

RELIGION AND CONFLICT: RADICALISM AND VIOLENCE IN THE NORTH CAUCASUS

Lately, the North Caucasus has become a major attraction point due to a great number of events and the worrisome trend in the region, with a big impact on the Russian Federation, on the one hand, and on the Wider Black Sea Region, on the other, as well as on the overall fight against terrorism. The themes surrounding this subject are various. One goal of this study is to supply a base of evolving information, ideas, and theories to give support to the evaluation of the situation in the North Caucasus and to provide a starting point for any projections regarding the area as well as larger themes defining the complexity of the region. The other goal is to foresee, based on these qualitative theories and trends, where this road is heading; in which way the current situation will evolve; and to what extent it will remain a local issue or it will affect the entire region.

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Lately, the North Caucasus has become a major attraction point due to a great number of events and the worrisome trend in the region with regards to religion based violence, radicalization, and the conversion of Russian/Slavic inhabitants. This situation has a big impact on the Russian Federation, the Wider Black Sea Region, as well as the overall fight against terrorism. This article explores into the causes of this emerging phenomenon in the region with the rising violence and radical approaches based on religion: the factors giving impulse to such trend and its spread in the Wider Black Sea region are analyzed here. Themes surrounding the subject are various, requiring researchers to pay a great deal of attention to several areas of study and to access numerous bibliographical references in order to provide in depth evaluations. We, as the Center for Conflict Prevention and Early Warning Center in Bucharest, have carried out such study as part of a project supported by the German Marshall Fund Black Sea Trust.

One goal of this study is to supply a base of evolving information, ideas, and theories to support the evaluation of the situation in the North Caucasus. The other goal is to foresee, based on these qualitative theories and trends, where this road is heading, and in which way the current situation will evolve. It will also be interesting to see whether the essential elements present for this region – Jihadism; conversion to radical Islam; suicide attacks; and terrorism – are to be found in other areas of the world and whether they represent grounds for the assessment of a much larger phenomena.

Bibliography, Associated Themes, and Ideas On How to Approach the Conflicts in the North Caucasus

The theme entailing conflicts in the North Caucasus is extremely broad and becomes particularly interesting, especially when we focus specifically on religion-based conflicts. Initial ethnic and national-separatist reflexes today have acquired a different manner of existence over a religious context, as exemplified by the Caucasus Emirate project as well as numerous religious insurgent groups dominating the region. At the same time, we also notice the involvement of Slavs that have converted to Islam and the rediscovery by moderate secular Muslims of the post-Soviet societies¹ of their religious identities in radicalized forms.

Our research is separated into three essential parts: the first part consists of the theoretical background originating from numerous disciplines, covering several realities easily identified in the North Caucasus. This ensures that subsequent evaluations will be based on consistent studies that have benefited from the

¹ The Muslims who now live in the post-Soviet states mostly used to be believers without a firm stand or clear base due to Soviet Union's restrictions on religion and religious services.

evaluation of other regions which are not directly related to the North Caucasus but carrying the characteristics of the various elements of Islamic radicalization analyzed here. Furthermore, the theoretical and general assessment of the phenomenon will help us draw conclusions that will be useful for showing the direction in which the North Caucasus is evolving into. They will be able to portray a prediction on the path and the nature of the transformations in the region, their impact on the wider Black Sea area, and maybe even offer models for other regions.

In terms of methodology, we approach conflicts systematically, recognizing the role that identities play in these conflicts as well as considering identity conflicts as a specific type of conflict. There is also a need to further analyse the characteristics of interethnic conflicts, focusing more on specific traits of religious conflicts and elements defining the relation between religion, conflict, and violence.

Last but not least, it is useful to take into account the original ideas of Dominique Moisi², who created the “geopolitics of emotions,” which replaces Samuel Huntington’s stereotypes in the *Clash of Civilizations* with a model that brings emotions to the forefront. This approach is valuable because it brings into discussion emotions, representations, and individual perceptions, as well as, commune emotions that could trigger collective reactions of different groups and communities in the forefront.

