

PLACE AND ROLE OF ISLAM IN REGIONS OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION, THE CAUCASUS AND CENTRAL ASIA

ZAID ABDULAGATOV. PROBLEMS OF POLITICS IN THE
CONTEXT OF THE NEWSPAPER AS-SALAM READERS'
INTERESTS

*Keywords: As-Salam; newspaper;
readers; readers' interest; political processes;
Islam; Russia; Moslem countries; rubric.*

Zaid Abdulagatov,
PhD(Philosophy), Leading Research Associate,
Institute of History,
Archaeology and Ethnography of the DSC, RAS,
e-mail: zaid48@mail.ru
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Abstract. The article presents the main results of a sociological survey conducted by the author among the readers of the As-Salam newspaper, popular in Russia and abroad. The main purpose of the article is to show the peculiarities of readers' informational interest in covering political processes in general, their relations to issues of Islamic political activity, in particular. It follows from the text that the readers of the newspaper have a low level of interest in the issues of Islamic political activity. At the same time, there is an interest on their part in

political processes in general, especially those taking place abroad. The results of the survey give grounds to the conclusion that believers want to see religion not as a political force, but as a spiritual support.

Introduction

Islam is a religion that regulates all aspects of life, both of an individual Muslim and the entire Islamic Ummah. In past decades, the political aspects of Islam have become relevant not only for Muslims, but also for society as a whole. There are sensitive issues of interfaith relations (Salafi and Sufi Muslims, and Sunni and Shia Muslims); relations between the state and religion (the state and Islamic radicals); and interstate relations (Syria and Russia, Syria and the US, Syria and Turkey, Yemen and Saudi Arabia). In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, both in Russia and globally, the most problematic aspect of Islam was politics.

One of the popular Islamic newspapers published in Russia is *As-Salam*, which discusses the issues of Islamic culture in its various dimensions and offers insight into the history of Islam and contemporary problems. The newspaper is being published in twelve languages, including English, Azerbaijani, Tajik and Turkish. In 2022 its circulation accounted to 245,500 copies, from which 68,000 copies were sold in Dagestan, a number that is several times greater than combined circulation of all print media in the republic. It should be noted that *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, founded by the Russian Government, sells less than 112,000 copies.

The author note that at the initiative of the editorial office of the *As-Salam* newspaper, a sociological survey about information and educational work of the newspaper was conducted among its readers.

A snippet of the study regarding the readers' information interest in the coverage of political processes related to Islamic political activity is provided below.

Sampled data of the sociological survey

The survey was conducted in all federal districts of Russia.

Central Federal District – 46 people;
Northwestern Federal District – 60 people;
Southern Federal District (Crimea) – 53 people;
North Caucasian Federal District – 287 people;
Volga Federal District – 104 people;
Ural Federal District – 65 people;
Siberian Federal District – 28 people;
Far Eastern Federal District – 35 people.

A total of 678 people were interviewed, with the maximum margin of error of 3.8 percent.

Who reads the *As-Salam* newspaper?

Among the respondents, 96.3 percent identified themselves as Muslims; 1.5 percent of the readers were Orthodox; 4.2 percent considered themselves believers; and only 0.2 percent found it difficult to answer the question about their faith. The sum of the percentages exceeds 100 percent because a small part of Muslims ticked two boxes (both ‘I am a Muslim’ and ‘I am a believer’).

According to the poll, the distribution of the readers according to age is following:

Aged 15 to 18 – 4.2 percent;
Aged 18 to 25 – 9.8 percent;
Aged 25 to 30 – 17.2 percent;
Aged 30 to 45 – 36.9 percent;
Aged 45 to retirement age – 20.3 percent;
Old-age pensioners – 11.6 percent.

Figures for different age groups of the readers indicate that young people – aged 15 to 30 – read the newspaper less often than the older generation (31.2 percent compared to 68.8 percent).

There are more than twice as many male readers than female ones in the sample (67.3 percent compared to 32.7 percent).

As to social status, the majority of the respondents were workers (42.9 percent), pensioners (13.3 percent), housewives (11.6 percent) and private entrepreneurs (9.4 percent). Thus, ordinary people, i.e. workers, pensioners and housewives, made up the bulk of the respondents (67.8 percent).

People with higher education accounted for 38.4 percent; people with secondary specialized education comprise 25.8 percent of the respondents; and number of those with secondary general education reached 18.1 percent. There were 13.0 percent of the respondents who received a religious education.

