
OLEG CHEREVKOV. THE PROBLEM OF COUNTERING THE RELIGIOUS AND POLITICAL IDEOLOGY OF ISLAMISM IN THE CONTEXT OF ENSURING THE NATIONAL SECURITY OF RUSSIA // *Article was written for the bulletin "Russia and the Moslem World."*

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Abstract. From the beginning of the 1980s, the destructive religious and political ideology of Islamism began to penetrate actively the territory of Russia under external influence. Its adherents expanded and strengthened their influence, using from outside support and actively used extremist and terrorist methods to achieve power under the guise of adherence to the Muslim faith. At the same time, Islamism shows a high degree of adaptation to the counter-measures used against it. In this regard, it seems relevant to pay attention to those areas in which counteraction to Islamism in Russia has areas of improvement, and in what ways the implementation of them is possible.

Islamism is a religious-political ideological complex, the purpose of which is a fundamental, revolutionary change of social relations on the basis of particular provisions of the Islamic religion and under its lee. These transformations are mainly achieved through violence, both physical (murder, robbery, illegal business, terror, etc.) and psychological (propaganda, intimidation, recruiting new followers, etc.). This ideology, which

in its relatively modern form originated in the Middle East in the 1930s of the twentieth century, today is a real scourge of public security not only in predominantly Muslim countries, but also in those parts of the world where Muslims have never constituted an absolute majority – Northern America, Europe, Russia, East and Southeast Asia. The availability of modern means of communication, the openness of the information space and the availability of certain material and spiritual resources allow the adherents of Islamism to achieve their goals quickly and efficiently, adapt to local conditions, and find their target audience. Although, due to the mass media, it may seem to the average man that the world community is actively opposing radicals, in fact, there is an imbalance in the methods of this counteraction: force, counter-terrorism methods prevail, while anti-terrorist ones aimed at preventing extremism still leave a great deal to be desired, which determines the relevance of studying the problems of countering Islamism and the search for the most effective tools for implementing this counteraction.

Russia is one of the pillars of the struggle against the religious and political ideology of Islamism. For many years, it has been fighting this destructive phenomenon. One of the arenas of confrontation is the region of the South of Russia, which is due to a number of factors: geographic, cultural, civilizational, economic, etc. The search for the necessary tools to counter the ideology of Islamism is impossible without a deep understanding of the circumstances under which this set of views and judgments penetrated our country, the South of Russia, under what conditions it developed in it, how it adapted. Therefore, within the framework of this article, it makes sense to resort to the historical and political approach and consider the events of the recent past through its prism.

The penetration of the destructive religious and political ideology of Islamism, or, as it is still sometimes mentioned in Russian scientific literature and journalism, the “Wahhabi” ideology in our country falls at the late 1980s. The history of the

emergence of this ideological complex is directly related to the systemic crisis of the central government in the USSR and Russia, the weakening of ideological control, the emergence of an ideological vacuum in society, which especially seriously affected young people. The liberalization of leaving abroad has led to the fact that in the predominantly Muslim republics of southern Russia a fairly large stratum of young Ulama appeared, who received spiritual education in the countries of the Middle East and gained a certain prestige among supporters of radical transformations and separatists.

Exactly during this time period the ideas of Islamic fundamentalism and radicalism began to spread among the believers of the Muslims of the Soviet Union. Supporters of the so-called pure Islam differentiated themselves from the Muslim Ummah of the USSR by their zero tolerance to atheism, perception of socialist society as a “godless” society as well as opposing themselves to the official Muslim Spiritual Directorates and a critical attitude towards the so-called popular Islam adopted among the Muslim population of the Union. Islamists of varying degrees of radicalism incrementally increased the intensity of their activities in the country's largest cities, and were also noticed in Tatarstan and Bashkiria. However, in the 1990s, it was the South of Russia that became the region where the conflict between supporters of the “pure one” and people who supported local “traditional” Islam with interspersing of highland customs became the most acute (Kudryavtsev, 2000). The growth in the number of “Wahhabis” coincided with Perestroika and a general increase in interest in religion in all stratum of Soviet society, including Islam.

Researcher Silantiev R.A. notes such a feature of adherents of Islamism, which immediately manifested itself at the very beginning of their existence in the South of Russia, not only as the inability, but also the unwillingness to tolerate representatives of other religious and philosophical school of thoughts, which is expressed in the manifestation of extreme aggression and

violence (Silantiev, 2007). Khalidov V. points out that the central place in the ideological platform of supporters of Islamism is the concept of non-recognition of any power extending away from the Sharia injunctions (Khalidov, 2012).