The second part of the study involves the socio-psychological elements that have determined radicalization and conversion; meaning the transformation from following a religion to pursuing its radical forms and to accepting violence as an instrument for a personal agenda of radical groups³. Also, this section looks into the mechanism that shapes terrorist actions, especially those related to suicide terrorism through bomb detonations. This is the type of action most often used in asymmetrical situations, which also entails the greatest emotional load and which could in itself explain the road to radicalization or self-radicalization (in front of the internet, for example, as seen in the case of “lone wolves”).

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² Dominique Moisi, *The Geopolitics of Emotion*, (New York: Anchor Books, 2009).

³ Mary Sharpe Ed., *Suicide Bombers: The Psychological, Religious and Other Imperatives* (New York: Cambridge, 2008).

The third part of the study should cast a deep and original look at Islam by including a variety of research and perspectives from its presentation as the major biblical religion –as described by Karen Armstrong⁴ and thoroughly presented by numerous older or contemporary researchers that analyse all the components and ramifications of this religion– to the political Islam. Here, the politicization of Islamic concepts and the use of Islam as an instrument to generate mobilization in conflicts will also be discussed. We grant an important role to the discovery made by Mihaela Matei⁵ in her recent Ph.D. thesis showing the versatility, opportunistic behaviour, and adaptability of Islam to the space where it is manifested, as well as the existence of several types of Islam, and formulas of the new Islam. She elaborates on the contemporary movements, from those inspired by the Iranian revolution and Al Qaeda type jihadist movements to John Esposito's "new Islamic Protestantism⁶" formula, also predicted by academics, which includes the evolution and revolution of modern Islam as professed, with certain limits, on two fronts in present day Turkey.⁷

The theoretical component would not be complete without the analysis of two strong and useful instruments for the North Caucasus: those regarding ungoverned territories and the strongly divided societies. They are conceived with a solid internal construct, theorized and applied to extended territories ranging from the Federally Administered Autonomous Territory in Pakistan (FATA) to larger areas of weak states and to societies created upon antagonistic existences with a long history still remembering the conflict throughout generations. These instruments will prove useful in analyzing the North Caucasus region since the reality of the region validates the fact that these types of already researched models are applicable to the area.

Finally, this study would not suffice if we do not attempt to radically change the points of views by giving them relevance and amplitude by trying to approach the subject also from the angle of the receptor's own deficiencies, where the receptor is made up of societies that are undergoing the effects of this reality. Here, we are talking about the evolution trends of acceptability of these realities by modern western societies, the decrease of our resilience and the sometimes exaggerated reaction when analyzing these events and raising them to catastrophic levels. This is important, because, terrorism is only relevant when there exists the proper environment to be terrorized, and the hyper sensitivity and the lack of resilience of our society, along with the hyperbolizing of such events and our perception of

⁴ Karen Armstrong, *Istoria lui Dumnezeu [The History of God]* (Bucharest: Nemira Publishing House, 2009).

⁵ Mihaela Matei, *Islamul politic și Democrația. Între Islakh, Ijtihad și Jihad [The Political Islam and Democracy: Between Islakh, Ijtihad and Jihad]* (Bucharest, PhD, Thesis, SNSPA 2010).

⁶ John L. Esposito, *The Future of Islam* (Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

⁷ Esposito's book is about the 'reform' that is being observed within Islam today: this transformation process within the certain factions of Islam is compared to the Lutheran and Calvinist movements experienced in Christianity.

these realities, do nothing more but amplify the impact of terrorist actions, and, consequently, escalate the number of attacks precisely due to the visibility and the impact that make them all the more appealing to insurgents, terrorists, and whomever wishes to send a political message while lacking visibility, audience or a critical mass⁸ that will satisfy their ego.

