

Russia and the Islamic State Challenge

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For nearly two decades, Russia has confronted Salafi Islam on a number of fronts: within its sovereign territory, in the Middle East, and in the international arena. The threat, which continues to develop in its territory and in its sphere of interests in the countries of the former Soviet Union, includes ongoing terrorism, guerilla warfare, and conventional war. As part of its activity in the Middle East, Russia has had to cope with this threat and prevent its penetration into Russian territory, while at the same time exploiting it as a lever for promoting its goals in the region.

Russia has shaped its position toward the Islamic State according to these considerations. Moscow initially regarded the Islamic State as merely one of many jihad organizations. Since the declaration of the caliphate in June 2014, however, which transformed ISIS into a different type of challenge, Russia's position has shifted and Russia's leadership has improvised moves that affect general Russian policy in the Middle East.

Currently Russia is home to some 16 million Muslim citizens, in addition to several million Muslim foreign workers from Central Asia and the Caucasus.¹ The Muslims are concentrated in two main areas: the northern Caucasus and the Volga and Ural districts (Bashkortostan and Tatarstan). Since the breakup of the Soviet Union more than twenty years ago, Moscow has conducted ongoing warfare against Muslim groups, mainly in the northern Caucasus, including two wars in Chechnya (in 1994-1996 and 1999-2003). Since roughly 2010, the Russian Muslim population in the Caucasus and the Volga-Ural has been under the influence of foreign Salafi Islam.² In addition to the young Muslims in these regions, Salafi influence is also strong among young Russians converts to Islam, as well as among Central Asian migrant workers in Russia.

Over the past two decades, Russia failed to generate a unified Muslim clergy capable of ruling Russia's Islam. Since Ramzan Kadyrov rose to become the head of the Chechen Republic in 2007, however, some improvement has been noticeable in relations between the Muslim population and the Russian establishment. This is particularly prominent in the general siding of the Chechens and other Muslims from the northern Caucasian districts with the central Russian administration – a development led by Kadyrov himself. It appears that many branches of Russia's Muslim clergy also support this trend. Nevertheless, opposition to Russian rule continues and is even growing in other parts of the Muslim population, including among Chechens, who are attracted to Salafi ideas and are thronging to the rival camps. A number of Muslim brigades are fighting against the Russian separatists in Ukraine, while others are active in various combat frameworks, most noticeably in the Caucasus Emirate. This regional Muslim association has supported al-Qaeda since it was founded in 2007, and is the principal source of belligerency, with an emphasis on terrorism directed against the Russian regime in both the Caucasus and in areas of Russia. Approximately 900 terror attacks throughout Russia have been attributed to it since it began operating.³

In June 2015, the Islamic State announced that the Caucasus Emirate had sworn allegiance to it and was accepted as a subordinate partner. This determined the status of the Caucasus Emirate, but the struggle in the Caucasus between the various terrorist groups continues, as it does between various global jihad groups all over the world, a struggle that has bolstered the position of the Islamic State throughout Russia. The organization directs propaganda efforts (including publications in Russian) aimed at expanding its influence among young people in the country. Concomitantly, the Islamic State pursues its efforts to form alliances with other Salafi jihad terrorist groups. Indeed, authorities in Russia and Central Asian countries that were part of the Soviet Union are increasingly alarmed at the spread of this phenomenon to the Central Asian countries – a process that began in 2014 – and from there to all over Russia. Individuals in Russia itself have enlisted as combatants in the Islamic State: Russian security services report that over 3,000 Russian citizens are engaged in the combat zones of the Middle East (this number is constantly growing) in addition to the numerous fighters coming from the post-Soviet space.⁴ As time passes, anxiety increases about their expected return to Russia and the role they will play in establishing terrorist and guerilla infrastructures in their local areas.

At this juncture, Russia faces a potential crisis. Russian authorities are aware that a major declaration of war against Salafi Islam is liable to increase instability and lead to another conflict in the northern Caucasus, this time against a better trained and tougher foe than in the past, in view of the heightened experience of the combatants returning from the battlefields of the Middle East. Furthermore, another crisis in the northern Caucasus could bring about a conflict between the Russian security forces and Kadyrov and his associates, in which case the situation is liable to spiral entirely out of control.