Readers about political issues in the *As-Salam* newspaper

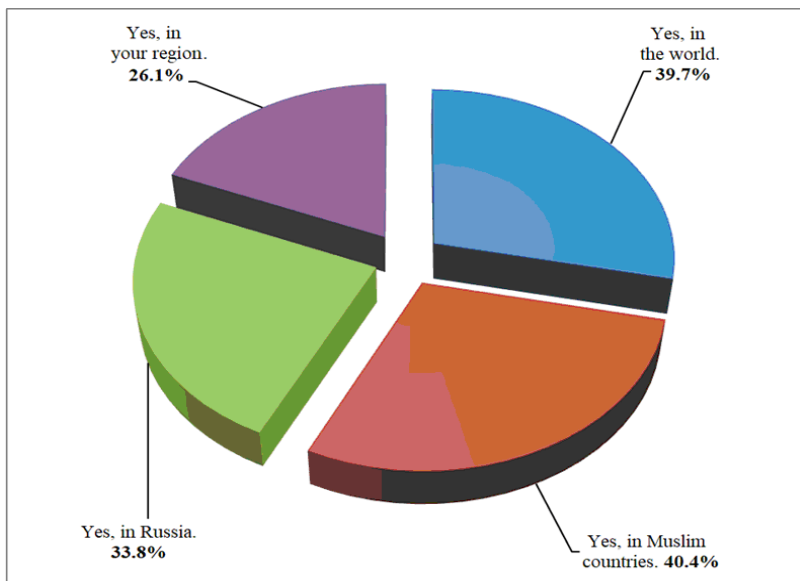
The readers of the newspaper were asked the following multiple choice question (MCQ): "Do you think the newspaper should discuss political processes taking place: a) in the world; b) in Muslim countries; c) in Russia; d) in your region? First of all, the author draws attention to the nature of the question. It does not touch upon Islamic political activity or processes in particular, but concerns political processes in general. (See Chart 1)

The results of the survey show that:

- The readers are interested in information about political processes published in the newspaper.
- The readers are moderately interested in this information.
- The readers are more interested in political processes that take place not in the region where they live, not in Russia in general, but in Muslim countries. Apparently, this may be attributed to the fact that Muslims of Russia may find out about the processes of such a nature from various secular printed media.

Chart 1

Distribution of answers to the question: "Is there a need for the newspaper to analyze ongoing political processes?". (Multiple answers can be selected). Russia. N-678.



As far as individual social groups included in the sample of this sociological survey are concerned, the answers to this question differ. The results of the survey that reflect age groups are given in Table 1.

Table 1

Is there a need for the newspaper to analyze the political processes taking place: a) in the world; b) in Muslim countries; c) in Russia; d) in your region? (Multiple answers can be selected). Youth / Older generation. Russia. (in percent). N-678.

	The Youth	The Older Generation	Total
Yes, in the World	39.9	39.1	39.7
Yes, in Muslim countries	48.7	30.6	40.4
Yes, in Russia	48.3	30.6	33.8
Yes, in your region	33.7	23.8	26.1

The author emphasizes that the younger, rather than older generation shows greater interest in reading about political processes. This differentiation is even clearer from the questions regarding political processes in Russia. At the same time, young people have a keen awareness of political processes in Muslim countries. This is indirectly confirmed by the fact that young Dagestanis actively fight for IS, religious and political movement banned in Russia. According to the FSB director A. Bortnikov, over four thousand Dagestanis were confirmed to be fighting for IS and other armed formations [1]. Russian ethnologist A.I. Arlykapov believes that there were at least five thousand fighters in Syria [2]. To varying degrees, this has happened in other Islamic regions of Russia [3].

The readers of the newspaper were specifically asked about the coverage of issues of Islamic politics. Answering the question "Would you like the newspaper to write about issues of Islamic politics?" the majority (34.1 percent) of the respondents answered "No, the newspaper should be writing only about Islamic religious life, no politics". Almost as many respondents (32.7 percent) answered "Yes, Islam and politics are inseparable". In general, readers' views on this subject vary; younger people showed greater interest in articles about Islamic politics, supporting such publications in *As-Salam*.

The author notes that the *As-Salam* newspaper has over 30 regular sections. The scope of the audience of the politics section was of particular interest for the research. Readers were asked to choose their favourite sections (no more than five) out of 26 primary sections of the newspaper, including those of a political nature.

The rank of the sections in decreasing order is as follows:

1. Q&A – 30.7 percent.
2. Family – 30.7 percent.
3. Islam in the World and Other Countries – 26.5 percent.
4. History of Islam – 26.5 percent.
5. Health care – 26.1 percent.

6. Islam in Russia – 24.9 percent.
7. Spirituality – 23.5 percent.
8. Women’s Page – 18.6 percent.
9. Sermon – 17.6 percent.
- 10.Children’s Page – 16.4 percent.
- 11.Edification – 13.1 percent.
- 12.Everyday Life of the Muftiate – 11.8 percent.
- 13.Muslims in the Regions – 11.4 percent.
- 14.Know How – 10.9 percent.
- 15.Education – 10.5 percent.
- 16.Identity – 10.0 percent.
- 17.We Are Muslims – 8.1 percent.
- 18.Analytics – 7.5 percent.
- 19.Culture of Different Nations – 6.6 percent.
- 20.Reader’s Digest – 5.5 percent.
- 21.News – 5.5 percent.
- 22.Interview – 4.9 percent.
- 23.Event – 4.7 percent.
- 24.Social – 4.4 percent.
- 25.Politics – 4.1 percent.
- 26.Art – 3.8 percent.