In the next step of this study, the direct relevance of the application of these theories to the North Caucasus region will increase. After a presentation of events and particularities of the region, and the manner in which they are described, we will apply all of these theories in order to understand to what extent the fundamental hypotheses are being verified and whether conclusions are relevant to our specific case. This is where most other conclusions will derive from along with the prospective picture that will be created for the medium and the long term by the current situation for the Wider Black Sea Region and for the evolution of international affairs in general in the future.

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Methodology: Thesis and Key Findings in the North Caucasus

The preliminary analysis of theoretical and factual elements allow us to draw a number of intermediary conclusions which are to be reevaluated by revisiting the interviews from the field. Based on the theoretical and documentary base, we can present the following preliminary conclusions as working hypotheses:

The Salafists/Wahabits (named specifically by different actors) are, most of the time, wrongfully accused of having had a certain role in the radicalization of the population in North Caucasus, in the conversion to Islam of certain Slavic elements from Stavropol Krai and Krasnodar Krai or from ethnic republics in the North Caucasus. Radicalization of Islam expresses itself in different forms. Self-radicalization of local Islamists searching for “real Islam,” which they claim to be different from secular or officialized formulas accepted in the Russian Federation by the state and by republican or regional leaders, is one of these forms. Another new and attractive type of jihadist Islamic radicalism, or the radical New Islamic Movement, embraces radical and even jihadist religions and the quest for the so called “new religions.” The picture would not be complete without converts,

⁸ Mary Sharpe and Abimbola Agboluaje (Eds.), *Science and Society in the Face of New Security Threats*, (Amsterdam-Berlin-Oxford-Tokyo-Washington DC : IOS Press, 2004).

whose fall into this space can no longer be assigned to the need for group identity or for fame that would substitute a severe identity problem, and it is more likely a sign of the adherence to the radical “old” formula or to the new form of regional radical-jihadist Islam as a form of protest, an anti-system reaction.

The formulas offered by the radical versions of Islam or by the new Imams of regional Islamism entail the transformation of the state; of its organization form, and of the dependence on the authoritarian local ruler of the Russian metropolis. Introduction of the Sharia law as an alternative to corrupt financial circuits that ensure the wealth of leaders as opposed to earnings of the population, as well as the avoidance of taxes and the brotherly support known as *zakat*, are all perfectly fitting both for a traditional but reinterpreted type of Islam and for the wish to brake loose from the Russian metropolis or from the revisioning of already existing state structures.

The North Caucasus is starting to be shaped more and more like a new Pakistani FATA – a tribal federally administered region close to the Afghan border, which is neither marked nor controlled. With no viable institutions, this region is subject to outside influences and exposed to trans-border pressures. This provides FATA with an excellent space for the promotion of various ideologies and moreover, an appropriate area from where attacks can be launched right to the heart of the system. In this context, the Caucasus resembles the classic Arab world more, rather than a version of independent, autonomous, financially unsustainable states and republics. Another complementary direction that could serve as a model is precisely the reaction to a form of previous “colonization” that melted away national awakening and initial separatist protest and fell into extreme forms of protest.

Chechnya, the Caucasus Emirate, and the new jihadist-Islamic movement are becoming well established, sovereign entities over time. According to existing data, their links to Al-Qaeda, for example, is accidental, informal, and is virtually limited to the training of its fighters on the field. The Caucasus Emirate looks nothing like an Al-Qaeda type construction either, but there exist external connections with the organization., The Emirate, moreover, is a specific local construction, extended onto the areas of republics with Islamic populations, with the notable exception of North Ossetia, though the footprint of conversion has been felt there as well.

Another characteristic of these entities is local attraction and support. They display a special ability to attract insurgent fighters, which can only happen due to systemic dissatisfaction which allows the birth of sympathy as well as of institutionalised forms of protest. This attraction also leads to extreme cases such as the conversion of Slavic Christians in the region and neighbouring regions to Islam, as well as the

extreme radicalization of all Muslims – original or converted – whose members put their own lives on the frontline through suicide bombings.