Daghestan and Chechnya became the spiritual and material centers of Islamism at that time. Sheikh Said Afandi Chirkeisky (Al-Chirkawi, 2003, p. 99), experts on Islamic studies Vagabov M.V. (Vagabov, 1999), Bobrovnikov V.O. (Bobrovnikov, 2001, p. 82) draw attention to the appearance of the heralds of a new ideology in their works. Akayev V.Kh. notes that as early as 1989, articles of an extremist nature appeared in the official print media, glorifying Islamism and criticizing the Muslim practices established in the South of Russia; records the high-quality training of Islamist preachers and the inability of local law enforcement and ideological control agencies to cope with the increasingly popular ideology (Akayev, 2003).

During this period of time, riding on the wave of intensification of the believers' political activity and religious cells in general, Muslim organizations became more active, aiming at the "purification" of Islam and the establishment of a new type of social relations based on the principles of Islam (Ermakov, 1994). These organizations, formed mainly by arrived preachers, "assistants" from the countries of the Middle East, Sudan, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and many who later became famous, "home-grown" ideologues came out.

The weaker the Russian state became, the more powerful positions were occupied by the Islamists. Establishing control over most of the former Chechen-Ingush Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic in the period from 1991 to 1993 allowed them to expand their social and economic base, form an alliance with ethno-nationalists, and bring over some religious leaders who previously belonged to the official structures of spiritual governance. For example, when federal troops were sent in the Chechen Republic in December 1994, Mufti Alsabekov Kh., a former naib imam of the Alma-Ata mosque and naib mufti of

Kazakhstan, who had been trained in Syria and Pakistan, declared a “holly war” to Moscow. He, as well as many like him, belonged to the younger generation of Ulama who were influenced by radical fundamentalists of Islam. Subsequently, separatists turned to Islamism even more, after 1996, when Chechnya gained de facto independence for some time. On its territory, under the slogan of “Sharia”, the Islamists destroyed representatives of the “old” clergy, teachers, former law enforcement officers and in general everyone who could be regarded by them as a dissident. The Islamists not only joined the “government”, they constituted an overwhelming majority in it, and wanted to expand their sphere of influence.

Meanwhile, in Dagestan, Kebedov B.M. was engaged in the spread of the religious and political ideology of Islamism, who created religious educational institutions in a number of settlements of Daghestan that were unauditably to the official bodies of the spiritual administration, in which the so-called pure Islam was studied. In one of these schools, located in Kizil-Yurt, young people from all Muslim regions of southern Russia studied, their number reached 700 (Khanbabaev, 2001, p. 105). In the spirit of their distant heralds, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, with charitable and educational activities, the Islamists in Daghestan quickly came over to organizational building, creating the necessary infrastructure, psychological and military training of followers. Poverty seriously helped them in it, unemployment and lack of confidence in the future, which worried the overwhelming majority of the population not only of the republic in those days, but of the entire country. The tendency to provoke a conflict with adherents of “traditional” Islam quickly became apparent, which manifested itself, for example, in the organization of unauthorized rallies and riots in Makhachkala, Buinaksk, Khasavyurt, the desecration of mosques, and the expulsion of “traditionalist” imams. To involve new adherents in their ranks, literature of religious fundamentalists was published on a mass scale. Books were not only imported

from abroad, but were also printed directly on the territory of Russia, and in large (up to 100 thousand copies) circulations (Khanbabaev, 2001, p. 105). Extremists paid attention to creating their cells and giving their activities a legitimate status, as Dobayev I.P. writes: "After the end of the Chechen events of 1994-1996, Kebedov B. actively organized Wahhabi cells - "Islamic societies" ("Jamaats") in the territory of Daghestan. On their basis, in mid-1997, the socio-political organization Islamic Society of Daghestan was created, officially registered with the Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Daghestan" (Dobayev, 2001).

Despite the fact that the regional authorities tried to put pressure on the followers of Islamism in Daghestan, their position continued to increase. One of the reasons for this is monstrous corruption. Leaders of various levels, officials of federal and regional departments privatized the most profitable sectors of the economy and social sphere. Explicit social injustice prevailed in society: ordinary citizens could not find work, rural and urban youth increasingly went into criminal structures. The deteriorating socio-economic situation contributed to cultural and ideological discord, and they, in turn, significantly helped to spread the ideology of Islamism in the Republic of Daghestan, including the strong assistance of foreign preachers and religious organizations.