Despite these obstacles and in view of the severe and immediate threat posed by the Islamic State to Russia in its own territory, Russia's attitude toward this problem underwent a fundamental change in the summer of 2015. Russia had regarded the Islamic State as a negligible and passing phenomenon – merely one of the many opposition organizations in Syria fighting against Assad, Russia's protégé. For this reason, despite the announcement of the caliphate and the subsequent threat to Assad posed by the Islamic State, the Russians did not regard a declaration of war against it as justified, and certainly not the formation of a broad based Western-led international coalition. For Russia, the main challenge in the Middle East was the West itself, and various streams in Russia still adhere to this approach. However, concern about the Islamic State has risen due to the Islamic State's proximity to Russia and the declarations by its leaders of their intention to conquer Russia in the future. It was further catalyzed by gradual Islamic State penetration into the northern Caucasus. All these factors have created a tangible threat to Russia's security, both external and internal, and the Russian leadership regards them as requesting a policy change.

While Russia was busy with the Ukrainian crisis, the developing crisis involving the Islamic State presented it with new challenges but possibly new opportunities as well. As part of the change in Russian policy on the Islamic State, Russia stridently declared that the Islamic State was its main enemy and the main threat to the Middle East in general. In this framework, Moscow decided to intervene militarily in Syria for the purpose of combating Salafi jihadi Islam, and to aid the Assad regime. Russian intervention in Syria is in effect a continuation of its political activism in the Middle East, which has been fairly successful in rehabilitating Russia's status vis-à-vis the countries in the region. The current intervention involves Russia's best forces, including MIG-31 and Sukhoi Su-34 warplanes (which were added to

the Russian air force only in the past two years), advanced electronic warfare devices, and Kalibr cruise missiles (the Russian answer to the Tomahawk missiles that the US planned to launch) launched from its flagship, the Dagestan frigate, the newest missile boat in the Russian fleet. The use of these and other means is designed to pose a substantial challenge to the West and the Islamic State, and “to impress the audience at home,” who like to feel that they are once again citizens of a major power.

In practice, the Russian offensive has consisted primarily (as of this writing) of air attacks against targets belonging to the various types of rebels, including a relatively small proportion against Islamic State targets. Although it is expected that these attacks will be expanded, at the current stage it appears that Russia has an interest in helping Assad through attacks against the more “moderate” rebels threatening the Latakia district. This policy is designed primarily to help the Syrian regime gain control of areas held by the rebels in order to facilitate the consolidation of future areas of control for the regime in the Syrian coastal area. At a more advanced stage, this measure is also designed to help promote an internal Syrian dialogue between the regime and the rebels and allow negotiations toward an agreement acceptable to Russia.

Russia’s traditional policy in the Middle East is to be an active regional player, and it is taking action both to reclaim its status of an influential power and enhance its international standing. Following the upheavals of the Arab Spring, Assad remains Russia’s main ally in the region, and Syria possesses the only logistics infrastructure in the Middle East available to Russia. Throughout the civil war in Syria, Russia has supported Assad, whose survival is critical from its perspective, and has reaped benefits for itself from the resulting situation.

Yet along with Moscow’s regional interests, it appears that Russia’s policy constitutes a response to other difficult challenges that it faces in the international arena. It appears that Russia is taking advantage of the situation in the region to deflect international attention away from the Ukrainian theater to the Middle East, and to create an additional area of friction with the West in order to divert attention from the Ukrainian question. Furthermore, Russia is directing its efforts to facilitate a possible dialogue with the West by promoting the idea of give and take on the Syrian question (Russian willingness to sacrifice Assad, for example) versus the Ukrainian question (easing of the economic sanctions imposed on Russia by the Western

countries, which are gradually posing a threat to the stability of the Russian regime). In this give-and-take approach, Russia has both persisted in its support for Assad and refrained from joining the coalition fighting against the Islamic State. It is possible that from the beginning, this was intended as an additional bargaining chip, probably in order to increase pressure on the West for the sake of promoting the equation that includes concessions to Russia on the Ukrainian question.