The violence of authorities, impunity of the Army, abusing of the local population by secret services and representatives of security forces, complicated economic situation in the region, increased unemployment rate, gap between the lives and wealth of ordinary people and the local authorities, along with unproportional salaries paid to those working for Moscow, have created the base for deep discrepancies and hatred towards local and regional authorities, as well as towards Moscow. Under these circumstances, all it takes is a personal trigger, which consists of traumatizing personal experiences, injustice, and humility, to ensure that people openly support and join the insurgency and go to mountains or even proceed to violent acts.

Beside the direct involvement of unsatisfied people, the insurgency also benefits from a context providing it with even larger recruitment space; the quest for radical movements, does not necessarily have anything to do with personal search towards “true faith,” but it is rather a movement against the officially accepted religion, a movement which is situated more on the realm of protest reactions than in that of the search for a sufficiently strict “true faith” that would ensure “afterlife”.

There is an entire body of theory talking about support of certain factions of the population for ethnic and national causes. According to such theories, however, it is observed that although tendencies exist towards embracing of national and ethnic identities, they do not necessarily lead to separatist movements because there is a common realization that there are economic grounds in the North Caucasus that would give base to such movements.. Certain points of these theories can be worthy of consideration; however, the inhabitants of the region unhappy of their leadership, both regional and central, are more inclined towards religious forms of insurgency, which creates an emotional climate in which reactions are likely to be harsher in comparison to a logical framework. Although ethnic-national sentiments and ethnic-separatism combine and create a force, they still fall weaker than and contrary to the idea of a Caucasus Emirate, a regional separatist formula funded religiously, not ethnically, and a model for reproducing the Sharia governed Caliphate with specific national autonomies.

Ethnic separatism has not disappeared entirely. In fact it is persistent and anti-Russian, flowing from the idea of contesting the colonist and the imperial metropolis, the imposed and nonelected authority, and the non-traditional forced-down rules and abuses.

It is also important to notice elements connected to sociological experiments which, in time, caused the rebirth of ethnic-national sentiments as a side effect after the fall of the former USSR. What is referred here is, the result of the ethnic construction experiments in the USSR, including the Caucasus region: the experiments were launched systematically by a number of sociologists in order to create multiple ethnic identities.

They identified ethnic groups spread out over half of one village by differentiating their cultural elements based on distinctive alphabets and symbolism, and managed to collect folkloric elements, which they transferred into several volumes of virtual “ethnic literatures.” The entire effort was aimed at underlining multi-ethnicity and the claim that the USSR was a haven of peoples living together in accordance with an ideological communion. It was also aimed at undermining the distinct classic national elements completely with specific key traits in order to avoid nationalist and separatist tendencies, attempting to magnify the existence of a multitude of ethnic groups and peoples living happily in the Country of the Soviets. The strategy was obviously applied against big national republics as well as against North-Caucasian ethnic republics from the Ural-Volga area or from the Far East, elements covering and encompassing the issue of invaded territories. The approach was amplified by deportments and by the distinction between good and bad ethnic groups, asserted especially by Stalin, adding to the complications created by the comeback from Gulags and from these deportations, which entailed confiscation of lands and houses and their redistribution to other peoples and families stabilized in the area. Additionally, there was a territorial re-drawing based on the doctrine of maximum ethnic complexity, which was meant to bloc any subsequent attempts to break lose the USSR formation, as well as, the possible unification of republics; the real and projected formulas for a Caucasus republic, temptations, and sociological experiments with effects are still being noticed today.

The new strategy also aimed at rejecting national separatism and the attempts of different populations in the Russian Federation to question their stay in the conglomerate after the fall of the USSR, on the same train of thought of national pre-existence and the lack of consent for entering the Union or the Federation. The Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) was an instrument for succeeding to the former USSR; through two components: one was the succession of the Russian Federation in the Treaties, and the second was the succession of the new independent states into the USSR borders. However, it was also an instrument aimed at creating a reverse movement of integration and unification in the post-Soviet space at a time when, after the fall of the USSR, the Russian Federation itself was threatened by territorial collapse through separatism.