The activities of Islamists in Daghestan and Chechnya very quickly became aggressive. Radical leaders did not hide their plans to unite all Muslim republics of the South of Russia under the banner of "pure Islam." The period 1998-1999 became the apotheosis of the expansionist plans of extremists and is associated with the formation of the so-called Kadar zone and the invasion of militants in Daghestan. Only due to some stabilization of the socio-political situation in the country, increased interaction between federal and regional authorities and law enforcement bodies it was possible to disrupt the Islamist attack. Later, during the hostilities in Chechnya, the federal authorities used the tactics of "chechenization" of the

conflict, in some sense gradually separating it in the public consciousness from conflicts in other parts of the world with the participation of radicals.

The more stable the economic situation of the population was, the more stable the power became, the fairer and tougher the process of law was ensured, the more the position of extremists weakened. This was expressed, for example, in the transition from full-scale hostilities to partisans (2005), changing the management structures of gang groups and removing the last ethno-nationalist elements from the local ideological complex of North Caucasian Islamism (2007), falling under the closer control of international Islamist organizations (2012–2015). The combination of effective counter-terrorism (forceful) measures, as well as the formation of a major hotbed of tension in Syria and the outflow of most of the Islamists from the South of Russia, allowed some politicians and the media to talk about the “defeat of the terrorist underworld in the North Caucasus” (Regnum, 2016). The problem of confronting Islamism lost some resonance and is no longer in the epicenter of the media, as it was a few years ago.

However, turning to data on the number of registered terrorist crimes in the Russian Federation, we will see that their number has increased significantly: in 2012, 637 such crimes were recorded, in 2013 – 661, in 2014 – already 1128, in 2015 – 1538, in 2016 – 2227, in 2017 – 1871, in 2018 – 1679, in 2019 – 1806. For the period from January to October 2020, 1990 terrorist crimes were registered (Prosecutor General of the Russian Federation, 2020), which is much higher than the previous similar period. Only these data disconfirm the thesis that Islamism in our country is defeated and has lost its influence: on the contrary, it has not gone, and the activity of radicals has increased.

The problem of countering Islamist radicals is aggravated by the fact that, despite the fact that IS structures (a terrorist organization banned in Russia) were forced out to the peripheral regions of Syria and Iraq, the organization managed to maintain its financial, economic and organizational potential significantly.

According to *The Economist*, this terrorist organization has withdrawn a large amount of money from the above-mentioned states, amounting to about \$400 million. At the same time, the vast majority of these funds were placed in Turkey, Lebanon, European countries and the monarchies of the Persian Gulf (Archakov, 2016). The tactics and strategy of the actions of extremists have undergone significant changes: if earlier religious-political radicals sought to create an integrated space, the “caliphate,” which would stretch from the Iberian Peninsula to East Turkestan and the islands in the Pacific Ocean, now this is referred to the actions of deeply conspiratorial groups operating, for the most part, autonomously, using tactics of targeted attacks and sabotage. The so-called sleeping cells of Islamists operate in the territory of more than 60 states of the world, and Russia is no exception (Khoperskaya, 2018; TASS, 2018). In fact, there is a return to the follow-on concept of “rebellion,” formed back in the 1960s by the military theorist of the Russian foreign countries Messner E.E., who wrote in his work: “The fighting by rebels, saboteurs, terrorists, diversionists, propagandists will take on enormous dimensions in the future...” (Messner, 1960).

Radicals, probably not without the help of their curators, were able to maintain the senior leadership and organizational structure. The leaders of the autonomous “Jamaats” are based on people who have received tremendous experience in organizing underworld resistance in the Middle East, who return to their countries of origin – this is about 30 per cent of all those who took part in the fighting on the side of the Islamists (Kovalev, 2019). In addition, these are people who are deeply convinced of their rightness, the correctness of what they do, and who can ideologically and psychologically influence followers and sympathizers. Such an ideological influence is the cornerstone in the use of the tactic of “lonely terror,” the characteristics of which are low costs and, often, the formal non-belonging of the terrorist himself to the structures of the Jamaat. It should be noted here that the thesis about the use of this type of terror is not new:

Ayman al-Zawahiri, one of the leaders of Al-Qaeda (a terrorist organization banned in Russia), called for it in due time. The essence of such a strategy is that persons who may not initially be affiliated with Islamist organizations, but who share religious and political extremist views, must independently and without significant support from Islamist organizations (with the exception of ideological) commit terrorist actions, and organizations, in turn, should take responsibility for their development in fact (Andriukhin, 2018).

