asia or North Africa, while their counterparts closer to home are routinely presented as “Wahhabis” who are equally opposed to secularism and “traditional” or “Sufi” Islam. The term “Wahhabism” is deployed in a wide variety of contexts, from press releases of the Russian military command in Chechnya and memoirs of Russian participants in the Russo-Chechen conflict to journalistic coverage of the Russo-Chechen hostilities to the public speeches of major political figures. It is also widely used by the major figures of the Muslim religious officialdom of the Russian Federation and Russian academics, especially those specializing in Islamic studies. In these varied discursive contexts the term “Wahhabism” acquires different connotations and is deployed with various levels of sophistication to achieve different ends. While the Russian military consistently use it to explain the high casualties among Russian military personnel in Chechnya and Dagestan and the Russian Army’s inability to achieve a decisive victory over the Chechen separatists, representatives of the Muslim clergy of the Russian Federation employ it to emphasize their status as mediators between their congregations and the Russian state.

As their colleagues worldwide, Russian journalists pursue a wide array of personal and professional goals, including the expansion of their readership by means of playing on popular fears and expectations. By all accounts, “Wahhabism” is uniquely well-suited for this goal, as it allows the dramatization of the conflicts on the southern fringes of the former Soviet Empire by presenting them as “a clash of civilizations” driven by incompatible religious, moral and ethical values. Finally, Russian political experts and Islamologists, many of whom have been impoverished by the woes of the Russian economy after Gorbachev’s *perestroika* and marginalized by a steep decline of the erstwhile prestige of academic professions, see in “Wahhabism” a welcome opportunity to showcase their erudition to the public and to demonstrate their usefulness for the powers-that-be, on whose largesse they depend for their

well-being.

Crude as this picture may appear it helps to explain the ubiquitous presence of “Wahhabism” in Russian discourse and in the Russian public psyche. I would argue that in Russia “Wahhabism” has effectively assumed the role that “Islamic fundamentalism” plays in Western discourses on Islam and Muslims. As in the West, it is sustained by its vagueness of definition, which enable it to explain a great number of seemingly unrelated events world-wide in terms that are easily understood (or misunderstood) by the average consumer of such information.

I would argue also that without these discourses “Wahhabism” would have hardly acquired such a wide popularity among certain segments of Muslim populations in the former Soviet Union. Paradoxically, litanies of condemnation of the “sinister plotting” of “Wahhabism” which one hears daily from oppressive and corrupt government officials, as well as from military and political analysts and academics associated with them seem to be achieving the opposite effect. By exaggerating the magnitude of the Wahhabi threat, the discourses analyzed in this paper contribute to the appeal of “Wahhabism” to the impoverished masses who are disgusted with rampant corruption at high places, the disintegration of the social security networks, staggering unemployment and lack of any viable solutions to their problems. Through the good services of the state apparatus, its media outlets and academic institutions, “Wahhabism” has become an attractive option for disgruntled elements in the transitional societies of the former Soviet Union. Many Muslims in Russia and its “near abroad” construe its frequent invocation in the media by academics, journalists, political and military leaders as a sign of its inherent strength and invincibility. Consequently, the more adventurous (or perhaps more desperate) consumers of this information decide to explore its practical implications. Their oppositional activity couched in a religious rhetoric, whether consciously “Wahhabi” or otherwise, is then perceived by hostile outside observers as yet another manifestation of the worldwide “Wahhabi conspiracy.” This perception, disseminated through airwaves, printing presses, TV and the Internet, adds another cycle in the spiral of the proliferation of “Wahhabi” mythology. Once implemented in practice, the narrative construct named “Wahhabism” acquires a life of its own, at which point there emerges the critical watershed between those who bandy it around and those who stake their lives on it.

Note:

A longer and more detailed version of this analytical survey is due to appear in the academic journal *Die Welt des Islams* in 2004.

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