There are analyses presuming that, in combating the Chechen phenomenon, there was even some type of support by Russian central government authorities for radical insurgency, for forced ties to radically religious Arabs and the international religion-based terrorist Islamic movement, and, subsequently, even to Al Qaeda – initially western, rather than Arab faction – in order to demonstrate international involvement of Al Qaeda, and the denial of the reality that something objective was taking place in the Russian side: a form of national rebirth at the level of ethnic republics comprising the Russian Federation. Therefore, national separatist movements have been combated by moving the subjects of Islamic radicalism and international terrorism on the ground and by sliding of the forefront image of separatist movements to the benefit of the religious radicalism and violence. The result was the loss of public interest for the national and separatist sentiments objectively legitimised and their replacement with religion-based elements throughout the Caucasus. Therefore, jihad was, at first, embraced as an imposed formula, which was proposed by the authorities themselves, and, it, then, took over at one point and built itself as a solution as a form of protest. Eventually, it was preferred to the ethnic-nationalistic separatism.

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There is also the hypothesis that the entire radical Islamic movement, initially implanted in order to show the colors and the trend of separatism movements, was actually invented in Russia. After the opening of Pandora’s box, the situation become real and what was once a scheme to be used for public perception later became an integral, radical, regional, jihadist movement very real and supported by the local population, as a way of protest. The initial project of counterbalancing separatism got out of hand.

Today, religious insurgency is attractive and people are joining it, Muslims and Christian Orthodox alike – the former radicalized, the later converted to Islam – with the aim of fighting the establishment officially, pragmatically, and subliminally. The real aim and target of the movement remain unknown because of the multitude of leaders and their speedy elimination. However, it will eventually become clear in the process with the evolution of the situation, if the Emirate gains more self awareness, unity, coherence, and organizational characteristic, becoming more institutionalized –in a process similar to the OFP–; and, if it assumes responsibility for the fate of the entire region, evolving towards publically winning the dispute with

local republican authorities, as well as with regional and central ones. This way, a formula of a proto-quasi-state can be imagined in the North Caucasus.

An Islamic Caliphate-like pseudo-state with Sharia law as its principle for the executive-legislative process, with autonomous structures based on republics and ethnic groups which would, step by step, take over control and authority and would abandon the fight launched at the mountain heights. The state formula would be a trans-Caucasus one with such autonomous structures and the Russian-Slavic element either eliminated or converted to Islam, having an influence beyond the North Caucasus region.

Most likely, the North Caucasus will not undergo such process but in order to be able to oppose the classic counteracts of Russian security structures, it will remain in the combo of failed state and weakly governed border territory, without a completely organised and responsible structure and more likely with a network-type organization that is purely contesting and asymmetrical. Endemic instability will be a characteristic of the region on medium term, and a type of export of further instability in the South of the Federation by Russian migrants and a direct impact through the rush of the local Islamic elements for resources in richer areas, due to the demographic force of the North Caucasus, with a tendency to export insurgent attacks to the center of the country and to the metropolis, maybe even to Moscow will be added. The scenario we would most likely encounter here is more complex than that of a separatist authority taking over and creating a visible enemy in such a way, because, the formulation of an undefined and blurry enemy borrowing diverse identities would be nothing more than a copy of the Al Qaeda type franchise model, where the franchised brand here would be the Caucasus Emirate. Uncertainty is likely to become a way of life in the region and in the surrounding area, possibly extending to the whole of Russia.

Demography is the greatest vulnerability of the Russian state as it makes possible the worst case scenario: the general destabilisation of Russia with the creation of key points of gathering for spreading radical Islamic jihadist ideology, with great dissemination energy. Socially motivated migrants looking for work and better living standards could sustain such an epidemic and could export structural instability.