There are already many examples of such actions as of 2020: February 2 – an attack using knives in London (Rossiyskaya Gazeta, 2020), October 16 – the high-profile murder of teacher Samuel Patie in Paris (Vesti, 2020), October 29 – the massacre in Nice in the Catholic Basilica of Notre Dame (Gazeta RU, 2020), November 2 – a terrorist act in Vienna (Rossiyskaya Gazeta, 2020).

An acute situation also arose in Russia: the Federal Security Service during the year announced the prevention of more than 20 terrorist acts, which cover Moscow, St. Petersburg, Bashkortostan, Daghestan, Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug, Krasnoyarsk, Murmansk, Astrakhan, Rostov, Chuvashia, Tver region, Stavropol Territory, etc. (RIA, 2020). It is important to note that among the failed originators of terrorist attacks in Russia, two categories stand out: the first - immigrants from Central Asia, the second - from the Muslim republics of the South of Russia. They usually returned from the war zone in the Middle East and were located mainly in the large economic centers of the regions, which distinguishes the current type of Islamist underworld from the one that existed in the early 2010s (“forest Ummah”).

In the context of our article, special attention should be paid to the South of Russia, where, according to the old and bad tradition, the positions of Islamists are still strong. Daghestan again draws special attention to itself, where the “Wahhabis,” as in the 1990s, compete fiercely with representatives of official spiritual bodies for a worldview, primarily of youth. Despite loud

statements of some representatives of regional authorities, Daghestan remains a territory where extremist activities are systematic, not episodic. At the same time, Daghestan is becoming one of the centers for coordinating religious and political extremism throughout Russia. According to a number of experts, while the positions of the Wahhabis will be strong in the region, the threat – for the rest of the country will also remain high, since “a person who professes Wahhabi ideology is a potential recruit, he is a sleeping cell” (Nakanune, 2018).

Islamists managed to maintain their presence in the information field, where multilingual modern media still continue to operate – news agencies with trained specialists, television channels, a weblog, communities and information channels on social networks, especially Telegram, which regularly release materials of a fairly high quality of performance (Stavropol Pravda, 2018).

In view of the above, without denying the success of the Russian law enforcement forces in recent years, special attention should be paid to the imbalance between counter-terrorism (force aimed at eliminating already existing Islamist cells) and anti-terrorism (information and ideological, preventive, aimed at destroying the influence of destructive ideology) actions. The “Overall Plan for Countering the Ideology of Terrorism in the Russian Federation for 2019–2023” was adopted in the Russian Federation at the end of 2018, among the goals of which there were the following provisions: improving the effectiveness of preventive work with persons exposed to the ideology of terrorism, as well as those who fell under its influence; implementation of measures to create anti-terrorist consciousness among the population of the Russian Federation; improving information and propaganda measures and protecting the media landscape of the Russian Federation from the ideology of terrorism; development of organizational and other measures aimed at enhancing the efficiency of the activities of counter-terrorism actors (National Anti-Terrorism Committee, 2018).

In 2019, in terms of anti-terrorist activities, Russian services achieved the following results: financial assets of more than 2 thousand persons suspected in involvement in terrorist activities were blocked; more than 12 thousand targeted preventive measures were carried out with persons exposed to terrorist propaganda, about 14 thousand measures with persons serving sentences for committing crimes, about 35 thousand measures with migrant workers (Rambler, 2019). However, the threat of religious and political extremism does not go away, because there is no clear and simple system, a kind of “life plan” that could be opposed to such a powerful ideological complex as Islamism, which would hit the weakest points of this ideology: on the failure of the “purity” of Islam, which is preached by radicals (Dobayev, 2020); about the utter futility and retrograde system of social relations that Islamists want to build, etc. Not enough attention is paid to the ideological agenda, and if it is paid, then the target audience is not precisely determined.

To understand possible ways to combat the ideology of Islamism, it makes sense to study a certain foreign experience. A number of works of the famous scholar of Islam Dobayev I.P. (Dobayev, 2011, 2014, 2015, 2020, 2021) are devoted to the study of counteracting the ideology of radical Islam. Thus, it is noted that revelatory activity against Islamist leaders and organizations is a priority when developing methods of ideological opposition in the United States of America. Moreover, experts in this field, scientific centers and institutes are involved in this activity; joint expert events are regularly held with the participation of intelligence officers and individuals who have authority with the Muslim community.