It has been argued that Russia intends to change its policy of support for Assad, but in practice, it appears that Russia is opting for a more sophisticated compromise formula. The preferred procedure for Russia is likely to be based on the struggle against the Islamic State as its main axis in order to combine a number of interests by linking the Syrian crisis with the Ukrainian crisis, and achieving beneficial solutions for Russia in both, together with action against the Islamic State in order to remove the threat aimed at Russia.⁵

It therefore seems that all the actors in the region, including the other powers involved in the Middle East, are interested in making the Islamic State a lever for achieving their regional objectives. These include Iran, which is involved in Syria, together with Russia, which is supporting Assad and is probably also interested in using this card in the regional arrangements. The same is true of the West, which regards it as an opportunity, as part of the settlement with Iran, to saddle Iran with this task. The possibility that this matter has been coordinated among the “international six,” i.e., between Russia and the West, also cannot be ruled out. Russian-Western cooperation on the Islamic State, and probably also on Syria in general, is an increasingly viable option in the emerging circumstances. Furthermore, it is possible that under the new circumstances, the situation gives Russia an opportunity for rapprochement and the beginning of general cooperation with the West. In addition to Russia’s stepped-up rhetoric on the Islamic State, concrete contacts between senior Russian and American officials can be discerned concerning all regional affairs as a combined and coordinated package, including the Iranian question, the Syrian question, and the Islamic State. Presumably Russia is continuing its efforts to include the Ukrainian question, especially the easing of Western economic sanctions against Russia. In the wake of these processes, Russian willingness to withdraw its support for the Assad regime therefore cannot be ruled out.

In conclusion, Russia indeed faces a combined challenge at home and abroad from the Islamic State, which can be expected to escalate. The Russian

decision to embark on a military campaign against the Islamic state serves its desire to contain the threat on its territory, while simultaneously finding a suitable solution compatible with its interests in Syria.

It is premature to attempt an analysis of the results and consequences of the Russian involvement in Syria with respect to its fighting against the Islamic State. Russian attempts at creating a link between the above aspects are evident, including Russian willingness to cooperate with the other players in the region and in the West to halt the buildup and spread of the Islamic State – both in the Middle East and in the direction of Russian territory. It is difficult, however, to assess Russia's ability, with the help of its allies in the region, to eliminate the Islamic State. It is clear that this will not be a short and easy struggle, and will very likely spread to Russia itself, bringing with it a host of related challenges.

Notes

- 1 The figure is an estimate. According to official Russian sources, approximately 20 million Muslims live in Russia, 80 percent of whom are Russian citizens and the rest immigrants from Central Asia and Azerbaijan. Nevertheless, the exact number of Muslims in Russia is probably higher than the official figure, because the Russian immigration authority does not regularly monitor Muslim foreign workers from Central Asia and the northern Caucasus. The true number of Russian Muslims is almost certainly higher: about 20 million Muslim citizens and several million foreign workers of Muslim extraction in Russia.
- 2 Alexey Malashenko, "Islamic Challenges to Russia, From the Caucasus to the Volga and the Urals," American Enterprise Institute, May 13, 2015, <http://carnegie.ru/2015/05/13/islamic-challenges-to-russia-from-caucasus-to-volga-and-urals/i914>.
- 3 "Caucasus Emirate," Global Security.org, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/para/ik.htm>.
- 4 "Demand Action Based on National Interests, Not Personal Desires," *Kommersant*, June 30, 2015, <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2778226>.
- 5 Even though some believe that Russia is really playing a double game toward the Islamic State, and argue that the Russian secret service has turned a blind eye to the movement of jihad followers from the northern Caucasus to Syria; see Michael Weiss, "Russia is Sending Jihadis to Join ISIS," *The Daily Beast*, August 23, 2015, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/08/23/russia-s-playing-a-double-game-with-islamic-terror0.html>.