Demographic changes in the region are intense. The de-population of North Caucasus by ethnic Russians is a phenomenon that has already been noticed by the leadership of the North Caucasus District as well as by the entire population in Russia. This is why there is a need for two stable points: one is the comeback of religion to the area, while the other would be to keep in mind that the stabilisation of the Russian Church and the split between good and bad Islam in the area are

not good solutions. Ensuring a moral reference and a real understanding of Islam could require the support of Turkish authorities and the direct influence of a political Islam resulting from reform, as was the case in Christianity with Protestantism.

The Slavic islands are shrinking demographically at an accelerated pace. Things here could evolve with the planned version of repopulating of the area by Khazaks but this Slavic ethnic component will be interpreted more like an imposed colonist population. Furthermore, it will be the first one exposed to conversion to Islam and subsequent radicalization – as we have seen in Krasnodar Krai and Stavropol Krai. The process of forced transplantation of this population, taking refuge in the South of Russia, would bring intolerance toward local population, and, therefore, enslaving would not be a solution either, especially since the maintaining of this population at a local level can only be possible through warranting well paid jobs, created artificially and discriminatorily in relation to the local population.

The determined conversion campaign of Islamization that continues through the extending of the demographically superior Caucasus population that is free to roam Russia needs to be broken, but in a natural manner, and not through the creation of artificial barriers within the Russian State since it could be interpreted as a sign of discrimination. Ensuring employment and a coherent religious base, which would be a conservative, non violent, and austere form of Islam, could work to the extent where authorities would not sustain or try to impose it, but only tolerate it, all the while also taking some critical stands in regard to possible excesses of this type of practice.

The discussion regarding the temptation to detach North Caucasus from Russia as a solution remains in the forefront, and we believe it will perpetuate, as the version of cutting the lizard's tail, but the formula would most likely bring irrelevant results at this point as it comes to attention too late and since the entire surrounding region is influenced by radical forms of Islam, whose embrace is also a direct result of brutal, un-adapted policies in the region. It is also a result of the policies applied to the whole of Russia, with special reference to the installation of authority vertically and the eluding of elected leaders as genuine representation forms in favour of appointed leaders of false representation formulas.⁹ Moscow is all the more exposed to the counter reaction, the anachronic nationalism, and xenophobia of the majority of the population manifesting actions against foreigners and non-Russians, thus accentuating Islamic alienation and enclavisation right in the heart of Moscow and other Russian cities and predisposing local metropolis radicalisation similar to those felt in Great Britain, France, Germany, and the U.S.

⁹ 'Vertical authority' here means that the appointed governors and the representatives of the Central authority unit can also determine the eventual result of the local Parliaments' elections by rejecting, if they wished to do so, the legitimacy of an elected local official and replacing her/him with whomever else they want to.

The Georgian wars also did not help. The recognition and militarization of South Ossetia and Abkhazia did not add value to the stabilization of the North Caucasus, beyond the international costs. On the contrary, we have witnessed waves of recrudescence of suicide bomb attacks both in the North Caucasus and in Moscow as an effect of a constant revolt not necessarily connected to events in the South Caucasus but still with a certain dependency and chronological coincidence.

The recognition of the two separatist Georgian regions as independent states by Moscow and the resistance of Georgia against the Russian army resparked national impulses in the North Caucasus. The national, ethnical, and separatist movements had previously melted in the face of the attractiveness and visibility of the religious insurgency of the North Caucasus Emirate, where the jihadist and religious radicalism were more catchy than the ethnic-national one. The Russian authorities had to do with the creation of such situation as well. Georgia is also attempting to build good relations with the North Caucasus republics who aspire only for national rebirth, self-governing, and independence but also for feeding a vision of good neighborhood. Georgia is most likely to follow an ethnic agenda rather than a religious one, as it is the first one affected by the perspective of an Islamic wall north of the Caucasus Mountains to isolate Christian Georgia and Armenia at the Black Sea and in between distinct Islamic trends, some moderate, some politicized and radicalized amongst whose representatives sectarian type conflicts could arise at any time.