The politics section was next to the last popular section, ranking 25th place. The most popular headings of the newspaper were (in descending order): Q&A, Family, Health Care, Islam in Russia, Spirituality, Women’s Page and Sermon. Essentially, all these sections have something to do with understanding, comprehension or regulation of the social life of a Muslim. The answers to this question, in fact, clearly demonstrate the desire to see in Islam not a political force, but a spiritual support.

In the study, there was a question of how well the sections of the newspaper cater to diverse reading interests of Muslims in Russia. In this regard, the readers were asked to express their feelings about potential new headings of the newspaper. The respondents were offered six new headings, including ones of a political nature. (See Table 2)

Table 2

What would your reaction be if the following regular sections appeared in the *As-Salam* newspaper? (Percentage of the total number of respondents)

	City	Countryside	Men	Women	Total
Islamic Philosophy	23.6	17.4	23.5	19.7	22.1
Islamic Political Thought	10.1	8.7	12.1	5.2	9.7
Modern Science: Problems and Achievements	17.8	17.4	17.4	20.2	17.7
Salafi Islam	10.3	2.5	8.7	7.5	8.4
Shia Islam	5.6	3.7	4.6	7.0	5.2
Countering Extremism and Terrorism	30.9	29.8	33.3	26.3	30.7
Hard to Answer	15.3	18.6	15.3	16.9	16.1
Have a New Heading?	6.2	7.5	8.0	3.8	6.5

The author points out that the 'Countering Extremism and Terrorism' section turned out to be the most popular among urban and rural residents, men and women, as well as in an overall sample (30.7 percent). Even though it is of political content and popular with the readers, it does not mean that they approve political activities in Islam. The heading holds their interest solely because it discusses the issues of peace and social stability. A possible new 'Islamic Political Thought' section was the least to inspire enthusiasm in the readers (9.7 percent). Rural residents (8.7 percent) and female readers (5.2 percent) expressed the least support of the potential new heading. This conclusion is also confirmed by the fact that the respondents are not particularly interested in reading about 'Salafi Islam' (8.4 percent). The Salafi movement is strongly associated with interfaith conflicts and political confrontations in the history of Islam.

The author notes that the question of whether the newspaper should analyze political processes in the world and developments in its regions, including Russia, is multidimensional. In particular, this is a question about what the respondents think about political activities of the clergy. The

author included the question about political activities of clerics, muftiats and churches in one of the sociological surveys conducted in mosques and churches in Moscow, Kazan and Dagestan in 2002. In total, 1000 people were surveyed, 460 of whom in Dagestan. The question was worded as follows: "Do you believe that it is acceptable for a church (mosque, spiritual administration) to be involved in some kind of political activities?" The majority of the Muslims and Christians (64.6 percent) had a negative attitude towards the involvement of religious organizations in any political activities; only 23.4 percent of the respondents considered that a possibility. A poll in the Cathedral of Makhachkala showed that Orthodox Christians in Makhachkala were set against the participation of the church in politics even more (83.3 percent). At the same time, this survey confirms that the readers' interest in political processes in the world and its regions is of independent significance.

Conclusion

The author concludes that many readers of the *As-Salam* newspaper generally take an interest in learning about political processes. They particularly care for updates on political events taking place in Muslim countries.

Speaking about interest in the subject of politics, young people are much more eager to read about it than the older ones. Given the vast involvement of young people in the activities of various extremist and terrorist groups, and their greater exposure to influence of information, content of the largest circulated newspaper in Russia requires objective and responsible assessment. Considering the prevailing interest in Islamic countries, such assessments are crucial in the analysis of interfaith relations in the Islamic world in accordance with the principles of Islamic moderation.

The interest of readers of the *As-Salam* newspaper in politics in general is accompanied by low rates of interest in Islamic political activity. Based on this study and earlier researches conducted by the author, it could be concluded that faithful choose to see religion not as a political force, but as a spiritual guidance that supports them throughout their lives.

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VALENTINA SCHENSNOVICH. THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN INTERFAITH RELATIONS OF THE REPUBLIC OF BASHKORTOSTAN. *Analytical review*.

Keywords: Republic of Bashkortostan; believers; Moslems; Orthodox; confessional identity; interfaith relations; state-confessional relations; missionary work; religious organizations; Central Spiritual Governance for Moslems of the Russian Federation; CSGM of the Republic of Bashkortostan; ROC.