It is important to note that American foreign policy is often aimed at supporting “moderate” Islamists who are ready to make a deal with the United States and its allies, thus implementing the principle of “divide and rule.” Emphasis is placed on the elimination of Islamism by the hands of followers of Islam (Cohen, 2001). Visits of Islamist-sympathetic religious and political figures

to the United States are funded and carefully organized, where they contact exclusively with representatives of traditional religions, at most with some moderate reformists. Americans consistently pursue policy to curb violence against a number of social and religious groups in Muslim countries, emphasizing that those who commit such acts rank with Islamist radicals; they actively support local and regional media that criticize religious and political extremism, describe the way of life in the West and the capitalist system in a positive way (Dobaev, 2015).

The realization of a qualitative ideological counteraction requires the use of a system of modern social and information and communication technologies. Thus, the Echelon electronic warfare system uniting the United States and a number of its allies (Great Britain, Canada, Australia, New Zealand) after the events of 2001 was largely focused on ensuring anti-terrorist activities. The system includes the best technical, software solutions designed for interception and analysis of information. The system can recognize any language that is in its base, and if keywords are found, then it can be assumed that this object will fall under the supervision of security services (Bocharnikov, 2013). According to researchers Bocharnikov I.V. and Goncharov S.S., a kind of analogue of such a system in Russia could be the "Yarovaya package," but the desire of the state to save money led to the fact that the technical input is implemented by mobile operators, who are subjects of economic relations for which ensuring state security is behind profit (Bocharnikov, 2019).

Another vector of American anti-terrorism strategy should be noted. Back in 2015, watching the "remigration" of Islamists from Syria and Iraq to their homeland, to the countries of Central Asia, the United States adopted a "Strategy to combat extremist ideas," the object of which was the population of the states of the region, and one of the main goals was the fight against the terrorist threat and ideology of Islamism. Then a new version of the strategy was adopted, which covers the period from 2019 to 2025. A U.S. Department of State report says the U.S. has directed

more than \$9 billion of direct assistance to countries, allocated more than \$50 billion through international organizations, and invested more than \$31 billion in Central Asian economies. American specialized media distribute information materials in the languages of the peoples of Central Asia, which are devoted to Islamist threat (U.S. Department of State, 2018). At the same time, perhaps, the consequence of such an active U.S. policy in the region is the outflow of Islamists to Russia. Therefore, it is important for the Russian state to implement programs that would be comparable with the American Strategy.

Not only large and rich countries such as the United States are able to counter effectively religious and political extremism. For example, Algeria has an experience of creation of single ideological and information center on counteraction to Islamism: by means of massive counter-propaganda, focusing on the provisions of the Quran and Sunnah rejecting violence and terror and the impartial facts from the history of "Wahhabism," religious figures loyal to the authorities made significant progress in correction of a situation and also discredited of the Islamic movement in the eyes of youth (Abdullina, 2017).

Our country has every indication that, with the help of specialists in the field of Islamic studies, authoritative religious figures, to conduct more active and successful counter-propaganda work aimed at risk groups – Muslim youth of Russia and labor migrants arriving in our country from Central Asia. It is necessary to carry out more active work on adaptation and socialization not only for those who came to our country, and in certain cases – directly and our citizens, which will remove them from the category of people "vulnerable" to Islamist influence.

It is important to implement actions aimed at discrediting the image of supposed "heroism" around Islamists, the heads of the "Jamaats" and figures of large Islamist organizations, including through cinema art. So, an excellent example of how to shoot high-quality counter-propaganda is the British mini-series "The State" (Kinopoisk, 2017), the Swedish series "Caliphate"

(Kinopoisk, 2020), the Middle East series "Black Crows" (Kinopoisk, 2017).

Thus, summing up, it can be said that the number of supporters of Islamism in the world in general and Russia in particular, the growing influence of this religious-political extremist ideology, the activation of its members, suggest that the problems of countering Islamism are becoming more urgent than ever. Despite the fact that the Russian Federation is at the forefront of forceful opposition to extremists, there are still areas for improving this policy, especially in the field of ideological opposition. In order to resist effectively Islamist ideology, it is necessary to carry out a number of qualitative and large-scale activities, the development and implementation of which should take into account international experience and understand the importance of using modern social and information and communication technologies.

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